

## Revisiting Martin Luther King's Last Campaign and Unfinished Agenda

Michael K. HONEY \*

"I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Freedom..."  
"When the union's inspiration through the worker's blood shall run,  
There can be no power anywhere beneath the sun,  
for what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one  
But in union we are strong..."

"Stayed on freedom," sung by slaves emancipating themselves during the U.S. Civil War and again in churches and during the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, reminds us that the struggle for African American freedom has been long and hard. "Solidarity Forever," composed in 1915 by Industrial Workers of the World activist Ralph Chaplin during World War I, picks up another thread of American history: the struggle for worker rights. Chaplin's song tells us of the exploitation of labor for the benefit of the wealthy, and that through organizing, workers can make their demands: "the union makes us strong." These two songs are not usually sung together, but I like to sing them that way because they link the ongoing struggle in American history for freedom and for economic justice.<sup>1</sup> As we rethink the historical legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who died in Memphis, Tennessee, from an assassin's bullet on April 4, 1968, over fifty years ago, these two struggles remain interconnected.

Each generation rethinks its history and we are especially doing so in the U.S.

---

\* Michael K. Honey is the Fred and Dorothy Haley Endowed Professor of Humanities at the University of Washington Tacoma, the author of five books, and the editor of King's labor speeches. He worked as a civil rights and civil liberties organizer across the South from 1970–1976, based in Memphis.

1. Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1989), 175–82; Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Sing Out Publications, 1990); Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Carry it On! History in Song and Picture of the Working Men of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 112–14; Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, *Songs of Work and Protest: 100 Favorite Songs of American Workers Complete with Music and Historical Notes* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 12–13.

today. Our context is the dramatic shift to the right, as the Republican Party controls most U.S. state legislatures and governorships, the presidency, the Supreme Court and, as of this writing, Congress (we hope this will change). The reigning Republicans are using their power to crush labor rights, suppress voting rights, and, above all, enhance the wealth and power of the top 1 percent of the population at the expense of the great majority of Americans who rely on wages and fixed incomes for a living. President Donald Trump issues daily untrue statements and tweets, bullies critics, and tells people not to believe journalists but believe his fantastic stories instead; uses open sexism and racism to stir up renewed male supremacy and white nationalist movements; and presides over the deregulation of environmental protections on behalf of the petro-chemical and mining industries. As Trump undercuts environmental protections and pulls out of international climate change agreements aimed at curbing global warming, as I write this the temperature is over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Japan, while the region of the Pacific Northwest in which I live is engulfed in forest fires and clouds of smoke.

Trump's policies represent the long-standing agenda of the Republican Party and its wealthy benefactors. It has long supported massive tax cuts for corporations and the rich, who are using those tax cuts to inflate their profits by buying back corporate stock while donating hundreds of millions back to Republican politicians. Republicans have made an ideological position of trying to roll back all forms of government intervention to protect people and the environment. They support the huge escalation of military spending as Trump promises to militarize space; seek to cut back food stamps and social programs that benefit poor and working people; and sabotage full health care for women and health care at a reduced cost for all Americans. Republican tax cuts have cut income to the federal government while increasing spending, ballooning the national debt while planning to undermine Medicare and Social Security systems that working people have paid into their entire lives. Their president undermines the stability of the global financial and export system and stirs conflict abroad while undercutting constitutional protections at home of both citizens and immigrants protected by the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.<sup>2</sup>

---

2. Documenting this summary would require another article in itself. The stories of the Trump/Republican triumph/disaster since the election of 2016 can be easily traced through the "fake news" outlets of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. To take one example, after reducing corporate taxes by 20 percent and individual tax rates for the wealthiest people from 35 percent to 21 percent, the U.S. increased the budget deficit by \$76.9 billion, more than a 20 percent increase from the previous year. The Republican tax cut will produce a total deficit of over one trillion dollars for the next year, based on a tax cut that goes mainly to the rich, of over \$1.5 trillion expected in the next ten years. This is the work of Republicans who claim to be "conservative." Martin Crutsinger, "U.S. budget deficit in July totals \$76.9 billion," Associated Press, August 11, 2018.

