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The Hutchinson Report: Old Civil Rights Groups MIA on New Civil Rights Movement

Date: Thursday, March 30, 2006
By: Earl Ofari Hutchinson, Special to BlackAmericaWeb.com

The great irony in the gargantuan march of tens of thousands in Los Angeles and other cities for immigrant rights is that the old civil rights groups have been virtually mute on immigration and the marches. There are no position papers, statements or press releases on the websites of the NAACP, Urban League or SCLC on immigration reform and nothing on the marches.

The Congressional Black Caucus hasn't done much better. It has issued mostly perfunctory, tepid and cautious statements opposing the draconian provisions of the House bill that passed last December. The bill calls for a wall on the Southern border, a massive beef-up in border security and tough sanctions on employers that hire illegal aliens. The Senate Judiciary Committee will wrestle with the bill this week. Only nine CBC members initially backed the relatively liberal immigration reform bill introduced by CBC member Sheila Lee Jackson in 2004. The lone exception to the old guard's mute response was their lambaste of Mexican President Vicente Fox last May for his quip that Mexicans will work jobs that even blacks won't.

The silence from mainstream civil rights groups and the CBC's modest support for immigrant rights is a radical departure from the past. During 1985, when immigration was not the hot button issue it is today, the Caucus staunchly opposed tougher immigration proposals, voted against employer sanctions for hiring illegal immigrants and an English language requirement to attain legalization.

That was an easy call then. Those were the Reagan years, and Reagan and conservative Republicans -- then,



The great irony in the gargantuan march of tens of thousands in Los Angeles (above) and other cities for immigrant rights, opines BAW contributor Earl Ofari Hutchinson, is that the old civil rights groups have been virtually mute on immigration and the marches.

as now -- pushed the bill. Civil rights leaders and black Democrats waged a low yield war against Reagan policies.



The NAACP made a slight nod to the immigration fight when it invited Hector Flores, president of League of United Latin American Citizens, to address its 2002 convention. The NAACP billed the invitation as a "historic first." But it was careful to note that immigration was one of a list of policy initiatives the two groups would work together on. That list included support for affirmative action, expanded hate crimes legislation, voting rights protections and increased health and education funding.

There is no indication that the two groups have done much together since the convention to tackle these crisis problems, and that includes immigration reform.

The CBC and civil rights leaders tread lightly on the immigrant rights battle for two reasons. They are loath to equate the immigrant rights movement with the civil rights battles of the 1960s. They see immigrant rights as a reactive, narrow, single-issue movement whose leaders have not actively reached out to black leaders and groups. Spanish-language newspapers, and radio stations, for instance, drove the mammoth march and rally in Los Angeles. Their fiery appeals to take action were in Spanish, and many of the marchers waved Mexican and El Salvadorian flags. Black leaders also cast a nervous glance over their shoulder at the shrill chorus of anger rising from many African-Americans, especially the black poor, of whom a significant number flatly oppose illegal immigrant rights.

But illegal immigration is not the prime reason so many poor young blacks are on the streets and why some turn to gangs, guns and drug dealing to get ahead. A shrinking economy, sharp state and federal government cuts in and the elimination of job and skills training programs, failing public schools, a soaring black prison population and employment discrimination are the prime causes of the poverty crisis in many inner city black neighborhoods. The recent studies by Princeton, Columbia and Harvard

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researchers on the dreary plight of young black males reconfirmed that chronic unemployment has turned thousands of young black males into America's job untouchables.

Yet, many blacks soft target illegal immigrants for the crisis and loudly claim that they take jobs from unskilled and marginally skilled blacks. Black fury over immigration has cemented an odd alliance between black anti-immigrant activists and GOP conservatives, fringe anti-illegal immigration groups and thinly-disguised, racially-tinged "America first" groups.

Historians, politicians, and civil rights activists hail the March on Washington in August 1963 as the watershed event in the civil rights movement. It defined an era of protest, sounded the death knell for the near century of legal segregation and challenged Americans to make racial justice a reality for blacks. But the estimated million that marched and held rallies for immigrant rights in Los Angeles and other cities dwarfed the numbers at the March on Washington. If the numbers and passion immigration reform stirs mean anything, the judgment of history will be that it also defined an era, sounded the death knell for discrimination against immigrants and challenged Americans to make justice and equality a reality for immigrants, both legal and illegal.

The battle over immigrant rights will be fought as fiercely and doggedly as the civil rights battle of the 1960s. That battle forever altered the way Americans look at race. The immigrant's rights battle will profoundly alter the way Americans look at immigrants. The silence of civil rights leaders won't change that.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is a political analyst and social issues commentator. His column appears in The State of Black America channel every Friday.

