

**The
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Bruce's Beat
Anti-immigrant hysteria versus common sense
The 'neutered' Black Caucus
Crash and burn
Email from readers
by BC Editor Bruce Dixon

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Last weekend in Los Angeles somewhere between half a million and two million legal and illegal immigrants and their supporters hit the streets protesting the same federal legislation that brought at least three hundred thousand into the streets of Chicago two weeks earlier, and smaller crowds in dozens of other cities. As this article is written, the U.S. Senate has just stricken the most onerous provisions of pending immigration bills which make an instant felon out of anybody “illegally present” in the US, and lay a felony charge of “human smuggling” on anyone rendering medical care or other services to the “illegal humans” among us.

In Georgia where both Republicans and some right-wing Democrats like State Senator Kasim Reed of Atlanta proposed state level measures which echoed and exceeded the petty viciousness of congressional Republicans, similar proposals still live on. Reed sent us a letter defending his indefensible position which we will print in next week's **BC**, but the issue is too important not to revisit now.

How should black people view the wave of immigrant labor that has undeniably impacted us? How do we make sense of the current anti-immigrant hysteria? Can African Americans benefit from following the lead of Lou Dobbs and Senator Reed, blaming and scapegoating immigrants for lowering wages? Or do we help our people best when we stand up for a living wage and dignity for everybody? While the answer seems clear enough to us, some **BC** readers are not so sure.

Y. Denise asks:

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Why should we, of all people, fight for the rights of immigrants; regardless of the trials they go through to get here? Why is it that these groups can hate us, and openly and heinously undercut us at every turn. I am not just talking about Hispanic groups; I am also talking about other blacks. I never see any of them coming to our aid – in anything, and you have the nerve to say that we have to be on their sides? Many don't even live in our communities, don't support our communities and they don't hire from our communities. How much more self-destruction can we heap upon ourselves? Their fight has nothing to do with us at all.

Denise raises an unrealistic but oft-heard complaint about small retail immigrant business people that needs answering. Why don't those small businesses in our community hire more of us?

In the first place, hours are long and income is low for most startup small businesses, and most fail within a year of startup. Job One is just staying in business. For immigrant business people, Job Two is to hire their own families. Family work is cheap, sometimes for mere room and board. The business owned by a family or close friend is also the prime place to land for newly arrived relatives and close friends with limited language skills and sometimes with no papers. For small operations with low profit margins, hiring an American who expects to get paid a living wage and on time can be a huge additional expense. And if you do it, you'll have to explain to the extended family why that spot is not available for your sister-in-law or cousin Isaac. Job Three is to send money home, because of course everybody back in the old country imagines you're rich. You're in America, after all.



Given all this, it just ain't realistic to suppose small immigrant retail businesses will hire a lot of their American neighbors. Some. But not a lot. We need to get over that expectation.

Denise seems to imagine immigrants hate and “undercut” us. With all due respect, we suspect she may be projecting in the first instance and misdirected in the second. There are many voices in the ears of immigrants. White America teaches everybody to hate and fear black folks, and immigrants bring along their own helpful baggage as well. Cultures across the planet have ancient traditions that put lighter skinned people higher on the social pecking order than darker ones. Dark skinned Mexicans and Indians – the ones from India – are socialized to hate themselves, much the same as we are.

But immigrants bring other stuff to the American table, too. In the countries they hail from there are traditions of working class militancy and solidarity deeper and more widespread than anything here, and traditions of broad left wing social movements tougher and more enduring than we see here in the U.S. In Mexico, Nigeria, Indonesia and Brazil, in South Korea and Colombia, farm, factory and service workers join unions by the millions and fight for their own rights, often at great personal cost.

These are traditions that black America can use and learn from, traditions that will raise all our standards of living if we choose to adopt them. But they can't be put into play as long as immigrants don't have the same right to live, to organize, to bargain collectively and to strike that every one of us has. Immigrant labor only “undercuts” the wages of black Americans when immigrants can be threatened with jail or deportation for standing up to their employers. Their fight has everything to do with us. If black America refuses to make common cause with them, we cut our own throats.

