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“Work Stoppage Protests”

Black Americans usually protest at crisis points. Today, there are no major popular crises on the horizon. The economy is favorable: The Black unemployment rate is at an historic low and personal income reflects a rising trend. There is relatively favorable media coverage of Black athletes in college and professional football and basketball. Black Americans are featured in key political races that are to be decided in just a few weeks. Therefore, it is probably the case that a significant Black American protest will not occur in the near term. But, if events were to unfold that sparked a protest, then what would be the most sizeable and impactful peaceful protest that Black Americans could unleash?

When we say “peaceful protest” you imagine immediately 21st century Black Lives Matter-type protests, you hearken back to the 1990s Million Man or Million Woman Marches, or you remember the 1963 March on Washington that was led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK).

Arguably, the most meaningful and impactful of all these peaceful marches was the October 16, 1995 Million Man March. It attracted nearly two million Blacks. It took participants away from home and work during the weekend leading up to that Monday, the Monday itself, and for the additional days that were required to return. Unfortunately, to our knowledge, there are no studies on the economic impact of the march. Suffice it to say that, while home cities may have experienced adverse economic impacts from the absence of march participants, other cities along the way and Washington, DC benefitted economically from march participants’ spending.

Constraining our consideration to peaceful protests, and excluding entirely violent protests (i.e., riots), we would argue that most protests that have been conducted historically by Black Americans have had limited overall economic impacts on the nation. Even when Black Americans withhold our spending from traditional White suppliers and turn to Black providers of goods and services, because the ultimate source of most production in the nation is White-owned, we simply end up engaging in expenditure switching—from direct to indirect spending with White Americans. This is undoubtedly the case in a post-1960s context after desegregation began to take hold.

Yet Black Americans wonder out loud: “Why don’t conditions in the nation change significantly as a result of our protests?” The short answer is that Black American peaceful protests have not imposed enough economic pain on White America to stimulate change.

There is one form of peaceful protest that Black Americans, as a nation within a nation, have not, but can, operationalize. It would impose significant pain on the larger nation—especially at this hour.

We are referring to a “work stoppage” protest. To achieve maximum effectiveness, it would have to be carefully planned and broadly supported. It has not been attempted before for at least three reasons: (1) Fear of White, potentially violent, backlash; (2) Blacks’ inability to withhold our labor and forego the related income for an extended period; and (3) unwillingness by key Black organizations (churches, NOI, NAACP, Urban League, etc.) to coordinate the formation of a work stoppage protest. Clearly, there have been numerous events that warranted nationwide Black American protests, and we have the social and communications infrastructure to implement such a protest.

Today, Black America’s fear of White violence is at an all-time low. We have withstood burnings, lynchings, and police shootings. The fear is gone. Besides, international communications permit us to leverage foreign media to check violent domestic attacks against us.

Given sufficient planning, Black Americans are better placed than ever before to save income that can be used to secure reserves of essential goods and supplies that can be used during an extended work stoppage.

The weak link in the chain is the fractionalization of our organizations’ leadership. However, young, new leadership is coming to the fore in key Black organizations. We believe that this new leadership can harmonize to implement peaceful nationwide protests such as work stoppages.

What do we know about the power of work stoppages? In South Africa, the May 1961 “stay at home” general strike that was organized under the leadership of Nelson Mandela endured for just three days. However, it represented a pivotal point in the struggle that helped escalate change, which ultimately helped dismantle apartheid. Mahatma Gandhi used work stoppages to oust the British from India and to create a new republic—but mainly at the local level. MLK’s last action was a work stoppage (a strike by sanitation workers) in Memphis.

The current surging US economy that is operating beyond full employment presents an excellent opportunity for what would be a particularly effective work stoppage protest.

Of course, a work stoppage protest is just a means to an end. As we have reiterated so many times, a key ingredient to the successful organization and implementation of such a protest is for Black America to come together (all four Black Americas) to determine what the smaller nation should demand from the larger nation as part of a work stoppage protest.

Having failed so often to achieve our goals through marches and other types of peaceful protests, is it not time for Black America to do something different? Shouldn’t we launch a nationwide work stoppage that can impose enough economic pain to bring White America to the table to discuss racism/discrimination, reparations, the wealth gap, and nation formation?

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