How Mississippi's Black-Brown Strategy Beat the South's Anti-Immigrant Wave

By David Bacon

In April 2012, an anti-immigrant bill similar to the ones passed in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina legislatures was stopped cold in Mississippi—contrary to all expectations.

Tea Party Republicans, confident of rolling over any opposition, had enlisted Kansas Secretary of State and co-author of Arizona’s SB 1070 Kris Kobach, to push the bill with Mississippi state Representative Becky Currie, who introduced it. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which designs and introduces similar bills across the country, also had its agents on site in Jackson. The timing could not have been better. In November 2011, Republicans took control of the state House of Representatives for the first time since Reconstruction, making Mississippi one of the last Southern states to give up Democratic control of the legislature—a final triumph for the Nixon/Reagan Southern Strategy. But these were not just any Republicans. When Governor Haley Barbour, now ironically considered a “moderate Republican,” stepped down, voters replaced him with Phil Bryant, a rabid anti-immigrant whose venom rivals that of Lou Dobbs.

And yet, the seemingly inevitable did not happen. Instead, the state’s Legislative Black Caucus fought a dogged rearguard war from the opening of the legislative session in January 2012. Over the preceding decade, the Caucus had acquired a reputation for defeating over 200 anti-immigrant measures. This session, however, they had lost all the crucial committee chairmanships that had made it possible for them to kill the earlier bills. But they did not lose their voice.

“We forced a great debate in the House, until 1:30 in the morning,” says state Representative Jim Evans, caucus leader and AFL-CIO staff member. “When you have a prolonged debate like that, it shows the widespread concern and disagreement. People began to see the ugliness in this measure.”

People’s Voice Trumps Special Interest on HB 488

Like the other bills created by Kobach and ALEC, HB 488 stated its intent clearly: “to make attrition through enforcement of the public policy of all state agencies and local governments.” In other words, to make life so difficult and unpleasant for undocumented people that they leave the state. Without papers, residents would not be able to get so much as a bicycle license or a library card, and schools would have to inform authorities about the immigration status of their students. And the police were mandated to verify the immigration status of all they arrested—an open invitation to racial profiling.

“The night HB 488 came to the floor, many black legislators spoke against it, including some who’d never spoken out on immigration before,” says Bill Chandler, director of the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA). “One objected to the use of the term ‘illegal alien’, while others said it justified breaking up families and ethnic cleansing.”

Many white legislators were also inspired to speak against the bill. Nevertheless, it was rammed through the House to the Senate, also controlled by Republicans for some years but presided over by the more moderate Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves. Reeves could see the widespread opposition to the bill, even among employers, and was less inclined to toe the Tea Party line. Instead, he appointed Hob Bryan, a rural Democrat, to chair one of the Senate’s two judiciary committees and sent him HB 488. Bryan’s committee killed it.

On the surface, it appears as if fissures within the Republican Party facilitated the bill’s demise, but the real reason lies elsewhere.
As the debate and maneuvering played out in the capitol building, its halls and grounds were filled with angry protests and noisy demonstrations for several days. The grassroots upsurge produced political alliances that cut deeply into the bill’s support, and calls for its rejection came from the sheriffs’ and county supervisors’ associations, the Mississippi Economic Council (a.k.a. chamber of commerce), and employers—from farms to poultry packers.

That upsurge was neither spontaneous nor a last-minute emergency mobilization. “We wouldn’t have had a chance against this without 12 years of organizing work,” Evans explains. “We worked on the conscience of people night and day, and built coalition after coalition. Over time, people have come around. The way people think about immigration in Mississippi today is nothing like the way they thought when we started.”

Two Decades of Strategic Organizing Pays Off

In the late 1990s, veterans of Mississippi’s social movements like Evans, Chandler, attorney Patricia Ice, Father Jerry Tobin, activist Kathy Sykes, and union organizer Frank Curiel came together—not in the hope of stopping a bill 12 years later—but to build political power. Their vehicle was MIRA, which partnered with the Legislative Black Caucus and other coalitions fighting most of the progressive issues facing the state.

