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BLACK WOMEN’S LABOR: ECONOMICS, CULTURE, AND POLITICS

“This Nation Has Never Honestly Dealt with the Question of a Peacetime Economy”: Coretta Scott King and the Struggle for a Nonviolent Economy in the 1970s

David P. Stein

This article highlights the work of Coretta Scott King in the struggle for governmental guarantees to employment in the 1970s. In the two decades after her husband’s death, Scott King devoted herself to achieving governmental guarantees to employment and disentangling militarism and violence from the economy. For her, this was the continuation of the civil rights movement. Considering the efforts of Scott King highlights the class content of the long civil rights struggle after the 1960s and the contested evolution of neoliberalism. Further, focusing on the unsuccessful efforts of Scott King also reveals the difficulty of achieving legislation to ameliorate the crisis of unemployment, and how racism and patriarchy structured labor markets during this period.

Keywords: Civil rights movement, Coretta Scott King, full employment, job guarantee, Keynesianism, neoliberalism, unemployment

It is, it seems, politically impossible for a capitalist democracy to organize expenditure on the scale necessary to make the grand experiments which would prove my case—except in war conditions.—John Maynard Keynes, 1940¹

This nation has never honestly dealt with the question of a peacetime economy and what it means in terms of the development within the country. We've had much greater employment during times when we've been engaged in war. ... We recognize that in the urgency of the unemployment crisis there must be immediate solutions, jobs must be provided immediately by the government.—Coretta Scott King, 1975²

The role of Coretta Scott King in history is fraught with misunderstanding.³ When she passed away in 2006, no less than twenty-three members of Congress honored her life and efforts to create a just society. Even those who opposed many of her goals from both sides of the political aisle lauded her service to a better country and world. As her colleague in the civil rights struggle Congressperson John Lewis put it, “the historians will remember her as one of the founding members of the new America.”⁴ But curiously, few of those members of Congress seemed to consult the Congressional Record; they thereby overlooked some of Scott King’s most significant efforts to generate this new America, and consequently mistook what she hoped it would include. Only two speakers mentioned that Scott King spent a significant portion of her life after the death of her husband advocating for legislation to ameliorate the plight of unemployed people.⁵ And none highlighted that she created and led one of the most significant social movement forces attempting to achieve legislation to guarantee employment to those whom the private market had abandoned. Her coalition, the National Committee for Full Employment/Full Employment Action Council (NCFE/FEAC) was the energetic lobbying force behind the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978. The law set the goal of getting the country down to 3% unemployment within five years and attempted to hold the monetary policy of the Federal Reserve accountable to elected officials.⁶ The Humphrey-Hawkins Act stands alongside the 1946 Employment Act as the most important legislative attempts to guarantee employment for all. While each lacked sufficient budgetary allocations, these laws outlined the principles that if the private market refused to employ all people who wanted jobs—where they were located, and at appropriate wages—then it was the responsibilities of the federal government to provide jobs, income, and the means of survival. Although each of these laws were significantly weakened vis-à-vis earlier proposed bills, both remain as beacons for those who seek to continue to address the problems posed by unemployment, which have only deepened in the subsequent decades. For this and other reasons, the neglected history of Coretta Scott King in these endeavors has great relevance.

This history reveals the deep connections between the civil rights movement and those more commonly understood as “class-based” struggles for economic justice.⁷ Additionally, this history investigates the civil rights movement from the perspective of campaigns that went unachieved, in contradistinction to those that were won. By tracking movement actors into the 1970s, it adds to scholarship that poses questions about the duration of the civil rights movement, with emphasis on when it concluded.⁸ And, following the scholarship on Black women’s roles in social movement leadership, I show how Scott King reflects a legacy of many who utilized multiple strategies and crisscrossed manifold movements in a life of social protest and contestation.⁹

