RACIAL JUSTICE

Pro-Black Is Pro-Everybody

A Conversation with Cyndi Suarez and Isabelle Moses

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In this conversation between Cyndi Suarez, the Nonprofit Quarterly*'s president and editor in chief, and Isabelle Moses, Faith in Action's chief of staff, the two leaders discuss what pro-Blackness means for individuals and communities, and what a pro-Black organization looks like.*

Cyndi Suarez: **I'm excited to talk to you about Faith in Action. I know you've been working on the organization's transition for a while now, and I'd like to ask you some questions about that. But the aim of this conversation is to dig into pro-Blackness more generally. I want to put a finer point on what pro-Blackness means for people at different levels. So I'd like to start by asking you what pro-Black means to you in general, beyond organizations in the sector.**

Isabelle Moses: This is such a big and important question. I'll answer in the context of Faith in Action—since it's where I've had the opportunity to experience the question in a workplace setting—and also in the context of where I live.

I live in Detroit, Michigan. I've been here for about four and a half years. And one of the reasons I moved here was to be grounded more in Black culture. I grew up in a supersocialized, white context in San Francisco, going to private schools. Then I lived in Washington, D.C., for a long time. And I wanted to have a more rooted experience in Black communities. And Detroit, I felt, was a place where I could have that experience of being somewhere that really values and centers Black culture as just everyday life. I felt like I hadn't had that experience before. I'm Black, I grew up in a Black family and in a majority-Black neighborhood, but I was shipped out of my neighborhood to go to school, shipped out to schools across

the country. So, that sense of rootedness in Black community is something that I have been longing for. Unfortunately, the pandemic has set that back for me in some ways—because I learned that I don't actually have deep roots in Detroit, either, after two and a half years. You know, that takes time.

All this is to say, the reason I'm starting with Detroit is that it's the beginning of my personal grounding in Black identity and recognizing that "Black" is not one thing. I was a bit socialized around the notion that there's one way to be Black, particularly in majority-white spaces. Otherwise, you're going to be stereotyped as "one of those Black people," you know? It took my moving to Detroit to recognize the nuances of Black identity in a more powerful way and to internalize that I can be Black however I want to be Black.

CS: So, pro-Black means being rooted in that identity and community.

IM: Well, for me as an individual, yes. And it means connecting my identity, my lived experience, in a way that feels grounded. I've learned that it takes more than just having Black skin. What I've learned, at least for myself, is that because of the era that I grew up in—the colorblind era, the eighties and early nineties, when folks were embracing this kind of assimilation mantra—I needed to reclaim my identity as a Black person. Because the frame that you're asked to assimilate into is obviously a white normative frame. Reclaiming my identity as a Black person who was taught to assimilate into a white context has been a body of work for me. So, the bottom line for me is that I have to start with being pro-Black and embracing the mantra *Black is beautiful*, which wasn't always normalized, growing up.

CS: It's interesting hearing you describe this. It reminds me of my daughter, because she grew up here, obviously in a Black family and a Black neighborhood, but she also went to very elite schools, and she's had to navigate that. So, with all that said, what does a pro-Black organization look like? What does it mean to you? I know you've tried to build one, so I imagine you have a lot to say about this.

IM: Well, I think it starts with making sure you've got Black leadership. We operate at Faith in Action under the belief that if you take care of Black people, specifically Black women, everyone in the organization will be taken care of—because the needs of Black women in particular are often so overlooked. And Black women are expected to be the providers, the caretakers, the folks who do things without actually ever being asked, and a lot of that labor goes unseen, unrecognized, unappreciated. And if you start to pay attention to all of the things that Black women do to make an organization successful, and then you provide resources and support for that work to be compensated, to be appreciated, to be recognized, then you learn how much more people actually need in order to thrive in organizations.

And when you meet those needs—when you create space for people to take care of their families during the workday; when you create space for people to take meaningful vacations so that they get actual rest; when you create the conditions for really strong benefits and policies, so people's healthcare needs are provided for (and they're not worried about whether they can make their doctor's appointments on time, because they know that they have the time off to do that); when you create an environment where people aren't going to be pressured to deliver things at the last minute, because you build in time and space for thoughtful planning, so it doesn't end up on somebody's plate (often a Black woman's)—then you can create an organization where Black women can thrive. And if Black women are thriving, everybody is thriving. That's our fundamental belief.

CS: It's interesting that you said it has to start with Black leadership. So, an organization that doesn't have Black leadership wouldn't necessarily be pro-Black, even if they have Black staff?

IM: I have a hard time seeing how folks who aren't Black can understand what Black folks need in an organization. Truly. And how they would be able to resource it at the level that's required. That doesn't necessarily mean the top people all need to be Black; it just means you have to have meaningful representation of Black folks in leadership, in

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order for that ethos to get rooted all the way through the organization. I've worked in organizations where there were Black staff, but we didn't have enough power for things to change.

