

Hispanic mobilization yields political consequences

By Ron Walters
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The recent mobilization of Hispanics in many cities around the country was an exceptionally important event that has serious political consequences. However, for it to yield the fruit that is intended there should be some equally serious changes.

First, the mass demonstrations had the advantage of being narrowly targeted to the situation of undocumented workers in a way that tied it to the legislation and provoked clear and direct messages. This movement rejects the attempt to criminalize undocumented immigrants and feels that its contribution to the American economy earns it a place of respect and permanence as citizens in this country.

From my reading of the demonstrations, they would accept a guest worker status as outlined in the McCain-Kennedy legislation.

This bill, which was approved by the Judiciary Committee 12-6, would allow the nearly 12 million undocumented workers to apply for temporary resident status for six years. Then, they could pay a \$2,000 fine for entering illegally, and if they maintain a clean work, police, tax and other types of records, they could apply for a green card to work legally and get in line for citizenship.

This bill, however, was derailed by Right Wing Republicans who want to scuttle anything that looks like an amnesty program,

which is what they consider the "guest worker" bill. So, they began offering amendments on the floor to what supporters of McCain-Kennedy thought was a closed deal.

This was evidence that there are two wings of the Republican Party that are irreconcilable on this issue: one which favors growers and corporations who exploit cheap labor and the other wing which has an unforgiving (some say racist) "law and order" posture toward undocumented immigrants. This conflict means that nothing is likely to be done.

This puts the Hispanic movement in some difficulty, because what was an advantage of the mobilization risks becoming a liability because it may not result in obtaining a quick legislative victory and thus, the fires of the movement could go out.

This means that the organizing agenda needs to capture the moment and to be broadened in ways that bring on coalition partners, both among documented workers and Hispanic-American citizens, as well as other immigrants of color and Black Americans.

The stakes are high.

Speakers at the rallies said that today they would protest today, but in November, they would vote. In fact, if nothing happens to



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move their agenda, their anger about that should be stoked as the fuel which turns on voter turnout in big numbers.

The real prospects are that a strong Hispanic vote, combined with those of other groups in a coalition, could help to change the political complexion of the U.S. Congress and set up conditions for

lightening to strike in 2008 as well.

The possibility exists. Between 1998 and 2002, Hispanics increased their political participation substantially. Registration increased by nearly 20 percent and voting increased 10 percent. If this rate of increase takes place again this year, Hispanic turnout could match Black turnout, but the combined turnout of both could add a powerful blow to the political system as it is.

This depends, of course, on whether the anger of Hispanic voters causes them to overcome their experimentation with the right-wing, sham politics of the Republican party, which fooled them and some Blacks with gay-marriage as an issue in 2004, leading Hispanics to give them 45 percent of their vote.

This mobilization might also cause Hispanic men to turnout in big numbers as it did

for Blacks after the Million Man March of 1995, when the following year, two million more Black males went to the polls. Like Blacks, Hispanic women vote on an average of 5 percent or more than Hispanic men, but the mobilization that is occurring could become a strong motivation for their men to step up and vote.

I understand and have written about the problems that immigration has caused low-wage Black male workers. But in some quarters, Blacks have significant resources, and it is possible to negotiate an agenda which would find them supporting Hispanic issues of legalization and access to human rights — and Hispanics supporting fair access by Blacks to low-wage jobs.

Hispanics might also support the direct inclusion of Blacks in employment in areas in which they have access and control.

To my knowledge, Blacks don't control any sectors of the labor market, but Hispanics have become so dominant and so culturally well-organized in some sectors of the labor market that they effectively control a significant number of low-wage entry level jobs.

The leadership of both groups and, indeed, others that are relevant, need to get down to work. The stakes are high.

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Voters

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phased.

"This is one situation in which I would not hazard to guess. I wouldn't have a clue," said Ron Walters, University of Maryland political scientist, who is usually brimming with predictions and analysis. However, Walters did say that the intricate problems of former New Orleans residents will play a major role in whether they will participate.

"I would imagine that a lot of them are trying to deal with survival issues, which complicates any judgment about how many will get on a bus and come to New Orleans, even for one day to vote," says Walters.

Issues that have angered New Orleans residents include: officials' failure to provide transportation for the

poor out of the city before Katrina hit Aug. 29; the failure to provide basic food and shelter for those who were trapped, and the amount of time it has taken from many who cannot return to homes that are inhabitable.

