

Hundreds March on Governor's Mansion to Repeal HB 1523



May 10, 2016 - The Mississippi State Conference NAACP joined the Human Rights Campaign and hundreds of people, both in and out of state, in a passionate protest against House Bill 1523. The bill promises state legal protection to religious groups and some private businesses that deny services to same-sex couples and transgender people. The new law also allows an employer or government or private school to restrict a person's bathroom privileges to the gender he or she was assigned at birth. This means that if you were told you were a male as a child, but as an adult you identify as a woman, you could be restricted to the male bathroom no matter how inaccurate the classification is.

HB 1523 takes effect July 1 and hundreds marched upon the Governor's Mansion demanding that the governor and the legislature voluntarily nullify the impending law. The Human Rights Campaign organized the May 1 event. Human Rights Campaign President Chad Griffin said the bill essentially closes Mississippi for business.

“We’re gathered here today because a few weeks ago Mississippi lawmakers and Gov. Bryant inflicted a great injustice on this state and on its people. In doing so, Gov. Bryant sent a message to this country and to this world that the state of Mississippi is closed for business,” Griffin said. “And I bet he’s hearing that every day, because every day another CEO and another business speaks out (against the law).”

Bryant, Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, and Speaker Philip Gunn, he said, had firmly planted themselves on the wrong side of history - a *darker* side of history. “They’ve added their names to a list of disgraced southern politicians who have used fear throughout history to divide us,” Griffin said.

Susan Hrostowski, vicar of St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church in Collins, made a similar argument, claiming that shallow, cynical lawmakers had passed the bill specifically to divide the public and keep them from uniting against them in upcoming elections. She said the law perfectly mimics similar laws used against minorities in the past.

“This is a smokescreen,” Hrostowski told the energetic crowd. “Watch what happens now that our health department is cut, now that our mental health systems are cut, now that our social service system is gone, and our education (system) goes unfunded. Ladies and gentleman, Lyndon B. Johnson once said during the Civil Rights Movement that when we help the white man feel superior to the black man then he won’t scream so much while we’re picking his pocket.”

Other speakers also noted the unsettling similarity HB 1523 shares with past efforts by Mississippi politicians to use disingenuous, moral high-ground arguments to mask their more insidious attempts to manipulate voters Derrick Johnson, President of the Mississippi State Conference NAACP, warned the crowd to recognize the law for what it is.

“In a state steeped in a history of discrimination and racial division, with leaders that use the politics of division to maintain power, we must stand united,” Johnson urged. “This so-called religious freedom act has nothing to do with any religion that I’m aware of.”

Johnson lambasted the lawmakers’ effort to hide their bigotry behind the Bible.

“It was interesting that they said they’re doing this because of some ‘sincerely held religious and moral beliefs.’ I’ve heard this language before. This is the language used to justify slavery. ... This is the language used to justify women being second-class citizens. ... This is the language used to divide individuals and justify a racist symbol in our state flag,” Johnson said. “If we want to stand as a united community, we must stand to fight against this bill. We must stand with Planned Parenthood when they attack women, and we must stand with the NAACP to remove the state flag.”

Other speakers attending the rally opined that proponents of the bill were merely trying to use the controversial law to distract the public from their miserable voting records and political impotence. American Civil Liberties Union Legislative Strategist Erik Fleming was one of many who felt legislators backing the bill had plenty of incompetence to hide.

“It’s more pandering than anything else,” said Fleming, a former Democratic State Representative from Jackson. “This state is the poorest state in the nation, but instead of dealing with how to advance us they’re taking the lazy way and trying to distract us from the problems that they’re failing to fix.”

Jody Owens, a Jackson attorney who also works with the Southern Poverty Law Center, said the new bill, should it become law in July, would set off a volley of lawsuits against the State.

“A few weeks ago we asked (a certain politician) not to sign this bill and he (still) did it. ... We said ‘we promise you that if you sign this bill we’re going to take the fight to the courthouse,’ and that’s exactly what we intend on doing,” Owens told the crowd.

Owens said he and his affiliates were already on the lookout for plaintiffs in the upcoming suit.

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Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation’s oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors. For more information about the Mississippi NAACP or news stories, call 601-353-8452 or log on to www.naacpms.org. Like us on Facebook by searching Mississippi NAACP and follow us on Twitter @MSNAACP.