CS: Right. And I want to get into this more, because I know that you've been doing this work at Faith in Action, which is actually a network. What are the biggest differences that you've seen since you started making this kind of transformation? What are the changes that you're seeing that are the most meaningful in terms of the difference between *before* and *after*?

IM: I think one of the main things is how we relate to each other just on a day-to-day basis. When I started with Faith in Action four and a half years ago, it was a culture that had become toxic, for lack of a better word. I hesitate to put it like that.

CS: That's what they are sometimes. It's the truth.

IM: And I think it was because caretaking how relationships were evolving was not something that people were always paying attention to. And I think when you start to really pay attention to how people are actually feeling and how people are experiencing the culture—and you create space for conversations around that—you learn things that you might not have been seeing, because you were more focused on the work or something.

CS: Like what? Can you give an example?

IM: Well, I was hired at Faith in Action in large part because there was a lot of turnover of Black women staff both nationally and networkwide. And people started to ask the question, "What is going on?" And I do think it stems from this movement that organizations go through on the spectrum. You start with diversity—"We want more representation; we want more people who look like the people we work with every day in our organization." So, you hire folks, but you don't necessarily create the conditions for those folks to be successful. And so that's where you're moving toward inclusion—"Okay, I have a seat at the table, I can say what I want to say, and I feel included"—and equity—"My needs, which might be different from your needs, are being met." And I think when you're in the earlier stage of this evolution, organizations experience a lot of churn, because they haven't created the conditions for the folks that they've hired to succeed. When Faith in Action was in that place of hiring folks who were not set up for success, and we experienced the churn, we had to stop and ask, "What is going on? What needs to change for folks to feel supported and well-resourced in order to do their best work and, ultimately, stick around?" Because if you're in the business of movement and societal change, and you're constantly churning people, you don't make any progress. You're barely treading water. You're possibly drowning. And you can't win on the things that you care about with that type of churn. We were feeling like we couldn't move the needle on the issues we care about unless we paused and figured out how to take care of our people and resource folks in order to be able to stay in the work for the long term. And we're starting to see some early signs of results of that shift, whereby some pretty-long-tenured staff who've been able to ride this wave have been given the power to hire the teams that they want and to figure out what strategies we need—and they are excited. And for the folks who are tired, we're figuring out how to send them on sabbatical so that they can come back refreshed. We don't have to burn people out. That does not have to be the mode.

CS: That's really interesting. I like that you highlight the churn as an indicator of where you are. Of course, we see that, but I've never heard it articulated that way. And I'm also hearing you say that you're really flexible in terms of your organizational policies, and are aiming toward giving people sabbaticals. These are things that are considered to be very exclusive. Usually only senior people get sabbaticals, and very infrequently. I think I've only worked at one place that had sabbaticals. Can you say more about that? How do you decide to do these little things that can actually make a big difference, and that are not common?

IM: At Faith in Action, you have to be on staff for at least ten years before you're eligible for sabbatical. We have enough long-tenured staff that that's quite a lot of people. Over the last few years, we've had about one person a year

taking a sabbatical, just so as to minimize the impact on the organization as a whole. But now we have a backlog of people who are eligible, so we need to create a sabbatical schedule so that everyone who's eligible gets their turn in a way that can still minimize disruption overall.

CS: And how much time do they get?

IM: Depending on what they need, anywhere from three to five months. And they can put together a plan for the time. Our colleague Denise Collazo used her time to write a book, *Thriving in the Fight*. Denise has been organizing for twenty-five years and is now our chief of external affairs. And she talks a lot about how that sabbatical was one of the ways in which she got the space that she needed to do the reflection for that book. So, she was able to use that time off to get clear about how it was that she was able to stay in the work.

Denise was an innovator of our Family–Work Integration program, where we strive to reduce meetings on Fridays and limit email. It's not a day off, but it is a day that you can use to meet whatever needs you have—to catch up on any work from the week that didn't get done, or sleep in a little and go to a gym class, or take your mom to a doctor's appointment, or take care of that errand that you've been meaning to do—so that you don't end up feeling like there's no time for those activities that are really important for one's well-being. If you center well-being, then you create more opportunity to do better work.

CS: I love that. It's interesting, because people often think that you won't get good work if you do that. But you're saying that you're seeing more good work from having these policies.

IM: Absolutely. And people are happier. We have a much happier culture. Some evidence, for me, is that a consultant we recently hired to project manage a big event that we're organizing, said to me, "I see how hard you are all working to practice different kinds of cultural norms than what you would typically see in an organization [your size]. . . . I can feel it." We're trying really hard to center people as human beings—not as, like, widgets. She needed to take her son to an appointment, and I said, "Oh, yeah, no problem, we'll just reschedule." And she said, "Really?" Or, you know, you can

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be late to an appointment because of a thing you need to do. No problem. If there's good communication, then do what you need to do. And you don't have to pretend you're doing something else. We can hold space for each other's humanity.