Two weeks ago, Guest Commentator Rhone Fraser compared the white liberal “moderates” of the King era, who were more interested in order than in justice, to the spineless “moderate” Democratic office holders and candidates of today, prompting this response from reader Jack Harrington:

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I wish to comment on the idea that white moderates hold a significant degree of political power in our contemporary political structure. The three branches of government clearly are under the control of the neocons and conservative Republicans and Democrats of various social and economic stripes.

Moderates have been phased out, in Congress for example, by the simple expediency of being barred from meetings, having meetings called in the middle of the night for votes, etc. The White House, by the same token, has no use for moderates, they pursue their own strange and deadly agenda, as in their response to Katrina.

In addition, over the last 25 years, the label moderate has shifted to the right by a significant margin, so that a contemporary moderate would have been a “centrist” Republican around 1975 or 1980. The label moderate has been twisted every bit as much as the label liberal over this time period.

Many moderate and liberal Americans of all colors have been involved in protests on any number of issues. We are in the streets because other, more immediate and more effective avenues are closed to us. We do not have the reins of power in our grip. We are spied upon, arrested and harassed, isolated and kept from power.

Actually, we think Jack is confusing the kind of whites and others who attend meetings and demonstrations against the war, and would vote for antiwar, progressive and pro-impeachment candidates if only they could find any, with the white Democratic political class themselves.

It is worth noting that Americans do presently enjoy the freedom to get out here and get organized, if not the democratic access to media that would make their efforts much more effective. Nobody's knocking at our doors and disappearing us in the middle of the night for calling or attending neighborhood meetings, or reading the wrong library books, and unless you're in the military, nobody censors your email and web usage. It's up to us to use the freedoms we do have to fight for more of them, and for more people.

Ivan, a **BC** reader in Washington state knows a little about that:

I marched with Andrew Young in the 1960s, and Dr. King, and Fred Shuttlesworth, and John Lewis. Andrew Young knows he is betraying what he once claimed to stand for. I cut him no slack. I pity the fool who thinks Wal-Mart is the friend of working people – of any color.

And let us not forget the black moderates of the Congressional Black Caucus, neutered by the presence of a handful of DLC and open right wingers, refusing to take any stand as a caucus in the absence of unanimity. Well, almost any stand. Cynthia McKinney certainly thinks she should get her seniority back, and isn't ashamed to say so. But in this case, the CBC's silent majority speaks volumes.

BC reader Randy Short recalls how in 2002, a congressman from North Carolina called Cynthia McKinney the b-word, and wonders what would happen if that epithet were directed elsewhere.

Thank you for the article... I hope that you sent a copy of it to each member of the CBC. I would like to hear the response but I imagine they will be quiet about that too.

I wonder what would happen if a white man would call Nancy Pelosi a bitch in the presence of one of the Black CBC male members. The National Guard would probably have to be called out to pull the CBC member off of his behind. I used to respect some of these guys. Now I wonder.

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Cynthia McKinney deserves to have her committee seat and seniority returned.

Finally, in the March 16 **BC ThinkPiece**, Derek Smith expertly deconstructed the movie *Crash*, winner of this year's academy award for best picture. Smith detailed how the heralded “honesty and complexity” of the film, praised in many quarters for being a complex and unsparing portrait of race relations in the US, amounted to merely humanizing its flawed white characters while trivializing its flawed black ones.

In so doing, Smith explained to at least one **BC** reader the source of his unspoken misgivings about the movie. Reader T. Burroughs writes:

I have tried in vain to explain to conscious Black people why I don't like "Crash." I was beginning to think I was insane.....

Another reader had already found some of the necessary language to describe his misgivings. From Jon Nelson we heard:

I very much appreciated the think piece on "Crash." I sometimes find it useful to borrow an idea from feminist theory when discussing race relations. While members of all races can behave badly, or harbor prejudices, there are power relationships between the races that actually define racial oppression.

This idea was summed up for me by a friend, a white cop. I was politely dithering something foolish to the effect of "Why can't we all just get along?" When he interrupted me, "That's not the problem," he said, "There's plenty of nice people out there. The problem is that the white man has been fuckin' the Black man for the last 500 years. That's the problem."

I'll take my wake up calls anywhere I can get them.

We at **BC** have also learned to take wake up calls and good advice from wherever we can get it. Send yours to bruce.dixon@blackcommentator.com