This article highlights the efforts of Coretta Scott King and the movement for guaranteed jobs to re-route Keynesian policy away from its racist, patriarchal, and militarist elements. The Keynesianism that took hold in the years after the Great Depression crafted a system of labor relations under the Fair Labor Standards Act that excluded agricultural workers (80% of whom were African American). Likewise, Black women, one-third of whom were employed as domestic workers were denied access to these labor rights, and overall only 14% of all women workers had access to them.¹⁰ Such institutionalized discrimination was similarly reflected in access to credit and housing markets over the subsequent decades.¹¹ Additionally, during the years leading up to NCFE/FEAC's campaign from 1946–1974, defense spending never dipped below 30% of the federal budget and reached almost 70% in some years; the Department of Defense never accounted for less than 62% of federal employees during this time.¹² Scott King confronted this paradigm when NCFE/FEAC tried to shift such spending towards nonviolent priorities such as day care, housing for all, mass transportation, environmental conservation, and funding for arts and cultural activities.¹³

This article first sketches some of the formative moments in Coretta Scott King's life that set her on the course to become a leading figure in the struggle for a non-violent economy in the 1970s. It outlines how, following the death of her husband in 1968, Scott King continued their work to challenge what he famously described as the "triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism."¹⁴ I then discuss the role of Scott King within the search for Black political power and legislative influence in the early 1970s. With guaranteed employment as a key goal in this effort, Scott King created a coalition to pursue this objective. Such ambitions took on new urgency as unemployment skyrocketed in the mid-1970s. Scott King's frequent declaration that unemployment and poverty were forms of violence now became even clearer. And to this end, NCFE/FEAC shaped legislation to alleviate such violence, but faced many obstacles along the way.

While many scholars have highlighted the breakdown of the Keynesian consensus in the 1970s, less have noted that there were programmatic struggles to wrest such policies leftward.¹⁵ These contests in the 1970s present a divergent policy program to the neoliberal modes of political and economic governance that ascended during this era. In this way, I suggest that neoliberalism was not inevitable, but that there were a number of alternatives that were unsuccessful as a result of discrete confrontations in the political sphere.

The Political World of Coretta Scott King

Back before she became Coretta Scott King, a young Coretta Scott was drawn to the politics of Henry Wallace, the 1948 Progressive Party's Presidential Candidate. As a student at Antioch College, she was selected as a student delegate to the Party convention where "peace, prices, and race relations" were the most important issues on the agenda. The insurgent party was trying to heave the United States to the left after the postwar legislative revanche of the prior years had elicited the Taft-Hartley Act,

the Truman Doctrine, and the consolidation of the warfare state under the National Security Act of 1947.¹⁶ Scott was among the 150 African American delegates in Philadelphia for the convention (three times as many as the Republican and Democratic conventions); and she was able to hear leftist writer and civil rights activist Shirley Graham's powerful keynote speech.¹⁷ Graham explained that the convention was crucial for bringing together the principles of "PEACE, FREEDOM, and ABUNDANCE," and for establishing the priority that "JIM CROW IN AMERICA MUST GO!" Furthermore, having lived through such monumental changes over the nature and scale of government in less than two decades since the Great Depression's onset, Graham urged the audience to dream of what they wanted: "PEACE without battleships, atomic bombs and lynch ropes." Graham announced, "We would use Science for human uplift and not for death."¹⁸ And for Graham, "peace" did not only mean the occasion of not fighting in a war against international enemies, but instead an armistice of what often appeared as a war within the nation against those considered surplus populations and domestic enemies—the unemployed—those whom capital did not seek to exploit for their waged labor.¹⁹ As Graham put it, "peace ... will mean health to our sick, homes to our homeless, education for our children, food for the hungry of the world and clothes to the naked."²⁰ When, over the subsequent decades, Coretta Scott and her husband spoke to similar goals of recalibrating common assessments of "peace" and "violence," they were not simply articulating individual brilliance, but instead a social vision and a set of moral values that had been in the making for decades through the long history of Black freedom movements and leftist struggles.²¹

Back at the convention in 1948, one can imagine Coretta Scott being among the many roused from their seats to give Graham's speech a standing ovation.²² After all, Graham was the biographer of Scott's hero, Paul Robeson, who was also a leading member of the Progressive Party. Scott was a musician as well and she particularly admired Robeson's ability to combine "singing with social issues." Scott's opportunity to sing for Robeson and talk with him briefly about her future at a Progressive Party meeting in Cleveland remained an often remarked upon highlight of her life.²³ Like Robeson, Scott was passionate about music, and political and economic concerns were also at the forefront of her mind. She had grown up in relative economic stability, but the racist and patriarchal elements undergirding the Jim Crow political economy of the era remained prominent in her life. As a young girl in rural Perry County, Alabama during the Great Depression, she picked cotton alongside her family.²⁴ Her father had faced threats of lynching when, as a truck driver hauling lumber, he posed economic competition to white workers.²⁵ And when she arrived to study at the New England Conservatory of Music in 1951, she did domestic labor to pay for her housing.²⁶

