

EDITORIAL

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"Along the Color Line"

Labor Organizing And The Black Poor

The most important election to take place this fall was largely unreported in the press. There were no public debates, no campaign slogans or posters, not even a bumper sticker. There weren't even any candidates running for office. This election was not about personalities, but power. At stake was potentially the economic future of millions of poor people across the country.

Since the passage of the draconian 1996 welfare bill, the survival of several million poor women and children, the majority of whom are blacks and Latinos, become at risk. Hundreds of thousands of Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients have been forced into various "workfare" schemes. In New York City, for example, many AFDC recipients are required to work 20 or more hours each week in order to receive their modest payments.

These women usually work in jobs normally associated with the lowest wages: cleaning public toilets and streets, mopping hospital floors, picking up litter in subway stations. Few women receive proper equipment for their jobs. Health and safety safeguards are virtually nonexistent. Frequently women assigned to work outside are not even provided with toilet facilities.

Several decades ago, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, known as ACORN, began building a progressive, human rights movement among America's poorest and most oppressed people. Today ACORN

has over 200,000 members. In its latest initiative, ACORN began a campaign in New York City to achieve union representation status for workfare workers.

Some political "experts" thought that ACORN's efforts to organize AFDC recipients was quixotic at best. Welfare mothers, for the most part, have no personal history or experience in unions. Besides, organized labor had traditionally viewed poor people's problems and concerns as being irrelevant to its own interests.

This October, New York City's 35,000 workfare participants were given the choice to determine whether they desired to have union representation. Over a period of four days, about 17,300 people cast ballots at 250 polling sites across the city. The election results were clear: almost 17,000 workfare workers voted in favor of organizing a union, with barely 300 voting against. The vote showed without a doubt that "welfare mothers" recognize the exploitation of labor inherent in the workfare program.

Representatives of Republican Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani immediately dismissed this overwhelming mandate for union representation. Randy L. Levine, New York City's Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, protested that because welfare is supposed to be "temporary", that it made no sense for "welfare recipients to become city employees." ACORN organizers immediately challenged the Giuliani administration to meet with them, with the goal of improving working conditions for workfare workers.

perspectives



BY PROFESSOR
MCKINLEY
BURT

The North Will Rise Again, III

The poet Robert Frost said, "writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net." And a blatant disregard for the 'rules of the game' can derail even the initial phase of a well-planned enterprise like the "Alberta Food Project."

But enough, already, of the specific disabilities of the chosen community group we sought to interest in the project. Except to say that, for the on-coming generation and any others planning "Community-Owned", economic development, such real-time, experienced-based models are needed - whether they ended in success or were aborted. Refer to last week's article.

This is not to say that those Americans who have long-suffered from traumatic and institutionalized economic limitations do not need or deserve governmental intervention e.g. minority or 'set aside' contracts, Affirmative Action. Without that recognition and intercession in a vicious and racist circumstance, financial, cultural and political parity never will be achieved.

For the moment, we restrain ourselves from any caustic comments on the hypocrite segment of those groups whose shrill screams for a "color-blind America" could cause you to almost forget certain facts

This is the blustering crowd that institutionalized racism, creating an urgent need for federal intervention to prevent a further descent into an urban social and economic disaster for us all.

As my black neighbor put it during a loud abusive commentary addressed to some construction workers having their lunch next to his property; "That's easy for you to say. You've been free since you landed on Plymouth Rock, enslaved the Africans, slaughtered the Indians, invited over tens of millions more European immigrants - and, then, rewrote the constitutions of the craft unions to read, 'for white males only;'"

'Bill' has been reinforcing his point by giving me rides up and down N.E. Alberta Street and M.L.K. Blvd. where so much new construction is going on.

He has promised me five dollars for every black seen operating any machinery, tool or device more sophisticated than a shovel or a hammer. So far, I'm still broke.

But, meanwhile, back to my "All American" concept of business development and ownership by community residents who 'only happen to be minorities or women' - and whose independently-managed operations would be unfettered (or controlled) by any federal financial or 'social' liens, or cultural encumbrances. In other words, entrepreneurship in the style of the "Alberta Food Project." Or as 'Bill' would say, "just like white folks."

My comfort level and successes with this inclusive position of either complete independence for those endowed with the necessary skills and experi-

ence, or a reasoned assistance where both the need and the capacity to benefit are demonstrated - can be attested to by either of the following successful business leaders in our community. Both took my business and urban economic classes at Portland State University.

Sam Brooks of the "Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs" and Herman Grimes, President of "Coast Janitorial," and there are many more, too numerous to name, who completed that series of business courses and have gone on to either chart new seas or to successfully model my own business experiences or my industry experiences; Service, manufacturing, retail - accounting, shipping, computers.

Next week: concluded 'one-more-ounce' as we append some necessary observations; "better information retrieval is needed - using your cultural base and cohesion to your advantage, but avoiding resegregation in a narrowing world."

Vantage Point

The Sell out In New York: When Pragmatism Replaces Principle

By RON DANIELS

Rudolph Giuliani, Mayor of New York, is the epitome of a new wave of right wing politicians who have come to power in the last decade espousing policies and programs in direct opposition to the interests of people of color and poor and working people. Indeed, it was Rudolph Giuliani who won the mayoralty in 1993 by bashing former Mayor David Dinkins and accepting the support of the Police Benevolent Association of the New York Police Department at a drunken, profanity filled, racist rally on the steps of City Hall. Rudolph Giuliani, like so many right wing politicians around this nation, was swept into office by the White backlash against the progress of Black people and other people of color during the era of 60's.

