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Out of Mountain of Despair a Stone of Hope

**Martin Luther King, Jr.
National Memorial**

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Tom Vilsack's New Civil Rights Era... **Not!**

USDA Remains the Last Plantation for Minority Employees

BY MICHAEL McCRAE, ESQ., CPA

WASHINGTON, DC—A group of present and former U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees, minority farmers and advocates recently gathered in the shadows beneath a 30 foot sculpture of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on the Mall near USDA. It was a demonstration timed to focus attention to the lack of accountability for USDA managers who violate federal worker's civil rights — just one week before the historic dedication ceremony for the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. statue.

The group assembled despite the fact that Secretary Tom Vilsack had arrogantly announced a new era for civil rights at USDA and promised to finally resolve mishandled and unprocessed civil rights claims.

However, the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees said his talk was just cheap rhetoric ... it's time for some action and accountability. People spoke and played historic civil rights speeches on the Mall in front of USDA for two and a half days.

In the background, the haunting voice of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spread across the ages and the manicured lawn on the Mall of the Washington Capitol.

"He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it," echoed the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

But these passionate USDA Minority Coalition speeches were not a part of the festivities celebrating the statute commemorating Dr. King's life and work. Instead, these speeches were part of a Citizen's Filibuster and the continuation of his fight for civil rights at the USDA.

Lawrence Lucas, has led a lonely and lively one man crusade for minority employee rights—and has also launched a historic citizen's filibuster. The civil and human rights com-

munity needs to know and recognize Lucas and his legendary crusade for justice.

"We will 'Filibuster for Justice' until President Obama's administration brings this plantation culture to an end," said Lucas, President of the USDA Coalition of Minority Employees. He's a bad Brotha armed with a righteous cause and a robust campaign.

The daily demonstrations Lucas orchestrated were conducted because Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, who was appointed by President Obama, refused to meet with the group to discuss their more than twenty-five "civil rights issues and concerns" for nearly three years. The USDA Coalition of Minority Employees (The Coalition) and minority farmers requested Secretary Vilsack to speedily and properly address the decade long racism, sexism, sexual assaults, bullying, racial epithet reprisals, intimidation, hostile work environment, and other widespread abuses against USDA employees and minority farmers.

In addition to powerful voices from the past, Lawrence Lucas was also joined on the Mall by activists, women and minorities from across the country including—John Boyd, Jr. Founder & President, Black Farmers' Association; Dr. Marsha Coleman Adebayo, Author, Founder & President, No Fear Coalition; Tom Devine, Legal Director, Government Accountability Project; and Tanya Ward Jordan, Founder & President, Coalition 4 Change (C4C).

But Lawrence Lucas was perfectly willing and prepared to protest alone. "The point was to illustrate that one person, perhaps the only voice that dares to speak truth to power, even in a vacuum, can make a real difference. The point of the filibuster was not to focus on numbers, it was designed to focus on a singular message—and demonstrate the power that courageous individuals have to seek justice and fairness on their own," said the personable and persuasive Lucas. The fil-



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ibuster concept is unique because no one has every organized a citizen's filibuster before."

Reverend Frederick Douglass Taylor, the former Director of Direct Action for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference agreed with this progressive philosophy. Reverend Taylor, who often marched with Martin Luther King Jr., often boasted about "the powerful moral force that could be demonstrated—even by a protest of one."

The USDA Coalition of Minority Employees has also asked President Obama to promptly intervene and bring this long history of widespread discrimination to an end. We want USDA top officials held "accountable," and the USDA Office of Civil Rights—administration and process—put into "receivership."

EEO Class Action / McCray vs USDA

Likewise, I filed an EEO Class Action last year. *Michael McCray vs Rural Development* (Case No. RD-2010-00074) that has far reaching implications because it alleges that the entire EEO process at USDA discriminates against minority employees; because USDA immediately address claims of reverse discrimination but forces minority employees through a inherently hostile EEO process.

Tom Vilsack ordered Shirley Sherrod to be immediately terminated at the mere suggestion of reverse discrimination. Why doesn't he do the same thing for the bureaucrats who actually discriminate against Blacks, Minorities and Women?

This could be a game changer at USDA. The stakes are very high, if it is actually determined that the entire Title/VII EEO process at USDA has a disparate impact on minority employees. As I write this, USDA is covering up my class action by refusing to forward the case to the Washington EEOC Office for a hearing or class certification.

USDA is trying to avoid this class action, despite the support of the former Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Blanch Lincoln (D-AR). The cover up is always worse then the crime, and USDA is once again covering up another important class action, which affects every minority EEO claimant at USDA—so much for Secretary Tom Vilsack's New Era on Civil Rights.

USDA is Bad... but what does this have to do with me you ask?

Why should I care about rampant discrimination at USDA—if I'm not a Black farmer or a USDA Employee?

USDA is more than just farming, much more. When people think of discrimination at USDA they usually think of family farmers scratching for survival by living off the land, which is still a problem. Unfortunately, most people fail to realize just how impactful USDA actually is—and the illicit discrimination goes way beyond farming.

Abraham Lincoln created USDA, immediately following the Civil War, when America possessed an Agricultural econ-

omy. Back then the Department of Agriculture—really meant, the department of everything... “The People’s Department” so to speak.

- **Education**—USDA supports Land Grant Colleges and research institutions, including all “State A&M” Agriculture and Mechanical Universities (e.g., Texas A&M, Florida A&M, Prairie View A&M, etc.)
- **Food and Nutrition**—From food stamps to meat inspection, USDA ensures the safety of our food system.
- **Housing Programs**—USDA has single-family and multi-family housing programs, similar to HUD.
- **Business Loans**—USDA has better business and industry loan programs than the SBA.
- **Infrastructure**—USDA provides water systems, utilities and electrification to communities across the country.
- **Economic Development**—USDA supports rural, economic and community development programs across America.

More importantly, all of these agencies utilize a similar network of county offices and field service centers to deliver their services across the country.

What does that mean?

It means the same delivery network that discriminates against Black Farmers also discriminates in other program areas as well—USDA has a culture of discrimination.

You might not need a farm loan, but USDA discriminates in housing loans, and business loans, and infrastructure loans. That is what I discovered working for the Empowerment Zones Program.

I experienced the discrimination and retaliation at USDA first hand, back to 1994 when I reported over \$40 million of waste, fraud and abuse in Federal Empowerment Zone Program at USDA.

What’s worse, when conscientious federal worker’s like myself speak out and try to stop the wrongdoing at USDA—we suffer career ending discrimination and retaliation at the hands of USDA management. The political leadership at USDA speaks the right rhetoric, but unfortunately lacks the fortitude to discipline and remove the bureaucrats who actually discriminate and harm the public. **sclC**



Michael McCray, Esq., CPA is a dedicated human rights and public interest advocate who champions national issues such as federal worker’s rights, fair lending (mortgage fraud) and judicial reform. He is a National Board Member of Federal Employed Women/Legal Education Fund (FEW/LEF) and Author of “ACORN 8: RACE, POWER & POLITICS—Memoirs of an ACORN Whistleblower.”

*We Join SCLC in Honoring the Memory of Dr. King.
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