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Cover Story

*Black Convention Tackles Economic Issues
Jobs and Development to Dominate in Gary
by BC Publishers Glen Ford and Peter Gamble*

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Back in 1972, it was "Nation Time!" in Gary, Indiana, at the historic convening of the National Black Political Assembly. In 2006, it's time for another mass political gathering, "to bring together the collective wisdom, creativity and resources in our community to map out a bold economic agenda that can unite us and be a catalyst to forming new economic relationships that will empower communities of color across the nation." The Call to Convention for the National Black Peoples Unity Convention – to be held at the same Gary high school as the 1972 gathering – promises that the March 9 – 12 event "will be a potent catalyst to refocus and rejuvenate the movement for black economic empowerment." And by "empowerment," the organizers don't mean some mythic trickle down from Black millionaires to the masses:

"We must explore new concepts to build partnerships among the religious community, the trade union movement and the investment community.

"We must use these partnerships to anchor economic empowerment and job creation, more affordable health care and housing, and improvements to an educational system that will prepare our youth to succeed rather than fail or falter."

The convention's slogan is "Policies for Empowerment: A Struggle for a New Economic Order" – which is indeed a tall order. But why the focus on economics in 2006? "Because very seldom if ever does the national political leadership talk to our communities about economic issues and economic solutions," said William Lucy, President of the Coalition of Black Trader Unionists (CBTU) and one of three co-chairs of the "Unity" convention. "We're talking about taxes, development, job creating possibilities, capital development programs... We need to form partnerships to generate jobs and prepare the young for jobs. It is possible to make change. The convention will identify ways to do so."

The Legacy

Lucy first announced plans for "going back to Gary" at last May's annual convention of the CBTU, which was founded the same year as "Gary I."

"What we expect [from Gary II] is that a consensus will develop around an agenda that will serve to help mobilize our constituencies across the country," said Lucy, who is also Secretary–Treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Although great currents of energy went into, and emerged from, the 1972 event, it cannot be said that a consensus emerged. The National Black Political Assembly is viewed by many as a watershed in modern Black history, when new and aspiring Black Democratic officeholders clashed with Black Power activists and those who sought to build an independent Black political party.

The 1972 Gary Declaration called for radical transformation of American society, and of Black politics:

"A Black political convention, indeed all truly Black politics, must begin from this truth: The American system does not work for the masses of our people, and it cannot be made to work without radical, fundamental changes. The challenge is thrown to us here in Gary. It is the challenge to consolidate and organize our own Black role as the vanguard in the struggle for a new society.

"To accept the challenge is to move to independent Black politics. There can be no equivocation on that issue. History leaves us no other choice. White politics has not and cannot bring the changes we need."

Eight years later, under the leadership of Dr. Ron Daniels and other veterans of Gary I, the National Black Independent Political Party (NBIPP) was formed at a tumultuous convention in Philadelphia. As at Gary, delegates to the 1980 NBIPP affair formed as state delegations – which often found themselves in even deeper conflict than the colonial delegations that gathered in Philadelphia in 1776. NBIPP soon faded from the scene.

Gary II co–chair George Brown, the former Colorado Lt. Governor, says there will be no state delegations at Gary II. "Everybody is a participant. Nobody is shut out" from speaking as an individual.

The third co–chair is Richard Hatcher, the former mayor of Gary, an 84 percent Black city of about 100,000, forty miles from Chicago. "We know that we cannot replicate 1972," said Hatcher, whose job is now held by a white man, Scott King. Gary II will be dissimilar to Gary I in many ways. Hatcher doesn't expect more than a quarter of the 8–10,000 activists that last descended on his hometown, although the number of Black elected officials has increased from less than 2,000 to about 9,500 over the past 34 years.

"The problems that face us are perhaps more critical than in 1972," said Hatcher, a view reflected in the "Unity" convention's Mission Statement, prepared by University of Maryland political scientist Ron Walters, a member of the convention's advisory board:

"[T]he storm of political, economic, social and cultural subordination has not yet passed over us and so we, and others of our class, continue to be prevented from achieving their full citizenship by acquiring the means to give it substance. This occurs by the neglect of the needs of our communities, by passage of deleterious public policies and by acts of direct racial and class aggression.