CS: Is there anything that you want to do that you haven't gotten to do yet at the organizational level?

IM: Well, we want to make sure that our teams are resourced. With the gift that we got last year from MacKenzie Scott, we now have the resources to make sure that people can work reasonable hours. If there's a gap in the organization, we can create a job description and recruit for it. We don't have to operate out of scarcity; we can operate out of abundance. And that's so exciting. I think our organization is going to grow, and that we'll have more opportunity for impact. We have an aspiration to be the global spiritual and political home for people who are seeking communities of belonging and want to create the conditions for our democracies to actually work for all of us—which we know is not true right now. And, you know, as people of faith who don't necessarily go to church every Sunday. I identify as a person of faith who doesn't go to church every Sunday—I feel like I get a lot of my spiritual needs met at work, which is super awesome for me. And I feel like I don't have to go to church if I get my spiritual needs met at work.

CS: Ah, that's interesting. How do you get that? How do you get them met at work?

IM: We have these beautiful rituals. For example, that project manager I mentioned who's come into our culture has been amazing. She's totally figured out that one of the ways we build community is through check-in questions. We recently had an hour-long meeting with twenty-five people, and we spent twenty-five minutes of the meeting with everyone calling in the ancestor that they wanted to bring into the space, and then we spent thirty-five minutes getting all the business done that we needed to do. And when you spend twenty-five minutes hearing each other's personal stories, that's a way of centering Blackness, centering Black culture, and centering the fact that we are more than the people in this room. We are all the people who came before us. We are all of the wishes and aspirations that our ancestors had for us, and often have exceeded those. And it was really beautiful. It was emotional, how much people were sharing about how proud we are to have potentially exceeded our grandparents' or great-grandparents' expectations—for the work that we're doing, the way we are living in the world, the opportunities we have that they never had but for which they created those stepping-stones so that we could step into these opportunities. And when you really create space for that conversation it builds community, it builds deeper trust, it builds deeper relationship, and it allows for better conditions for the work. And then you can spend thirty-five minutes doing the work, instead of spending an hour potentially griping about the work and not actually getting the work done. Because you have started by creating conditions for a powerful conversation.

CS: You know, it's funny, I experience that as well. And I think of it as a people-of-color way of being. You don't do anything until you talk about the family and how things are—there's the whole personal aspect. I remember years ago when I was doing organizing, and it was when I was starting, and I was in a Latinx neighborhood. And I remember it took so long, because everywhere I went, I had to come in and sit down to eat or something. I couldn't get them to just give me the information I wanted. And it's very different, when you go to a meeting and there isn't that kind of tradition. If you go to Puerto Rico, where my family's from, it's the same. The relationship to time is very different. It's more fluid, it's more qualitative. It's not as quantitative—you know, you have to start at this time, and you have this much time. I never thought about that until now—how the way that we use time and hold meetings is very culturally based.

My last question to you is about the field, in terms of the sector. What does a pro-Black sector sound, look, taste, feel like?

IM: That's a hard-to-answer question. I'm going to take a detour here. You wouldn't be hearing about Donald Trump talking about white men feeling like they're the victims of racism. It's not that.

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CS: You wouldn't be hearing that?

IM: You wouldn't be hearing that. Pro-Blackness isn't a zero-sum game. It shouldn't be seen as anti anything else. I think right now there's this kind of binary orientation. But I think we need to understand pro-Blackness as a way of saying pro-everybody—and by that I don't mean the equivalent of "all lives matter"! What I do mean is that if you're pro-Black, you are actually pro-everybody, because you can't be pro-everybody if you're not pro-Black. So, if everyone felt comfortable saying, "I'm pro-Black" (because that's the only way to know that I'm actually pro-everybody), and if everyone's organization lived that, you could hold different kinds of cultural value systems in harmony with one another, not in competition with one another—where people feel free to run meetings the way they want to, because they're doing it out of their authentic expression of their own identity, versus, "This is the way I was taught at business school, and that's the only way to do it." I think you can create space for lots of different ways to be. And, ultimately, Black identity has historically been the most marginalized—so, if you don't hold space for that identity to be centered, then you do create these kinds of false binaries.

CS: I was talking to a big funder a few weeks ago, and they wanted to talk to me about power, because it's one of the things that they're centering. I think it's a mostly white organization, whose mission is to support grassroots movements, but they don't really talk to grassroots people. And they're very concerned about having to give up power. So, when you say that being pro-Black doesn't mean you're anti something else, that it doesn't take anything away from others, it brings that conversation I had to mind. Also, I was doing an interview earlier today with someone who said, "You have to figure out what you are willing to give up." So, I keep hearing this as almost a wedge—it doesn't mean you have to give up anything, but some people think that you *do* have to give up something. Can you say more about this?

