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The Carolina Times

THE TRUTH UNBRIDLED

VOLUME 93 - NUMBER 8

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA - SATURDAY, MARCH 1, 2014

TELEPHONE (919) 682-2913 PRICE: 30

Civil Rights Leaders Submit Agenda to President

By Freddie Allen
NNPA Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - A group of civil rights leaders met with President Obama and several members of his cabinet last week to discuss the "1963-2013: 21st Century Agenda for Jobs and Freedom," a formal document with more than 90 legislative policy and priority recommendations.

In a statement released after the meeting, Al Sharpton, president and founder of the National Action Network, said that it was one of the most substantive meetings he has had with any president.

"We covered a broad spectrum of concerns from the civil rights community including unemployment, minimum wage, and job training; as well as concerns about restoring and protecting our voter rights, and state laws that we feel threaten our civil rights such as Stand Your Ground which is in 23 states," said Sharpton.

Even though some have called it the "Black Agenda" civil rights leaders want people to know that they have been working with the president on many of the policy priorities since he took office.

Right after the president's re-election in 2012, Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, said that he and other civil rights leaders felt the need to develop a set of formal, written policy priorities to be presented not only to the president but also to his cabinet and Congress.

The agenda focused on five primary objectives:

1. Achieve Economic Parity for African-Americans
 2. Promote Equity in Educational Opportunity
 3. Protect and Defend Voting Rights
 4. Promote a Healthier Nation by Eliminating Healthcare Disparities
 5. Achieve Comprehensive Criminal Justice System Reform
- Melanie Campbell, president and CEO of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation said that discussions surrounding the "1963-2013: 21st Century Agenda for Jobs and Freedom" will stretch far past the White House. The goal is to use the agenda to engage other government agencies and departments as well, said Campbell.

"This administration is always looking for new ideas," said Campbell "The agenda was just a comprehensive way of presenting those ideas."

Those ideas range from job creation and training programs to updating programs that fund Historically Black Colleges and Universities to financial assistance to care for people with mental health disorders.

Contrary to criticism from some members of the black community that wonder why it took the civil rights organizations so long to craft the document, Campbell reiterated the fact that the many of the groups have engaged the president, collectively and individually, on a number of key issues.

Morial said that the agenda reflects the idea that the civil rights groups have to be much more collaborative and much more unified than ever before.

The National Urban League also crafted a document that showed how many of the priorities outlined in the president's

State of the Union address align with recommendations spelled out in the agenda.

The 21st Century Agenda calls for a higher minimum wage, funding for urban infrastructure projects, full implementation of the Affordable Care Act, and support for early childhood education.

"What people do not know is that those are the things that we have been encouraging for the last several years," said Morial.

Morial continued: "Before income inequality became a mainstream, hot button issue, black civil rights organizations back in 2010, 2011 and 2013 were encouraging the president to increase his focus on it. This State of the Union this second term agenda reflects an embrace of some of the recommendations that we have been making over the years."

Morial also noted that Attorney General Eric Holder has

taken on criminal justice reform in a way that is unprecedented. Holder called for states to reform or repeal laws that banned ex-felons from voting during an event at the Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C. The attorney general expressed support for sentencing reform and new guidelines for prosecutors at public events last year.

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First Lady Michelle Obama takes a selfie with Baltimore student Lawrence Lawson's phone following a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) workshop at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., Feb. 5. (Official White House Photo by Amanda Lucidon)

No 'Carolina Comeback' Just a 'Carolina Setback' for too many jobless workers

By Alexandra Forter Sirota

In recent months, Governor McCrory and his supporters have pointed to a number of controversial steps lawmakers took in 2013, like cutting unemployment insurance, as being the catalyst for a "Carolina Comeback." A look at the evidence, however, reveals no such benefits and, indeed, points to very real harm being done to jobless workers and their families as a result of unemployment insurance changes.

A more accurate description of the current situation is that North Carolina is simply riding on the coattails of the painfully slow national economic recovery, while failing to create enough good-paying jobs to improve the lives of working families and those looking for work. Moreover, unemployment insurance changes are actually making it more difficult for many jobless workers to meet basic needs as they seek work in an economy that has too few jobs to go around.

