



Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.

June 29, 1937 – October 1, 2023

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., emeritus professor of Human Studies and Labor Economics at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, died after a brief illness on October 1, 2023, in Montour Falls, New York. He is survived by a loving family, including his wife of 52 years Martijna (Tina), as well as two sons Vernon III and Kees, four devoted grandchildren, and his brother Donald. He was predeceased by his sister Carol Mullen and brother Robert.

Vernon was born on June 29, 1937 in Washington, DC. He graduated from Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in 1955, after which he studied Economics at the University of Maryland, where he received the Algernon Sullivan Award for exemplary service to the University and served as president of the Student Government Association during his senior year (1958-9). He pursued graduate studies, again in economics, at Michigan State University, receiving an M.A. degree in 1960 and the Ph.D. five years later. He joined the University of Texas (Austin) faculty as an assistant professor of economics in 1964, moving quickly through the ranks to associate professor (1968) and professor (1972), winning several awards for teaching excellence along the way. After coming to Cornell in 1978, he avidly pursued an active teaching and research agenda for nearly three decades prior to retiring in 2007.

Professionally, Vernon unfailingly embraced the nexus between scholarship and advocacy, primarily on behalf of America's low wage workers. This proclivity began during a trip to Detroit during Vernon's undergraduate years, where he witnessed firsthand the devastating effect of layoffs on auto workers. "I knew right then," he once said, "that I wanted to study why people become unemployed, why we can't find ways to keep them employed." This nascent interest came to fruition under the guidance of Professor Charles Killingsworth, Vernon's Ph.D. advisor at MSU and a strong advocate of direct labor market interventions – primarily training and job search assistance – to tackle the adverse employment effects of technological change. At the University of Texas, Vernon's interest turned to the plight of Black workers, leading, among other things, to a collaboration with Professor Ray Marshall (later Secretary of Labor in the Carter administration) on a book titled *The Negro and Apprenticeship* (1967), which urged policymakers to do more to create opportunities for Black workers in the skilled trades.

Subsequently, Vernon's Hispanic students wondered aloud why he didn't devote more of his obvious intellect and energy to their cause. In response, he undertook an extensive study of the Hispanic labor market in the southwestern U.S. that resulted in his 1973 book *Chicanos and Rural Poverty*.

Concurrently, Vernon befriended Cesar Chavez and supported his efforts to organize resident Hispanic farmworkers in Texas. Here, he had a front row seat to the systematic thwarting of Chavez's movement, primarily by farm owners who routinely bused illegal strike-breakers in from Mexico with impunity. This flagrant abuse of immigration and labor policy served as the impetus for most of Vernon's subsequent research and policy work, which favored the adoption and enforcement of immigration policies based primarily on labor market rather than family considerations. Vernon championed a controlled flow of both legal and undocumented immigrants, in part to protect them from exploitation in the labor market and at work and in part to prevent an overflow of cheap labor – which, in his calculus, served to suppress the wages of not only immigrants, but also other low-wage workers, primarily Black workers. Vernon developed these themes in numerous treatises, articles, and speeches, as well as in two books. In one, *Immigration and American Unionism* (2001), he took America's largest unions to task for doing too little to support immigration reform. And in his tour-de-force, *Mass Immigration and the National Interest* (2003; 3rd ed. 2015), he thoroughly reviewed the country's uneven record on immigration – castigating the “unholy alliance” of, among others, libertarian economists, immigration lawyers, and corporate leaders for their incessant preoccupation with sustaining a constant influx of cheap labor. He marshalled arguments favoring a more rational approach to policymaking, as well as recommendations for specific changes to enhance social equity and improve national efficiency.

Additionally, Vernon engaged in numerous public service pursuits over the years. He served on the editorial boards of several journals and consulted with a number of government agencies, both state and federal, on labor and immigration issues. He was an early member of the National Commission on Employment Policy, and later became active in the Center for Immigration Studies, serving on its board of directors for many years. Vernon testified before various committees of both the House and Senate 14 times, mostly regarding immigration matters – tasks he once described as akin to banging his head against a brick wall (a sentiment that even casual observers of U.S. immigration policy can surely appreciate).

Dedicated scholars who vigorously tackle controversial economic and social issues invariably attract both devotees and detractors. Vernon was no exception. For example, Philip Martin, a professor of Economics and immigration expert at the University of California at Davis, proclaimed Vernon “... the nation's preeminent institutional labor economist interested in immigration.” In contrast, some critics disparaged his institutional approach to research, a few going so far as to accuse him of ignoring quantitative data and analyses that were at odds with his preconceived notions. Following Vernon's retirement from Cornell, a group of his former colleagues and students collaborated on a volume celebrating his career, *Human Resource Economics and Public Policy: Essays in Honor of Vernon M. Briggs* (2010). In the book's frontispiece, noted economist and long-time MIT Professor Michael Piore offered a more nuanced and balanced view of Vernon's career, citing him as “a model of committed, passionate scholarship, even for those of us who often disagree with the policy changes he wants to

introduce...a man who studies the world in order to change it and make it better and whose research has always come from the heart as well as the head.”

When not engaged in his many intellectual pursuits, Vernon particularly loved spending time in the great outdoors with family and friends in Ithaca’s beautiful natural environment and more privately at his remote cabin in Colorado – built, he was proud to say, with his own hands.

Written by Lee Dyer, Robert S. Smith, and George R. Boyer