

The United People of Color Caucus

Reflecting Back, Marching Forward: TUPOCC's Origins and Our First Decade

By Ranya Ghuma, Renée Quintero Sánchez, and Russell Bloom

What does it mean to work “for the people” when, as people of color, and women of color, we are working within a field disproportionately dominated by white males? It means our very presence is an act of resistance. [. . .][W]e know from experience that the law is decidedly not race and gender neutral, and that the legal system in this country was founded on structures that enshrine racism and oppression. The language of the law perpetuates race, class, gender, [ability], and heterosexual privilege. [W]e often find ourselves challenging professors, fellow students, co-workers - and all too often, our comrades in the movement - calling on them to confront their own racism and other exclusionary practices.

- Ranya Ghuma and Renée Sanchez, TUPOCC: Notes on Changing the Fabric of the Law and the Guild, *Guild Notes* Spring 2005.

THE BACKDROP

The National Lawyers Guild was founded in 1937 as an association of progressive lawyers dedicated to supporting the movement as its “legal arm.” From its inception, the Guild was committed to working in the service of the people and to the concept that human rights are more sacred than property interests. It was the first integrated bar association in the United States and the only integrated bar association at that time. Through the National Lawyers Guild, progressive legal activists challenged inequality and oppression by representing political dissenters, marching in the streets in support of movements for equality and liberation and countering the dominant narrative of the entrenched legal profession that perpetuated racism, ableism, classism, homophobia, gender privilege and other oppressions.



But the Guild, like all living organizations, is a function of the society in which it exists and, like all movements, is required to engage in struggle internally as well as externally to confront manifestations of inequality. Throughout its history, Guild members have pushed within the organization to challenge the absence of people of color, women, students and legal workers in positions of power. In the 1950s, Earl B. Dickerson was elected as the Guild's first African American president. The Guild's first woman president, Doris Brin “Dobby” Walker, was elected in 1970 - over thirty years after the founding of the organization - and the Guild's first

woman of color president, Azadeh Shahshahani, was elected in 2011 - close to seventy-five years after the Guild's founding. Law students did not become full-fledged members of the Guild until 1970. Legal workers were not admitted as members until 1971, after many years of

contested and heated internal discussion. Karen Jo Koonan became the first and only legal worker national president in 1997.

Learning about the various movements to transform the Guild internally is as important as learning about the Guild's activism in the courtroom and with communities. At various times throughout the Guild's history, Guilders have challenged exclusionary practices in the Guild. Similarly, at various times throughout the Guild's history, Guild members of color and their allies addressed the presence of institutionalized racism in the Guild and called upon Guild comrades to work to ensure that the organization reflected internally the principles to which it was committed.

We have learned of these, and other histories, through our conversations and reflections with numerous Guilders over the years, some of whom became increasingly less involved in the organization, believing that their efforts would be better focused elsewhere. We have learned through these conversations that Guild conventions, historically, were predominantly white. Guilders of color have shared with us their dismay at being at national conventions and noticing that they were one of only a handful of folks of color. It was not simply a question of numbers - it was a question of how the Guild approached its work. Were people of color viewed as equal comrades in the fight, informing and leading the agenda, or merely as "clients" or "communities" to be paternalistically advised and defended? They shared with us their profound disappointment at the response of some Guild comrades who, when approached on these issues, would justify the absence of leadership or meaningful input by people of color by cloaking themselves in their movement work or passing blame on to communities of color, who, according to some representations, were "not progressive" or "resisted" inclusion in movement work. Some long-time Guilders have shared with us that the issue of the Guild's "whiteness" has been around for decades, that others have attempted to address it, and that the institutionalized response was often the same: "We are not racist. We oppose racism. This conversation is divisive and diverting energy from our real work." We, unfortunately, heard this same response after the founding of TUPOCC.

This is the contextual backdrop to the historic meeting of about twenty students of color at the Birmingham convention in 2004, and to the later formation of TUPOCC. All of this context and history matters. One cannot understand the formation of TUPOCC without learning about and appreciating the incredible righteousness of the Guild's work - the way in which Guild members have stood on the front lines of demonstrations, or have represented sisters and brothers when no one else would and when the full force of the government's repression was directed at silencing them and eradicating their movements. One cannot understand the formation of TUPOCC without recognizing that the Guild is an organization which, since its inception, has dedicated itself to supporting and defending the convergence of movements that strive for justice, self-determination and liberation for all oppressed people.

