

Point of View

ORGANIZED LABOR and BLACK WORKERS

by Norman Hill

The A. Philip Randolph Institute, an organization of Black trade union activists, was built on its founder's belief that the best ally of Blacks is the labor movement, because trade unions empower those who would otherwise be powerless. With Randolph's April 15 birthday centennial having recently passed, we at the Institute find that the Black-labor alliance is as meaningful as ever. A look at three urgent issues now before Congress shows why this is so.

An increase in the minimum wage is currently on the national agenda. Recently, the AFL-CIO News pointed out that at the beginning of this year, a worker would have needed \$4.56 an hour to equal the purchasing power of the current \$3.35 an hour minimum wage when it went into effect in January 1981. Therefore, organized labor has been fighting for a large hike.

The minimum wage issue is of particular importance to Black workers. It's no secret that Black, on the average, are poorer than whites. Recent figures place Black per capita income at only 58 percent of white per capita

income, and they peg the median weekly earnings of Black wage and salary workers at \$301, only 78.6 percent of the median white wage and salary earnings. So it's not surprising that 15 percent of minimum wage earners are Black, which is more than 25 percent greater than the Black share of the population. Since Blacks are disproportionately represented among minimum wage recipients, they benefit disproportionately from organized labor's attempts to boost the minimum wage.

A second critical issue is child care. Organized labor has put high on its agenda a child care bill now before Congress. It would help fund the development of more child care centers, subsidize care for low-income working families, and set quality standards for child care facilities.

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Because of income, family structure, and employment patterns in the Black community, federal assistance is particularly welcome for Blacks. More than half of all Black children live in a single-parent family, and 68

percent of these children are poor. And between 1970 and 1984, the proportion of Black single mothers in the work force rose from 52 percent to 62 percent. So once again, the legislative efforts of the AFL-CIO are of particular benefit to Blacks.

The third issue is perhaps the most important one in the long run. Congress is considering an AFL-CIO-backed five-year renewal of the Steel Import Stabilization Act. This legislation, with its voluntary restraint arrangements (VRAs), has helped stem the decline of the steel industry by establishing a level playing field between American steel manufacturers and their foreign competitors. Such legislation is necessary so long as foreign governments continue to massively subsidize their domestic steel industries and

close their markets to imports.

The decline of the steel industry and other basic manufacturing industries has not only left our economy vulnerable in times of international turmoil; it has also been a great tragedy for millions of Americans of all races. And Blacks have been especially hard hit, because decent-paying union jobs in manufacturing represented for them the best route to a better life--in the mid-1980s, fully 60 percent of all Blacks with middle-class earnings were working in manufacturing and construction.

Is it just a coincidence that organized labor's efforts regarding these three issues is to the advantage of Black workers more than others? Not at all. Blacks are the most exploited and vulnerable segment of the work force, so when the trade union movement battles to meet the needs of workers, Black workers have the most to gain.

A. Philip Randolph understood this long ago, and he founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1965 to cement the relationship bet-

To Be Equal COURT BACKTRACKS ON BIAS

by John E. Jacob

In his eloquent dissent from the Supreme Court's decision in the WARDS COVE PACKING case, Justice Harry Blackmun wrote:

"One wonders whether the majority still believes that race discrimination -- or, more accurately, race discrimination against non-whites -- is a problem in our society, or even remembers that it was."

Justice Blackmun's words



John E. Jacob

were written in sorrow tinged with anger, and rightly so, for the Supreme Court -- by evidence of recent key decisions -- seems to be abandoning the constitutional rights of minority citizens.

Its latest blow came in the Wards Cove case. In what another dissenting judge, John Paul Stevens, called its "latest sojourn into judicial activism," the Court ruled that victims of job

discrimination can no longer prove their case by showing that employment policies had a discriminatory effect.

Instead, the Court ruled, employees must identify each specific practice in question and prove its discriminatory impact. Further, they still have the burden of proving that the employer's explanations have no reasonable business justification.

Talk about stacking the deck! The Court raised tremendous barriers to

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workers seeking redress in the courts against discriminatory employment patterns.

In the past, employers had to show that a job policy that had an unintended discriminatory effect was necessary. Now, it's up to the victim of discrimination to prove such policies were not necessary for business reasons.

Which gets us back to Justice Blackmun's comment -- what "business reasons" could justify discrimination in a society racked by inequality and unequal opportunities?

Discrimination exists, and it was clear intent of the Civil Rights Act to eliminate it.

Previous Supreme Courts recognized that and established common-sense standards, such as statistical evidence showing that minorities were underrepresented in a company's workforce or in its white collar jobs.

But this Court is different-- it has been hijacked by an activist conservative majority intent on rolling back the clock and undermining past decisions that furthered the goal of equal opportunity over the past two decades.

In effect, this Court represents the real triumph of Reaganism. High on the Reagan Administration's agenda was the goal of reshaping the federal courts to implement its social program, the cornerstone of which was reversing civil rights gains.

Since the current decision concerned interpretation of a federal statute -- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act -- Congress can overrule the Court.

It should amend the law to explicitly make statistical imbalances in hiring and promotion evidence of illegal discrimination, and it should place the legal burden on employers to justify and alleviate practices that have discriminatory effects.

This is not something that should be a partisan issue. Leading Republicans, from President Bush and Party Chairman Atwater on down, have stated they want their party to attract African American votes.

This issue presents them with an opportunity to demonstrate their desire to combat discrimination in employment. The Administration and Congressional Republicans should take the lead in formulating the necessary legislation and cooperate to get it passed.

And the President should instruct his Justice Department to immediately end its alliance with anti-civil rights interests and to support discrimination's victims in future cases that come before the courts.

CHILD WATCH

By Marian Wright Edelman
President Children's Defense Fund

What Messages Are Children Getting About Drug #1?

While our community (and our nation) debate how we can best keep our children from abusing drugs, let's not forget the drug that's in most kitchen cabinets: alcohol. It's time to think hard and act decisively to discourage abuse of "Drug #1."

We all have a friend, a family member, or a neighbor who drinks too much. We've seen the downward spiral of

destructiveness that results. Multiply these individual tragedies and we end up with, on a national scale, a massive waste of human and financial resources. A recent report from the National Alcohol Tax Coalition, (a group urging higher taxes on alcohol) states that each year 100,000 deaths are alcohol related and the cost to

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"BECAUSE OF OUR LACK OF FAITH AND CONFIDENCE IN OURSELVES, WE HAVE CAUSED OTHERS CREATED IN LIKE IMAGES TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF US FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS."

-MARCUS GARVEY

