

IBW has impact at Congressional Black Caucus Conference

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

Wednesday, 30 September 2009 15:14

For years there has been a debate about the relevance of the Congressional Black Caucus Annual Legislative Conference (CBC-ALC). Dubbed the premier political gathering in Black America, every September upwards of 20,000, including the who's who of Black America, descend on Washington, D.C. for four days of Issue Forums, Legislative Brain Trusts, shopping and freebies in the expansive Exhibition Hall, musical performances, seemingly endless receptions and parties -- capped by a star-studded Dinner Gala with a minimum price tag of \$750 per person. Progressive activists often focus on the receptions, the parties and the Dinner/Gala in suggesting that CBC-ALC is largely a waste of time.

There is a danger that the vision/mission of the Congressional Black Caucus as the "conscience" of the Congress and the nation can be stifled by the flood of corporate dollars that fund the overall conference and many of the receptions/parties. In my view, however, CBC-ALC continues to be an important vehicle to gather information and analysis on vital issues of concern to people of African descent and for networking with people from various walks of life from around the country. Each year there is absolutely an amazing array of Issue Forums and Legislative Brain Trusts with stellar panelists/presenters offering expert perspectives on a range of important issues. And, though the Dinner/Gala is out of the reach for most Black folks, there is no fee to register to attend the Issue Forums and Brain Trusts. CBC-ALC is accessible to the general public. That's a good thing!

Rather than disdain and boycott CBC-ALC, I contend that progressive activists should take advantage of the fact that thousands attend to familiarize people with our organizations and gain valuable exposure for the causes we advocate. For years Dr. Benjamin F. Chavis used to convene a progressive forum at a neighborhood church on the final afternoon of the Conference to offer perspectives on domestic and international issues. For a number of years, as Convener of the African American Progressive Action Network and most recently as President of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century (IBW), I have sought to keep the idea of organizing a progressive forum during CBC-ALC alive. This year by organizing a Forum and participating in other activities, I feel IBW was successful in promoting our "brand" as a progressive, African-centered, action-oriented think tank.

At the behest of Congressman John Conyers, Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and Dean of the Congressional Black Caucus, I was privileged to organize and moderate the Haiti Issues Forum. The Haiti Support Project (HSP), which I founded in 1995, is a major Initiative of IBW. HSP has emerged as the principal Initiative building a constituency for Haiti in the U.S., with a focus on mobilizing/engaging the Black Diaspora. Accordingly, we had little difficulty assembling two outstanding panels of experts, advocates and organizational leaders including Jacques E. Alexis, the former Prime Minister of Haiti. It was important to have a substantive discussion of critical issues like security, political stability, economic growth, dual citizenship, good governance and the role of the Diaspora in building democracy and development in Haiti. Congressman Conyers made certain that the concerns of the first Black Republic were front and center at CBC-ALC. From our vantage point, it was also significant that the President of IBW was called on to organize and moderate this session.

I was also privileged to serve as a Panelist for the Issue Forum on Reparations convened by Congressman Conyers. Hulbert James moderated a Panel on Immigration Reform and the

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2010 Census, hosted by Congresswoman Yvette Clarke; Attorney Nkechi Taifa moderated a Criminal Justice Panel in ending disparities in drug sentencing convened by Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee. And, Leonard Dunston moderated the CBC Veterans Brain Trust convened by Congressman Charles Rangel. All three are IBW Board members. Dr. Gilbert Parks, IBW Advisor, spearheaded a spirited discussion on the need for grassroots engagement in the struggle for universal health care in the Issues Forum on Single Payer. The point here is that progressives can forge valuable relationships with members of the Congressional Black Caucus which can translate into influence on issues we care about.

Hulbert James and Makani Themba Nixon, Executive Director of the Praxis Project and an Advisor to IBW, worked to facilitate a Black Diaspora Dialogue Luncheon convened by Dr. Joseph Baptiste, President of the National Organization for the Advancement of Haitians and Dr. Claire Nelson, President of the Institute for Caribbean Studies. This was another example of progressives and activists taking advantage of the occasion to build bonds of unity that can bear fruit beyond the Conference.

IBW's greatest impact, however, was through the convening of a State of the Black World Forum entitled "Life in Post Racial America." With an awesome line-up of Panelists, which included Minister Ava Muhammad (National Representative of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan) Susan Taylor, Makani Themba-Nixon, Dr. Iva Carruthers, Attorney Nkechi Taifa, Dr. Julianne Malveaux and Dr. Ronald Walters, there was a packed house for this session. Organized by Leonard Dunston, President Emeritus, National Association of Black Social Workers and IBW Board Member, 31 national organizations associated with IBW's Black Family Summit were also in attendance. Among the highly informative and riveting topics/issues discussed were the need for millions of mentors for at-risk young people, devastating levels of unemployment, unspeakable poverty in the Mississippi Delta and rural south, miscarriage of justice in the case of Rev. Edward Pinkney, the critical importance of an accurate count of Black people in the 2010 Census and a "report card" on President Obama in terms of issues of importance to Black people.

Taken together, through the involvement/engagement of Board Members and Advisors in various Issue Forums and Brain Trusts, special activities and the State of the Black World Forum, folks at this year's CBC-ALC knew that IBW was in the house! We didn't get seduced by the receptions and parties. We decided how we wanted to take advantage of the occasion to advance our interests. Mission accomplished!

Dr. Ron Daniels is President of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century and Distinguished Lecturer at York College City University of New York. He is the host of Night Talk, Wednesday evenings on WBAI 99.5 FM, Pacifica New York. His articles and essays also appear on the IBW website www.ibw21.org and www.northstarnews.com. He can be reached via email at info@ibw21.org