Similarly, one cannot appreciate the reasons for the formation of TUPOCC without understanding that the Guild has positively transformed over the years - not only in how it performs its external work, but also in how it acts internally - because Guild members have pushed for it to be that way. That beautiful struggle is fueled by love, admiration and a belief in the value of the Guild. It also emanates from the same motivation for justice and equality that drives us, as progressive legal activists, to expect nothing less from the Guild than what the communities demand on the streets. In other words, the Guild can only evolve if we check and question *how* we do our work as well as *why* we do our work. We, as TUPOCC, emerged as a part of this history.

THE 2004 BIRMINGHAM CONVENTION

It was one decade ago, in Birmingham, Alabama, at the 2004 annual convention of the National Lawyers Guild, that the seeds of the United People of Color Caucus of the National Lawyers Guild were planted.

Many of us will never forget that Convention. In the heart of a city that stood as a living testament to the struggle to end apartheid in the United States, we were called upon to examine what it meant to be meaningfully engaged in the fight to dismantle racism. For the three of us, it was our very first Guild convention, made possible only through the support of a travel stipend for students of color.¹ We were humbled and incredibly moved by the powerful energy and politics of the place, and by new radical comrades.

On the last day of our weekend together, a group of around twenty student activists of color convened to caucus about our work and our future in the Guild. What brought us together, as new and seasoned activists, was a sense that we believed in the history, the work and the principles of the Guild. We discussed the history of the organization and the concerns regarding the absence of people of color in positions of leadership or at the convention. We also discussed whether it made sense to stay in the Guild and work for change, or to leave the Guild and devote activist efforts to another organization. Many of us wanted to continue to be a part of the Guild's principled



legal activism in support of the movement. We shared an understanding, however, that we, as activists of color, could not authentically participate in the Guild unless we critically addressed what we persistently experienced as a phenomenon not only in the Guild, but throughout the U.S. Left. As was the case in many justice-minded organizations, people of color far too often were viewed as “targets” of solidarity or “groups” requiring representation, rather than

¹ Prior to the Alabama Convention, through the active efforts of Maunica Sthanki, the Student National Vice President of the Guild, her co-Vice President, Merrillyn Onisko, and the Guild's national Student Organizer, Laura Raymond, a Birmingham Travel Scholarship was put in place to bring students of color to the Birmingham convention. These comrades, along with Guild member Kenavon Carter, actively fundraised for and spread the word about this stipend. The fund was part of a conversation started by them with the NEC prior to Birmingham, challenging white privilege and normativity in the Guild and calling upon the leadership to critically ask whether the Guild was a truly anti-racist organization, where people of color could feel safe to voice concerns and were a meaningful part of the organization's work. They challenged the leadership to identify ways to push forward an anti-racist agenda within the organization and they built the foundation for so much of the subsequent anti-racism and anti-oppression organizing in the Guild. We salute you!

ALABAMA MANIFESTO

The United People of Color Caucus (TUPOCC) of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) is an alliance of law students, legal workers, attorneys and other people of color within the NLG community. The necessity of such an organization is borne from the historical context of the capitalist United States where economic prowess is dependent on the furthered and continued subjugation of people of color, women, the poor, queers and other oppressed people. We are dedicated to fostering and supporting the growth and empowerment of all people of color, particularly within the organization of the NLG. We believe that meaningful social change and actual justice can only be attained when people of color and all other beleaguered communities are more than mere afterthoughts. Equality must be woven throughout the fabric of the organization. We seek to further educate ourselves and inform the larger NLG community about the issues that affect us and investigate the relationship of these issues to social justice. We strongly believe that this work cannot be done unaided, and we encourage support from our allies throughout the NLG in furtherance of our goals. We wish to provide all people of color opportunities in support of these goals, and when such opportunities are not available, to work with our associates and allies to create them. We seek to unite ourselves, represent our communities, achieve our potential, and function as a powerful force within the NLG, our chapters, schools, communities, the United States of America and the global population.

