



Carmen Berkley of AFL-CIO Urges Fight for Economic Justice and Civil Rights

Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium at Stockton Marks 50th anniversary of protest at 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City

For Immediate Release; with Berkley photo attached

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Galloway Township, NJ - "Racism is not over, brothers and sisters," said Carmen Berkley, the keynote speaker today at the Eleventh Annual Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. "In 2014, it's built into our system," which includes a lack of economic opportunities, unequal justice and recent court rulings making it harder for people to register to vote, she said.

"You're going to have to make a choice," said Berkley, who at 29 is national director of Civil, Human and Women's Rights for the AFL-CIO. "Be a part of something greater than yourself," she told students and others in the audience.

"The fact that people of color are being killed for the color of their skin sounds like something out of slavery," she said, citing the cases of Trayvon Martin in Florida and Michael Brown in Missouri. She urged black people to unite with Latinos, gays, immigrants, women and others who are discriminated against.

"We are not in the minority any more, we are the majority," said Berkley. "They don't want us to vote."

She noted however, that New Jersey has progressive voting laws, not requiring special voter identification and allowing convicted felons to regain the vote two years after paying their debt to society.

"Dream your highest dream of racial equality and economic justice," Berkley told the college audience. "Dream and then act and unite. Black people and white people have to dream together."

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Berkley also said protest marches aren't enough. "Vote - participate - speak up about problems and be ready to fight back," she said. "There is nothing more important than taking risks," she added.

The Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium at Stockton celebrated the 50th anniversary of Mrs. Hamer's historic protest at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City.

Hamer was a civil rights activist who helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration drive for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964. She also helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to oppose her state's all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Mrs. Hamer, who died in 1977, brought Mississippi's civil rights struggle to the national stage during a televised speech at the convention.

Her speech galvanized millions of viewers, who heard how African-Americans were being denied the right to vote in various states through intimidation and illegal tests and poll taxes. As a result, two MFDP delegates were given the right to speak at the convention and the other members were seated as guests.

The theme of this year's program, "Fifty Years After the Protest: The Enduring Legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer," continued Stockton's tradition of bringing informative educational programs that speak to the life and legacy of Mrs. Hamer to the college and the wider community.

The program, with welcoming remarks by President Herman Saatkamp, included a selection of freedom songs performed by members of Stockton's Vocal Jazz Ensemble and led by Dr. Beverly Vaughn, professor of Music. Actress Mattilyn Rochester portrayed Mrs. Hamer to illustrate her struggles and strength in the face of arrests and beatings.

The program also included a panel discussion with Zulima V. Farber, former New Jersey attorney general, Dr. Anne Pomeroy, associate professor of Philosophy and president of the Stockton American Federation of Teachers, and Dr. Patricia Reid-Merritt, Distinguished Professor of Social Work, Africana Studies and program coordinator.

Farber, who graduated from Rutgers University law school in 1974, said she found there were very few women - and even fewer women of color - practicing law. "You have to work harder and be better," she said of the challenges. "But if I made it through, you can do it."

She urged students to take care of themselves and their families, while striving to succeed and help their communities. Farber advocated taking a high-paying legal job instead of only working for non-profits or government, because it offers "the resources to help the cause."

And once you've made it, "Open the door to those behind you," Farber said.

The event was sponsored by the Stockton Africana Studies Program and the Unified Black Students Society.

"Fannie Lou Hamer remains an inspirational role model for me," said Dr. Reid-Merritt. "These annual tributes to her legacy continue to educate a new generation and, hopefully, will encourage young people to work for social change and social justice."

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Photo credit: Maryjane Briant/The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

Photo caption: Carmen Berkley, national director of Civil, Human and Women's Rights for the AFL-CIO, speaks on Tuesday (Oct. 7) at the Eleventh Annual Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.