

Recommended Priority Policy Agenda

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "inalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

– **Dr. Martin Luther King, March on Washington, 1963**

Our cities are crime haunted dying grounds. Huge sectors of our youth – and countless others – face permanent unemployment. Those who work find our paychecks able to purchase less and less. Neither the courts nor the prisons contribute to anything resembling justice or reformation. The schools are unable – or unwilling – to educate our children for the real world of our struggles. Meanwhile, the officially approved epidemic of drugs threatens to wipe out the minds and strengths of our best young warriors.

-- **Excerpt from the Preamble of the National Black Political Agenda, adopted in Gary, Indiana 1972**

Background/Introduction

November 4, 2008, the day that Barack Obama was elected the first Black President of the United States, will long be remembered as one of the most glorious moments in American history -- potentially a defining moment, a turning point in the long and often painful and tortured struggle to achieve a "more perfect union." The shouts of exhilaration from exuberant crowds pieced the midnight air throughout America and the world. People sensed that at long last America had taken a giant step towards upholding its creed – change was/is possible.

As the nation and the world watched the tears of joy stream down the cheeks of Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Congressman John Lewis and multitudes of Black elders, no doubt the triumph of the moment was felt against the backdrop of the refrain in the Black National Anthem: "We have come, treading our path thro' the blood of the slaughtered..." The road to the White House crossed a now famous bridge in Selma.

Our history demands that we who have gathered in New Orleans for the Black World Conference pledge to work tirelessly to ensure that the promise of the moment and the aspirations of generations that have proceeded us be fulfilled. The change we seek must come but the burden for bringing it to fruition should not be borne by President-Elect Barack Obama alone. It is our task to see to it that a much larger payment on the "promissory note" that Dr. Martin Luther King referenced at the March on Washington is forthcoming. For while we celebrate, the sobering reality is that far too many of our communities are still "crime haunted dying grounds." Therefore, we must resolve that the result of the 17 million Black folks who marched on ballot boxes to form the backbone of the coalition which propelled Obama into the White House will be permanent, transformative change for the masses of Black people in this nation.

It is in this spirit that we seize this moment to recommend a priority policy agenda as a framework for mobilizing/organizing to ensure that change will come. In so doing, we recognize that there are a myriad of worthy proposals that should and must be acted on in due course, e.g, affirmative action, reparations –which IBW supports. However, the short term proposals we advance here are calculated to address the toxic chemistry of chronic joblessness, underemployment, inferior education, health disparities, the epidemic of drugs and violence and the explosive growth of the prison-jail industrial complex in our communities. Moreover, in most instances the policy proposals being recommended are contained in bills which have already been introduced in the Congress of the United States. Others are contained in the platform of President-Elect Obama. Our goal is not only to present these proposals but to challenge the participants of SOBWC to return to their districts to energetically work for their passage. So let the real work begin!

◆ **An Urban Policy that Rebuilds New Orleans and Rebuilds America**

The plight of New Orleans before and after hurricane Katrina is a metaphor for the condition of Black and poor communities across the nation that have been victimized by policies of “benign” and blatant neglect for decades. Under the reign of right-wing conservatives and “centrist” Democrats who have dominated public policy in Washington, there has been no meaningful urban policy in recent history – disinvestment in urban areas by the federal government has been the order of the day.

Recommendation – Hold President-Elect Barack Obama to his commitment to create a White House office on Urban Affairs

The Obama Campaign pledged to establish an Office of Urban Affairs in the White House that would fully fund Community Development Block Grants, support job creation and access by creating innovation clusters, a national network of public-private business incubators and investment in improving infrastructure. It would work to increase the supply of affordable housing and lower mortgage payments by instituting a new housing tax credit. It would alleviate poverty by establishing “promise neighborhoods,” increasing the Minimum Wage, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and help low-income workers into the job market. It would also strengthen the livability of cities by supporting law enforcement, ending racial profiling, addressing gun violence especially against youth and generally lowering crime. It would also support families through providing a tax cut for working families, expanding after school activities, capping interests rates on payday loans and encouraging the rehabilitation of the Community Reinvestment Act.

◆ **Bail Out Main Street, Not Wall Street**

Recommendation – Adopt the following statement of principles and proposals as developed by the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition

In the attempt to fix the economy, consumers, workers, and homeowners must also be bailed out, since they are the key to American economic growth. Some of the largest banks that are being bailed out used their financial power to target bad loans to vulnerable

communities, such that 50% of such loans were made to African Americans alone. Given that minorities were disproportionately damaged by having been forced into exotic mortgages, as a country, we must establish a moratorium on mortgage foreclosures so that those affected can adjust their mortgages to save their homes. In fact, in the previous administration, many banks were relieved of the responsibility to serve their communities by loosening the regulations that supported their accountability to the neighborhoods they served. Rather than the cause of the crisis, the Community Reinvestment Act should be strengthened to cover more home loans, since 75% of those made were not through CRA.

◆ **Combating the Epidemic of Gun Violence in our Communities**

Recommendation: Support of HR – 7115 -- the Communities in Action Neighborhood Defense and Opportunity (CAN DO) Act, introduced by Congressman Bobby Rush

The CAN DO Act will serve as an innovative public health and safety strategy that focuses on reducing youth homicides and gun violence. Using a community-based and collaborative problem-solving approach, a broad coalition of Federal, State, and local governmental agencies, schools, nonprofits, community service organizations, religious leaders, parents, businesses, and resident stakeholders will be brought together to address the escalating number of youth homicides and increasing incidence of youth violence. The CAN DO bill calls for a four-pronged approach in addressing gun violence in our nation's most crime-impacted neighborhoods by focusing on: a) aggressive law enforcement and community policing; b) increased access to mental health and psychological counseling; c) employment training and enhanced economic opportunity; and 4) increased educational and recreational services for at-risk youth.