The United People of Color Caucus (TUPOCC) of the NLG has a multi-point strategy that we shall use to advance our mission:

1. Elect students of color and people of color into leadership positions within the NLG
2. Demand that white and privileged Guild members take accountability for their racism and other oppressive behaviors by joining us in examining and effectively changing the culture of the NLG. Together we believe that we can accomplish this goal by: (a) Meeting as people of color regularly to deal with oppression and other issues we uniquely experience as people of color (b) Encouraging all members who are not of this caucus to regularly attend meetings of the Anti-Racism Committee, or preferably, to join such committees. (c) Institutionalize an anti-racist agenda by creating policies in favor of and beneficial to eliminating racism and other oppressions. (e.g. making anti-racism an active and prioritized component of the National Convention)
3. Alter the focus of the NLG by learning how to be accountable to the communities that it seeks to support and protect.

Membership is open to all members of the NLG community who self-identify as people of color. There will be no arbitrary exclusion from membership on the basis of sexuality, religion, gender, gender presentation or identity, sexual orientation, disability or age. All other members of the NLG are invited to work with and support TUPOCC as allies in the pursuit of true justice.

equal and active comrades defining and leading the agenda. People of color represented a distressingly low percentage of membership and an even lower percentage of the leadership of those organizations. In short, the Guild, like many organizations in the fight for racial, social and economic justice, was overwhelmingly white. How could it credibly speak as the "legal arm of the movement" when it did not internally represent, or prioritize the input of, the communities it aimed to serve? What did it mean to work towards the elimination of racism and

all forms of discrimination when whiteness as the “norm” was pervasive and unchallenged within the organization itself?

And so as we caucused, that group of around twenty of us, we pondered these and other questions. Was it worth the time, the effort and the fatiguing personal cost it would take to voice our concerns and organize for long-term, foundational transformation in the Guild? Did we think the Guild could become an organization where the authentic presence, participation and leadership of activists of color was no longer an exception to the norm or a happy accident, but rather an intentional result of an organization sincerely endeavoring to transform into an anti-racist institution?

For many of us, the answer was yes. The decision was made to stay, and to organize through a caucus of legal activists of color, in conjunction with allies, for things to change. At that early Sunday morning meeting, we elected our first co-chairs, Ranya and Renée. We attended the NEC meeting that afternoon and presented ourselves and our calls to action. Our founding document, the Alabama Manifesto, speaks to those initial calls to action. TUPOCCers and allies have worked together, since that time, to institutionalize an anti-racist and anti-oppression agenda - by guaranteeing positions on the board to TUPOCC representatives, by working to promote the meaningful leadership of people of color throughout the Guild, by actively dedicating funds to bring activists of color to the national convention - as active participants and as speakers - and by facilitating anti-racist organizational change through trainings locally and nationally that challenged the white normativity of the Guild.

TUPOCC'S FIRST YEARS: FOSTERING AN ANTI-OPPRESSION CULTURE

Shortly after Birmingham, we, as founding TUPOCC Co-Chairs, along with Russell Bloom, founding member and unofficial Minister of Art, proposed to change our name from the Student of Color Caucus to TUPOCC, *The United People of Color Caucus*, acknowledging that our movement necessarily requires the inclusion of all activists of color - students, legal workers and lawyers alike. We also drafted the Alabama Manifesto. Our new name and our declaration were reviewed and endorsed by the individuals present at that Sunday meeting.

As founding co-chairs, we spent the first three years as TUPOCC's leadership organizing on two key fronts. The first front was to actively dedicate efforts towards the meaningful recruitment and retention of people of color in the Guild. At the first meeting of the NEC following the Birmingham Convention, TUPOCC advocated to institutionalize the travel stipend, to ensure that at least 25 students of color would be able to access travel funds to attend future “Law for the People” conventions. Our advocacy was successful. Today the stipend remains an institutionalized part of the NLG budget, as a commitment by the Guild's leadership to make concrete, affirmative efforts to recruit and retain activists of color. Since its inception, TUPOCC has expanded eligibility for the stipend to legal workers and recent law graduates, in addition to students, with priority given to legal workers, the goal being to challenge class dynamics and to reach out to individuals for whom travel to the Guild convention would otherwise be economically impossible. Through TUPOCC and allied advocacy by the Anti-Racism Committee, the Anti-Sexism Committee, the Queer Caucus, the Next Gen Committee, the Student Vice Presidents, and other allies, the NEC voted to allocate additional stipend funds each subsequent year, so that awards were granted to more activists of color to attend the convention. The change set into motion by the stipend has been historic. It represents a committed effort on the part of the NLG leadership to change the fabric of the Guild. Like us,

many individuals who were awarded stipends over the last decade have not only remained active members, but have also stepped up and into leadership positions, bringing with them histories, perspectives, energy and a commitment to pushing forward anti-racist and anti-oppression organizational change that has transformed the Guild.