Yes, the state's official unemployment rate has dropped. However, it is actually the decline in North Carolina's labor force that is primarily driving the drop. Only one in 10 North Carolinians who left the ranks of the unemployed found a job over the past year; the rest simply gave up looking for work and left the labor force. There simply aren't enough jobs for jobseekers. North Carolina's employment level relative to the state's population is well-below the national average, and job creation in 2013 was below that of 2012.

Changes to North Carolina's unemployment insurance were implemented last summer, and with the passage of time, we now know what they have meant to jobless workers. We know, for instance, that the combined effect of the 2013 policy changes (to the way payments are calculated, the weeks available, and the maximum benefit amounts) has produced a dramatic fall in the average weekly benefit. Last June, the average unemployed worker received a modest benefit of \$301 per week. By December of 2013, that average had plummeted to \$248.

Even at the \$301 level, North Carolina's average benefit ranked 25th in the country and was clearly insufficient for a family of three to meet their most basic needs. Today, however, such families are bringing in \$224 less each month (enough, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to meet a bare bones, thrifty food budget) - a reality that makes it even more difficult for them to survive.

We also know that workers are waiting longer for their first-time benefits and thereby, in turn, going without any income despite the fact that they are qualified for unemployment insurance. In a recent news article in Raleigh's News & Observer, state unemployment insurance chief Dale Folwell stated that the backlog is to blame, in part, on the increased attention his office is devoting to preventing overpayments. It seems certain, however, that the longer waits are also the result of cuts to administrative dollars and staffing at local unemployment offices. Right now, roughly one-third of unemployed workers living without a paycheck are also doing without unemployment insurance payments for at least two weeks. Stories abound of folks waiting much longer to receive notification of their claims being approved.

The unemployment insurance system was designed to work, and works best, when jobless workers receive a temporary and partial replacement of their prior wages so that they can continue to meet basic needs, spend money in their local communities and search for work. The reduction in benefit amounts combined with the delay in processing claims not only creates hardship for families but negatively impact the economy.

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The Future Rests in How I Teach My Child, 2013

NCCU Art Museum Exhibits The Work of Printmaker and Artist Robin Holder

North Carolina Central University Art Museum will host the work of artist and printmaker Robin Holder in an exhibit titled, "A Layered Perspective." The exhibit runs through April 18.

"Robin Holder uses art to tell her own story," said Kenneth Rodgers, director of the NCCU Art Museum. "This exhibition includes 41 prints representing a wide range of printmaking techniques and themes."

In her series titled What's Black and White and Red all Over? Holder examines childhood quandaries engendered by her biracial background, while Warrior Women Wizards: Mystical Magical Mysteries extols the dynamic and resilient nature of women.

Behind Each Window, A Voice draws from the oral histories of her Brooklyn, N.Y., neighbors using handwritten text. The exhibit also includes work from her latest series, A Time Yet to Come, which merges dilapidated houses, African-American vernacular architecture, history and the all-seeing eye.

Born in 1952, Holder is a nationally known artist who works from her studio in West Milford, N.J. She is a graduate of the famed New York City's High School of Music and Art and she refined her skills as a printmaker at the Art Students League of New York. Founded in 1875 by artists for artists, the Art Students League has been instrumental in shaping America's legacy in the fine arts.

Holder studied black and white lithography at Werk-groep Uit Het Amsterdam Grafisch Atelier in Amsterdam. In Mexico she studied the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros from the perspective of art as means of aesthetic and sociopolitical expression. In 1977 she joined the workshop of African-American printmaking master Robert Blackburn, later becoming assistant director and coordinator of the workshop.

Holder has received numerous large-scale commissions, including public art projects for New Jersey Transit, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the Connecticut State Arts Commission and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Works by Holder are held by numerous museums, institutions, and private collections, including the permanent collection at Clark Atlanta University and Yale University; the Library of Congress in Washington; Con Edison and the Xerox Corporation; the Queens Borough Public Library in New York City and others.

The NCCU Art Museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Sundays from 2 to 5 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, call the museum at 919-530-6211.

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