

BUSINESS

Labor organizing and the black poor

Special to Sentinel-Voice

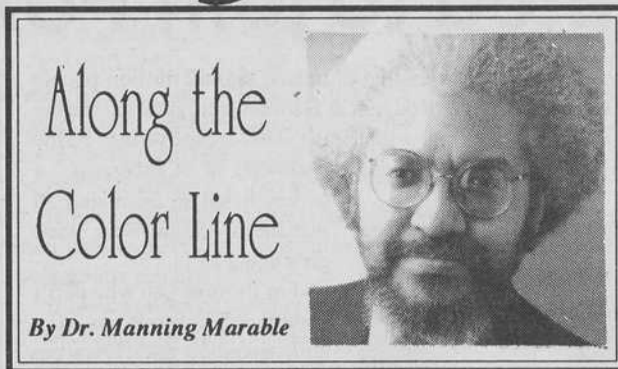
The most important election to take place this fall was largely unreported in the press. There were no public debates, no campaign slogans or posters, not even a bumper sticker. There weren't even any candidates running for office. This election was not about personalities, but power. At stake was potentially 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, became 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 more than 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 were 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. The most important factor in rebuilding the black freedom movement lies in the linkage of distinct yet overlapping constituencies within the African-American community. Two critical groups here are the low wage workers and welfare recipients.

There is often tension and misplaced hostility between black workers who earn barely more than the federal government's minimum wage versus poor people who have been unemployed for years, or those who barely manage to survive on public assistance. Both groups are manipulated against each other, to protect the interests of employers who want to keep labor costs low. The only long-term solution to this dilemma is to bring poor people into the organized labor movement.

The NAACP, Urban League, and other civil rights organizations need to follow ACORN's lead in reaching out to organize the most oppressed people within black America. The vitality and vision of our movement must be judged not against the economic gains of the black middle class, but within the material conditions and prospects for those black folk who have the least. As we elevate and empower workfare workers, we advance the interests of our entire community.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University, New York City.

ENTREPRENEUR'S CORNER

Finding, hiring, keeping good employees

*By Pierre A. Clark
Special to Sentinel-Voice*

One of the most important responsibilities you have as a business owner is hiring employees.

Hiring employees is a daunting task for nearly every entrepreneur. The job of interviewing and evaluating potential candidates is tricky because the process of selecting people that will bring the greatest level of skill, dependability and professionalism is more art than science; a judgment call at best.

You can't, as one man said, "call them all." You'll make some mistakes, but your instincts will ultimately be your best guide in whom you hire.

Evaluating potential employees and staff is an acquired skill. You'll learn by trial and error how to determine who is the right kind of employee for your business; how to evaluate the kinds of positions new hires should hold and what things make employees happy.

But evaluating and hiring staff is not your greatest challenge, it's keeping them.

Talented employees are in high demand and employees feel less loyalty to a company than in previous years.

Yet, few employees accept a job with the intention of leaving. Any employee that accepts a position at your firm does so because he/she wants to work there and sees a profitable and satisfying future.

There are really only five

things that most employees want:

- To work in an attractive environment.
- To have their opinions and ideas heard and considered.
- To be told the truth about the company's financial health and prospects.
- To be given clear policies about vacation, sick leave, starting times and work hours and overtime.
- And most importantly, to get their paychecks on time. Or in extenuating circumstances, to be notified far enough in advance.

Here are some simple, yet powerful strategies that will help recruiting:

- Look for high-energy people hungry for success.
- Visit your competition and note bright, energetic employees.
- Call vocational schools and ask about the high achievers.
- Look for staffers amongst the salespeople that visit your firm.
- Hold open houses at your firm to draw potential candidates.

Your greatest asset in attracting and retaining high quality employees is to create an attractive working environment.

Remember how you felt as an employee? Did you feel that your boss communicated with you, respected your abilities, offered you opportunities for advancement and the higher pay you felt were

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commensurate with your skills and contributions to the firm's success? How did you feel when you perceived that your boss did none of those things?

The feelings you had in all these circumstances should guide your actions toward employees in your own firm.

As important as the working environment you create is the quality of the products and services you offer. Do you offer great products and services that any employee would be proud to represent and sell? Are you a firm that keeps its word in terms of customer service, guaranteeing quality, correcting errors and delivering on promises? Are your employees aware of every business aspect relevant to their

performance and success such as sales volume, client lists, delivery schedules and sales options?

A key trait you must develop to successfully retain talented staff members is the ability to delegate responsibility.

If you're like many entrepreneurs, you're used to doing everything yourself, wearing "all the hats" in your company. The attitude of "If I want it done right, I have to do it myself," can imply a mistrust of your staff's ability to perform.

When you actually hire an employee and that individual starts work, your firm becomes subject to a variety of laws and regulations, including

minimum wage, employment taxes, overtime provisions, and other requirements.

Contact your state's Department of Employment Security to be sure your firm is in compliance with all laws.

It's really simple to recruit and retain talented employees.

Make sure employees feel they can do their best work in a place where their talents are appreciated; where they receive pay and benefits

commensurate with their contributions; where their opinions and ideas are recognized and where there are opportunities for advancement.

Creating that kind of environment is your greatest selling tool in attracting and retaining high-quality employees.

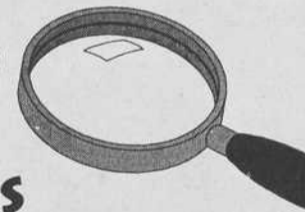
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