Such experiences and ideas framed her life and nourished her relationship with her soon to be husband, Martin Luther King Jr. Early in their courtship, they corresponded over Edward Bellamy's socialist novel, *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, which Scott had given to him as a gift. Upon the copy she had written, "I shall be interested to know your reactions to Bellamy's predictions about our future." And in his reply, King commented, "I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic."²⁷ While Scott had ensured that the duty to

“obey” her husband was removed from her marriage vows, throughout their life together she at times expressed frustration with their division of household and reproductive labor, and articulated a desire to be more active in movement politics.²⁸

Despite aspirations to be even more involved, Scott King was a consistent activist against militarism during their marriage. As an active member in the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and Women’s Strike for Peace, she emphasized that “women of the world . . . can become a most powerful force for international peace.”²⁹ And her conceptualizations of peace harmonized with those that Graham had explained at the Progressive Party convention: the peace struggle was not only directed internationally, but domestically as well. As Scott King argued, “there cannot be peace outside of our nation without peace inside our nation. No peace without racial justice and no racial justice without peace.”³⁰ She knew well the force of the U.S. government’s violence. She had been a close friend since high school with the aunt of Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was shot and killed by Alabama state troopers in 1965 during the voter registration drive in her home county.³¹ Likewise, she explained the danger her family faced a few months after Jackson’s death, stating, “we live constantly with the threat of death. I accept this.”³² And with even greater fervor after her husband received the Nobel Peace Prize, she encouraged him to take a stand against the Vietnam War and work to align the civil rights movement with peace movement. As she argued to him and others, “you cannot separate peace and freedom; they are inextricably related.”³³ Scott King was insistent about connecting the many violent features of society and struggling against the institutions that upheld them. In all these ways, it should be clear that Scott King was a political actor before, during, and after her life with her husband. As she explained, “I didn’t learn my commitment from Martin, we just converged at a certain time.”³⁴

Scott King’s framework of understanding the many manifestation of violence is consistent with the struggles her husband emphasized towards the end of his life, especially the Poor People’s Campaign and his support for striking sanitation workers of Memphis (which was catalyzed by the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker due to inadequate safety precautions on their garbage truck).³⁵ After her husband was assassinated during this struggle in Memphis, she worked to clarify what his legacy meant. As she explained a few days after his death regarding their vision of nonviolence, “nothing hurt him more than that man could attempt no way to solve problems except through violence. He gave his life in search of a more excellent way; a more effective way; a creative way rather than a destructive way.” And further she highlighted how “our concern now is that his work does not die. He gave his life for the poor of the world: the garbage workers of Memphis and the peasants of Vietnam.”³⁶ In this same vein, in the wake of massive and widespread uprisings after her husband’s death, she continued to clarify strategies to ameliorate violence. As she put it, “this is no time for business as usual, and strengthening the police is business as usual—a tried and false answer.” And further she emphasized that, “even intense prayer and a new commission of notables will not ease the violence in our lives—though acting forthrightly on the recommendations of the Kerner Report might help.”³⁷ The Kerner Commission report had stressed that the uprisings of the prior

years were a result of “police practices, unemployment and underemployment, and inadequate housing”—all issues that she, her husband, and many others had been struggling around for years.³⁸ Framing the issues in this way posed the question that Scott addressed in her speech at Memphis City Hall, four days after her husband’s assassination: “Every man deserves a right to a job or an income ... our great nation ... has the resources, but his question was: Do we have the will?”³⁹

Accordingly then, in the years after her husband’s death, Scott King continued struggle to galvanize such a political will and to expand and further the political ideas that had developed since her encounter with Shirley Graham, Paul Robeson, and the Progressive Party. In fact, many of the key elements of her political agenda resonated with the questions discussed at the 1948 Progressive Party convention.⁴⁰ The most salient issues on Scott King’s agenda in the 1970s circulated around racism, unemployment, inflation, and the use of technology and science to serve human needs; and these issues combined with her expansive understanding of what constituted peace and violence.

