

# OPINION

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## No Human Being is Illegal

### Immigration proposals dehumanize people

Editor's note: The following excerpts are from a speech Sen. Avel Gordly delivered to a rally for immigrant workers:

By SEN. AVEL GORDLY

The first thing that I want to say to you today is that no human being is illegal!

I want to tell you something about being "illegal." When Oregon's Constitution was enacted in 1857, it declared all African-Americans within the state's boundaries "illegal." The Oregon Constitution stated that no black person could live anywhere in this state.

Such is the power of bigotry and hate.

The native people, who had inhabited these lands for 10,000 years, had it even worse. They were made "illegal" in their own homes! They were starved, decimated by diseases brought by the white settlers, and their ancestral lands stolen. This is the power of bigotry and hate.

In 1906 and 1910, Oregon voters—all white men—voted to continue to deny women the right to vote. Women voters were "illegal" in the state. In 1910, these privileged white men specifically denied women taxpayers the right to vote. Oregon women did not win the right to vote until 1912.

During World War II, people of Japanese ancestry were declared "illegal" and entire families were sent to internment camps. That was the power of bigotry and hate.

A black person could not live in this state legally until 1926. Those that did, did so at the risk of imprisonment and worse. Some members of the state legislature were openly members of the Ku Klux Klan.

We stand here today next to Broadway Avenue. Before 1952, there was no restaurant on that street that would serve black people. There was no department store that would allow black customers to try on clothing. The hotels would not rent rooms to black people.

The Public Accommodations Law of 1953 forced them to open their doors to people who look like me. Such is the power of the law.

A few good people from Portland and

other places went to Salem for 18 consecutive legislative sessions—36 years!—before racial and ethnic discrimination in public places became illegal in this state.

My father was a Pullman porter on the Union Pacific railroad. My mother was active in church and in women's organizations. Born American citizens, but in those not-so-long-ago days of redlining, entire neighborhoods were off-limits to black homeownership.

History tells us that our oppressors will try to divide us.

In 2002, I was the chief petitioner for a Constitutional amendment that at long last removed the remaining racist language from the Oregon Constitution. The voters overwhelmingly supported the amendment, but 352,027 Oregonians voted to keep the language in!

particularly people of color, and particularly people who speak languages other than English.

On the other side of this issue, opposing you—here in this state—is a large group of people, well-financed and entrenched in power, with their hate radio shows and a long history of support for causes that seek to marginalize and dehumanize and criminalize people of color and poor people no matter how long they have inhabited this place, and no matter how great, how honorable have been their contributions to our nation.

Next January, the Oregon Legislature will convene, and we can anticipate that some legislators will draft laws like the Sensenbrenner bill before Congress.

They will use essentially the same arguments that were used to condone slavery,



*They will use essentially the same arguments that were used to condone slavery, that were used to deny free blacks the right to live in the state of Oregon.*

You should know that in 2005 the voters in Alabama went to the polls to decide whether to remove outdated racist language in their state constitution. These laws required segregated schools, and enacted poll taxes designed to keep African Americans from voting. More than 600,000 Alabama voters voted to keep the language in, and it is still there today.

Just between these two states, then, Oregon and Alabama, we can count nearly a million voters—actual voters—people who will turn out and vote—who have no qualms about dehumanizing other human beings.

Does it surprise you to know that until recently, farm workers in Oregon not only did not have the right to meal and rest breaks, but Oregon law specifically excluded them alone—among all the different categories of employment—from these rights that we all take for granted.

Now there is another movement in Congress that would further dehumanize people who are born in other countries,

that were used to deny free blacks the right to live in the state of Oregon, that were used to imprison innocent Japanese families during World War II, that were used to prohibit Chinese people from emigrating to America, that were used to prohibit women from voting, that were used to deny Native Americans the right to speak their own languages, to live in their own homes, even to survive as human beings.

That is the nature of the opposition we face today, that we will face tomorrow, next week, next month and next year.

They will attempt to deny basic medical care to immigrants; they will attempt to deprive impoverished people striving to build a better life for their families of opportunities for education, employment, and of every basic human dignity.

But we will meet that opposition with organization, commitment, dedication, and voices raised in support of justice!

Sen. Avel Gordly represents northeast and southeast Portland in the Oregon Legislature.

## Letters to the Editor

### Community Must Stand Up

There I was on my way to the End-the-War, Begin-the-Peace rally on March 19. A rally that I would later learn was one of the largest protests in Portland history and the largest anti-war rally in the world.

I was feeling excited to know that soon I would be standing side-by-side with people of other communities, including my own.

