Herman Greene - Moral Mondays in North Carolina

For the last nine Mondays, the NAACP of North Carolina has led “Moral Monday” protests at the North Carolina legislative building. At first small, the rallies have grown to over 2,000 people per gathering. Further, over 600 people have been arrested for civil disobedience. I have been present as a protester at six of these events, though I have not been arrested.

In North Carolina, as in many other states, Republicans now control both houses of the legislature and we have a Republican governor. The legislatures changed to Republican control in the 2010 election and a Republican governor was elected in 2012. With majorities in both chambers and no threat of a veto, Republicans have set out to change the direction of the state. Their goals are to make the state more competitive, create jobs, grow the economy, lower taxes, shrink government, and address moral issues, including abortion, state dependence, and laziness.

North Carolina has a reputation for being a progressive Southern state. Rob Christensen, a reporter for the Raleigh News & Observer, wrote a long article on how “progressive reforms” of the last 50 years are being rolled back, including many passed with the support of Republicans. Here are some of the actions that have been taken or are proposed:

- In 1951 state unemployment benefits were extended from 20 to 26 weeks. Effective July 1 this was reduced to 12-20 weeks (depending on the unemployment rate), maximum benefits were reduced from $530 per week to $350 per week (the average benefit before the cut was $298.50 per week), and 170,000 unemployed workers whose state unemployment benefits have or will expire this year will be denied federal emergency unemployment benefits totaling $700 million.
- The Child Fatality Task Force, created by the legislature under Republican Gov. Jim Martin in 1991 and aimed at reducing infant and child deaths, is on the chopping block.
- Measures to provide partial public financing for judicial races, treasurer, insurance commissioner and superintendent of public instruction are being terminated.
- Incentive pay for teachers who earn Master’s degrees is ending. Teacher pay in North Carolina is 48th (on the low end) in the nation.
- The racial justice act that permitted death row inmates to appeal their sentences on the basis of racial jury bias was repealed.
- A law requiring teachers beginning in the 7th grade to teach that abortion is a risk factor for later premature births was passed. On July 2nd, the NC Senate passed a law
requiring abortion clinics to meet standards of same-day surgery centers and have a
doctor present for all procedures even giving pills to end early-term pregnancies. The
legislation if passed will potentially close 35 of 36 abortion clinics in North Carolina.
- Medicaid expansion that would cover 500,000 low income North Carolinians was
rejected. (An article in July 2nd’s News & Observer stated that as a result of actions by
North Carolina and other states, such as Florida and Texas, two out of three uninsured
low-income people nationally who would qualify for subsidized coverage under the
Affordable Health Care act will not be covered.)
- The NC Senate is considering a bill that would require voter IDs, end early voting and
require college students to vote in their home districts.
- A law preventing the state from having environmental laws that are more strict than
federal laws was passed. Standards for land-fills have been loosened.
- A proposal is pending to grant vouchers for private schools. Charter schools will be
allowed to expand without obtaining State Board of Education approval.
- Tax reform that will eliminate the low income tax credit, raise taxes on lower and middle
income groups, reduce taxes on the wealthy, and eliminate taxes on corporations is
under consideration.
- A law requiring illegal immigrants to obtain a state-issued ID showing their immigration
status and allowing immigration status checks when a person is stopped for any
infraction has been proposed.

Many of the actions being taken in North Carolina are part of a national effort by
conservatives to change state laws. The American Legislative Council (ALEC), www.alec.org, is a
source of many of the legislative proposals. For ALEC environmental regulation is a train wreck,
and most of the achievements in cleaner air and water have come from technology and
business. The regulation has, according to ALEC, only hurt people and economies.

The Moral Mondays come out of the Southern civil rights history. A chant at the rallies is
“One step forward, not one step back.” These reforms were hard won. Some attention is given
at Moral Mondays to the roll-back of environmental measures, but mostly to the plight of the
poor and middle class.

Some conservative legislators call these protests “Moron Mondays” caused by
outsiders. They believe their “reforms” will make things better.

I believe as time goes on conditions will become more and more difficult for the middle
class and poor. Environmentalists will increasingly work with social activists. The climate
deniers are also the ones who purportedly call for a smaller state (while increasing security
expenses and corporate welfare). Those who lay waste to the land also oppress the poor . . .
“for their own good.”
This video will give you a feel for Moral Mondays: 
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=GoVK0xyTcQY. As Reverend Barber says, it’s not that the legislature is Republican, it is what they are doing.

May a thousand Moral Mondays bloom. I’ll be back next week.