At the heart and center of the struggle around immigration is the issue of justice—justice not only for immigrants but for all concerned, especially the equally and similarly vulnerable. Indeed, it is the teachings of our ancestors in the sacred Husia that the righteous law and the most principled practice is that which does justice for all the people. So there is no justice in denying Latino or other immigrants’ human and civil rights and marginalizing and mistreating them, regardless of their legal status. And there is no justice in denying, dismissing and failing to deal with the rightful concerns and needs of fellow African American and other workers and neighbors who are also working hard to provide for their families, send their children to school, pay their taxes, secure a living and decent wage and live a good and meaningful life.

Thus, somewhere beyond the racist ranting and raving of the right-wing, the vote-pandering-and-posturing of the average politician, the manipulative moves of big business in the background, and the unthoughtful embrace by most progressives of policies inadequately attentive to the real and rightful concerns and needs of the impacted communities, we must struggle to find a just and humane way to address this critical issue. And to do this we must, first, reject the language and logic of our oppressor and not talk and think in ways that are divisive and degrading, make villains out of fellow victims and injure our shared interests in social change, justice and the common good.

In the best of our ancient and ongoing ethical tradition, as found in the Husia and Odu Ifa, we are obligated “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice.” We are to welcome the stranger, care for the vulnerable, shelter the refugee and seeker of asylum, and do justice for those we don’t know like those we do know. And above all, we must treat all human beings as bearers of dignity and divinity, divinely chosen to bring good into the world. We thus stand in solidarity with the oppressed and struggling peoples of the world. And we uphold their right to live lives of dignity and decency in their home countries and to migrate to seek this in other places, whether they are from Mexico, Haiti, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia or any other place in the world.

What we need, then, is a comprehensive immigration reform which includes: (1) respect for the rights and dignity of all immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and exiles, regardless of documented or undocumented status and the rejection of criminalization of undocumented immigrants or of those who aid and advise them; (2) recognition and respect for the rightful concerns and needs of the receiving and impacted communities; (3) ways to prevent employer exploitation and manipulation of the labor and vulnerability of undocumented workers; (4) a just, humane and legal means of permanent and temporary entry for citizenship and work; (5) a border control policy which respects the immigrants’ right to due process and dignified treatment and is directed against human trafficking and a justly regulated flow of legal immigrants; and (6) the strengthening of the economies and life conditions of the immigrants’ home countries, devastated by historical and recent
imperial policies and related poverty, oppression and armed conflict.

Within this context, Latinos, Africans and others must address key issues missing from the current progressive agenda and discourse on immigration. These include: application of the above policies to other immigrants in addition to Latinos, i.e., the Haitians, other Caribbean and Continental Africans, Asians and others; dealing effectively with employer preference for low-wage, vulnerable and pliant undocumented workers and its effect on employment, wages and working conditions for U.S. workers and especially employers’ displacement and replacement of African American workers with them. And it is important to note here that it is not the case, as commonly argued, that African Americans don’t want to do the work that Latinos do. It’s only that they don’t want to work for the low wages and degraded working conditions under which Latinos do it. Moreover, the potential misuse of the call for bilingual workers by employers and the Latino ethnic network which favors Latino workers both pose problems which require a just response. Thus, progressives and the labor movement must find ways to insure Africans have an equitable share of the jobs, training, economic opportunity and leadership in this rapidly evolving economic context.

As some sections of labor have conceded, the guest workers program is similarly problematic. For it creates a second-class vulnerable work force which encourages employers to transform regular jobs into temporary ones, lower wages and degrade working conditions. Also, a path-way to citizenship for those immigrants who wish to remain, must be developed, but it must be for all immigrants—Haitians, other Caribbean and Continental Africans, and Asians as well as Latinos. And justice requires that it not privilege Latinos or put them ahead of those already in the process.

Finally, whatever is done in Congress, the courts or closed corporate boardrooms, it’s on us as Africans and Latinos first, who still must and will most often live and learn together, work together, and be locked down together and even compete in middle-class and corporate spaces across this country. And thus, we, more than any other groups, must find ways which serve our interests and achieve common good for everyone. The current mobilization by Latinos around this single issue does not overshadow our history nor threaten our future. It is rather a historical moment of possibility for both of us and the country.

Thus, we must not underestimate what we, African Americans, have done and continue to do in the struggle for justice, nor fear or inflate what Latinos are doing now. We have both mobilized millions in marches for justice in recent times, nurtured youth activism, and worked together on issues of common interests and common good. Now we must each rebuild our own movement and in the process, link our movements and with other struggling and progressive peoples, build a larger movement for fundamental and far-reaching social and world change based on an ethics of sharing—shared struggle and shared good in the world.

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