"We're talking about communities where they have not even turned on the lights, communities where they have not even picked up the trash," says Sylvain. "Now those are physical things that it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out. But, somehow those tasks have not been accomplished."

Of the 22 candidates running, incumbent Mayor Ray Nagin, Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, and Ron Forman, president and chief executive of the Audubon Nature Institute have emerged as leading

candidates. It is a forgone conclusion that no candidate will win a majority in Saturday's election, creating a May 20 runoff between the top two contenders.

It is expected that Nagin will end up in a runoff with either Landrieu or Forman. This has led to an interesting twist, with the two White candidates attacking each other rather than taking on Nagin.

Each has raised more than \$1.5 million, and TV commercials are expected to become more personal the closer it gets to Election Day.

Nagin is not home free. He was first elected four years ago as the corporate community's favored candidate. This time, however, most of the corporate contributions have gone to Landrieu and Forman. In or-

der to win, Nagin must also rely on Black voters, most of whom voted against him in the last election and remain bitter about the way he handled Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina has created an unusual predicament for New Orleans voters who have seen their homes and polling places destroyed.

The Louisiana Secretary of States office has organized what is being called "Super Precincts," the consolidation of a number of former polling places into one. In order to clarify questions of voters showing up at their old precincts, he says a person has been stationed at each former precinct in order to give correct information. Workers at Super Precincts will also watch for elderly, pregnant or otherwise disadvantaged people who are standing in long lines.

Meanwhile, venturing into the areas where pockets of voters may need information has been the greatest challenge, says Latosha Brown, an executive director, who is heading up the Hope efforts in Atlanta.

"We've been sending out street teams to get information to the Barber shops, the beauty shops, the corner stores, the grocery stores, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, where a large number of our people are. We've also identified apartment complexes where evacuees are sprinkled

throughout and we've been door-to-door canvassing in those sites," says Brown.

Special voter education efforts have also been made through the media, including the National Newspaper Publishers Association, as well as Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church, the congregation of Bishop Paul Morton, whose 4,000-member congregation is largely displaced people from New Orleans.

Meanwhile, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund has launched a "Pass it On" campaign urging everyone to pass on information about its special booklet to help displaced residents.

"We need to work quickly because deadlines are rapidly approaching," says LDF Assistant Counsel Alaina Beverly. "We know that the 'Pass it On' system works so we are borrowing from the lessons of the past to protect our future."

Copies of the brochure can be obtained by calling 1-866-OUR VOTE or going to www.katrinavote.org

Earlier efforts led by Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow/PUSH Coalition to delay the election because of violations of the Voting Rights Act were thwarted by U.S. District Judge Ivan Lemelle, himself a displaced African-American voter, who said the election is fair.

Therefore, the coalition of organizations, spearheaded by the NCBCP, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law have had to mobilize buses from around the nation in order to get people to New Orleans to vote. The NAACP alone is sending 35 busloads.

People needing a free ride to the polls or other information may call 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683).

John Musser IV, president of the New Orleans Board of Election Supervisors, which counts the absentee ballots on Election Day, says the city has hired about 20 additional people and trained them to help count the ballots. The five-member board has four African-Americans.

Also, to ensure that the counting goes smoothly and fairly, Musser says the counting will begin around noon on Election Day instead of 6:00 p.m., the time it normally starts.

"We take very seriously our desire to have the absentee count available at the same time as the machine count so everybody knows right away," Musser says.

Meanwhile, political observers are watching. Says Walters: "The barriers to a fair vote right now are so formidable that however it turns out, as far as I'm concerned, it's atrocious."

Clingman

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These "manufactured" gas prices will soon be a thing of the past if we, the consumers, would simply practice a little restraint, endure a little inconvenience, make simple sacrifices, and act in concert to decrease our demand for their precious fuel and, thereby, their supply. Get organized and get going!

Oh yes, we cannot spend all of our efforts withdrawing our dollars from the rip-off gas companies and refuse to do something for ourselves at the same time.

So take some of that money you save and buy a few gas stations; that way we can at least gain some of the profits from this burgeoning industry. As Reginald Lewis said,

"Why should White guys (and Arabs) have all the fun?"

One more thing. Let's cut back on all of the Navigatin', Escaladin', Expeditin', and Hummin' we love to do. The auto makers are probably laughing their heads off at the fact that consumers are still willing to purchase these monstrosities that get 12 miles to a gallon of premium gasoline.

If we really want gas prices to at least stay where they are, we had better be ready to do battle with the only weapons that count: Our dollars. Start your personal boycott today, and spread the word.

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