



**REMEMBERING PAUL ROBESON IN RIGHTEOUS RESISTANCE:
FREEDOM FIGHTING FOR HAITI, PALESTINE AND OURSELVES**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AT THE CENTER OF ALL OUR COMMEMORATION and celebration of the magnificent and meaningful life and legacy of Nana Paul Robeson in this month of his coming-into-being, April 9th, must always be a recognition and raising up of his deep and defiant dedication to the freedom of African peoples and all the peoples of the world. A world renowned freedom fighter and soldier for all seasons, he reaffirmed that he “saw no reason why my convictions should change with the weather” or for “promise of gain (or) threat of loss.” Thus, he stood as Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune described him, as “the tallest tree in our forest” when intensified racism and rising fascism and McCarthyism ran rampant and ruined his and so many others’ careers and lives.

Freedom for him was a sacred principle and natural practice indispensable to what it means to be human, have hope, exercise rights, develop, flourish and find essential and ultimate meaning in life. And he saw freedom as a shared good and natural right for Black people and all the peoples of the world. Therefore, he dedicated his life and career to its pursuit and achievement, singing songs of freedom and struggle around the world, organizing, advocating, petitioning, marching and working for freedom to become and be a lived and living reality for us and all the peoples of the world. And he offered his life and death, his welfare and work, and his career, defiantly rejecting the promise of a comfortable and catered to life if he would only pursue another path, compromising his identity, ideals and integrity.

Although a committed internationalist, he assures us that we are morally and ration-

ally obligated to realize and respond according to the reality that the fight for freedom of the world begins where we are. And it then spreads out and links with other oppressed and struggling peoples of the world for achievement of the ultimate goal of a shared human freedom in the world. This struggle for freedom and other shared goods in the world was unavoidably anchored in his love of his people and his commitment to their cause of freedom. Speaking of this position, he stated that “This belief in the oneness of humankind . . . has existed in me side by side with the deep attachment to the cause of my own race.”

Here he reaffirms a central ethical understanding and position of African American people and culture advanced so beautifully by Nana Dr. Anna Julia Cooper who asserted that “We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country or condition.” Thus, he reaffirms our need to wage our freedom struggle not only to liberate ourselves, but also as a means of expanding the realm of freedom, justice and good in this country and the world.

Indeed, during his questioning in the McCarthy hearings which was dedicated to searching for grounds to suppress freedom of speech, association and the right to resistance, Nana Robeson defiantly claims his and his people’s right to be free and live free in this country and rejects the racist and fascist attempts to deny it verbally and politically. Thus, when asked if he is so critical of the U.S. treatment of Black people and praises other places, why he doesn’t leave the

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country and stay elsewhere, he responds saying, "Because my father was a slave here and my people died to build this country and I am going to stay right here and have a part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me away from it. *Is that clear?*" (emphasis mine)

His insistence on self-determination is ever-present and powerful. He declares that his primary allegiance and obligation is to his "own people," to their freedom, to justice, equal treatment and a good life for them. But he knows and teaches us we are a small-minded people and misunderstand our world-encompassing mission if we are only for ourselves in imitation of our oppressors. Thus, he would be in the vanguard of those advocating and asking for the liberation and self-determination of Haiti, Palestine and all the peoples of the world. He would advocate for the people of Sudan and Yemen, the Uighurs and Rohingya, and other oppressed and struggling peoples of the world.

If we wish to truly honor Nana Robeson and his legacy, then, we must do so in recognition and rightful response to the context and urgencies of our time as he did, and the struggles in Haiti and Palestine are defining moments and movements of our times even though Haiti does not yet have the attention due it. Thus, as he taught, in critical moments, we cannot equivocate, hesitate, half-step or hold back for a safer, easier or more acceptable time. Indeed, in the struggle against emerging fascism and Nazism he told artists, intellectuals and all of us, "We must decide where (we) stand now. We have no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict." Indeed, "The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear". For no one is neutral in the struggle between freedom and enslavement, independence and occupation, human justice and genocide.

He spoke of fascism and its further deformed political twin, Nazism, emerging internally and externally and the ruthlessness it was making against vulnerable populations and peoples. "Fascism is not respectful of persons. It makes no distinction between combatants," he stated, "It is imperialist and destructive of human progress and achievement, its heritage and futures and vulgarly and viciously committed to "the propagation of false ideas of racial and national superiority," and the telling of the Hitlerian big lie narrative about the oppressed and their right to resistance. And it is ultimately genocidal.

Clearly, we see signs of emerging fascism in this country in the self-declared aspirations of a presidential candidate to be a dictator, the militarization of the police and the rise of the surveillance state, the book-banning, the attempted erasure of Black history and culture and of other records and realities of America's history of unfreedom, injustice and oppression. And we see it abroad whether in Haiti or Palestine with savage sieges, brutal occupations, indiscriminate and saturation bombings, the destruction of homes, hospitals and heritage sites, schools, mosques, churches and always and everywhere children, women and men targeted, terrorized and murdered in mass. And there is also in these genocidal practices the wanton and willful destruction of water, food and sanitation systems and the testing of new weapons on defenseless populations.

Nana Paul Robeson would thank the churches and unions, which he saw playing a decisive role in resistance, for calling for ceasefire in Palestine. But he would also urge them to call and fight for an end to the occupation and savaging of Haiti by the U.S. and its European crime partners and for the self-determination and sovereignty of both peoples. He had admired the Haitian people, the Haitian Revolution and the Haitian liberator,

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Toussaint L'Ouverture, and aspired to portray him in film. And in an article supporting the right of resistance of the Vietnamese liberation movement, he stated that "Ho Chi Minh is the Toussaint L'Ouverture of Indo-China." Nana Paul Robeson was also a committed pan-Africanist who understood and embraced his African identity, supported the African liberation struggles, and engaged African culture as a part of his own identity and "indeed, a treasure store for the world."

HE SAW OUR PEOPLE AS A DECISIVE moral and social vanguard in this country and the world and called for leadership worthy of its historical mission in the world.

For he said, our struggle for freedom "represents a decisive front in the struggle for democracy in our country" and is critical to "the cause of peace and liberation throughout the world." Moreover, he urged full respect for and inclusion of women leadership in the liberation struggle and remembrance of the lessons of our history written in thought and practice by our women on the battlefield for freedom. Finally, he rightly reminded us of and reaffirmed our beautiful, creative, ethically sensitive and unconquerable spirit which must undergird, inform and guide us in all the good we imagine, seek and achieve in the world.▲

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