Dr. King would be appalled. How could this happen in a nation that declares in its founding documents that “all men are created equal” and endowed with “unalienable rights” including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”? As King preached and as we still find today, those who have the greatest wealth and power can never get enough and always want more; they do not seem to care if they get it at the expense of everyone else. Other capitalist countries do not necessarily enshrine greed and profits as national priorities. In the U.S., the top 1 percent owns more wealth than 90 percent of the rest of us, and its four richest people own more wealth than the bottom half of the world’s population. Particularly egregious, given our history of slavery and racism, the president and his supporters have perpetuated “us against them” racial conflicts, increasing the sense of many people who identify as “white” that they have racial grievances against black athletes, against Latino and Muslim immigrants, and “others.” Since the “southern strategy” of President Richard M. Nixon in 1968, Republican politicians have stoked racial conflict to split potential interracial working-class alliances and promote racial divisions to gain and hold power. This is an old story and an old strategy in American history, involving Democrats as well as Republicans.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of all this, I begin with freedom and labor movement songs to remind us that people in the U.S. have long struggled to unite workers and communities of color to confront common problems; that history suggests that it remains possible to work together against poverty and economic inequality, to stop forever wars and global warming, and create a better future.<sup>4</sup> Freedom and labor movement songs remind us that our story is only part of a much larger story of Native peoples, slaves, indentured servants, immigrants, workers, and men and women of all ethnicities and genders who have long struggled for a better life. A vast and growing literature in American Studies on the leading role of women in the civil rights movement and a literature of grassroots organizing has documented that the history of social change is not about the “great man” theory in which a special leader rescues us from our troubles.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, as a historian and

---

3. For an update on these issues, see the special issue of *The Nation*, July 16/23, 2018. Eric Foner, in *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), reminds us that southern Democrats were the mainstay of both slavery and segregation until the tables turned when African Americans won full suffrage under the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

4. “Declaration of Independence” (1776), in Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, A-23. Foner provides the most reliable overview of American history.

5. Most recently, see for example, Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013) and *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Paul Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), in a

activist who has lived through the last fifty years, the current crisis of democracy in the U.S. makes me appreciate more than ever the life and legacy of Dr. King.

We go back to the King story more than fifty years since his death in 1968 not because we wish to idolize heroes and heroines of the past, but because we hope to pass on a growing literature on King and social movement history to young people; they are the ones, with the help of older people, who can stop our planet from burning up or flooding out, who can blunt escalating racism, sexism, and violence, and forge new bonds of common world citizenship. In this article, I hope to convey some of the ways labor and civil rights scholars make sense of the King legacy and its meaning for us today. My own most recent contribution to that literature, *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice*, surveys themes and issues related to labor and poor people's issues that King addressed throughout his adult life.<sup>6</sup>

King's legacy provides no prescriptions for change, but much food for thought. King both critiqued structural economic racism while also seeking to mobilize people in interracial alliances that he hoped could lead us in a better direction. The first thing to learn is that, in King's time as in our present, as King warned, in order to cure an illness you first have to understand the disease. His analysis of racism, war, poverty and economic injustice made him unpopular among some Americans, but he insisted we look in the mirror and face hard truths in order to make a better world."<sup>7</sup> The greatest enemy of this disease is truth. So it was in King's time as well.

### **I: The Importance of the King Legacy**

I count myself as part of "the other America" that Dr. King called into being: an America of love and justice, of equal rights and democracy. Against today's regressive backdrop, we can contrast King's lofty vision—his "I have a dream" speech at the 1963 March on Washington—that the U.S. and the world can become a place where people "are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin." Yet beyond that vision we should also know that King very purposefully gave his speech on the one-hundred-year anniversary of emancipation (1863). He used this occasion to join civil rights and economic justice campaigns that he hoped would overturn the legacy of slavery and racism

---

series by Beacon Press called "ReVisioning American History."