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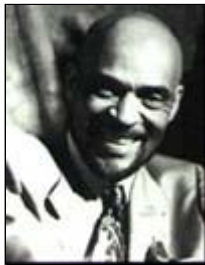


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Why So Many Blacks Fear Illegal Immigrants - Pt. 1

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson, BlackNews.com Columnist



Near the close of a recent spirited community forum in South Los Angeles on black and Latino relations, a young black man in the audience stood up and proudly, even defiantly, shouted that he was a member of the Minuteman Project. This is the fringe group that has waged a noisy, gun toting and headline grabbing campaign to shut down the Mexican border to illegal immigrants. GOP conservatives and immigration reformers denounce their borderline, racist rants.

Their rhetoric didn't faze the young black man, nor many other blacks in the audience who nodded in agreement, as he launched into a finger pointing, tirade against illegal immigrants that he claimed steal jobs from blacks. He punctuated his tirade by loudly announcing that he had taken part in a Minuteman border patrol back in April. Illegal immigration clearly touched a raw nerve with many blacks in the audience. Nationally, many blacks are unabashed in fingering illegal immigrants, mostly Mexicans, even though many illegal immigrants are from Canada, Europe and Asia, for the poverty and job dislocation in black communities. Illegal immigration has touched a national nerve. More than half of Americans, according to a Pew Research Center survey in November 2005, said that illegal immigration should be a top national policy priority.

The first big warning sign of black frustration with illegal immigration came during the battle over Proposition 187 in California in 1994. White voters voted by big margins for the proposition that denied public services to undocumented immigrants. But nearly fifty percent of blacks also backed the measure. Republican governor Pete Wilson shamelessly pandered to anti-immigrant hysteria and rode it to a reelection victory.

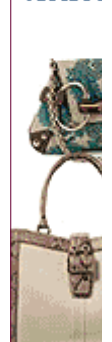
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Wilson also got nearly 20 percent of the black vote that election. It was double what Republicans in California typically get from blacks. Wilson almost certainly bumped up his black vote total with his freewheeling assault on illegal immigration. Blacks have also given substantial support to anti-bi-lingual ballot measures in California.

Though there is furious dispute over the economic impact that the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. have on the job market, there is no concrete evidence that the majority of employers hire Latinos at low-end jobs and exclude blacks from them solely because of their race. The sea of state and federal anti-discrimination laws, and labor code sections explicitly ban employment discrimination. Despite a recent flurry of lawsuits and settlements by blacks against and with major employers for alleged racial favoritism toward Hispanic workers, employers vehemently deny that they shun blacks, and maintain that blacks don't apply for these jobs.

These aren't just flimsy covers for discrimination. Many blacks will no longer work the low skilled, menial factory, restaurant, and custodial jobs that in decades past they filled. The pay is too low, the work too hard, and the indignities too great. On the other hand, those blacks that seek these jobs are often given a quick brush off by employers. The subtle message is that blacks won't be hired, even if they do apply. An entire category of jobs at the bottom rung of American industry has been clearly marked as "Latino only" jobs. That further deepens suspicion and resentment among blacks that illegal immigration is to blame for the economic misery of poor blacks.

The anti-immigrant sentiment among blacks is not new. A century ago, immigration was also a hot button issue among black leaders. Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. DuBois railed against Eastern European immigrants that crowded Northern cities. They claimed the new immigrants elbowed blacks out of the bottom rung manufacturing jobs. At times, these leaders, otherwise, progressive, and staunch fighters for civil rights and against Jim Crow laws, sounded every bit as hard line as the most rabid, nativist, America first anti-immigration foes in demanding that the federal government clamp down on legal and illegal immigration.

Illegal immigration then and now is not the prime reason so many poor young blacks are on the streets, and why some turn to gangs, guns and drug dealing to get ahead. A shrinking economy, savage state and federal government cuts in and the elimination of job and skills training programs, failing public schools, a soaring black prison population, and employment discrimination are still the major reasons for the grim employment prospects and poverty in inner city black neighborhoods.

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Civil rights leaders, and the Congressional Black Caucus, have repeatedly condemned the thinly disguised race tinged appeals of the Minuteman Project, Save Our State, and the legions of other fringe anti-immigration groups that have cropped up in nearly every part of the country in recent months. Some of them openly pitch their anti-immigrant line to blacks. As the immigration debate heats up in Congress and in the states, and with so many young blacks unemployed and with a prison cell staring them in the face, more blacks may find it harder to resist the temptation to join in their shout to close down the border.

