Defending Affirmative Action
A Popular Movement for Social Justice

by Pedro Noguera
Berkeley, California

The fight for affirmative action finds us defending a policy that many had begun to take for granted. Though it was born out of the struggle for civil rights, affirmative action gradually gained wide acceptance at universities and among employers in the public and private sector. In fact, because affirmative action has been so firmly integrated into the infrastructure of mainstream American society, many people find themselves shocked at its present vulnerability.

Though many people of color have been critical of affirmative action because in many cases it has not benefited the poor as much as it has helped the middle class, affirmative action must be defended. To date, affirmative action constitutes the most meaningful and effective means devised by government for delivering the promise of equal opportunity. Without a policy that holds universities and employers accountable for who they admit the pledge to not discriminate is meaningless, and there is little doubt that most organizations would drift back to being mostly white. As a consequence of affirmative action, white women and people of color have gained access to higher education and professional jobs in such significant numbers that over the last twenty years there has been a dramatic rise in income for a growing number of individuals from these groups. Unfortunately, too many of those who have benefited most from affirmative action fail to recognize its connection to the struggle against racism in the United States.

Now we find ourselves confronted by a full-scale attack against affirmative action. Though thus far only the state of California has enacted anti-affirmative action policies via the UC Board of Regents and Governor Pete Wilson's brazen political opportunism, several states and the U.S. Congress have proposed legislation that would undo these policies. This is occurring at a time when progressive forces are largely unprepared to mount a counter-offensive. Students and a variety of civil rights groups have begun to mobilize in defense of affirmative action, but so far a mass movement capable of reversing this trend has not materialized.

Clearly, a mass movement will be necessary to counter not only the attacks on affirmative action, but the broader offensive directed at poor and working class people generally. Since the 1994 elections, right-wing Republicans have been moving with great speed to enact their reactionary contract on America. The shut down of the federal government is just an indication of how determined they are to see their vision for this country realized. So far, Clinton and his allies in the Democratic party have proven to be no match for Newt Gingrich and his gang, both because they agree with parts of that agenda (as demonstrated by Clinton's support for NAFTA and his administration's unwillingness to raise the minimum wage) and because they lack the conviction to meet the challenge forcefully.

Defending affirmative action and responding to the broader right-wing offensive is made difficult by the fragmentation and lack of shared vision that characterizes progressive people in the U.S. Several of the groups and individuals that have benefited from the civil rights struggle are now being manipulated to lead the attack against it. Its no accident that Black conservative, Ward Connerly, has become the spokesman against affirmative action in California, or that Asian Americans are described as the primary victims of the "reverse discrimination" that it supposedly causes. Moreover, many others are cynical toward the policy because its existence hasn't prevented the growth of poverty in our cities, nor has it or can it compensate for the glaring inequities that characterize education throughout this country.

Despite its limitations, and in spite of the obstacles, affirmative action must be defended. Racism is alive and well in America, and there is no reason to believe that universities and employers no longer need to be held accountable in ways that affirmative action ensures. Groups and
individuals who are being encouraged to see affirmative action as conflicting with their interests, must be educated about the ways in which the opportunities it creates benefit society as a whole. This must occur within the context of a larger effort to build a broad movement to counter the forces of reaction in this country.

The question is how. How do we overcome the fragmentation and hopelessness that characterizes progressive forces in many parts of the US. today? I believe we can only do this by linking the fight for affirmative action to the other issues that directly affect the quality of life of most people, and through concerted and strategic organization. The only way to counter the prevailing sentiment that each individual or group must protect their own interests even at the expense of others, is by making it clear that our collective efforts can be mutually supportive. Those concerned with health care, education or labor rights, must be made to see how those issues connect to immigrant rights, defense of affirmative action and more humane approaches to addressing crime. This kind of coalition building was given a boost during the Jackson campaigns in 1984 and 1988. It must be revived in the 1990s.

But perhaps organizing and coalition building must take a different form in the 1990s. My experience participating in the affirmative action organizing efforts at UC Berkeley leads me to believe that instead of focusing exclusively on bringing groups together on the basis of their racial identity or particular interest, that we must find ways to organize around a common set of interests and even a common vision for the future. Differences in outlook and perspective will certainly be present and create tensions, but a common vision is needed to overcome the ways we have been splintered and factionalized.

I am struck by the fact that many of the young activists I speak to are more interested in building a broad movement than they are in finding the comfort of a small group of people who think like they do. Some of the more enlightened have even come to see that building unity requires suppressing differences and finding ways to communicate with and organize people who may not think or look like you do. Interestingly, these young activists have learned some of these lessons on their own because so many of the veterans of past struggles are no longer actively participating in any sort of struggle. That too must change. In the months and years ahead, those of us who took a hiatus from political activity to raise a family, pursue a career or get an education, must get involved again. Its not good enough to complain about where things are heading. Each of us must find ways to get involved again and do what we can to build a popular movement for social justice, for as far as I can tell there is still no substitute for organizing.

The fight to defend affirmative action may be the best opportunity for doing this. The issue lends itself quite easily to coalition building. Moreover, because it was a concession won through past struggles, the effort to insure its preservation also represents a clear sign that those who fought in the past haven't just given up.

Winning this fight won't be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is. As Frederick Douglas pointed out long ago "Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and it never will." That was true then and its true now as well.

Dr. Pedro Noguera is a professor of education at the University of California, Berkeley. He is a former president of the Berkeley School Board. He is the father of four children.