

Independent African-American Politics and the Legacy of the 1972 Gary Convention Fifty Years On

National Black Political Convention in 1972 represented a culmination of struggles from the 1950s and 1960s

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From March 10-12, 1972, an estimated 7,000-10,000 African Americans gathered in Gary, Indiana for the National Black Political Convention (NBPC).

The confab was covered extensively in the Black, left and mainstream press due to the significance of the event which brought together a wide spectrum of political currents within the African American community from elected officials, functionaries of the Democratic and Republican parties to leaders of revolutionary grassroots organizations such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Congress of African People (CAP).

[One account](#) of the event from the Indiana Historical Bureau says:

“Approximately 3,000 official delegates and 7,000 attendees from across the United States met at Gary’s West Side High School from March 10 to March 12. The attendees included a prolific group of Black leaders, such as Reverend Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King, Amiri Baraka, Muslim leader Minister Louis Farrakhan, Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale, and Malcolm X’s widow Betty Shabazz. Organizers sought to create a cohesive political strategy for Black Americans by the convention’s end.”

Gary, an industrial city known for the production of steel, was representative of the then emerging Black political movement sweeping urban areas throughout the United States. In 1967, Carl B. Stokes won the mayoral elections in Cleveland, Ohio against a white opponent who appealed to the racist sentiments of those feeling threatened by the Hough Rebellion of the previous year.

That same year, 1967, Richard Hatcher won the mayoral race in Gary which was by that time a majority African American city. Millions of African Americans between the First and Second World Wars flooded into the cities seeking employment in industry and to escape

the violent institutional racism of the Jim Crow South. After World War II, more African American migrated into the urban areas of the North and West while those remaining in the South launched the independent Civil Rights Movement beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56), the sit-in movement and the Freedom Rides of 1960-1961.

A new radicalized African American political mood was in evidence by the early years of the 1960s, when organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) took over the leadership of the mass struggle for the elimination of segregation and disenfranchisement. By 1963-64, urban rebellions accelerated making their mark on at least 200 cities from Los Angeles on the west coast to Chicago and Detroit in the Midwest all the way South to Birmingham, Cambridge, Nashville, Atlanta, Miami and Memphis to New Jersey, Philadelphia and New York City in the east.

The gains won through the mass struggles led to legislative reforms with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, adopted as the flames of rebellions across the U.S. raged encompassing broader segments of the Black population.

However, the racist system struck back with repression including the killings of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mark Clark, Fred Hampton, Medgar Evers, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Carol Denise McNair (four African American girls in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham), among countless others. Hundreds of members of the Black Panther Party and the Republic of New Africa, and numerous organizations, were jailed, imprisoned and driven into exile by the early 1970s. The NBPC represented an effort to realign the African American struggle through the building of broader unity across ideological perspectives.

Outcomes of the NBPC

The strength of the Gary Convention was that it was able to mobilize such a broad-based collection of Black organizational leadership. At the same time, this very important advancement in the overall movement contained the elements which hampered its effectiveness. A myriad of issues and questions were before the African American people in 1972.

Image on the right: Shirley Chisolm Presidential Campaign, 1972 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)



New York Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to the House of Representatives, had launched a presidential campaign during the primaries. Chisholm was an advocate of progressive social policies including the full rights for women. Her campaign for the Democratic Party nomination gained significant support including an endorsement from Huey P. Newton, former political prisoner and co-founder of the Black Panther Party.

At the same time, there were numerous organizations which called for the immediate formation of a mass Black political party independent of the Democrats and Republicans. This question was the subject of intense debate and saw formidable opposition from African American elected officials such as Congressman Charles Diggs of Detroit and then State Senator Coleman A. Young, who would be elected as the first Black mayor of the City of Detroit the following year of 1973. Resolutions related to the support for an independent party led to the walk out of some of the Michigan delegation including Diggs and Young.

The Indiana Historical Bureau said of the outcomes of the NBPC that:

“After intense debate, a steering committee tentatively adopted a National Black Agenda. The committee officially published the 68-page document on May 19, Malcolm X’s birthday. The resolutions included Black representation in Congress proportionate to the U.S. Black population, a guaranteed minimum income of \$6,500 for four-person households, a 50% cut in the defense and space budgets, and an end to national trade with countries that supplied the U.S. drug market. The resolutions, designed to move Black Americans towards ‘self-determination and true independence,’ represented major, yet tenuous compromise among the Black community.”

The aftermath of the NBPC saw the formation of a National Black Political Assembly (NBPA) which held conferences in 1974 and 1976. By 1980, there was a call to transform the NBPA into the National Black Independent Political Party (NBIPP). This same year saw the eruption of a rebellion in Miami while the failure of the presidency of Jimmy Carter had further alienated many African American activists from the Democratic Party. The disillusionment of African Americans, a key demographic within the electoral framework of Democratic politics along with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran for more than a year, contributed to the ascendancy of President Ronald Reagan and the advent of a new era of imperialist militarism, political repression and economic recession.

Although the NBIPP was never able to consolidate into an effective fighting organization for various reasons which extend beyond the scope of this analysis, the presidential primary campaigns of Reverend Jesse Jackson during 1984 and 1988 mobilized African Americans, labor and some elements within the U.S. left into a coalition which was able to raise issues such as plant closings, Palestinian statehood and the liberation of South Africa and Namibia from the apartheid settler colonialism.

Lessons from Gary for Today

At present the legislative agenda of President Joe Biden is stalled within Congress largely due to the obstruction from moderate Democratic lawmakers. The progressive wing of the Democratic House and Senate are at variance with the moderates and conservatives. Republicans within the House and Senate are united in their opposition to all initiatives proposed by any faction of the Democratic Party.

Inflation is escalating rapidly while the social spending aspects of the Biden agenda has been largely abandoned as a legislative measure. While sinking rapidly within the polls, Biden has turned to provoking a military conflict with the Russian Federation over the status of Ukraine and the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

A convergence of the burgeoning economic crisis with the prospects for a protracted war in Eastern Europe could result in major setbacks for the Democrats in the 2022 midterms. Such a scenario does not bode well for the African American working class and impoverished.

In similar historical circumstances, African Americans have called their own independent conferences, conventions and congresses. Beginning in 1829 during the period of antebellum enslavement in response to the Ohio Exclusionary laws related to African people, a convention movement arose which lasted through the Civil War until the conclusion of the 19th century.

A resource website on [this political history](#) says of the convention movement that:

“Providing a powerful structure and platform for Black organizing, more than 200 state and national Colored Conventions were held between 1830 and the 1890s. Filling churches, city hall buildings, courthouses, lecture halls, and theaters, the well-attended Colored Conventions illustrate the diversity of cultural life and political thought among Black communities and their leaders. The meetings included the most prominent writers, organizers, church leaders, newspaper editors, educators, and entrepreneurs in the canon of early African American leadership—and tens of thousands more whose names went unrecorded. While most delegates were male, Black women participated through their newspaper work, entrepreneurial activism, political commitments, and especially their presence. They embodied the movement’s core values and challenged traditional beliefs about women’s place in public society.”

Although it is difficult to predict which form this independent political tradition will take in the 21st century, undoubtedly African Americans will assess their social situation and move towards new tactics and strategies aimed at achieving full equality and self-determination.

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Featured image: Gary Mayor Richard Hatcher opening the NBPC, March 1972 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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