IM: I guess it depends on what people value, what they perceive as giving up versus not giving up. So, if people value having the top job, and if that's a zero-sum thing—where the only way you can express leadership or power is by being the top of whatever the food chain is, or the apex predator, so to speak—then yeah, you might feel like you're giving up something. But if you can reframe what it means to be powerful, then I think we have a chance. So, if we can reframe the conversation around power—where it's just as powerful to give away money as it is to be the CEO of something, or it's just as powerful to think about, Okay, how do I take all my privilege and apply it? I mean, I know I hold a certain amount of privilege as a fairly well-educated Black person with an upper-middle income doing grassroots community-organizing work in an infrastructure-type role, and I've decided to apply my privilege to creating conditions for our organization to thrive. I thought to myself, I can apply my skill set to creating more conditions for more profit-centered organizations to make more profit—which I used to do—or I could explore how I actually really think about organizations. Because I love organizations—I think organizations are dynamic, interesting, living beings. And if I apply my privilege toward that, I'm giving up on maximizing my profit potential as an individual. I could go make a ton more money in the corporate sector. I'm choosing to give that up, because I believe that I will get so much more back through this contribution in this way.

So, it just depends on how people think about what the trade-offs are. And I think if we can collectively reframe the trade-offs, then we get closer to creating more conditions for more people to thrive—which, in my opinion, is way more rewarding than having the most money that I could possibly have for myself.

CS: I'm intrigued by what people say about this, because it is a point of tension. Another question I have is around this concept that the Black community is the most marginalized. Because when we started to develop this edition on building pro-Black organizations, we heard from Native people who were like, "Why? Why Black people?"

IM: That's a fair point.

CS: I remember being at a conference a few years ago, and there was a sheet that was given out that had this gradient of how marginal people were, and that was the point of contention: whether Native or Black needed to flip or not. It was a big thing. So I'm wondering how you would answer that. The

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way I responded to these questions regarding this edition was, "We are inviting you to support pro-Black, just as we invite Black people to support pro-Indigenous." And that was enough, but it was a very interesting challenge. I'm wondering if you see that tension, and what you think about it.

IM: I think it's a totally fair question. And in our organization, while we believe very much in being pro-Black, we don't necessarily start with that language. We really believe in building a multiracial coalition of the willing, so to speak. And we very much see Native American communities as part of that—and to your point, there are contexts in which anyone can win the oppression Olympics, right? There are contexts when not just Native folks, not just Black folks, but Latinx folks have been really, really marginalized in our society. So, I guess I'm less interested in the oppression Olympics aspects of it and more interested in how we actually take the original sin of America—which is a combination of genocide and slavery—and *together* think about how to create conditions for people to thrive. We don't have as many Native folks in our community of the coalition of the willing as we would like. We would like to create a bigger tent and for more people to see themselves as part of it, as part of this movement we're building. And when we talk about Indigenous communities, we're not just talking about U.S. Indigenous communities; we're talking about Indigenous communities all over the world.

CS: Is Faith in Action global now?

IM: We have activities in El Salvador, Rwanda, and Haiti. And we have opportunities for expansion in other parts of the world, too. So, yeah, ultimately, we do have a vision for being even more of a global organization than we are today.

CS: That's great. Is there anything else you want to say about pro-Blackness?

IM: Yes. There's pro-Black, and then I think what we at Faith in Action tend to say more is, there's centering Blackness in the context of a multiracial vision for society. So, I think we try to find the nuance there, so that pro-Black is seen as part of a bigger constellation of folks who are part of it. At Faith in Action, we're trying to find ways to talk about it so that Latinx

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folks and white folks and *everybody* can see themselves as contributing to this vision that we have for the world that isn't just about pro-Blackness but about recognizing that the Black experience is a particular experience that we need to pay attention to.

CS: Yeah, I've heard from Latinx people who've written for us saying that we're covering a lot of pro-Black stuff and not enough Latinx stuff—and I'm thinking, Well, those are not mutually exclusive, but okay.

IM: Yeah, we're trying to thread the needle. A big part of our work is immigrant justice and pathways to citizenship—which is not just a Latinx experience, obviously. But we see that as an important pillar of democracy building—making sure that everyone who lives here contributes to our society, has a right to say how our society's major decisions get made. And so we want to make sure that we're thoughtful about that.

CS: Thank you so much, Isabelle. I wanted to dig into these particular levels of pro-Blackness and start to define them a little bit more—so, I appreciate this conversation.

IM: Thank you, Cyndi. It's great to connect. Take care.

CS: You too.

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