6. For an introduction to King scholarship see my source notes to chapter 1 in *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice* (W. W. Norton, 2018), 199–201. See also the forthcoming monograph by Sylvie Laurent, *King and the Other America: The Poor People's Campaign and the Quest for Economic Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

7. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1968).

that afflicted generations of African Americans—most of whom still lived “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a sea of prosperity.” As scholar William Jones documents, King’s focus on economic justice at the 1963 march for jobs and freedom was not his alone but reflected generations of organizing efforts by A. Philip Randolph and other African Americans in labor and civil rights movements.<sup>8</sup>

Nor was King’s demand for economic justice removed from his own experiences. Although he had a PhD and people think of him as a middle-class leader speaking in a suit and tie, he remained personally connected to issues of racism and poverty through his own family history: his great grandparents had been slaves, his grandparents and parents had been victims of sharecropping and poverty, and he himself grew up during the Great Depression, afflicted by Jim Crow segregation in the Deep South state of Georgia. His direct experiences naturally made his demands for economic justice an important part of his agenda for change. More than many of our accounts of King acknowledge, he spoke often and clearly to the historical legacy and interconnection of slavery, racism, and oppression; he saw these combined illnesses as the disease that needed to be cured through a nonviolent social movement aimed at transforming America’s racial and economic system. The King Papers Project at Stanford University, stellar accounts by Thomas Jackson and others, and my own telling of the story all link King’s championing of both freedom and labor rights struggles as part of a larger fabric of radical and reform movements in American history.<sup>9</sup>

One need not subscribe to the “great man” theory of historical change to appreciate King’s influence. He was not alone. Rather, he responded to and represented generations of grassroots people such as Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, and many other men and women determined to make the “American dream” of equality and a good life available to all. On December 5, 1955, in his first public address and on the first day of the historic Montgomery Bus boycott, King addressed a mass meeting of mostly working-class men and women as “we, the disinherited of this land.” During the Montgomery bus boycott he repeatedly pointed out that he did not start the movement but rather served a movement started by many others. In this first speech, King connected the dots linking labor and civil rights struggles, saying, “When labor all over this nation came to see that it would be trampled over by capitalistic power, it was nothing wrong with labor ...

---

8. William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

9. Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); for an overview of the King Papers Project, see <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/about-papers-project>.

protesting for its rights.”<sup>10</sup>

For the next ten years, from 1955 to 1965, King led what he later called the “first phase” of the movement. In this phase, he focused on implementing the post-Civil War Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the American Constitution for equal rights before the law and for voting rights. Without these rights, he said, African Americans could not function as citizens to effect change within the larger society. Through mass movements in the streets, the civil rights movement and its labor allies led Congress to adopt the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But King did not stop with these victories. When people label King as a “civil rights leader,” they “misremember King”—they miss his campaigning for what he called for a “second phase” of the movement, beyond civil rights to the correct problems of structural economic injustice and inequality created by generations of slavery and segregation. We will not overcome structural racism and inequality without moving on to King’s next phase: the movement for economic justice. By “economic justice,” King meant Black political power, well-paying jobs, decent housing, high levels of education, and adequate health care for people who had for generations been shut out of the good things of American life.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning of his time as a social movement leader, reactionaries and racists denounced King. Although he emphasized civil and voting rights, he did not hide his larger critique of American society. King told Rosa Parks and others gathered at Highlander School in Tennessee on September 2, 1957, eight months after the victory of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, “I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the... tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities for the masses to give luxuries to the classes.” Undercover agents took his photo and the John Birch Society, funded in part by Charles Koch, father of today’s petro-dollar funders of the right wing, placed ads on billboards and sent out postcards of King at this Highlander meeting with the false headline, “King at a Communist Training School.” America’s right wing attacked King as a socialist and subversive throughout the rest of his life. The Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, funded in part by the industrial Bradley Foundation which still promotes the right-wing agenda today in Wisconsin and other states, published a pamphlet, “King Unmasked,” labeling him “the great deceiver” and a secret subversive. Activists of the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan physically attacked King numerous times. Imagine if you can the most famous

---

10. Honey, *ibid.*, “We the disinherited,” chapter 2, 39. All King quotes in this article are cited in *To the Promised Land*.

11. Jennifer J. Yanco, *Misremembering Dr. King: Revisiting the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); on Highlander and the origins of the anti-communist crusade against King, see chapter 2 and its source notes in Honey, *To the Promised Land*.

