

# “We Are Meant to Get Free”

*An Interview with the Black and Brown Workers Collective*

by Caleb Gallus

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Organizers from Philly's Black and Brown Workers Collective (BBWC) reflect on their recent organizing work combating race and class oppression in the Gayborhood and Mazzoni Center, an LGBTQ focused health and wellness center, as well as their vision of how this work helps sow the seeds of a new society.

## How, when, and why was the BBWC formed?

**BBWC:** The BBWC formed in February 2016 to dismantle the systemic oppressions that exist within nonprofit institutions, at the time specifically HIV/AIDS nonprofit institutions that serve majority Black and Brown communities and claim to be working to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As Black and Brown, queer, and trans\* folks, we are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS, and this is not an accident or a product of our communities' lack of self-regulation. We know that these disproportionate rates are rooted in white supremacy. We decided that we cannot medicalize a social issue; not when mass incarceration, displacement, food deserts and lack of access to adequate and trustworthy medical systems exist. All of these factors make Black and Brown people—particularly those who identify as LGBTQ—most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Finally, for us, it has become a conflict of interest to continue to give our labor to a genocidal system.

## What is the history of the organizing work you have been doing to combat racism in the gayborhood and the Mazzoni center?

**BBWC:** Our first public and very successful campaign was one that targeted all of the bars in the gayborhood for their racist policies. One example was the “no tims, no hoodies” policies at gay bars such as iCandy and Woody's. There were no businesses in the Philadelphia gayborhood owned and/or ran by Black or Brown community members. The few spaces we had were extremely discriminatory. After experiencing the racial profiling firsthand and getting feedback from the community on their experiences, we did our first direct action targeting iCandy. However, what pushed this

campaign into the media and public eye was a recording that was released of iCandy's owner Darryl DiPiano calling Black patrons “n\*\*\*\*\*”.

Next, we went to the bar with tims [Timberland boots] and entered the space to shut it down. Community members now had language for their experiences and were taking to the streets to voice them clearly. As a part of challenging the racist policies and practices of gayborhood businesses and institutions, we cited that Philadelphia LGBTQ Liaison to the Mayor Nellie Fitzpatrick had failed Black and Brown LGBTQ folks by not responding to the unique needs faced by groups who are oppressed because of their sexual identities, gender identities and racial identities. We demanded her resignation. We also demanded that a community advisory board be formed to lead the process for selecting the next LGBTQ Liaison. Both these demands were met.

As a result of our organized and direct action work, the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations (PCHR) responded with a public hearing on racism in the gayborhood. This alone was a huge win for community members, as Black and Brown LGBTQ voices had never been centered, let alone captured on public record that would be used to inform necessary changes in policy. Those in power tried to say it was a “small core group of activists” making these claims. However, when hundreds of people packed the PCHR hearing, they could no longer deny that systemic racism was a reality for Black and Brown LGBTQ people in the gayborhood and in the broader society. Our elders who had been fighting to be heard for years on this issue, were finally heard. Youths' voices were centered, as their contemporary reality supported what our elders

had been saying for decades. From this hearing, new policies were formed and implemented immediately. These changes included a policy of zero-tolerance for discrimination in the gayborhood, along with mandatory implicit bias training that every bar in the gayborhood was mandated to complete.

Further, a report of findings was published after this public hearing. Included in this report were pieces of the BBWC's Call To Action, written after completing one-on-one interviews with frontline workers from many of these gayborhood HIV/AIDS nonprofit institutions. Two of the organizations cited for having particularly discriminatory policies were Philadelphia FIGHT and Mazzoni Center. Finally, the commission concluded that there was indeed “rampant racism” happening in Philadelphia's LGBTQ community. CEO Nurit Shein of the Mazzoni Center, one of the largest LGBTQ organizations in the

country, was interviewed shortly after the hearing on racism. Her response to the hundreds of Black and Brown LGBTQ community members was to call these testimonies “anecdotal” and dismiss the seriousness of the community's outcry. As a result, the BBWC decided to turn our energy towards the Mazzoni Center and to support the workers there who were now looking to us for direction. One of the demands the workers decided they wanted was the resignation of

CEO Nurit Shein. We strategized with them and took action demanding the resignation of Shein.

Another demand was that a doctor at the Mazzoni Center, Dr. Robert Winn, resign, as he had been accused by a line of patients of sexual misconduct and enforcing quid pro quo policies around treatment and medicine dissemination. The staff knew that Nurit Shein had known this for some time, yet she chose to protect the doctor instead of the vulnerable patients. It was

time to take action. The irony of Mazzoni Center leadership hosting a “Justice in Action” conference was too good to pass up. We disrupted this event and read out loud the demands of the frontline workers. The Mazzoni Center shortly thereafter fired Dr. Robert Winn.

They believed this would silence the workers and the BBWC. However, we decided we would not stop until every demand was met. The final direct action that pushed the campaign to a winning conclusion for workers and the community at large was an action where we led 70 Mazzoni staff out of the building during a staff meeting for a walk-out. The workers demanded that Shein resign before they would return. To ensure that this demand would be met, BBWC cofounder and collective member Abdul-Aliy Muhammad went on a med strike. Their med strike meant that for each day Nurit stayed in power, they would forgo their HIV medication. Just 3

days later, we received news of not only Nurit Shein's resignation, but also the resignation of Jimmy Ruiz, another corrupt person in power. We are now working with the new Philadelphia LGBTQ liaison to ensure that the community decides who fills these positions next.

## How do you see this work connected to building a world without oppression?

**BBWC:** The BBWC does root work. That means we go beyond diversity and inclusivity strategies. Time and time again, these strategies prove to be a band-aid for issues that need deep surgery. Diversity paradigms leave out a critique of Power. When we think of diversity, we have to consider Power, Privilege, and where each group and person is positioned within these very real systems of oppression. We cannot just talk about our differences and why it is important to coexist. Many institutions have used this language-turned-jargon to create the illusion of a non-discriminatory working environment, while in practice and policy they continue to disproportionately disenfranchise Black and Brown people. At the BBWC, we believe in pulling up these social inequalities by the root.

## How do you connect your day to day organizing tactics to a broader strategy to build power? What is your vision for how that strategy leads to a new society?

**BBWC:** We believe that one of the key components to Black Liberation is economic sovereignty

and power. When we speak of economic sovereignty, we refer to the ability to build our own infrastructures and systems. Part of our 2017 platform and an ongoing platform issue for us is becoming a cooperative. Our cooperative will serve as freedom schools, where political building for and amongst Black and Brown LGBTQ folks and our accomplices can exist outside of the constraints of a white supremacist system. It is very difficult to organize when the oppressor is your employer and you depend on them for a paycheck, for health insurance and for what at least feels like stability. We are training our minds and bodies to know and to live that we are the welders of our destiny. We have the Power to define our labor and the value of our labor.

When we speak of economic Power we are not referring to Black capitalism. We are referring to building economic power through organizing workers' collective bargaining power within oppressive institutions to shift the power dynamics and build our own spaces outside of these institutions so that we can become less dependent on oppressive systems and circumstances. Often, when incremental change is used by people in power, this operates as a tool of the oppressor. In an age when Black folks are murdered every 12 hours by the state, there is no time for incremental change. It is time for MOVE-MEANT. We are meant to move, to resist, to evolve, to get free. \*

\* Trans\* refers to people who are transgender and those who identify as genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, third gender or Two Spirit. Though not all people who use these terms identify as trans\*, the asterisk is meant to indicate inclusiveness.



BBWC FLAG BY KIKI PAINHAMMER GRIFFIN