

COMMENTARY

The "fast track" to trouble for the American people

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The Clinton Administration is about to introduce a so-called "fast track" bill to Congress. What is "fast track"? Basically, it is a set of rules governing how Congress will consider the legislation that implements trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). President Clinton wants "fast track" authority to negotiate an extension of NAFTA to Chile, and eventually to the rest of Latin America. "Fast track" makes it easier for the President to negotiate trade deals with foreign nations, because it prevents Congress from picking and choosing which aspects of a given trade agreement it agrees with, and which it would like to reject. According to Ralph Nader's organization, Public Citizen, "fast track" legislation requires Congress to agree, before seeing any text (or for that matter, before negotiations begin), that when a trade pact is finished, Congress will vote either yes or no, without amendments, not only on the agreement, but on all of the changes to domestic law required to conform U.S. law to the pact. In other words, Congress must either swallow the President's deal whole-hog, or reject it completely. And therein lies the problem with "fast track."

In the 1990's, trade agreements go beyond merely setting tariffs and quotas on imports. Now they deal with so-called "non-tariff barriers" — that is, laws passed in our country that regulate wages and working conditions, that protect consumers from pesticide residue on fruits and vegetables, that limit air and water pollution — all of which may sometimes have the effect of keeping out another country's imports. Under "free trade agreements" like NAFTA, our laws protecting workers, consumers, health and the environment are exposed to challenge as "illegal trade barriers" when they impose higher standards on

*This Way
For Black
Empowerment*
By Lenora Fulani



products and services than similar laws in foreign countries. NAFTA and other agreements like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) require that our laws be "harmonized" with laws prevailing in other countries, so that they don't interfere with trade. Under fast-track, the legislation "harmonizing" health and safety protections, and making other legislative changes necessitated by a given trade agreement, is drawn up by the Administration's secretive panel of foreign trade bureaucrats and presented on a take-it-or-leave-it basis to Congress. By granting fast track, Congress gives up its right (and by extension, the American people's right) to draft, debate, mark-up and pass its own legislation dealing with the nitty-gritty details of implementing a trade agreement.

Though lower minimum wages are not mandated by free trade agreements, the purely economic forces set loose by agreements such as NAFTA have the practical effect of "harmonizing" American wages and working conditions downward. Major corporations have used NAFTA as a tool in contract negotiations with unions. A Cornell University study

found that one-half of all employers confronted by union organizing drives threaten to use the incentives of NAFTA to move their plants abroad. "Fast track" prevents Congress from adding amendments that would strengthen fair labor practices or provide compensatory mechanism like retraining programs for displaced workers.

As we have seen, when it comes to "free trade agreements," the devil is in the details. Advocates for such agreements argue that we live in a global economy, and that it is neither possible nor desirable to isolate America from the benefits of international commerce and technological and cultural exchange. Certainly it is the case that the selective removal or reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers can under some circumstances stimulate the creation of new jobs, give consumers a greater choice of goods and services, and improve the competitiveness and innovativeness of American industry. But, as former Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich pointed out in a New York Times op-ed piece this week, in a national and international context where the gap between rich and poor is large and growing, the "benefits" of free trade tend to be distributed very unevenly. The "losers" in the free trade game are concentrated in low-wage and low-skilled jobs, who are disproportionately poor and people of color.

These unpleasant details — and not just the much-hyped benefits — must be fully exposed to the American people in the course of a national dialogue on what kind of trade agreements are in our best interest. But we won't have any dialogue at all if Congress takes the highly undemocratic step of granting the Clinton Administration fast-track authority.

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VOICE FROM THE HILL

UNCF backs words with action

By George Wilson

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Known for its outstanding work and the slogan, "a mind is a terrible thing to waste" the United Negro College Fund, in conjunction with a bipartisan group of scholars, has released a report entitled "The African-American Education Data Book - Volume II, Preschool Through High School Education" which documents the progress, or lack thereof, of African-American students.

The report should serve as a call to arms for all who purport to care about African-American children.

