

Black employees need help of tough unions

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The growing economic crisis has pointed to significant flaws in the theory and functioning of the U.S. economy. After years of an ideological barrage from the political right insisting that there is no need for social safety nets to protect those at the bottom, we are discovering that those at the bottom are increasing in number and that there is nothing 'trickling down' from on high to save them. We are watching increasing numbers of people lose their health insurance — if they ever had it — and increasing numbers of people relying on insufficient food stamps in order to eat.

A significant section of the population of the USA bought into compelling myths about an economy benefiting us all. And while these myths were being propagated, our living standards were dropping. Yet not everyone's living standard has been dropping; only the bottom 80 percent of the population.

To put it in stark terms, unless you are a millionaire or approaching millionaire status, your income and 'wealth' have been neither stagnating or dropping. Since the mid 1970s, wealth and income in the USA have been polarizing very dramatically. Stark figures, such as the top 1 percent of the population controlling 35 percent of the wealth, are no

longer viewed, even in the mainstream media, as doubtful. The entire notion of a fair distribution of society's wealth has been challenged by years of Reagan, Bush, Clinton (yes, even Clinton!!), and the younger Bush. And while this has been happening, misery has spread, and along with that a significant amount of despair.

There are two points about this that need to be made. The first, which is not the main subject of this commentary, is that Sen. Obama was correct when he spoke about encountering bitterness among much of the White working class. This is so obvious that it was shocking that it could be seen as controversial.

This anger has been growing among White workers and White farmers going back to the mid-1980s, a point that Rev. Jesse Jackson observed and spoke to in both his '84 and '88 campaigns.

What has not been said is that Black workers have been bitter for a lot longer. The replacement of Black workers by more and more sophisticated technology, as well as the relocation of jobs from the major cities into more distant suburbs (and in some cases ru-



BILL FLETCHER JR.

ral areas), has made the possibility of making a decent living less possible.

The other point that arises when looking at the evolution of the wealth and income disparity between the lower 80 percent and the upper 20 percent is that as organizations of working-class people weaken—including but not limited to labor unions — it has become much more difficult to fight for wealth and income fairness. It is actually very straightforward. The upper 20 percent want to ensure that they not only control the process of work, but that they secure the lion's share of the wealth produced by those who work.

Black workers have, particularly since the 1930s, been especially loyal to and involved with labor unions. We recognized during the Great Depression that unions were the most successful means of demanding that wealth and income be divided on a fair basis. As a result, Black workers have played a key role in building and sustaining unions through the years.

When the economy started to shift, however, many of the key industries where there were significant numbers of unionized Black

workers (e.g., auto, steel) vanished or relocated. While a considerable number of Black workers remain unionized, about 16 percent, the disappearance of these unionized jobs has contributed to a hollowing of our communities.

If we are going to challenge income and wealth inequality, we must join and build unions where Black workers can play an influential, if not leading, role.

The Service Employees International Union, for instance, has played an important role in a major organizing effort targeted at security guards, a sector that has a very large Black component. While this is important, we will need to go further. Retail, warehouses, not to mention public sector jobs in the South, are all places where Black workers can be found in large numbers, and the union movement needs to move on them, and in doing so must have our support.

Those in the upper 20 percent have, by and large, little interest in sharing the wealth. So be it. Now the time has arrived for us to stop blaming ourselves and demand redistribution. Labor unions can be part of the answer, particularly if Black workers have a major stake in leading them.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a senior scholar with the Institute for Policy Studies and an international labor activist.

Supreme Court decision sanctions modern poll tax

By Marc H. Morial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

This election season has been full of stories about bowling scores, bar-room boilermakers and pick-up basketball. But, last week a little-noticed U.S. Supreme Court ruling may have jeopardized Americans' precious right to vote.

In *Crawford v. Marion County Election Board*, the Supreme Court ruled to uphold the most restrictive voter identification law in the country and failed, I think, in its duty to protect the voting rights of all Americans. In its 6-3 decision, the Court sanctioned the practice of requiring Indiana voters to present government-issued photo identification in order to vote.