The Search for Political and Legislative Power

The years following her husband’s death brought Scott King into the political spotlight as a significant leader and thinker. Like her husband’s work in the years preceding his assassination, the struggles she focused on were more clearly “economic.” Noting this element is crucial, but insufficient to apprehend how voting rights were implicated in the class structure, since the Voting Rights Act in and of itself did not force racist elected officials out of office, or negate the policies they had shaped. In this sense, the voting rights struggle should be situated within Congress’s power over fiscal policy and its unequal apportionment. Accordingly, when, in the midst of the struggle for guaranteed jobs in 1975, a reporter asked Scott King about the changes underway whereby the civil rights movement was “taking on a larger economic role,” Scott King clarified the continuity over the prior years. “The civil rights movement indirectly spoke to this question all along,” she responded.⁴¹ Under the broad rubric of Keynesianism, the federal government in the post–New Deal era played a tremendous role in economic relations and took on greater significance in managing the turbulence of the business cycle, generating macroeconomic stability, and eliciting aggregate demand for goods and services.⁴² Thus, Congress, and its control over taxation and spending, was the key target of Scott King as she led at least 3,000 protesters through Washington, D.C. for the May 12, 1968 Mother’s Day’s march of the Poor People’s Campaign.

The Poor People’s Campaign protesters were well aware that only Congress had the power to alter the core macroeconomic problems undergirding their precarious survival; accordingly, marchers held signs demanding “the right to a decent job.” Others lofted the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) banner reading “Mother Power,” which for Scott King meant ending the Vietnam War and shifting such violent spending into housing, healthcare, and other social necessities. As she explained during another event for the Poor People’s Campaign’s Solidarity Day, “if we stop the war two

months sooner, 230 housing units could be built; one hour could create a new school or housing center.” She emphasized the need to end the “three great evils of racism, poverty and war.” And she highlighted that “women of our country have been called at this hour to bring about dedicated leadership to the difficult problems we face.” Scott King also affirmed the focus on Congress, telling her audience at the Mother’s Day march, “Congress passes laws which subsidize corporations, firms, oil companies, airlines, and houses for suburbia, but when they turn their attention to the poor they suddenly become concerned about balancing the budget and cut back on funds.” For Scott King, the question of spending priorities was harnessed with her understanding of violence. As she announced to the marchers: “I must remind you that starving a child is violence ... suppressing a culture is violence. Neglecting school children is violence. Punishing a mother and her family is violence. Contempt for poverty is violence. Even the lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence.”⁴³

Although canceled due to the rainy weather, the Mother’s Day marchers had originally intended to deliver an ironic Mother’s Day card to the wife of Dixiecrat Wilbur Mills in order to focus attention on her husband and the role of the Ways and Means Committee (which he chaired) in drafting welfare restrictions. Targeting Mills made much sense since the *New York Times* and others considered him to be the “most powerful man on Capitol Hill.”⁴⁴ These efforts reveal how even following the Voting Rights Act, the struggle to displace the Dixiecrats’ power of the purse in Congress remained unfulfilled. Thus, supplanting Dixiecrat congressional dominance was essential to eliminating their power over the economic lives of many, and generating the types of the nonviolent spending priorities that Scott King and the Poor People’s Campaign demanded.

Into the 1970s, Black political power was growing in significance and coherence. Few events crystallized this like the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. In March 1972, 4,000 delegates from around the country convened in Gary to create a national agenda for Black political influence. Whether in the form of an independent political party or in another shape, the convention aimed to expand the political power of Black people. As one of the conveners, Gary Mayor Richard Hatcher, told the audience, “we reject the role of advisor to the parties’ governing circles.” Likewise, as the crowd sat after a sustained standing ovation in her honor, Scott King emphasized, “this is a historic event ... what we do at this convention will be judged by future generations of the black liberation struggle.”⁴⁵ Impelled by such principles, those at the convening adopted a call for a “guaranteed suitable job for every employable worker” with a \$3.13 hourly minimum wage, and \$6,500 per year guaranteed annual income for a family of four for those unable to work (\$17.87 and \$37,109 in 2015 dollars). All of these, they added, would include cost of living increases. To pay for such programs they demanded a transfer of governmental spending away from the defense and space industries by at least 50% and towards social welfare capacities, as well as progressive taxation.⁴⁶ Scott King too underscored how inequalities of wealth and power relied on the political process. “Our present tax and welfare structure is such as to encourage the wealthy to speculate and the poor to vegetate,” she wrote a few months before Gary. “If a rich man wants to speculate, he is encouraged