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Why So Many Blacks Fear Illegal Immigrants Pt.2

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson



A few months before the 2004 presidential election, Project 21, a Washington D.C. based group of black conservative business and professionals, called George Bush on the carpet for his conflicted immigration reform proposals. The group railed that if Congress enacted Bush's reform proposals it would flood the country with hordes of illegal immigrants, speed the deterioration in public education, further bulge the prisons, and undercut American worker's wages. But Project 21's biggest fear was that illegal immigration would have dire impact on black workers. It claimed that illegal immigrants depress wages, elbow blacks out of low and unskilled farm and manufacturing jobs, and snatch vital services from the black poor.

This is the worn argument of conservatives, and fringe anti-immigrant groups such as the Minuteman Project. Other studies show that illegal immigrants pay more taxes, spend more consumer dollars on goods and services, and receive less in benefits from government agencies than any other group. Project 21's leap on the anti-illegal immigration bandwagon was predictable. They are following the lead of their ultra-conservative GOP boosters that have pounded on Bush to take even harsher steps to shut down the border.

But the illegal immigration debate is not a manufactured ploy by conservatives to exploit black fears over illegal immigrants. In the days immediately following the Katrina debacle, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, a centrist Democrat, touched off a mild flap with his shoot-from-the-lip quip to local business leaders that he was appalled at the thought that Mexican workers seeking to fill reconstruction jobs would overrun New Orleans. The crack was silly, impolitic and crude, but civil rights leaders were mostly mute on it and him. That's no surprise either. During the past two decades, the illegal immigration debate has stirred doubt, hesitation, and even conflicting positions by black liberals and Democrats. In the 1980s, the Congressional Black Caucus staunchly opposed the 1984 immigration reform bill. The bill called for tougher sanctions against employers that hired illegal immigrants and for tighter enforcement controls at the border, and an English language requirement to attain legalization. But that was an easy call then for the Caucus. Those were the Reagan years, and black Democrats and civil rights leaders waged relentless war against Reagan's domestic policies. In 1985, and 1990, the Caucus opposed other reform measures that were pretty much a carbon copy of the earlier proposal.

The CBC took its cue from the Hispanic Caucus and continued to oppose tougher punitive measure immigration. But the sharp jump in the number of illegal immigrants, new polls that showed that a significant numbers of blacks opposed increased immigration, bi-lingual education, and drivers licenses for illegal immigrants, and the rumbles from their constituents that illegal immigrants were grabbing jobs from blacks especially in retail and construction industries, made some black Democrats pause. While they and the NAACP and the Urban League still strongly oppose the shrill, nativist, borderline racist calls by fringe immigration groups to deport all illegal immigrants, they cautiously demand measures to better control immigration. In 2003, the SCLC, Rainbow Push and other civil rights groups backed the freedom ride bus campaign to lobby Congress for amnesty for illegal immigrants and stronger labor protections. The NAACP and Urban League, though, took no official position on the Freedom Ride.

A year before the freedom ride, the NAACP invited Hector Flores, the president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, to be a featured speaker at its convention. Flores and the NAACP mostly skirted the issue of immigration. It was only one of several policy initiatives that included affirmative action, tougher hate crimes legislation, health care, elimination of racial profiling, voting rights, and greater public education funding that

the two groups agreed to work more closely together on. The NAACP did not say what or how it would work with LULAC on immigration reform, nor did it spell out its own position on the issue.

This is not a total retreat by some civil rights leaders and black Democrats on immigrant rights. In 2004, the majority of Congressional Black Caucus members backed an amnesty measure that was for more liberal and generous in granting amnesty than the one offered by the Bush administration. But some civil rights leaders still warned that illegal immigration threatened black job gains in some parts of the country, and that some blacks had begun to parrot the same racially charged arguments of groups such as the Minuteman Project.

The illegal immigration controversy is not going away. Civil rights leaders and black Democrats must and should not pander to the anti-immigrant hysteria that has gripped many Americans, and that includes many blacks. They must continue to call for a fair, equitable immigration reform measure that both safeguard the rights and labor protections of undocumented workers and the job security of black workers. That's a tall order, but it's one they must fill.

