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Affirmative action in danger

Uproar greets introduction of Harrisburg bill

By Kendall Wilson
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Philadelphia's Black state legislators, business leaders and affirmative action advocates are up in arms over a bill introduced to the Pennsylvania General Assembly that would wipe out affirmative action programs across the state.

State Rep. Ron Gamble, of Allegheny County, the Democratic chairman of the House Transportation Committee, has introduced HB

(House Bill) No. 363, an act "prohibiting discrimination or preferential treatment of an individual or group in the operation of the Commonwealth's system of public employment, public education or public contracting."

The bill was referred to the Committee on State Government on Jan. 26. It is not known when it comes before the full House for voting.

Gamble was able to get 12 other co-sponsors for the bill, including Philadelphia State Rep. Chris

Wogan of Northeast Philadelphia's 186th Legislative District. He said the bill is patterned after a California initiative, which is expected to be put on the ballot next year, a proposal to eliminate all legal preferences for jobs or educational programs based on race.

State Rep. Harold James (D-186), chairman of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, said his colleagues are "very upset" about the bill and are working on strategies to address it.

"We've had attacks on affirmative action in the past, but now it seems the gates have opened up with the Republican Contract With America mentality," James said. "This could have great impact on our communities and they should be very much involved in the process to deal with this issue. They're claiming that white males are being discriminated against under these programs, but they said nothing when Blacks and others were being totally excluded from the process.

"The climate is changing and certain people are feeling quite free to go after affirmative action programs after getting the signal from (Republican House Majority Speaker) Newt Gingrich. We may have to return to the activist days of the 1960s, get back in the streets to keep what is deservedly ours and reclaim what has been taken away from us."

State Rep. David P. Richardson agreed.

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Blacks strongly oppose Affirmative Action bill

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"They've simply declared war on Blacks and it's almost like a civil war on affirmative action," said Richardson. "And it reminds us of the Post-Reconstruction period. They're saying, 'We don't want you folks to have anything.' This is mean-spirited, divisive, and selfish. But we will do everything in our power to prevent that legislation from passing."

John Simon, president of the United Minority Enterprise Association, an organization of minority contractors, says his group will initiate a letter-writing campaign to Black and other legislators in the Philadelphia area and across the state.

"How can they say that white contractors are being discriminated against when they've been getting 99 percent of the business in the first place?" Simon asked. "This whole thing is not so much about fairness to white males as it is to wanting it all."

"Where were all these righteous people when Blacks were getting absolutely nothing?" Richardson added. "You didn't hear one word from them."

"We've said all along that

racism is alive and well, in Pennsylvania and across the country. Now we are seeing it at its worst. They want to warehouse our people by building more jails. They want to take the needy off welfare. And they want an end to affirmative action. It seems they want to create an anarchy and — who knows? — start another civil war?"

"We've been trying to tell our young men and our fathers that alternatives to violence and crime are the job and business opportunities that could be available because we have affirmative action programs," said Bilal Qayyum, founder and director of the Father's Day Rally Committee. "I'm just outraged that this man is trying to get this bill through. Yes, we as a community should be in an uproar over what is trying to be pulled off and let these politicians know that we are not going to stand idly by and watch them turn back the clock."

John Macklin, legislative affairs regulatory monitor for the city's Minority Business Enterprise Council (MBEC), said the move on the state level probably has been encouraged by the new conservative leadership in Washington.

"What this whole thing is about, is turning us back," said Macklin. "From the 1964 civil rights gains and all the gains since then, some people have decided to reverse all this and put those gains in jeopardy. They are talking about knocking out all federal programs embracing affirmative action, or what they claim is 'preferential treatment', even though they really can't prove that white males are actually hurt in this process, not with the 99 percent control of the contracts. Perhaps they really want us to go back into the streets."

Marla Hamilton, former executive director of MBEC, now handling affirmative action at City Council President John Street's office and serving as acting chair of a coalition called the Affirmative

Action Association, said Blacks, other minorities and affirmative action advocates must move quickly at this point to deal with the onslaught.

"I don't think we have really educated our people enough about what affirmative action really is and the broad-ranging impact it has had on our communities," said Hamilton, whose group mobilized some 18 buses from Philadelphia to join thousands in front of the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington to address attacks on civil rights and affirmative action. "It is not limited to whether someone gets a contract, or parts of contracts. It's also about the school lunch programs, equal housing, being able to send Black and other minority students to college, getting assistance."

"Some people don't know the difference between affirmative action and so-called 'reverse discrimination,'" she said.

"But Blacks themselves have slept on this issue by not going to the polls and allowing the new regime to take over in Washington and in their states. By not coming out to vote, we did not send out a mandate that we were working together. We are at our greatest strength when we rally at the polls and on these issues," Hamilton said.

Hamilton said the Pennsylvania bill and other issues will be discussed Tuesday afternoon (4 to 7 P.M.) live over WHAT AM Radio (1340) from First District Plaza, 3801 Market St.

"This will be the first initiative in addressing our commitment to start educating the community," she said. "We will have four or five representatives from various sectors, especially from the rank and file, to speak on these issues we call 'The Newt Agenda.' It's time we became pro-active about this and moved forward."

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