The second front to which we dedicated ourselves was related to fostering a culture within the Guild that internalized anti-racism and anti-oppression practices - one where the Guild's work was not "presumed" to be helpful or important to people of color, but rather was informed by the communities themselves. We wanted to see a Guild that felt safe for people of color to voice concerns and thoughts and to contribute as equal comrades in the organization. To encourage others to join with us in organizing around anti-racism and anti-oppression, we asked the Guild - nationally, regionally, locally, and through committees - to endorse the Alabama Manifesto and to pledge to work internally on these issues. The NEC unanimously voted to sign on to this "TUPOCC Pledge" at the January 2006 NEC meeting. The San Francisco Chapter of the NLG also quickly signed onto our Pledge, followed by many other chapters and committees throughout the country. The NEC also voted to institutionalize anti-racism trainings at every "Law for the People" convention for white members of the Guild, calling upon them to critically examine how to confront white supremacy, to challenge how their privileges affect their work and activism, and to recommit to dismantling institutionalized racism. Dedicated funds, space, and time were also institutionalized for concurrent workshops for people of color in the Guild to caucus in a safer space, combat internalized racism, heal, strategize, and organize. The NEC itself also participated in yearly anti-oppression trainings at the NEC level. The objective of all of this was to weave solid anti-racism and anti-oppression tactics and approaches into all elements of our advocacy and organizing - how we define the work that we do, who leads the discussions around the work that we do and how we judge the impact of the work that we do.

MARCHING FORWARD

We would be misrepresenting TUPOCC's impact during our first decade were we to focus only on the travel stipend, the Alabama Manifesto, the Pledge, and the anti-racism and caucus sessions at the annual conventions. The political impact TUPOCC has had in the Guild and beyond over the last decade goes much deeper than that.

The profound impact of all of this work is, in our opinion, the strong bonds of solidarity, the commitment to each other's liberation and the sense of joint struggle that has developed amongst us - a network of activists growing and organizing together to seek change that reflects the principles we support. Through an anti-racist and anti-oppression lens, we demand, as a united front, that we end all forms of racism and injustice. We confront Zionism and support the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. We call for justice for the indigenous. We demand the human rights of all people in the LGBTQI community. We fight for the right of migrants and immigrants to live with humanity, dignity and justice. We work to free political prisoners and confront the racist brutality of the criminal justice system. We oppose war and imperialism. We organize to dismantle ableism, sexism and all forms of oppression. We confront homelessness and poverty, discrimination and apartheid. And by presenting our demands together, in solidarity, with an insistence that we, as the movement, do not get a pass on challenging any of these things internally, we have witnessed the evolution of the organization and ourselves as individuals, acting in coalition and within our communities. This is what TUPOCC represents.

In looking back over the last decade, we find it difficult to describe the ups and downs, the pains and joys, the victories and successes experienced by TUPOCCers in the journey from then to now. We feel an overwhelming sense of pride in TUPOCC. We cherish the relationships built and the progress achieved. We tend to wounds from battles. We heal and we mend. We know that the Guild today is, in so many ways, a very different Guild, because of the commitment made by TUPOCCers and our allies to ensure that the anti-racism and anti-oppression goals of the movement are reflected in both why we do our work and in how we do our work. We are heartened by the numbers of people of color attending conventions and meaningfully participating in the leadership of the organization. We stand as TUPOCC for anti-racism struggles worldwide, as we continue to commit ourselves to our universal goal of eradicating racism and all forms of oppression.

