



**REMEMBERING THE WATTS REVOLT:  
A SHARED CONDITION, CONSCIOUSNESS AND COMMITMENT**

*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 08-29-19, p.A6

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HE ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1965 WATTS Revolt occurs in the context of a larger history of Black struggle, sacrifices and achievements: the assassination, sacrifice and martyrdom of Min. Malcolm X; the Selma March; the Voting Rights Act; the founding of our organization Us and the African American Cultural Center; and the introduction of the Black value system, the *Nguzo Saba*, which became the core values of the pan-African holiday *Kwanzaa* and of *Kawaida*, a major Movement philosophy of life and struggle. Moreover, placing the Revolt in its larger context, means first of all, seeing it, not as an isolated action or event, but as a part of our long history of revolt and resistance that stretches from the Holocaust of enslavement thru segregation and the Sixties, to the revolts and resistance of our time. Indeed, all these revolts are part of our larger struggle for liberation and our right to live lives of dignity, decency, security and flourishing.

It requires also that we understand Watts (as well as its sister sites of struggle), not only as a geographical site, but also as a shared condition, consciousness and commitment to righteous and radical struggle. This means a shared condition of oppression, a shared consciousness of the need and obligation to resist our oppression, and a shared commitment to the struggle to end our oppression. Indeed, the Revolt did not begin in Watts and only reached its center on the third day of the six-day uprising. The National Guard cordoned off South Central Los Angeles and Black people from all over L.A. often claimed to be from Watts, claiming not the place, but the shared condition, consciousness and commitment to radical and transformative struggle it represented.

The Watts Revolt, then, grew out of a long history of righteous resistance and revolt. The Watts Revolt, as well as revolts in Ferguson and elsewhere, was a collective act of resistance to achieve three fundamental goals and affirm and secure three basic rights: self-determination, self-respect and self-defense, a definition we also used to define Black Power. And these remain rights and responsibilities which we must

still secure and defend are: (1) to control our communities and have effective participation and representation in every critical social space and in every decision that affects our destiny and daily lives; (2) to be ourselves without penalty, oppression, disguise or erasure and to live our lives in culturally grounded and dignity-affirming ways; and (3) to defend ourselves against all forms of systemic and social violence—police, vigilante, economic, political, educational, etc.

Fifty-four years ago, on August 11, 1965, Black people of L.A. and especially of Watts rose up in righteous resistance to *police violence*, *merchant exploitation* and *systemic oppression*. They confronted the police who had for so long acted in our community as an occupying army and burned stores and other externally controlled institutions as sites and symbols of exploitation and humiliation. Thus, they did not burn what was theirs, but the sites and symbols of their oppression, their exploitation and degradation. At the end of the Revolt, there were 34 martyrs, 1,032 injured and 3,952 arrests. It was clearly a heavy price paid for a freedom from oppression which was their right by birth and being human. However, as Harriet Tubman taught, “We must go free or die, and freedom is not bought with dust”, but is achieved and secured with sacrifices of all kinds, including the lives of the oppressed and struggling people.

The tendency is for the established order to frame the narrative of the Revolt in negative ways, but we must frame it in ways that criticizes the society for its oppression of us and others; its failure to follow thru with commitments made under the pressure of our struggle, its deep-rooted hypocrisy which Malcolm X constantly condemned and its false claims which Fannie Lou Hamer continuously questioned. Also, we must not confuse *what the established order did not do with what we did, in fact, do*.

And we must not let the oppressor’s claim that the Revolt achieved nothing be used to discredit the right to resistance or deny the things we achieved against overwhelming odds. For not only did we struggle rightfully and righteously

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for our rights, but also, we built many organizations and institutions, achieved a new expanded sense of self and built an enduring model of struggle for oppressed and struggling peoples and groups in this country and around the world.

In the aftermath of the Revolt, there were community demands which spoke to the urgent need for racial and social justice. Our people first demanded, like today, the end to police violence. We began a systematic monitoring of police thru the Community Alert Patrol (CAP), securing pro bono legal services from Black lawyers who taught people their rights and often volunteered representation of them in cases of police violence. But eventually as the Movement declined, the police violence returned and reversal of gains began. Our people demanded also jobs and an equitable share of development resources; early education programs; teen programs; improved education; increased and effective representation in the political arena; adequate housing and health care; support for cultural institutions; and prisoner rights and real programs of rehabilitation and reentry.

During the early period, following the aftermath of the Revolt, there was also the building and strengthening of institutions and organizations to respond to the people's needs and demands. These included the Watts Health Foundation, Kedren Community Mental Health Center, King/Drew Hospital and Medical School, the Watts Summer Festival, Mafundi Institute, Ujima Village, the Black Congress, the Brotherhood Crusade, the Social Action Training Center, the African American Cultural Center (Us), the Organization Us, and other social change organizations as well as other new and reinforced formations and structures.

Moreover, there arose also a new sense of self, which Frantz Fanon tells us can only come

from struggle and which Dr. Martin L. King asserts was "the greatest victory of this period", i.e., "something internal". For "we armed ourselves with dignity and self-respect" and "we straightened our backs up".

We must then, learn from these struggles and intensify our struggle in the face of new and old realities. Among these are increased police violence; the continuing problems of gangs and drugs; increased homelessness and health issues; increasing class differences; mass incarceration; higher levels of poverty; and racist and class injustice deceptively called "disparities". Problems remain, but we have a new consciousness and an increasingly heightened commitment. We must continue to strengthen our collaborative and cooperative initiatives like with the Black Community, Clergy and Labor Alliance (BCCLA), a Black united front concerned with building what we have called since the 60s *operational unity*, unity in diversity, in order to increase our strength, coordinate our efforts and cooperate on common ground issues of racial and social justice, and the well-being and flourishing of our people. And we must rebuild the Movement.

**F**INALLY, WHAT CAN WE OFFER AS A WAY forward except to repeat and reaffirm the ethical and enduring message of our ancestors concerning life, love and struggle. And it is this: "Continue the struggle. Keep the faith. Hold the line. Love and respect our people and each other. Seek and speak truth. Do and demand justice. Be constantly concerned with the well-being of the world and all in it. And rebuild a righteous Movement which prefigures and makes possible the good world we all want and deserve, and work and struggle to bring into being."▲

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