Their strategy was based on the state’s changing demographics. Over the last two decades, the percentage of African Americans in Mississippi has been rising. Black families driven from jobs by factory closures in the north have been moving back in a reversal of the Great Migration of the last century. Today, at least 37 percent of Mississippi’s population is African American—the highest of any state in the country.

Following the boom in casino construction in the 1990s, people from Mexico and Central America, displaced by NAFTA and CAFTA, started migrating into the state to work in the poultry plants, farms and factories. Guest workers were also brought in for the Gulf Coast reconstruction and shipyards. Today, Mississippi has several established Latino communities whose children are achieving voting age.

In MIRA’s political calculation, blacks, immigrants and unions are the potential pillars of a powerful political coalition. HB 488’s intent to drive away immigrants is an effort to make that coalition impossible.

MIRA is not just focused on defeating bad bills. It built a grassroots base by fighting immigration raids at the Howard Industries plant in Laurel (2008) and at other worksites, and its activist staff has helped families survive sweeps at apartment houses and trailer parks. MIRA also brought together black workers suspicious of the Latino influx and immigrant families worried about settling in a hostile community, with the idea that political unity based in neighborhoods protects all groups.

For unions organizing poultry plants, factories and casinos, MIRA became a resource helping to win over immigrant workers. It also brought labor violation cases against employers in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Alliance of Friends and Adversaries Pays Off

Despite being adversaries otherwise, employers and MIRA both opposed workplace immigration raids based on the “attrition through enforcement” idea and recognized a mutual interest in fighting HB 488. Since 1986, U.S. immigration law has forbidden undocumented people to work by making it illegal to hire them. The enforcement of this law (part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986), especially

Photo: Jim Evans, chair of the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA), Bill Chandler, MIRA director, and Frank Curiel, MIRA board member.
under the Bush and Obama administrations, has caused thousands of workers to be fired. In the last decade, Congressional proposals for comprehensive immigration reform have called for strengthening sanctions and increasing raids and firings.

“Those bills violate the human rights of working people to feed their families,” says Chandler. “Employers... didn’t like workplace enforcement either. All their associations claimed they didn’t hire undocumented workers, but we all know who’s working in the plants. We want people to stay as much as the employers do.”

During the protests, the organizers underlined this point by giving legislators sweet potatoes with labels saying, “I was picked by immigrant workers who together contribute $82 million to the state’s economy.”

“Forcing people from their jobs forces them to leave,” Chandler continues. “[That’s] an ethnic cleansing tactic.”

Although MIRA allied with employers over HB 488 for tactical reasons, it is primarily a labor coalition that helps workers defend themselves against employers. In fact, MIRA has actively fought guest worker programs used by the Mississippi casinos and shipyards to recruit workers with few labor rights. To fight HB 488, MIRA bussed in members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1529 from poultry plants in Scott County, laborers from Laurel, Retail and Wholesale union members from Carthage, catfish workers from Indianola, and electrical union members from Crystal Spring. The black labor mobilization was largely organized by the new pro-immigrant leadership of the state chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the AFL-CIO constituency group for black union members.

Religious congregations—Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Evangelical Lutherans, Muslims, and Jews—along with the Mississippi Human Rights Coalition, also brought people to protest HB 488. The groups around MIRA and the Black Caucus fought not only this bill, but many others introduced by Tea Party Republicans, on a wide range of issues: banning abortions when fetal heartbeat is detected; promoting charter schools; restricting access to workers compensation benefits; and taking away civil service protection from state employees.

Big Picture is Bleak Without Sustained Organizing

According to Dr. Ivory Phillips, a MIRA director and member of the Board of Trustees of the Jackson Public School District, charter school proposals, voter ID requirements, and anti-immigrant measures are all linked.

“Because white supremacists fear losing their status as the dominant group in this country, there is a war against brown people today, just as there has long been a war against black people,” he says. “In all three cases—charter schools, immigration reform, and voter IDs—what we are witnessing is an anti-democratic surge, a rise in overt racism, and a refusal to provide opportunities to all.”

Tea Party supporters also see these issues as linked. Following the defeat of HB 488 and in the wake of a debate on charter schools, Representative Reecy Dickson, a leading Black Caucus member, was surrounded by a shoving crowd, which hurled racist epithets at her.