For a large number of our children, preschool is an extremely rewarding experience. According to the report, approximately 33 percent of African-American children attended Head Start compared to only seven percent of white children. These children enjoy school.

However, with time, interest wanes. For example, 29 percent of the parents of African-American preschoolers visited a library with their child each month, compared with 42 percent of whites, the report says. African-American pre-schoolers scored far below their peers on tests measuring vocabulary skill.

Unfortunately, after the pre-school days are over, African-American children generally exhibited less than adequate progress in the school

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— Congressman Bill Gray

setting, the report says.

This report sheds some necessary light on the educational dilemma, a subject many would prefer to ignore. Poorly educated black children can not compete in an increasingly demanding society.

"We are dealing with a matrix of failure. On the one hand, there are attempts to eliminate affirmative action — an act that will reduce the number of African-Americans who have access to certain institutions of higher education and jobs. On the other hand, the level of achievement in the schools is low which guarantees failure later in life," said Congressman Bill Gray.

The UNCF has provided the African-American community with a dose of castor oil. As many of us know, castor oil tastes terrible, but it ultimately makes you feel better. I hope that the information in the report

has the same effect. For those who need an additional dose, consider the facts: Only four percent of African-Americans, but 17 percent of white eighth-graders scored at or above proficiency on the history test; on mathematics assessments, 66 percent of African-American 12th graders scored below basic, compared to only 28 percent of whites.

African-American children and high schoolers watch too much television. More than 20 percent of African-American 12th-graders watched more than five hours of television each weekday, compared with only 6.4 percent of whites.

"It Takes A Village." "Stand for Children." and "Children First." Slogans abound preaching our commitment to children.

However, 'when the rubber meets the road,' the success and well-being of children seems to be the least of our concerns.

The time has come to replace idle talk with real caring and action. For our children, the choices seem to be education or participation in the prison-based economy.

The UNCF has lit the torch. It's time for a concerned African-American community to light the fires of educational motivation and achievement.

George Wilson is a 16-year Capitol Hill correspondent for the American Urban Radio Network.

Carl Rowan's Commentary

ABA's affirmative action stand shows leadership

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Certain groups in America seem to come to the fore and stand up for justice no matter what the pressure. In recent years the American Bar Association (ABA) has been one of these.

Earlier this year, the ABA showed courageous leadership when its House of Delegates called for a halt to the imposition of the death penalty in this country, terming it a "haphazard maze of unfair practices."

Then, at the recent national convention of the prestigious 380,000-member organization, the ABA's new president, Jerome Shestack of Philadelphia, attacked the move away from affirmative action that has rocked public law schools in Texas and California and sent shock waves across the country. He announced that the ABA would try to find ways to restore and maintain minority enrollment.

Dramatic drops in that enrollment have occurred since the governing body of California's public university system voted to drop race as a factor in admissions. Court rulings have produced the same results in Texas.

Shestack branded the law school drop-offs "disastrous." Pointing out that a majority of California residents will come from minority groups 25 years from now, he asked where leaders will be found if minority students are no longer able to attend the state's top graduate schools.

Shestack announced that the ABA will begin a study to look at new ways of using Law School Admission Test scores — LSATs — for determining eligibility. At present, they are a major factor in admittance decisions, together with student's undergraduate grades.

The ABA, which accredits law schools, has proposed using a minimum LSAT "threshold score" to get a pool of eligible students, then turning to factors such as grades and undergraduate majors to choose the final candidates from this pool. That would reduce the test's heavy impact on minorities.

At its San Francisco convention, the ABA also announced that it will train volunteer lawyers to help restore the welfare eligibility of disabled children slated to be cut off from Supplemental Security Income (SSI) under last year's welfare reform law.

Up to 250,000 children who now get SSI benefits may lose them. Shestack called the law "a form of torturing little children" and vowed that "the ABA is going to help them out."

It is heartening to see that some organizations, their leaders and members, have the courage to take "politically incorrect" stands on sensitive and controversial issues.



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