

Poverty A Human Rights Violation
Freedom Bus Tour tries to Spread the Word

Published in The Oakland Tribune

December 5, 2000

In the wake of the current presidential election, it has become obvious that Americans are at a loss for who to turn to for leadership going into the 21st century. Too many Californians are faced with growing economic struggles while they watch politicians boast about the economic boom.

Most working people feel they're working harder and harder for less and less. The politicians don't talk about the growth in low wage, no-benefit jobs, or how many jobs it takes for a family to barely make ends meet.

They don't talk about economic insecurity or the rising misery index, a result of the economic issues that make many people worry so much about their kids, their futures and their quality of life.

But more than 50 years ago, the founding members of the United Nations adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, saying all people have a right to adequate food, housing, education and medical care. Poverty is a human rights issue, and too many Californians are suffering economic injustice, even in our current booming economy.

That's why the Women's Economic Agenda Project sponsored the Freedom Bus Tour. For two weeks following the elections -- Nov. 8 through Thanksgiving Day -- a band of hardy travelers, most of them poor, braved whatever punishment the weather and hard economic times dished out to ride a Freedom Bus from one end of California to the other.

Nearly 40 of us spent two weeks on the bus, traveling 2,600 miles with people of all races and all ages, sleeping in makeshift arrangements, eating through the kindness of community groups along the way, and stopping in 20 cities to hold rallies and teach-ins.

Our goal was poverty elimination and breaking the silence about poverty by bearing witness, speaking truth to power, and uniting the troops. We left behind 17 new Poor People's Economic Human Rights Committees.

Every day, we saw how so many working men and women, those with jobs and those unemployed, wage a daily battle against poverty -- and lose. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes every such example a human rights violation, right here in the richest country the world has ever known. And it's vital that all of us who see this make it known.

The trouble is, the nation's movers and shakers don't yet take seriously the idea that poverty is a human rights violation that must be abolished now. They also didn't take seriously the start of campaigns to abolish segregation and second-class citizenship for women.

We conducted the Freedom Bus Tour to spread the word that we need freedom: freedom from hunger, from homelessness, from joblessness, from addiction, from violence, from illiteracy and from criminalization of the poor.

We needed a Freedom Bus Tour to point out how globalization is accelerating the war on the poor by putting corporate profits way ahead of people in all areas, including health care. Many health care professionals have been leading fights to keep the hospitals open and accessible to the poor, while the health care industry puts hospitals under increasing pressure for profits.

We know that the fight for health is a losing battle for 7 million people without health care in California, and it's criminal that the state has to give \$590 million in unspent health care dollars back to the federal government.

The Freedom Bus Tour taught about the possibilities of the Just Health Care campaign for universal health care, and called attention to how the children of the poor are voiceless and health care is not treated as a fundamental human right.

This is why health care workers have hit the streets recently demonstrating against the encroachment on workers rights and fighting for patient's rights.

Our goals were to protest poverty, document human rights violations, and build new alliances between working and poor people. It's not just a fight against economic injustice -- it's a fight for our lives.

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