Like all struggles against oppression, we know that our work evolves and continues. We now watch as a new generation of TUPOCCers and allies take over and carry on, organizing nationally and locally, within committees, inside and outside of the Guild. We are fired up by this new generation, who challenges us to think in different ways and push for TUPOCC to grow. We are totally inspired and humbled by their work. We know that the struggle is one that will continue in the Guild, as it has existed in the past, and we will continue to push toward the realization of a National Lawyers Guild that represents a truly liberated organization. We know that it is not naïve or misguided to work to achieve that goal. As we look back at that early Sunday morning meeting of activist students of color in Birmingham ten years ago, we are reminded that the love we felt then for this work is the same love and gratitude we feel now. We remember fondly the laughter and joy we have all shared and we look with affection, admiration, gratitude and respect on those who marched forward with us believing that another world is possible.

In solidarity and peace, with love, towards justice, in struggle, and with respect,

Ranya, Renée and Russell

"TUPOCC was the reason why I joined the Guild. Without it, I never would have seen the NLG as a viable place for me to spend my energy, and I still believe that. TUPOCC remains one of the pivotal reasons for many if not most members of color to join and to remain in the NLG. With that I must say, that as I write this, NEC members have been fundraising online for the TUPOCC convention travel stipend for over two weeks, and there are less than 10 white contributors to the campaign. On this, the 10th anniversary of TUPOCC in the NLG, there could not be a more telling barometer of the continued need for TUPOCC's presence and push for anti-racist internal work within the Guild."

-Anne Befu, TUPOCC co-chair 2006-08

Local TUPOCC Chapters

New York

In the fall of 2012, National Lawyers Guild New York City Chapter members of color joined together to start our New York City regional chapter of The United People of Color Caucus. We as members of the NYC TUPOCC chapter had been discussing starting our own chapter for several years given the large under representation of members of color in the NLG's largest local chapter in the nation and given our various experiences in working in these circles as members of targeted communities the Guild purports to help. Specifically, we felt our voices in representing our targeted communities were not always welcome if not outright rejected, relegating us to a tokenized status and our communities' voices under represented in discussions about our own struggles. Further, our presence in general in the Guild, including New York, was not encouraged, anti-oppression analysis and trainings were met with hostility, and little to no racial analysis existed internally as to how members treated members of color, how they related to the communities of color they worked with, and their race politics generally. As a united front, we are pushing for our voices to be included and be central to this work, and for our communities and ourselves to have an equal seat at the table. We encourage other members of color to reach out and join us and our efforts. Please contact either Bina Ahmad at binaahmadesq@gmail.com or Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan at lyciaora@gmail.com.

Chicago

TUPOCC's Chicago Chapter had our first meeting on October 16, 2012 with the leadership of a couple of committed NLG-Chicago members. We hit the ground running with our first event in January 2013, which commemorated civil rights hero Fred Korematsu with a short film about his life and panel discussion about racial profiling during Mr. Korematsu's time and now. In May 2013, we sponsored "From Puerto Rico to Palestine: Colonial Domination and Political Prisoners," a CLE that explored the commonalities in the Puerto Rican and Palestinian experiences and the intersections between colonization and political repression. In June 2013, TUPOCC Chicago hosted a discussion and meal with Guild history maker Stan Willis about how to organize, lobby and legislate for social change.