Baptist minister of his time reviled as a closet Communist! It seems absurd, but many people believed it. Not only right-wing publications, but the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), led by its director J. Edgar Hoover, vilified King and promoted hatred that helped to create a climate of fear. The FBI jeopardized his movements and ultimately cost him his life.<sup>12</sup>

In tracing King's economic justice framework, I found it easy to see that the current problem of right-wing hallucinations is not new. Back in the day, the Koch family, the Bradley foundation, and many others mobilized their profits to peddle lies about King and other civil rights and labor activists. President Trump's political mentor Roy Cohn served as counsel to Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, who used rabid anti-communism as a way to destroy honest political discussion and debate in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Cohn taught Trump to use labeling and falsehoods to destroy his opponents in ways that continue to haunt us today. Nancy MacLean's new book, *Democracy in Chains*, traces how an anti-democratic form of incipient fascism emerged from theorists and funders of racism and labor exploitation, linked to opposition to desegregation in the South and to union rights for workers, setting the stage for the right-wing movements of today.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding the full King legacy of demanding both civil and economic equality can help us to see through the dense smog of people today who would "make America great again" by reinvigorating the myths and lies of the past. We should remember King's teaching that labor rights and civil rights must go hand in hand to be effective, and that we have a common interest in uniting for a better life for all people rather than in engaging in racial, gender, anti-immigrant, anti-gay, or other such divisive campaigns that demean the "other." Students of American Studies and people around the world can clarify the issues we face today and move forward with an ethical, spiritual, and humanitarian compass through studies of King. One need not be a Christian like King to appreciate his perspective that a moral universe exists, or that nonviolence theory and practice provide a tried and true method to bring about human progress without adding more violence to the world.

## II: King, Labor, and Economic Justice

My emphasis on the importance of economic issues and King's call for a labor and civil rights alliance results from my thirty years of scholarship. Researching

---

12. See David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981); Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

13. Nancy Maclean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017).

interracial industrial unionism in the South in the 1980s, I learned how employers, politicians, and right-wing ideologues in an earlier period combined racism and anti-communism to destroy promising labor-based movements for social change. I also learned about what we labor historians call “civil rights unionism” based among activists in the left-wing unions of the old Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). During the Great Depression of the 1930s and after World War II, industrial worker-led sit-down strikes, mass demonstrations, and community and workplace organizing challenged age-old white supremacist barriers that had so undercut American labor organizing. Tragically, as “Cold War” anti-communism swept through America in the postwar 1940s, its pressures led the CIO to expel eleven major unions with nearly a million members for being “Communist-led.” Anti-communist and accelerating employer and white supremacist attacks eviscerated interracial alliances and democracy within unions and removed some of the strongest equal rights advocates and most courageous organizers and undermined the CIO’s post-World War II effort to organize unions in the South called “Operation Dixie.”<sup>14</sup>

Not by coincidence, the purged unions included some of the labor movement’s strongest civil rights advocates, both white and black. Increasing numbers of African American women had started to make the labor movement a powerful vehicle for their interests in the 1940s, but in the Cold War 1950s, union expansion in the South nearly stopped. In the 1960s, mechanization and computerization began to eliminate many industrial jobs while unionized industries in the North moved South and beyond the U.S. borders in order to profit from non-union work. If labor-based interracial movements in the South had not been cut short by red-baiting and racist hysteria, the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s might have had a much better chance of addressing the underlying, structural problems of racial inequality that King tried to address in the 1960s. Interracial and black and female-led movements for economic justice on the job did not stop. As Lane Windham’s new study, *Knocking on Labor’s Door*, documents, in the 1970s southern workers mounted new organizing efforts but anti-union and racist attacks increasingly undermined the possibilities for carrying out King’s unfinished agenda for social and economic justice.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1990s I gained new insight when I more or less stumbled upon

---

14. Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Robert Rogers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 75/3 (December 1988): 786–811.

15. Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor’s Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

files at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, in a box titled “King’s Labor Speeches.” I learned that King had repeatedly spoken to unions and forged strong personal and political relationships with them. My explorations led me to publish fourteen of King’s labor speeches, in *All Labor Has Dignity*. I also undertook a deep research project that resulted in the book *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign*. I concluded that we cannot seriously understand King’s legacy today without also looking at King’s labor politics. King emphasized the need to create a powerful alliance between labor and civil rights movements to create a majority coalition for a government that serves the people instead of prioritizing the needs of corporations and the rich.<sup>16</sup> Of special note, King strongly criticized so-called “right to work” laws that the U.S. Supreme Court and the right wing are now implementing across America. Those laws banish the union shop in which workers as a condition of employment must either belong to a union or, if not, pay a fee to the union that represents them in contract negotiations. “Right to work” laws in twenty-eight states, now upheld for public employees by the U.S. Supreme Court, allow “free riders” to gain all of the benefits of unionization without paying any of the costs. In Wisconsin and elsewhere, this incentive for workers to abandon unions has undercut them at the workplace and undermined unions as a means of worker political action. Republican laws to suppress poor, working class, and young voters have made it far easier for corporations and the wealthy to advance their interests and ideology.<sup>17</sup>

