

President Obama: Meeting the Crisis of Black Youth

History was made on January 20th when Barack Obama took the oath of office and became the 44th president of the United States. The nation's first Black president took office the day after the national holiday honoring Martin Luther King, 23 days before the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. While President Obama's election doesn't end racism in America or reverse the slide into an economic recession or restore America's good standing in the world, there is a great sense of optimism in the nation. And as he said about these challenges, "They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America. They will be met."

So many Americans feel a personal connection to President Obama that his victory seems as though it is also their victory. And, in a sense, it is.

But as President Obama takes office in the midst of the national economic crisis, it would be easy to overlook the growing problem of disconnected youth, mostly young people of color ages 16 to 24 who are neither in school nor in the work force. Currently, there are about 200,000 disconnected youth in New York City; 4 to 5 million nationally. Disconnected youth are a special issue because (1) most are without sufficient education or job experience and (2) they are not yet on the political or media radar screen.

There have been several estimates that the nation's official unemployment rate may hit 10 percent in the near future, oversaturating the labor market with low-wage workers. If that happens, the number of disconnected youth could double or triple, a situation that could totally destabilize our communities.

While the Obama administration strives to solve the overall crisis, it must not overlook the looming disaster of our disconnected youth. Our leaders in Congress must not let this moment pass without insisting that at least part of the economic stimulus focus on our underserved communities.

Barack Obama is aware of this situation. When he addressed the Working Cities Forum, co-sponsored by the Community Service Society, in July 2007, he said, "We're going to have to invest in skills and we're going to have to create enough transitional jobs to give them a resume that then allows them ultimately to transition into the private sector."

Choices to be Made

President Obama understands that our problems are rooted in the choices made in the past. New choices – wiser choices – must be the hallmark of his administration.

The rising inequality of wealth is a blight on America. We need more funding for education and health care, a minimum wage with increases tied to inflation, and more progressive tax policies. And he understands the absurdity of the term "working poor": "We should retire the term working poor, because if you are working in America, you should be able to obtain a living wage and support a family." Yet he knows many people are skeptical that government can do anything about poverty. But only the federal government can lead the way out of this situation, by becoming government that works.

There are two key elements that the Obama stimulus plan should include. First, there should be an infusion of funds to the states and cities – where legal constraints to balance budgets are forcing unconscionable cuts in public services. These will only deepen the economic crisis and add to the unemployment rolls. Keeping public services operating will keep people employed.

Second, the stimulus should fund jobs. Government funding to rebuild the nation’s aging infrastructure would put millions to work immediately. This would be a smart investment in the nation’s future. Some jobs would be temporary, while others could lead to long-term employment on large projects such as renovating and building bridges, tunnels, light rail, and highways. This is a place where many of our disconnected youth could find a way to training and further employment.

Although many crises face us, Obama emphasized in his inaugural address that we have chosen hope over fear. This, in fact, is the choice Americans face at every presidential election, never more so than in 2008.

Inspiring Confidence

The anticipation of Obama’s presidency is so great, yet it can disappear so quickly. So much of the ability of the nation to rebound – to claw its way out of this recession – depends on the confidence of the people in our leaders and national institutions. F.D.R. was able to inspire confidence even in the midst of the Great Depression. Obama must do no less now.

The measure of a nation is in the way it treats its most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Considering the extent of poverty and inequality of opportunity prevalent in the nation – much of it unacknowledged - we still have a long way to go.

One last point: Barack Obama has become a hero to millions of African American young people in the nation. It’s now cool to be smart, to be successful, to aspire to be somebody in life. That, in itself, is an immeasurable gift to young Black Americans. Now his administration should address the crisis of disconnected Black youth.

Join the discussion on how we can improve the lives of low-wage workers by making your voice heard on our Turnstile blog at <http://turnstile.cssny.org/turnstile/>.

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