by preferential capital gains and loss provisions which give him a 25% cushion against losses and take less than half as much on his nominal earnings. But if a poor man on relief took a part times job, he had to pay a 100% tax on his earnings in the shape of a dollar-for-dollar reduction in his relief allowance ... such is the topsy-turvy morality of the Internal Revenue laws.”⁴⁷ The challenge of changing such priorities remained the question of political will.

The achievement of shared unity on such issues as jobs and income guarantees at the Gary Convention is attributable to the recent decade of social movement organizations like the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the Black Panther Party, and NWRO, who each pursued similar commitments to expanding the government's social welfare capacities.⁴⁸ Despite their divergent ideological orientations, these organizations also reflected the long fetch of Black freedom movements going back to Reconstruction. Such movements sought to create government institutions that decreased the power of the market to commodify the necessities of survival like land, housing, and food, as well as enable programs for employment guarantees and income subsidies.⁴⁹ In early 1972 *Freedomways*, the leading journal of the Black left, clarified this sentiment. The editors noted the political tasks to ensue by highlighting that “the issues have not changed in any fundamental way. They remain the same—freedom, peace and economic well-being based upon a full-employment, peacetime economy and more representative government being put in power.”⁵⁰ And it was towards the achievement of these goals that Scott King would labor in the coming years.

The reverberations of the Gary convention and the importance of Black political power were fully on display in the coming months and during the buildup to the 1972 election. In California—then one of the most important swing states in the country—the eventual Democratic nominee, George McGovern, chose to kickoff his campaign in the state with an endorsement from Scott King.⁵¹ While there had been debate at the Gary Convention about whether or not to support Shirley Chisholm's candidacy, Scott King backed McGovern. Standing side by side with McGovern in Los Angeles's historic Second Baptist Church, she told the assembled crowd, “many of the stands Senator McGovern has already taken, and the positions we have arrived at jointly have many points of conjunction with the developing black political thought, as expressed at the Gary convention and in the developmental work on the National Black Political Agenda.” In this regard, Scott King underscored McGovern's commitments to progressive taxation and a “program of full employment for all by substantially increasing the nation's housing and by expanding public service employment.”⁵²

In addition to their longer history, these agenda items, and Scott King and McGovern's commitments to them, had been shaped by the social movements of prior years. The previous summer, in July 1971, McGovern and Scott King were both key speakers at the NWRO convention, which sought to influence the presidential election by promoting the theme of “Welfare, Not Warfare.”⁵³ While the 1972 elections proved disastrous, with Nixon drubbing McGovern in almost every state, principles such as those enumerated at the NWRO convention—while somewhat constrained—were affirmed in McGovern's platform that proposed cuts to military

spending and increased expenditures for social welfare.⁵⁴ Organized labor, however, proved to be a laggard in respect to changing such priorities. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and its president, George Meany, withheld an endorsement of McGovern—the first time in the labor federation’s history since the 1955 AFL and CIO merger that they did not endorse the Democratic nominee.⁵⁵ In this sense, the political coalition between civil rights groups and organized labor, that Scott King and others envisioned as necessary, was uneven and remained to be consolidated.

Building a New Coalition for Full Employment

The most far-reaching and significant role that Scott King would play in the efforts to craft a just political economy came when she, along with Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), tried to further knit together the civil rights–labor coalition to fight for the principles that she and others had enumerated over the prior years—especially a governmental right to a job. For her, this was essential to stem the tide of what she felt was a growing backlash against the civil rights agenda that was developing among white working-class people within and beyond the South, and had become more visible and much discussed.⁵⁶

In the eighteen months after McGovern’s electoral loss, Scott King had spent a good deal of her time establishing the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change in Atlanta. During this period, Scott King’s ties with her husband’s organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), grew fractious as she developed the King Center into her own organizational home while SCLC saw their funding dwindle.⁵⁷ The King Center would serve as her political base from which she could direct her own agenda and shape how her husband’s legacy would be enacted. As the by-laws explained, the work of the Center was to “carry on [Martin Luther King’s] unfinished work” and to “provide programs to assist the poor, oppressed, and down-trodden.”⁵⁸