Destroying unions and voting rights goes against what King and presumably most Americans stood for and drastically impacted the incomes and lives of African Americans. In the 1960s, King opposed misnamed “right to work” laws, saying they guaranteed “no rights, and no work.” He supported unions as a crucial means for the black working class—the great majority of the black population in America—to improve wages and working conditions. Black workers I interviewed in Memphis helped to forge labor-civil rights and electoral coalitions after they successfully organized unions at their workplace. They obtained “middle class” wages and earned enough money to buy homes and send their children to college, who often became part of the 1960s generation that challenged the “white” and “colored” signs and other barriers to black freedom.<sup>18</sup> But,

---

16. Martin Luther King, Jr., *All Labor Has Dignity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), ed. Michael K. Honey; Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

17. Dan Kaufman, *The Fall of Wisconsin* (NY: WW Norton, 2018), provides rich detail and paints a devastating portrait of how Republican special interest politics turned a union-strong state with progressive political leaders into a largely non-union state whose politicians undercut higher education, environmental regulations, and tax fairness.

18. Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

beginning in the 1980s, the anti-union policies of successive Republican governments from President Ronald Reagan to the present have destroyed much of this working-class African American economic and political power. Corporations also shifted their investments to low-wage, non-union districts in the U.S. South and abroad, leaving millions of black and white workers stranded without living wage jobs. Places like Detroit suffered from communities hit hard by deindustrialization and de-unionization, drugs and gang wars, the collapse of families and educational systems, and proliferating violence. This is what happens, sociologist William Julius Wilson documented in Chicago, “when work disappears.”<sup>19</sup>

In campaigns that King took up from 1955 to his death in 1968, he emphasized the connection between social and economic justice issues while strengthening his critique of American capitalism. Speaking to a union convention on September 8, 1962, he said, “There are three major social evils that are alive in our world today ... the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice.” When he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he demanded that “peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.” King’s “freedom budget” in 1966 for the working class and poor called for a massive redirection of federal spending away from war toward adequate housing, health care, education, and jobs for every person. At great personal cost to himself, he denounced the Vietnam War as a drain on the federal budget, an inculcator of violence and poverty, and a humanitarian disaster for the Vietnamese and for American soldiers.<sup>20</sup> On April 4, 1967, a year before his death, he denounced war as an instrument of foreign policy and called on the U.S. to move “from a thing-oriented to a person-oriented society.” During a time of bloody revolts against police brutality, escalating unemployment, and poor schools and housing in America’s cities, King vowed that the U.S. should move toward jobs or income for “all God’s people.” In 1968, he launched his Poor People’s Campaign to bring thousands of unemployed people to Washington, D.C., to demand that Congress change its priorities from war spending and tax breaks for corporations and the rich to investing in creating an economic basis to end poverty.<sup>21</sup>

---

19. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

20. Fujimoto Hiroshi, “The Legacy of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident: ‘Real American War’ in Vietnam,” *Nanzan Review of American Studies* XXXVI (2014): 113–21. In this and other studies, Professor Fujimoto has documented the long-term and devastating effects of American war crimes in Vietnam, including the use of Agent Orange, which led to the death of one of my childhood friends, among many others. I appreciate Fujimoto’s continuing work to investigate and heal the effects of this horrendous and futile war.