In the face of this kind of right

wing record, how is it possible that prominent Black political and religious leaders and liberal-progressive labor leader could line up in support of Rudolph Giuliani in the recent mayoral election in New York? Such notable figures as Congressman Floyd Flake, Congressman Augustus Towns and stalwart labor leaders like Stanley Hill of District 37 AFSME and Dennis Riveria of I 199 Health and Hospital Workers gave their stamp of approval to a mayor who has given tax breaks to Wall Street while offering no meaningful plan for job generation or economic development for inner-city neighborhood and communities. His honor has been a prime proponent of warfare which threatens to undermine the security/stability of workers with good paying union jobs within the municipal workforce. In addition,

in a city where hundreds of thousands of Black and Latino students are compelled to attend low performing schools, Giuliani drastically reduced the education budget further damaging the chances for these young people to attain a quality education. Rudolph Giuliani's major claim to fame is a dramatic reduction in crime. New Yorkers are said to be feeling much safer these days. Police brutality and misconduct, however, have noticeably increased as Giuliani's aggressive policing policies have resulted in scores of cases of police brutality and murder. People in inner-city neighborhoods, particularly young African American, Latino and Asian males feel less secure as they daily face the threat of harassment, abuse or even death at the hands of renegade cops. This is the man that some prominent

African American leaders and stalwart labor leaders endorsed in the recent mayoral campaign.

In making this fateful decision these "respected" leaders intentionally or unintentionally sold out the interests and aspirations of the masses of Black people, other people of color and poor and working people. In most instances these leaders meant well, they were simply being "practical" in going along to get along in order to have access to the winner in the hope of garnering some benefit for their limited constituency or for themselves. They chose the prospect of gaining "divisible" patronage/benefits, those benefits that might accrue to an individual or a narrow constituency over "indivisible" benefits, those benefits that accrue to an entire group or class. They placed pragmatism over vision, values and principle. They abandoned the many in the interest of a few.

Houston, Yes! - Hatch, No!

RAINBOW PUSH COALITION

Election day brought some good news, by way of the Lone Star State. The very last state to surrender during the civil War, Texas is not normally a place where one would begin the search for justice and equality.

However, the voters of Houston stood tall, by voting to preserve the city's affirmative action program, thereby proving that not all Americans are fooled or scared by right-wing race-baiting. (At the same time, they gave Lee Brown a strong first-round lead in his attempt to become the city's first African American Mayor.)

What are the lessons from our victory in Houston?

*First, this vote shows that people are not automatically ready to resegregate. (This also makes the California situation even more shameful, as Texas voters have now acted more decently than Pete Wilson's followers.)

*Second, the Houston vote demonstrates that bold leadership from white politicians, as part of a broad coalition, can make a huge difference. Mayor Bob Lanier stood strong on the side of justice in this battle, making the case to preserve and pro-

tect affirmative action. He didn't end it; he defended it. The contrast with the Democratic Party in the Clinton Administration is stark. Mayor Lanier stepped forward and fought back; most other prominent Democrats have remained in hiding.

*Third, this initiative victory in Houston reminds us that an early start is critical to our ability to overcome the other side's huge funding advantage. This early start will be vital as the anti-affirmative-action right wing moves to other states next year, such as Florida, Colorado, & Washington.

*Fourth, this victory reminds us that we can win if we stay focused on our priorities. Reverend Jackson spent the last weekend before the election in Houston, working the churches to boost voter turnout. This election was the most important one on the ballot for those interested in preserving Dr. King's dream. We fought back hard there, and we won.

The people of Houston sent a message of decency to the rest of the country. If we hear it, we can save the dream. We hope it is heard in the Supreme Court. We hope it is heard in the White House, and in California.

Sadly, it is obvious that Houston's message will not be heard by Orrin Hatch (R-UT), who has chosen to sully his career with an undeserved, unprecedented, racially-charged attack on Bill Lann Lee, President Clinton's nominee to serve as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights.

Hatch's decision is mean-spirited, an abuse of power, an insult to Asian-Americans.

Karen Narasaki, Executive Director of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, put it this way in The New York Times: "Just a few months ago he [Hatch] said about a white male nominee, Joel Klein, 'I don't agree with all his views, but he's qualified and he's the President's choice and he de-

serves the chance.' Now when presented with Bill Lee it's a totally different standard."

This is a shameful episode for Orrin Hatch, and for the Republican Party which seems poised to join him in defaming one of the best qualified, most decent, most talented Americans ever to be nominated for this post.

Bill Lann Lee's story symbolizes the American Dream the conservatives claim to stand for--born in Harlem, of a father who immigrated to America with no money, worked in a laundry, and volunteered to serve in the Air Force during World War II.

Bill played by the rules, too, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude from Yale, and then from Columbia University Law School. He has spent his life working on behalf of civil rights, and lists endorsements even from his previous opponents. (Perhaps Senator Hatch would like to match up Lann Lee's qualification with those of Clarence Thomas... Yeah, right!)

Bill Lann Lee is an American success story; but he's about to become another victim of a vicious, partisan, ideological battle. It's a shameful episode. The right wing is taking no prisoners.