Governmental guarantees to employment had been at the forefront of Black social movements for decades, but with unemployment having remained above 5% since January 1974 and prime interest rates soaring above 9%, the issue achieved an even greater salience across racial lines. In May 1974, Scott King and Woodcock initiated a plan for organizing to ameliorate this growing crisis. They wrote to a select group whom they wanted to organize to “develop and disseminate ideas about strategy and tactics for full employment.”⁵⁹ They asked those who were interested to join them for a conference in New York to consider the next steps. Accompanying Scott King and Woodcock in issuing this call were leading activists and labor leaders like Michael Harrington, Cesar Chavez, Murray Finley, and Gloria Steinem, as well as members of the House and Senate—Augustus Hawkins, Walter Mondale, Ted Kennedy, and Jacob Javits. In crafting their invitation, they developed a “Four Point Employment Statement” in order to structure their thinking going into the convening:

1. The problem which influences all other problems is persisting and ballooning unemployment. It expunges hope for millions, especially the young; it generates

insecurity for the employed; it is an economic deadweight that results in the loss of billions in gross national product.

2. The guarantee of a job is a basic civil right, without which human dignity and equality are diminished or excluded for millions.
3. Full employment is in the interest of the employed whose bargaining power shrinks as unemployment is enlarged. Full employment will result in the delivery of vital services presently restricted. Stimulating private services employment is necessary for economic stability, for political morality and for social tranquility. Modern society is a contradiction without it.
4. Therefore, the Coalition for Full Employment is committed to achievement of a full employment economy, and works to support all measures, public and private, to that end. As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the nation, it is time to declare as public policy that the pursuit of happiness and equality means the right to employment.⁶⁰

As the statement clarified, they meant “full employment” in the sense that the British economist and social reformer William Beveridge had popularized the term in his country during the awakening of Keynesianism: “It means having always more vacant jobs than unemployed men, not slightly fewer jobs. It means that the jobs are at fair wages, of such a kind, and so located that the unemployed men can reasonably be expected to take them ... the labour market should always be a seller’s market rather than a buyer’s market.”⁶¹ Like *Freedomways*, Scott King and the conference conveners argued that this was the continuation of the unfinished tasks of the civil rights agenda—those that were so prominently on display eleven years before when the March on Washington demanded, “a massive Federal Public Works Program to provide jobs for all the unemployed.”⁶²

Coming out of the convening the attendees determined to put unemployment at the center of their agenda. This choice, as historian Marisa Chappell highlights, was freighted with highly gendered implications, since it deliberately de-emphasized welfare.⁶³ Despite her commitment to welfare rights, Scott King argued that unemployment was the issue to address. As she stressed, “if we could solve the unemployment problem most of the social problems we have could be solved. In fact, most of the social problems stem from unemployment.”⁶⁴ Although Woodcock was unable to continue on as the co-chair, Murray Finley, the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America agreed to take his place. And building off of this, the participants decided to organize as a coalition—The National Committee for Full Employment and the Full Employment Action Council.⁶⁵

Over the subsequent four months, Scott King and Finley created the new coalition. They solicited membership for a board of directors; developed a statement of purpose; crafted by-laws and a charter; and legally incorporated as a non-profit organization.⁶⁶ At one of the initial board meetings in October 1974, Scott King opened the meeting by explaining the reason they were in the room together. “Full employment,” she said, “has been a wistful dream so long people may not regard us as serious, and it will be an initial task to convince them we are not trying merely to

be on the side of the angels verbally but are deadly serious.” As she noted, the freedom struggle for democracy was incomplete if people were unable to survive. The challenge, she suggested, was to ensure that the United States, “on the 200 [year] anniversary of its birth will begin to take democracy seriously.”⁶⁷ Scott King’s co-chair, Finley, also indicated the difficulty of *unemployment* displacing *inflation* from the key agenda item of the day. But he assured the rest of the board that their coalition would confront this task forcefully. At the meeting they approved the statement of purpose for the group, which largely reflected the “four point statement” from the summer convening. However, it emphasized that they would challenge the type of intellectual gymnastics and quantitative metrics that attempted to rob “full employment” of its meaning. They refused the “sophisticated ‘numbers game’ whereby ‘full employment’ is defined as an ever-increasing percentage of unemployment.” Instead, they explained that “any rate is unacceptable ... full employment means no involuntary unemployment.”⁶⁸