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Earl Ofari Hutchinson is a noted author of nine books about the African American experience in America. His numerous published articles appear in newspapers and magazines across the country as well as some of the most popular web sites on the Internet. He is a radio host and TV commentator. He has received several awards for his writings. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and political analyst. He is the publisher of The Hutchinson Report Newsletter, an on-line political newsletter: subscribe: hutchinsonreport@aol.com or visit the web site: <http://thehutchinsonreport.com>

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Why So Many Blacks Fear Illegal Immigrants Pt. 3

Immigration Matters -- 150 Years of Black Fears of Job Loss



By Earl Ofari Hutchinson

"Every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant." A century and a half ago, a deeply conflicted Frederick Douglass saw immigration as a looming threat to the fragile economic gains that Northern blacks had made in some trades and industries. The famed black abolitionist and pioneer civil rights champion was no lone voice in denouncing immigration. Black leaders waged ferocious fights with each other over ideology, politics and leadership, but they closed ranks on immigration. "The continual stream of well-trained European laborers flowing into the West," warned educator Booker T. Washington in an 1882 speech, "leaves Negroes no foothold."

Washington's great fear was that immigration would displace Northern blacks from manufacturing industries and that Southern landowners would use cheap European and Asian labor to boot blacks off the land. Educator and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois railed against Washington's racially accommodationist views. Yet, like Washington, he attacked immigration as a dire threat to blacks. He accused "the Northern industrialist of the promotion of alien immigration to eliminate black workers, and depress wages."

During and immediately following World War I, millions more Eastern and Southern Europeans poured into the country to escape war, poverty, hunger and anti-Semitic pogroms. Many were poorly educated, marginally skilled workers who crowded the cities and muscled blacks out of the bottom-rung manufacturing and farm jobs. Black leaders and rabidly racist, America-first anti-immigration proponents screamed loudly for Congress to stop the flood.

In an editorial in 1919, the New York Age, a black newspaper, skipped the niceties. "Speaking purely from a motive of self-interest, the American Negro can say that the passing of a law restricting immigration for four years is a good thing." Two years later, the Chicago Defender, which had virtually become the bible for black American readers by the early 1920s, chimed in, "The restrictions recently placed upon immigration to these shores ought to help us if they do not help anybody else." In a speech in 1920, black nationalist Marcus Garvey painted an even scarier picture of what unchecked immigration could mean for blacks: "We will be out of jobs, and we will be starving." It was vintage, over the top, stir-the-masses Garvey rhetoric. But it pricked a public nerve.

When Congress passed a racially exclusionary anti-immigration bill in 1924, the black press cheered madly. The Immigration Act of 1924 barred entry of "aliens ineligible to citizenship." Because Japanese and other Asians were barred by a 1790 law stipulating that "whites only" could be naturalized, the 1924 act effectively ended the immigration of all Asians into the United States.

The radical, pro-Socialist, pro labor Messenger instantly hailed the bill as a victory for black workers and claimed that it would open up more jobs. A year later, the National Urban League's house organ, Opportunity, which championed black professional and business interests and relentlessly opposed the Messenger's pro-Socialist views still applauded the anti-immigrant assault: "The gaps made by the reduction in immigrant labor have forced a demand for Negro labor despite theories which hold that they are neither needed nor desired."

The 1924 restrictive immigration law didn't totally allay black fears that immigration would unhinge their tenuous economic plight. Some blacks viewed Mexican immigrants as the new threat to black jobs. In 1927, the Pittsburgh Courier pushed the panic button and warned that Mexican immigrants would "menace" blacks' position in industry. "The

Mexicans are being used as laborers on the railroads, on public works and on the farms, thus taking the places of many Negro workers." The Courier did not blame Mexican immigrants for taking jobs, but regarded them as pathetic pawns of greedy, unscrupulous employers to depress wages, labor standards and sow divisions with black workers.

Though the Courier nailed employers for exploiting illegal immigrants, it did not take the next logical step and urge black workers, labor groups and civil rights leaders to join with Mexican workers and fight for better wages, fair hiring practices and improved labor standards, and against Jim Crow segregation that impoverished black and Mexican workers. This was the pre-Depression era of naked, laissez-faire capitalism, and the black press and black leaders banked on the goodwill of white corporate employers for black economic gains. The Courier wailed that Mexican immigrants would snatch jobs from blacks in public works and railroads in the 1920s. But the estimated million or so Mexican illegal immigrants that trickled into the United States then was relatively low. They were mostly concentrated in the Southwest and posed no direct threat to blacks in the industrial North. Yet, in singling out Mexican illegal immigration as a potential danger to blacks in the 1920s, the Courier gave verbal ammunition to opponents of illegal immigrants that some blacks decades later would eagerly pick up and use.

Starting more than a century ago, Douglass, Washington, DuBois, Garvey and the black press sounded alarms over legal and illegal immigration. They forged a strange alliance with conservative and even fringe anti-immigrant groups to finger-point immigrants as the ultimate peril to blacks. As the national debate rages over illegal immigration, some black leaders and their strange bedfellows are doing the same thing again.

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