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""This situation is intensified by the fact that we live in the context of an American capitalist economy that continues not to produce full employment and the leaders of which have transferred millions of jobs to low-wage labor markets outside this country, penalizing not only individual workers, but whole communities, towns and cities which have depended upon the returns from that economic activity.... The result is that America is becoming a country of the very rich and the very poor and its middle class has suffered serious deterioration.... Because Blacks have been uniquely situated in the industrial sector, the black middle class has stagnated over the past decade in terms relative to growth of the white middle class....

"[Conservatives] punished organized labor and transferred substantial wealth to the upper classes, through the management of fiscal policies.... Accordingly, we are 'going back to Gary' in the spirit of unity fostered by the historic Gary Convention of 1972, to focus on the state of the black economy and its relationship to other sectors of life."

Note that the organizers of the National Black Peoples Unity Convention refuse to treat "economics" as the domain of the rich – white or Black. Rather, they plan to confront the *political–economy* in the totality of its impacts. Dr. Walters prepared a beginning list of economy–related concerns to be wrestled with in Gary: poverty, the aftermath of Katrina, family viability, labor rights, fair wages, business development, the role of Black in large corporations, health care economics, urban economics, affirmative action, Social Security, international trade and investment.

(*BC* would have placed mass Black incarceration at the top of the list. So massively pervasive is the impact of this evil, racist state policy that it presses an unbearable weight on all aspects of Black life, and interacts with the political economy in multitudinous, horrifically destructive ways.)

By correctly framing economics broadly, the convention promises to explore real–world afflictions, and to take the subject of "Black" economics out of the narrow confines of African American business development, which is only one aspect of the much larger picture. Discussions will be grouped around broad categories such as Youth Leadership, Economic Issues, Human Rights and Social Justice, Education, Job Creation, Religious Leadership and Community Development, and Community Based Organizational Partnerships – all approached from an economic standpoint. The format appears well–designed for activists in a wide range of areas to relate their experiences and propose solutions to the multiple scourges that ravage Black America.

The living, breathing fruit of the Civil Rights era, Black elected officials, have been summoned to attend in force: the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL), National Conference of Black Mayors (NCBM), National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials (NBCLEO), National Association of Black County Officials and appointed Black officials from all levels of government. Every name on Ebony magazine's Most Influential 100+ list has been contacted, in the effort to give the convention both broad and deep representation – William Lucy's shop floor labor troops mixing with grassroots activists, business and investment types, and political luminaries.

An Internal Dialogue

No matter how the organizers frame the convention, the corporate media already have a pre–fabricated story. Undoubtedly, they will frame the event in terms of whether or not it represents a threat to the Democratic Party. "This one is not expected to be totally a political convention in the nature of the Gary convention," said Ron Walters, in an interview with the (Black) National Newspaper Publishers Association news service.

"I would not think it requires Blacks dropping the Democratic Party identification. We don't have a political institution. We need it for strategy making. We need it for mobilization. We need it for fund–raising. What happens is that it becomes a vehicle that can be used for

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bargaining and these things are done in the interest of the Black community."

William Lucy stresses that the convention is concerned with Black people working on solutions to grave socio-economic problems, not a game of positioning, posturing or maneuvering:

"This is not being billed as a partisan activity. I'm not advocating bolting the Democratic Party. I think what we're saying is that we want to establish an agenda that the party will have to react to. I think without question, the overwhelming majority of the Black voters still favor the Democratic Party and its Democratic policy platform. But I think that the fact of the matter is that we've got to have an agenda of our own that we will impress on the party as if to formulate its platform. We can't keep having knee-jerk reactions."

There are enough contradictions to resolve – or to live with – *within* the Black polity, without the relentless confusion sowed by corporate actors and their surrogates. However one may judge the outcome, Gary I dramatically revealed that generation's tremendous hunger for both unity and action. A generation and a half later, when the early elements of the so-called hip hop generation are already growing bald and fat, the hunger remains.

We have a lot of time to catch up on, in a political and economic climate that grows exponentially colder. But, as we used to say, "Black folks draw heat."

For logistical information on the National Black Peoples Unity Convention, the organizers ask that you call 202-955-5000.

BC Publishers Glen Ford and Peter Gamble are writing a book to be titled, Barack Obama and the Crisis in Black Leadership.