21. King, *All Labor Has Dignity*, 55–64; King, Nobel Peace Prize speech in Oslo, Norway,

We now have a robust literature that shows that King did not just suddenly come to these views. He would always seem to be a “radical” in a country that seems to place profits above human rights. As a minister of the Social Gospel of Jesus, King had long believed that capitalism as practiced in America needed to drastically change. “We’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace,” he told his Southern Christian Leadership conference in August of 1967. “But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” He went further in speaking to his staff in December, saying, “Something is wrong with capitalism as it now exists in the United States... a radical redistribution of power must take place.”<sup>22</sup>

The fact that King died while supporting a strike by black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, should make us pause from the standard narrative that many still hold about King that narrows his vision down to the title, “civil rights leader.” He was so much more. Workers I interviewed in Memphis saw his commitment to workers and the poor as central to his legacy. They recognized the tragedy of his death in Memphis, but emphasized that he did not die in vain; his intervention led to a settlement on behalf of 1,300 striking workers. Without the success of this strike, the subsequent rise of the unionization of public employees across the United States might have failed. The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the union that organized the Memphis workers, honors King every year as one of its heroes, and some would say one of its founders.<sup>23</sup>

More than fifty years since King died in Memphis on April 4, 1968, people returned to what that event meant, seeing in that strike the context of King’s much broader campaign to end poverty, racism, and war in America and the world.

### III: Bonds of Memory

On February 1, 1968, Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death while riding out a cold, driving rainstorm in the back of an outmoded “packer” garbage truck in Memphis. Unsafe working conditions, racism, and abuse had

---

December 10, 1964, cited in Honey, *To the Promised Land*, 84; Beyond Vietnam, April 4, 1967, in King, James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 231–44.

22. King at Frogmore, South Carolina, Southern Christian Leadership Conference retreat, December 1967, in David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 536–38; “A radical redistribution of power must take place,” comments in New York, November 24, 1967, cited in Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 76.

23. See the comments of workers and organizers in chapter seven, “I Am a Man,” in Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, especially 301–302 and 315–18.

long been intolerable for the city's 1,300 sanitation workers. They worked long hours on poverty wages, with no workmen's compensation if they got hurt, and they could be fired at a moment's notice. They had no rights. On Abraham Lincoln's birthday, Monday, February 12, they refused to go to work. Attacked by the police, the news media, and the city government, their fight under the banner "I Am A Man" for union rights and a living wage marked a turning point for the movements of the 1960s from civil rights to economic justice. Joining them in a dramatic speech at Bishop Mason Temple on March 18, Dr. King told the workers, "You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages. And I need not remind you that this is our plight as a people all over America." King made Memphis the first stop in his projected Poor People's Campaign to shift America's priorities from funding war and the accumulation of private wealth to providing housing, health care, education, and jobs or sustainable income for all. He had begun the campaign by focusing on the unemployed poor, but now he added to his agenda the working poor like the sanitation workers in Memphis.<sup>24</sup>

Fifty years later, on February 1, public employees across the USA held a moment of silence honoring Cole and Walker. In Memphis on February 12, labor advocates of "The Fight for 15," demanding a minimum wage of fifteen dollars an hour for fast food and service economy workers, marched again. They saw this as the first step in the new Poor People's Campaign led by ministers like Rev. William Barber and Liz Theoharis, protesting, as King did, today's crime of deep, unrelenting, and unrelieved poverty in the richest nation in the world. On April 4, thousands of us gathered in Memphis again. Professor Kawashima Masaki of Nanzan University marched along with us on that day to rededicate ourselves to King's campaigns for racial and economic justice, an end to war, poverty, and violence. In his remarkable new study of African American history, Professor Kawashima poses the many dilemmas and contradictions confronting Americans as they try to create a shared vision and a new coalition for the future. He reminds us of the importance of deeply studying history in order to move forward. In his presence in Memphis, he also reminded us of the importance of witnessing for your beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

On April 4, the bonds of historical memory and today's vast disparities in wealth and well-being both reminded us of the importance of learning about and remembering the struggle launched by workers and by King in the spring of 1968. Our march through acres of dilapidated housing, abandoned city streets, and collapsing infrastructure in Memphis made it clear to us that the struggle for a

---

24. King's March 18, 1968, speech in Memphis, *All Labor Has Dignity*, chapter six.

25. Masaki Kawashima, *American History, Race and the Struggle for Equality: An Unfinished Journey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

better life remains as desperate and as important today as in 1968. Some 40 percent of black Memphis children live in poverty; nearly a third of the city's African American population lives in deep poverty, another third lives on the edge of poverty, while another third of "middle class" people remain only an illness or loss of a paycheck away from economic difficulty. Unionized mass production jobs that pay a living wage for black families are mostly gone; most of the new jobs in the health and service economy jobs in Memphis, as in America, are at poverty or near-poverty wages; unions are nearly non-existent.<sup>26</sup>

