



PROTECTING Diversity

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Illustration by Luba Lukova

For most of US history, women and minorities were **kept “in their place.”** Systematic discrimination leaves a stain, one not easily erased. That’s why **affirmative action** promotes equal **opportunities**. Last November, Michigan became the third state to pass an affirmative action ban. We cannot afford another one.

Affirmative action opens doors for those who have been locked out.

It's as simple as that.

Affirmative action is a tool that provides qualified individuals with equal access to educational and professional opportunities. It levels the playing field for women and for minorities who have been systematically denied equal treatment in every sphere of American life since 1607. Affirmative action benefits everyone. Statistics show that states and metropolitan areas that cultivate diverse, multicultural, well-educated workforces have higher per capita incomes than geographic areas that don't.

It should be simple: As long as discrimination creates significant barriers to minorities and women, the United States will continue to need affirmative action. In a 2003 case involving the University of Michigan Law School, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that universities may take race into consideration when selecting incoming students and that student body diversity is a "compelling state interest" that can justify using race in university admissions.

Yet efforts to level the playing field are under attack. Last November, Michigan passed a ballot initiative called Proposal 2, banning affirmative action programs that provide "preferential treatment" to women and minorities in state contracting, employment, and higher education. Michigan's ban follows similar bans in California and Washington. Despite the loss, the stories from Michigan women and young girls who benefit from affirmative action and equal opportunity programs were powerful. NCJW's Greater Detroit Section played a key role in trying to reach and educate women.

Opponents to affirmative action aren't satisfied with banning affirmative action in Michigan, California, and Washington. They are organizing nationally to eliminate affirmative action. Among those leading the charge is Ward Connerly, chairman of the so-called American Civil Rights Institute (ACRI) and the American Civil Rights Coalition (ACRC). In April ACRI/ACRC and its allies announced their plans for November 2008 ballot initiatives banning affirmative action in at least four more states: Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, and Oklahoma.

Connerly is trying to deny these four states a diverse workforce even though, during a time of rapid economic and demographic shifts, they are going to need the benefits of diversity more than ever. Corporations continue to say that a diverse workforce is not a luxury, but a critical business tool. Twenty-one Fortune 500 companies, including General Motors, DuPont, and Microsoft, filed briefs in support of affirmative action in the Michigan Law School case. The United States is part of a global economy, and Americans are competing with the world. We cannot afford to have narrow, limited views of that world.

Connerly won't tell you that business likes affirmative action. He has a history of exploiting financial insecurities and racism while building on misconceptions about affirmative action, telling whites that affirmative action equals quotas (it doesn't) and that minorities are taking "their" jobs, "their" slots in college. He argues that affirmative action undermines their progress. He says that we should live in a colorblind society and ignore completely the effect that ending affirmative action would have on minorities and women.

Since the state affirmative action ban passed in California a

decade ago, two-thirds of certified Minority Business Enterprises in the state's transportation construction industry have gone out of business today, according to a 2006 *AsianWeek* article. Following the recent release of figures showing that only 3.4 percent of the University of California's fall 2006 freshman class was black, the university has commissioned a study to determine the ban's effect on enrollment. The Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board has also commissioned a study of the impact that Initiative 200, its 1998 ban of affirmative action, has had at Washington universities.

We cannot afford to look back 10 years from now and realize we made a mistake in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, and Oklahoma. We can't fall for Connerly's scare tactics. He picked those states for a reason. He's targeting angry, restless people,

What Is Affirmative Action?

Outreach to underrepresented women and minorities during job searches, in college admissions, and in accessing government contracts.

Creating programs and strategies that address hidden or unintentional biases in recruitment, hiring, promotion, and compensation practices.

Identifying and dismantling discriminatory barriers such as biased testing or recruitment and hiring practices.

telling them that affirmative action is responsible for their failing economy and stagnant living standards.

A recent study from the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, titled "Why White Americans Oppose Affirmative Action," found that whites do support affirmative action policies as long as they are not harmful to whites. And it suggests that whites are willing to support policies that help minorities.

Protecting affirmative action is about more than statistics. It's about people's lives — about the diversity of our campuses and workplaces, which benefits everyone. It's about social justice. Given a legacy of racism and sexism in the United States, it behooves us to provide avenues for women and minorities to succeed where they haven't before, so that we can all succeed.

By working together proactively, women and minorities can change how Americans view affirmative action. By bridging racial and gender divides through affirmative action, we can keep the door open for equal opportunity. >