“We need political alliances that mean something in the long term,” says Chandler. “Permanent alliances and a strategy for winning political power that includes targeted voter registration that focuses on specific towns, neighborhoods and precincts.”
Selma to Montgomery March:
From Voting Rights to Immigration 1965-2012

By Alma Campos

Every year, the NAACP holds a rally from March 4-9 to commemorate the Selma to Montgomery march and draw attention to the issues facing African Americans in America. Since the passage of Alabama’s HB 56—the nation’s worst anti-immigrant law—the NAACP has reached out to organizations around the country to build lasting relationships between Civil Rights and Immigrant Rights communities over their common history of struggle. The event marks the coming together of a broad movement for a renewed call for civil rights in America. This year, a core part of their agenda was a demand to repeal HB 56.

Gamaliel, a grassroots network of non-partisan, faith-based organizations in 18 U.S. states, South Africa and the United Kingdom, is now taking on the voting rights issue. They are working together with the NAACP and other social justice organizations on “Get out the Vote” initiatives for the Fall elections.

Among the participants in the Selma to Montgomery march this year was 28-year-old Carlos Pinedo, who emigrated from Mexico with his family at the age of eight. In the racially diverse community in Chicago’s South Suburbs, young Pinedo soon became conscious of the tensions and boundaries between blacks, Latinos and whites and quickly adopted the racial stereotypes he learned from his new friends. Growing up in Blue Island, Illinois, Carlos and his brother Jose became targets of racial profiling themselves. Things took a nasty turn when Jose was arrested by ICE officers in front of his mother on Mother’s Day for failing to present a state-issued picture ID to police officials who were questioning him for no legitimate reason. He was deported to Mexico, leaving behind his family and newborn child.

The incident prompted Carlos to become a leader with the South Suburban Action Conference (SSAC) and Gamaliel’s Civil Rights of Immigrants Task Force, working to raise awareness about racial profiling and its negative impact on families. In 2010, SSAC was able to persuade Blue Island Mayor Donald Peloquin to sign a resolution allowing undocumented immigrants to present the Matricula Consular as a valid form of identification.

Pinedo decided to participate in the march because, as he says, “I felt that now more than ever, I needed to show my community that what I have been working for is really worth it. In this way, I can stand for the ones who have no voice.”

The march made Pinedo acutely aware of other communities all over the U.S. who have been fighting for the same thing—namely, human rights.

The Reverend David Bigsby, co-founder and president of the Gamaliel National Clergy Council, also attended the march. He was at Morehouse College in Atlanta during the 1965 Selma-Montgomery March. “Voting rights were especially important to me because neither my parents nor anyone in our family had ever voted, except me,” he recalls. “They feared what would happen if they attempted to register. Most of them could not read very well and did not think their vote would make a difference. The 1965 march caused my father to find the courage to vote for the first time. He had served in WWII but did not feel he was a valued citizen.”

One young leader with Gamaliel, Eliza Perez-Montalvo, is responding to the call for renewed black-brown unity, saying: “Marching today is the beginning of my journey.”

Alma Campos is the communications coordinator for Pilsen Neighbors Community Council, a Gamaliel affiliate.

Despite the national implications of stopping HB 488, the resources for the effort were almost all local. When MIRA emptied its bank account over the fight, additional money came mostly from local units of organizations like the UAW, UNITE HERE and the Muslim Association.

“The resources of the national immigrant rights movement should prioritize preventing bills from passing as much as fighting them after the fact,” warns Chandler.

On the surface, the fight in Jackson was a defensive battle waged in the wake of the Republican takeover of the legislature because the Tea Party threatens to bring HB 488 back until it passes. Yet Evans, who also chairs MIRA’s board, believes that time is on the side of social change. “These Republicans still have tricks up their sleeves,” he cautions. “We’re worried about redistricting and a Texas-style stacking of the deck. But in the end, we still believe our strategy will build power in Mississippi. We don’t see last November as a defeat but as the last stand of the Confederacy.”

David Bacon is a freelance writer and photographer. For more articles and photos see dbacon.igc.org. This article was first published in The Nation.
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