Now, as in 1968, the majority of the poor are "white" but poverty remains concentrated among the historically oppressed people of color, including Native Americans, Latino/as, African Americans, young people, women, and working-class people of all backgrounds. In the U.S. today, we see workers who live under strained economic circumstances; undocumented immigrant workers who are exploited economically and punished brutally for trying to flee from poverty and violence in places like El Salvador, where the U.S. fought brutal wars to suppress indigenous movements for economic justice and left behind economically and politically wrecked societies. We see Congress funneling billions in tax breaks to the richest 1 percent while prioritizing military spending over human needs. American militarism continues to perpetuate cycles of violence and poverty in the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa. And according to today's "Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for a Moral Revival,"<sup>27</sup> fifteen million more Americans are poor today than fifty years ago. Millions of African Americans and other racially oppressed workers, millions of undocumented workers, and most Native Americans on the reservations continue to live in catastrophic conditions due to historical genocide and neglect. But much of the white working class too lives in disastrous poverty that perpetuates the opioid crisis and gun violence.

How can we take steps forward from this time of crisis? It remains ironic that so many economists and popular opinion writers wonder why wages have not risen in tandem with huge increases in productivity and profits. The answer is hiding in plain sight. Increased stress and poverty among workers with jobs results from many factors, but high among them is the loss of union rights. In 1968 Memphis, sanitation workers demanded dues check off and a mandate to represent all workers in order to create an effective union. Several weeks after King's murder on April 4, the City of Memphis recognized Local 1733 of the

---

26. The website "MLK 50: Justice Through Journalism," provides a stark and detailed rendering of these poverty statistics in Memphis and elsewhere; see <https://mlk50.com>. Also see Michael K. Honey, "Black Workers Matter: The Continuing Search for Racial and Economic Equality in Memphis," in Aram Goudsouzian and Charles W. McKinney, Jr., eds., *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 366-92; and Elena Delavega's Memphis Poverty Fact Sheets: <http://www.memphis.edu/socialwork/research/2017povertyfactsheetwebversion.pdf>.

27. See <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/>.

AFSCME. For a time, the AFSCME raised wages for workers and made them a force to reckon with in city politics. But Tennessee's anti-union "right to work" laws outlawing mandatory dues for workers represented by a union kept unions weak. From the 1980s onward, the privatization of public jobs, the loss of big factories and unions, and a new flood of non-union, cheap-wage service economy jobs kept most Memphis workers mired in the ranks of the working poor. These conditions today highlight the problem of income inequality and a lack of political power by organized workers, not only in Memphis but across America. As Professor Kawashima saw in Memphis and has outlined in his own research, movements for equality and opportunity in American life stand at a crossroads today.<sup>28</sup>

#### **IV: "Where Do We Go From Here?"**

King posed this question in his last book, and it remains on everyone's minds in our current political and economic configuration. In the era of Trump's Republican Party, many of us are using what I like to call "the power of remembering" to reinvigorate movements to end poverty and demand a living wage. For many of us, the way to "make America great again" remains simple: join a struggle for economic justice, civil rights, and union rights. Yet the way forward remains heavily clouded by the seemingly overwhelming powers of people and corporations determined to maintain an oligarchy rather than a democracy at home. Government attempts to attain what Vice-President Mike Pence calls "dominance" of the universe by militarizing space will no doubt drain billions of additional dollars from federal budgets that could go to build infrastructure and create jobs, to advance education, health care, and affordable housing.

No doubt, King would be appalled to see how things have turned out fifty years since his passing. Yet King always led people with the hope and the belief that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." We do not know if this is true, or if there even is a moral arc, but we do know that if people give up the struggle for a better world they will never have one. Thinking about our future, we would do well to study King's vision of nonviolence as a means to rebuild social justice movements that care for everyone on the planet, and for saving the planet itself. We see no simple way forward, but it is not difficult to see that the forces of greed and violence are taking us backward. We cannot replicate past movements for change, but we can study them and the past to help us understand how to possibly build a better movement in the present and change conditions in the future. To do that, in American Studies across the globe, we

---

28. Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, chapter 8; Kawashima, *American History, Race and the Struggle for Equality*, chapter 10.

have an investment in studying and learning about one of history's great human rights advocates, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.