I just knew that people of my community would come out in full force to show support for the troops fighting the war in Iraq.

A war that's under the Bush and Cheney administration. A war that's taking money from healthcare, education and children here in the United States. A war that's killing not only men and women, but children in Iraq. And a war that is making the rich, richer while the working class and the poor fall more and more into poverty.

To my amazement, there was only about 75 to 100 Afro Americans that attended the rally. A rally that was so important to all people.

We as a community must show our support for the troops that's fighting on the front lines giving up their young lives. We must band together and have our voice heard against this outrageous war. We cannot just talk among each other about the wrongdoings of Bush and Cheney. We must take a stand against Bush and Cheney.

I was expecting to see church group after church group, organization after organization from the community. Other than the Freedom Socialist Party of Portland and Rev. LeRoy Haynes Jr. of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, out of 160 organizations, I did not see one organization from my community.

We must come together to fight against Bush who not only breaks the law but feels as if he's above the law. We must fight the Bush Administration with whatever we got, and that's the power of the people from the young to the old.

We the people of the community must organize from church to church, from organization to organization. We must work together before our loved ones and friends return home in a casket.

There is power within the people. Stand up and believe in yourself. Revolution is right here in the U.S. It's time to take it to the government. It's time to make a change.

What we do today will be based on what will happen tomorrow. Power to the people.

Gary Clay Sr., Northeast Portland

### Do Illegal Immigrants Really Take Our Jobs?

The young black man hesitated as he stood outside the small furniture manufacturing shop in South Los Angeles. He was dressed neatly, and he was well groomed. He eyed the building warily. The sign on the narrow glass door in English and Spanish, read "help wanted" and trabajo aqui. The opening was for a shop helper, mostly to sweep up and do routine clean up and maintenance. It did not require any education or special skill. It paid minimum wage, as did the thousands of shops that dotted the area. The company had no employee health care plan, or other benefits. After a moment he went in and politely asked for an application. The petite receptionist, a young Latina, handed him an application form, with an airy nonchalance. She curtly suggested that he fill it out and bring it back. When he asked if there would be an interview, she haltingly said only if there was a position open. The young man looked perplexed, glanced at the help wanted sign, politely thanked her and left. A couple of hours later two other young Latinos came in to apply. One was immediately hired. The other was told that another helper job might open up within the next few days. However, the workers in the shop, as they were in nearly all the other shops in the area were Latinos, a large percentage of who were illegal immigrants.

There were no other blacks, whites, or even English speaking native-born Latino workers in the plant or at few of the other shops in the area. This is not a fictional story. I personally witnessed the scene at the company involving the black job seeker. Anti-illegal immigration activists say that the experience of the young black job seeker has played out thousands of times at restaurants, hotels, on farms, and at manufacturing plants nationally, and that this is a major reason so many young black males are unemployed join gangs, deal drugs and pack America's jails.

Congress will hammer out a comprehensive immigration reform law. But it won't answer this question: Do the estimated 10 to 12 million illegal immigrants in the country take jobs from American citizens, especially the bottom rung American workers, the young, the poor and more often than not African-American workers?

What if the young black job seeker, or any other American looking for work in a low end manufacturing plant or a restaurant in Los Angeles, were offered that job which probably pays minimum wage and doesn't offer any benefits or job security? Would he take it? Maybe yes, maybe no. It's certainly hard to imagine that a young black from South Los Angeles, South Chicago, or Harlem, not to mention a native born young white or Latino going out to the fields to pick strawberries for 10 to 12 hours a day in the hot sun at minimum or even sub-minimum wages. Or, that they'd take a job at a car wash or bus dishes in a restaurant. But what if the farm contractors, car wash owners, and manufacturers paid a living wage and provided benefits. It might be a different story, at least for some young people in Los Angeles.

Then there's the regional factor. There is some evidence that young workers will work jobs in the South and the Midwest. Jobs that have long been designated as jobs that only illegal immigrants will work, that is if those jobs were offered to them. But when employers give the quick brush-off to young blacks and other young American workers that are willing to take lower end jobs, they send the not-so-subtle message that they are not wanted or welcome. This is a powerful disincentive for them to pursue work in these taboo areas of the job market. The end result is that an entire category of jobs at the ground rung of American industry is clearly marked as "Latino only." The fight over jobs and illegal immigration came at the worst possible time for the urban poor. Shrinking federal and state budgets for job training and creation programs, industry downsizing, and escalating crime and violence in inner city neighborhoods made banks and corporations even more reluctant to invest in these communities, and that made the job situation even worse.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson, BlackNews.com

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