◆ **Reforming the “Criminal Punishment” System**

Eliminate the Crack Cocaine Sentencing Disparity

The disparities in sentencing between powdered and crack cocaine are a major reason for the disproportionate number of Blacks fueling the growth of the prison-jail industrial complex. Therefore, crack cocaine reform must be a priority for the new administration.

Recommendation -- Support for:

H.R. 460, sponsored by Representative Charles Rangel

S. 1711, sponsored by Senator Joe Biden

H.R. 4545, sponsored by Representative Sheila Jackson Lee

These bills eliminate the 100:1 ratio without increasing current powder cocaine penalties, and the bills eliminate the mandatory minimum penalty for simple possession of crack cocaine to bring it in line with simple possession of any other drug.

Appropriate full funding for Second Chance Act

The Second Chance Act signed in April 2008 authorizes \$330 million over two years to expand assistance for people currently incarcerated, those returning to their communities

after incarceration, and children with parents in prison. No money has ever been appropriated to carry out this Act.

Recommendation -- The new Congress must continue to work on the FY 2009 appropriations bills; it should protect funding for the Second Chance Act (P.L. 110-199) and appropriate the total amount (\$165 million) authorized under the law.

Extend Federal Voting Rights to People Released from Prison

Currently there are 5.3 million people in the U.S. not allowed to vote because of a felony conviction. These laws do not serve a legitimate purpose, and are rooted in the Jim Crow era where they denied emancipated persons the right to vote. Today, 13 percent of African American men have lost their right to vote as the result of a felony conviction.

Recommendation -- Support The Democracy Restoration Act, HR 7136 and S 3640, introduced by Senator Russ Feingold and Representative John Conyers.

The bill seeks to restore the right to vote in federal elections to all persons with felony convictions who are not in prison.

Support Programs That Divert Youth from Gangs

Gangs or “street organizations,” that engage in illicit activities and utilize violence to protect their turf and enterprises pose a serious problem in communities across the country. Gangs often have an adverse impact on our youth. Measures must be adopted to transform the negative activities of these organizations into productive pursuits.

Recommendation – Support for the Youth Promise Act, HR 3846, sponsored by Representative Bobby Scott -- (The “Youth Prison Reduction Through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support and Education Act).

This Act aims to reduce crime before it happens by investing in research-based programs. It mobilizes community leaders and invests in prevention and intervention.

◆ A Quality Education: The Gateway to Human Development

The persistence of inferior education and low performing schools is not only debilitating to our communities, it has created a pipeline to the prison-jail industrial complex for our young, especially Black males.

Recommendation – Hold President -Elect Barack Obama to his pledge to create a 21st century education for America’s students – Including \$8 billion for the recruitment of teachers, performance pay and other initiatives that update the No Child Left Behind Initiative; \$4,000 tax credit to make college affordable; and, \$10 billion expansion of early childhood education.

◆ **Universal Health Care Under a Single Payer System**

We concur with the judgment of Congressman John Conyers, Jr. that “With 47 million uninsured Americans, and another 50 million who are underinsured, the time has come to change our inefficient and costly fragmented non-system of health care.”

Recommendation – Support for HR 676, the United States National Health Insurance Act (USNHI), introduced by Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

This bill would establish a unique American universal health insurance program with single payer financing. As a publicly financed, privately delivered health care system that improves and expands the already existing Medicare program, it would be available to all U.S. residents, and all residents living in U.S. territories. The goal of the legislation is to ensure that all Americans will have access, guaranteed by law, to the highest quality and most cost effective health care services regardless of their employment, income or health care status. They would receive all medically necessary primary care, dental, mental health, prescription drugs, and long term care services by the physician of their choice, with no restrictions on what providers they could visit.

◆ **Enhance the Right of Workers to Organize and Maintain Unions**

Historically, labor unions have been a principal avenue for working people to achieve a decent standard of living in the United States. The “war on labor” declared by President Ronald Reagan and right-wing conservatives has resulted in a significant decline in the ranks of organized labor. Membership in unions has represented a path out of poverty for millions of Black people and people of color. Strong unions contribute to a strong Black community.

Recommendation – Support for the Employee Free Choice Act (H.R. 800, S. 1041), supported by a bipartisan coalition in Congress.

This Act would enable working people to bargain for better wages, benefits and working conditions by restoring workers’ freedom to choose for themselves whether to join a union. It would:

- Establish stronger penalties for violation of employee rights when workers seek to form a union and during first-contract negotiations.
- Provide mediation and arbitration for first-contract disputes .
- Allow employees to form unions by signing cards authorizing union representation.

◆ A Just and Humane Policy Towards Africa and the Caribbean

Recommendation -- Support for a broad Statement of Principles on policy toward Africa and the Caribbean.

The United States must maintain a responsibility to engage countries in the African Diaspora from the progressive posture of assisting them to achieve social and economic viability, rather than continuing policies that privilege advanced industrial countries in the modern era of colonialism. Thus, debt must be forgiven, trade policies that do not advance the interest of workers and their families should be changed, and economic assistance projects should be increasingly administered by in-country resources and personnel. Moreover, the United States should refrain from enhancing the colonial stance by creating military projects such as the Africa force and help to develop the peace-keeping capability of the Africa Union. The United States should also be as vigorous a leader in Africa and the Caribbean as it has been in other parts of the world where natural disasters, famine and especially genocide is attempted as in Darfur, Congo and other places.

Resource Persons, Organizations and Sources: Dr. Ronald Walters, Nkechi Taifa, Kenneth Barnes, Mustafa Ali, Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, AFSCME and National Urban League's *State of Black America Report*