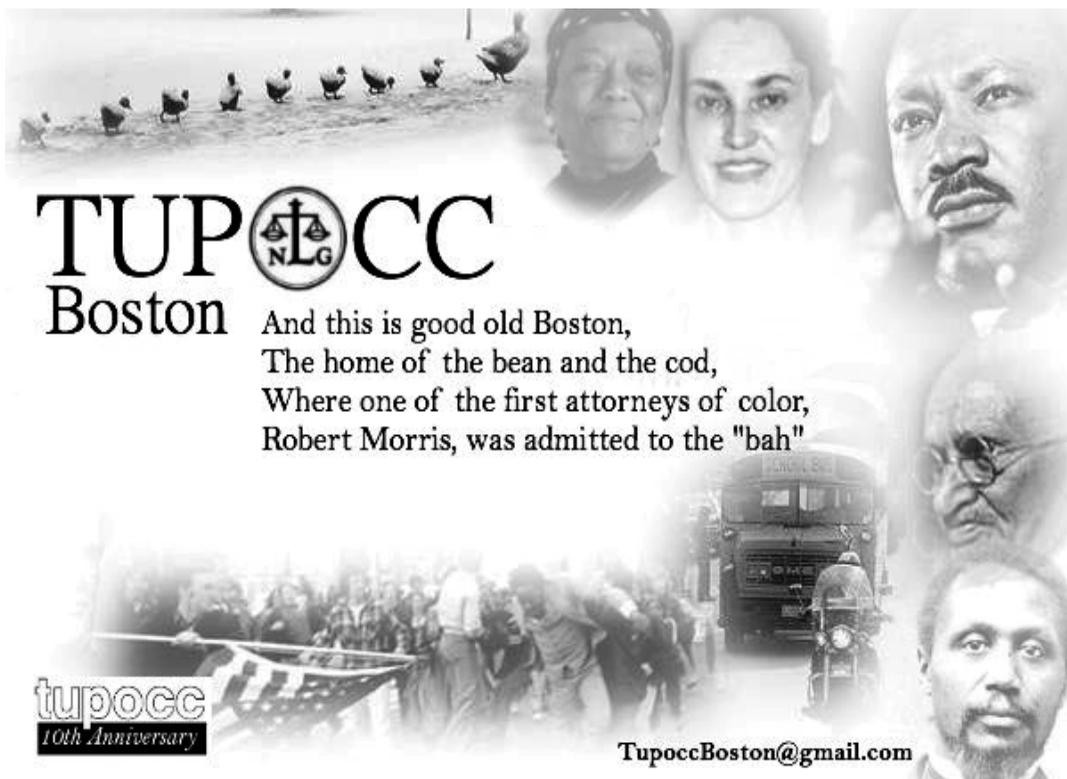
Since the fall 2013, TUPOCC Chicago has met every month to prepare for the 2014 Convention and ensure that the presence and voices of people of color at the Convention are strong. While preparing for the Convention, TUPOCC has also co-hosted and -sponsored many events with local organizations, such as Erie Neighborhood House, Mongolian American Student Association, Asian Americans Advancing Justice-Chicago, Sargent Shriver Poverty Law Center, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE). In January 2014 TUPOCC had the honor of again cosponsoring an event for Korematsu Day, especially made memorable

due to the fact that the event marked the first Korematsu Day recognized by the state of Illinois, thanks to the efforts of JACL. Most recently, TUPOCC worked with several organization to hold a successful DACA renewal workshop for the Mongolian and Korean communities. We are excited about continuing to organize events with local community organizations and being supportive of one another while working locally and nationally with other TUPOCC members! Contact us at: Chicagonigtupocc@gmail.com

Bay Area

TUPOCCers in the Bay Area have been meeting informally since 2008. In 2010 a group of TUPOCCers started a reading group around Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. Shortly after the reading group the chapter was formed. It's main event became a May Day fundraiser to fund the travel of the TUPOCC co chairs to the NEC meetings. In recent years, Bay TUPOCC has organized events with organizations, participated in direct actions, and functioned as a social and political organization for people of color in the Bay Area. This year Bay TUPOCC has planned quarterly events and is working in developing a Boycott Divestment Campaign with the Arab Resource and Organizing Center in San Francisco.

If you are interested in learning how to get involved with the Bay Area's TUPOCC chapter check out our Facebook page ("Bay TUPOCC") or email Gaby Lopez at gabacules@gmail.com or Aliya Karmali at aliya.karmali@gmail.com

A collage-style graphic for TUPOCC Boston's 10th anniversary. The top left shows a line of ducks on a beach. The top right features portraits of several African American men. The center contains the TUPOCC logo (a circle with a scale and the letters NLG) and the text 'TUPOCC Boston'. Below the logo is a quote: 'And this is good old Boston, The home of the bean and the cod, Where one of the first attorneys of color, Robert Morris, was admitted to the "bah"'. The bottom left shows a group of people holding a banner, with a 'tupocc 10th Anniversary' logo. The bottom right shows a bus and a person on a motorcycle, with the email address 'TupoccBoston@gmail.com' below.

TUPOCC
Boston

And this is good old Boston,
The home of the bean and the cod,
Where one of the first attorneys of color,
Robert Morris, was admitted to the "bah"

tupocc
10th Anniversary

TupoccBoston@gmail.com