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Current News

Perspectives: On Immigration and Black Unemployment, Congressional Black Caucus Remains Silent

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by Dr. Carol M. Swain
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In the new book *Debating Immigration*, I criticized the Congressional Black Caucus for its failure to take a leadership role in reforming the nation's immigration laws. A perusal of the CBC's Web site and press releases during the 109th Congress revealed that the issue was not listed among its legislative priorities, nor had the organization, traditionally concerned with jobs and education, acknowledged the negative impact that high immigration rates has had and is continuing to have on members' districts.

When the CBC finally addressed the issue in the 110th Congress, its official position placed the organization firmly in favor of amnesty for millions of illegal immigrants and for a guest worker program that would bring in even more immigrants to compete with Blacks and other low-wage, low-skill workers for housing, health care, education, employment opportunities and goods and services.

We need only focus on unemployment to get an idea of how Blacks and other groups are adversely affected by high levels of immigration. Consider that Black unemployment rates are usually double the rate of Whites and are higher than the rates of Hispanics. For example, in April 2007, the national unemployment rate was 4.5 percent. The Black unemployment rate was 8.2 percent, with the rate for Black males at 9.7 percent. The rate for Hispanics was 5.4 percent. Moreover, the Bureau of Labor statistics has forecast that in the next seven years the Hispanic labor force will be 6.3 million workers greater than the Black work force. By 2014, the Black work force will lag behind Hispanics, Asians and White non-Hispanics in labor force participation.

Employed African-Americans include a disproportionate percentage of high school dropouts and graduates who compete directly with legal and illegal immigrants for low-wage, low-skill jobs. Immigrants arriving since 1990 have increased the supply of labor by 25 percent for the kinds of jobs traditionally taken by poorly educated Americans. Using data from 2000-2004, Steven Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies has found that while immigrant workers constituted 15 percent of the U.S. labor force, they were a whopping 40 percent of workers without high school diplomas. Only 12 percent had greater than a high school diploma.

The greatest competition for low-skill jobs is now occurring among people at the margins of society, a multiracial group that includes poorly educated Blacks, Whites and Hispanics. It is no wonder members of the working-class are the ones most upset about high levels of immigration.

Whether the topic is education, poverty, housing, health care or unemployment, Blacks remain clustered at the bottom of the ladder in a most desperate situation. Therefore, their need for representation in Congress is on-going — the more vigorous, the better.

The CBC has not been an effective voice on unemployment and related issues such as immigration. It was U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who chaired the Senate committee that held hearings on Black male unemployment in spring of 2007. James Wright, a journalist writing for *Afro-American News*, reported that U.S. Senator Barack Obama, D-Ill., chose not to sit on Schumer's committee. At the time that Wright's newspaper went to press, no CBC representatives were seated on the bicameral committee of House and Senate members.

African-Americans should expect and demand more from the CBC, because its members have chosen to organize as a racial caucus. By doing so, CBC members have placed upon themselves the obligation to represent the interests of the millions of Black constituents who have faithfully and repeatedly sent them to Washington. Instead, CBC members have ignored social science studies, congressional testimony and census data documenting the harm that high levels of immigration has had and is continuing to have on low-wage, low-skill workers. Intervention is needed. Blacks and their allies should hold CBC members and other Democrats accountable for failing to represent the interests of their constituents.

The interests of American citizens should trump any obligations to illegal immigrants who have willfully broken the nation's laws and demanded rights and privileges not guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Often, these immigrants show open hostility and disdain for African-Americans, the very group whose civil rights movement have and continues to benefit them enormously.

CBC members should be expected to bring more to their districts than descriptive representation and loud rhetoric about race and rights. Effectively representing their constituents should trump symbolism and the Caucus's tendency to pursue abstract rights for imagined coalitional partners. If the CBC is to fulfill its goals and obligations to America, it must be actively involved in shaping immigration legislation to take into consideration the needs of the most vulnerable Americans.

— Dr. Carol M. Swain, a professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University, is the editor of *Debating Immigration* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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