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BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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SPOTLIGHTS

Economic Justice Today In America

February 17, 2023

We know that Black Americans face gaps in representation, wages, education, business ownership, and more. In honor of Black History Month, Patrick Miles, Jr., partner in the firm’s Grand Rapids office and former U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Michigan, discusses some of these gaps and shares his thoughts about economic justice in America today.

The challenge of achieving economic justice in America involves different obstacles – and opportunities – at different times. After my freshman year of college until starting law school back in the late 1980s, I worked four hot, grimy, and physically draining summers standing in place all day wearing steel-toe shoes, handling raw steel while spot welding in an office furniture factory. Although the factory work itself was hardly enjoyable, the wages were fantastic for me and the racially diverse group of male and female regular workers (for whom we college students as temporary summer help were filling in if the regulars went on vacation).

These were good manufacturing jobs. Almost every regular worker in that large factory had a decent house, a car or two, perhaps a cottage on a lake with a boat, and retirement savings. When I drive by that factory’s location today, sadly, it is gone. All of the jobs are long gone too.

Although a shrinking American middle class is a different problem than what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fought and died for, it is a partial successor to his frequent call for economic justice. Everyone is familiar with his stirring “I Have A Dream” speech during the March on Washington in 1963. Often overlooked, however, is the event’s organizers actually titled it “The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” and its purpose was to advocate for civil and economic rights.

As former NAACP President Ben Jealous once said, “Black people in the

U.S. are the canaries in the coal mine...What we get tends to hit everybody later.” Indeed, Dr. King knew all along the economic and diversity, equity and inclusion challenges in America’s future would be daunting. In 1966, Dr. King wrote an [article](#) on Economic Justice published in The Nation magazine as part of its 150th anniversary special issue. In pertinent part, he opined:

“The future is more complex [than the federal civil rights legislative accomplishments of 1964 and 1965]. Slums with hundreds of thousands of living units are not eradicated as easily as lunch counters or buses are integrated. Jobs are harder to create than voting rolls. Harmonizing of people of vastly different cultural levels is complicated and frequently abrasive.”

While seeking social and systemic changes, Dr. King understood America is a capitalism-based economy. From its inception, the American civil rights movement included a call for equal economic opportunity. Unfortunately, equal is not always equitable. From slavery, to Jim Crow, to separate but equal, to negative media images, to neighborhood housing price disparities, to redlining, to absent white collar corporate employment and upward mobility, to a lack of board representation, to paltry minority business ownership numbers, to income inequality, to unconscious bias and discrimination, African Americans categorically are disadvantaged. Elaboration on the reasons and results of same is beyond the scope of this piece. But, the solution is not – it is justice along with equity, diversity, and inclusion (a/k/a JEDI) for all racial minorities.

Over the past 30-plus years practicing law and loving justice, I’ve witnessed, experienced, and advocated the need for diversity, equity and inclusion in the legal profession. In addition, part of my legal practice includes counseling business people on forming, financing, and certifying minority- or woman-owned business enterprises. In this regard, one of the first things I frequently must dispel during the initial consultation is the myth that MBE or WBE certification is a “license to print money.” I have yet to see a MBE or WBE achieve any sustainable financial success without also being competitive on price, quality, and timely delivery of its products or services. Such certification can break a tie between suppliers and provides an economic opportunity to the historically disadvantaged. But it does not replace competent and competitive performance in the marketplace.

Beyond real economic opportunity, I truly believe America’s future economic success requires increasing opportunity for business creation and ownership. A positive result of that effort is more things will be made by workers in America. The natural effect strengthens our middle class, which necessarily produces the economic growth and political stability we’ve relied upon for almost 250 years and hope future generations enjoy. In contrast, countries with only “haves” and “have nots” experience political tumult or revolutions on a regular basis. Likewise, denying economic justice and opportunity creates social havoc as well as moral rot. Dr. King certainly so believed and said.

Today’s solution for economic justice is elegantly simple, but very difficult to achieve: My dream is that everyone in America embrace JEDI and pursue justice which leads to equity, which leads to diversity, which leads to inclusion. Thankfully, this is not a zero-sum equation. Following the canary analogy, all will benefit ultimately.