Poll taxes, which were used to disenfranchise Southern Black voters by requiring them to pay a tax in order to vote, were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1966. This current ID requirement appears to be nothing more than a thinly disguised modern-day poll tax that places a burden upon many citizens — especially minorities, low-income, the elderly and people with disabilities — seeking to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

Walters

(Continued from Page 8)

and support Obama, and others will stay home. Those who don't support Obama, however, should be made up by the huge numbers of new voters that his campaign is attracting. They cite voter registration results; of: 200,000 new Democrats in Pennsylvania, 165,000 in North Carolina, and 150,000 in Indiana.

Barack Obama's dazzling performance



MARC H. MORIAL

As Melanie Campbell writes in the National Urban League's State of Black America 2008, "Today there are still over 54 million eligible unregistered voters, including over 30 percent of African-Americans and over 40 percent of Latino-Americans who are unregistered. Yet there are those who consistently advocate for policies

that discourage eligible citizens from becoming active participants in our representative democracy..." Indiana is one of a growing number of states that have passed or are considering similar restrictive voter ID measures. It's one thing to have the right to vote and quite another to have unfettered freedom to exercise that right.

Despite my disappointment with the Court's ruling, I am encouraged that the Justices have left open the possibility that such laws could be challenged in the future with proof that the laws prevented eligible voters from exercising their right to vote. As the historic presidential election of 2008 draws near, we should be making it easier — not more difficult — for eligible voters to participate.

Marc Morial is president and CEO of the National Urban League.

shows that in order to win you have to know something about the political culture. At this moment in history, his attraction to the electorate may overcome race and working-class anxiety.

Dr. Ron Walters is the Distinguished Leadership Scholar, Director of the African American Leadership Center and Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland College Park.

Voting

(Continued from Page 4)
across the country faced."

Among the worse states was Pennsylvania, where more than 1,000 calls flooded the 1-866-OurVote hotlines April 22.

Among the complaints:

- In Pennsylvania's Delaware County, one voter was told the voting machines at her precinct were set for Republicans only. The voter was not able to cast a vote.

- Another Pennsylvania voter took her child with her, but a poll worker refused to allow the child into the voting area with her, claiming that her child "can read."

- Yet, another Pennsylvania caller said building materials were being thrown off the roof of the polling place to prevent voters from entering.

- Finally, in Pennsylvania, a caller reported a polling location with only three voting machines and no printers working. Voters were leaving without being offered emergency ballots.

- In the Georgia primary, Feb. 5, a man allegedly from the secretary of state's office walked around in a uniform and a gun asking people if they belonged there. He left within 10 minutes after a call to the secretary of state's office, Arnwine says.

- In Denton County, Texas, March 4, disabled voters were directed to the back of the building where there was no assistance for them to go up the stairs to the voting area.

- Untrained poll workers, ballot shortages, registration roll problems and confusion over voter identification requirements. Also, some 57 percent of Super Tuesday complaints had to do with equipment failures.

Arnwine credits the massive increase in voter turnout for revealing the flaws in the system.

"The irony is that pundits and columnists and people are constantly criticizing the American electorate for not engaging

in the election process and not actually coming and casting their votes," she says. "Yet, when you get even a 40 percent turnout versus the historical 15 percent turnout, the electoral machinery just crashes, it just implodes, it can't take that amount of voting. What if 80 percent turned out?"

According to David Bositis, a senior analyst at the Joint Center for political and economic studies, voting in presidential primaries has been as low as 10 percent in past years, but has gone up and down, depending on the candidates, the issues and the excitement of the race.

"Twenty percent would be considered a really outstanding turnout," he said.

Arnwine says the hotlines will remain alive until the final primary June 3. Then they will reopen in August through Nov. 4 to advise people through the registration process as well as on general election day.

A team of lawyers and other volunteers that make up Election Protection Legal Committees will be meeting with heads of electoral boards, secretaries of state as well as the U.S. Election Assistance Commission in order to report problems and work out solutions, she says.

Meanwhile, the report recommends: Improving poll worker training; ensuring proper protocols for dealing with election machinery breakdowns; guaranteeing that all eligible registrants make it on to the registration rolls; and widely publicizing correct requirements and restrictions about voter identification and other procedures.

"We're very, very on top of this," Arnwine said. She adds that they have not ruled out court action if necessary.

"If we can tell in advance that a jurisdiction is not properly prepared and has not set up the amount of voting sites that are needed, does not have or has not set up [appropriate] election equipment, or enough poll workers in advance, absolutely, we will take whatever action is necessary."