The Violence of Unemployment

As unemployment continued to rise with each passing month, the 1974 elections shifted the balance of congressional power even further power towards the Democrats. Alongside such political shifts, the economic crisis of the period further deepened. When Scott King had written the initial invitation to elicit support for the coalition in May 1974 the unemployment rate was 5.1%. But by the time NCFE/FEAC was making headway in January 1975, unemployment had jumped to 8.1% with no signs of slowing down.⁶⁹

Scott King’s hometown in Atlanta displayed some of the challenges to remedy the crisis of unemployment. As 1974 closed, as a result of projected reductions in tax receipts due to both white flight and the general economic downturn, the city imposed a hiring freeze on new workers.⁷⁰ Atlanta’s first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, worried that the city may have to borrow money to make ends meet—the first time they would have to do so since 1937. Indicating an understanding of the economic precarity that propelled those at the Gary convention to demand guaranteed jobs back when unemployment was 40% less, he noted that “the recession ... is actually a depression in many segments of the community.” With more than 40,000 people unemployed in the state (half of whom were in Atlanta), an official for Georgia’s Department of Labor described the situation as “very damn bleak.” And another commented that “our computers are running night and day just printing unemployment checks.”⁷¹

As 1975 began the federal government provided some funding for jobs, but not nearly enough. Scott King noted the gap in the short-term, ameliorative strategy by continuing to argue for guaranteed jobs. “It is a right. It is just as basic as that. ... It is going to take an act of Congress to deal with poverty and hunger,” she said.⁷² Atlanta revealed the urgency behind Scott King’s analysis. More than 3,000 people turned out to the Civic Center auditorium to apply for 225 public service jobs; the bulk of these jobs entailed litter removal from vacant lots and paid the lowest amount possible for the city pay scale. Those in attendance broke through the glass doors and

sent four of the job seekers to the hospital. The desire for employment revealed the fear and violence undergirding wagelessness. Stanton Gillman—the most seriously injured of the four—had survived the Vietnam War only to suffer leg lacerations as he sought survival back in Atlanta. While many of those searching for jobs were relatively young, others like Isaac Passmore were older. Passmore, 52, had been in the drywall business before losing his job in June—undoubtedly related to the curtailment of much construction, a result of both the recession and the especially high cost of borrowing. (The prime interest rate had been stubbornly above 10% while Passmore searched for work—making investments more costly than they had been in decades.)⁷³ For Passmore all this added up to increased desperation. “I don’t know what kind of job to apply for, except I was a mechanic in the Army. Maybe I could be a mechanic’s helper or something ... they’re going to have to find me some kind of job because I’m living on prayers right now,” he said.⁷⁴

The unemployment crisis went far beyond Atlanta’s recently-opened “Perimeter” boundary of Interstate-285. Mayor Jackson highlighted this as he looked out to the crowd: “what’s happening here is an indication of what’s happening all over the country, which is that people are desperate for jobs.” But not only “people” as a homogenous category whose labor power was all sold in the same way. Some of the members of the audience made sure Jackson acknowledged who was hardest hit by unemployment. They shouted back at him, “Black people!”⁷⁵ And Scott King’s analysis echoed those protesting, noting that “Blacks ... suffer more than any other group ... with 7% unemployment, you can multiply that twice for blacks.”⁷⁶

Traveling around the country accessing these issues, Scott King would have also agreed with Jackson in emphasizing that conditions were not much better elsewhere. As she put it: “Detroit, Chicago, New York—most of these cities are sitting on a powder keg because of neglect ... every city is beset by problems of poverty, crime, and housing.”⁷⁷ By 7:30 AM in Chicago more than 1,000 people had already lined up to cast their applications for 997 jobs. The crowd of would be workers—estimated to be 85% Black and 10% Latino—eventually grew and wound down the stairs from the 11th floor of the Civil Service Commission. After accepting 2,500 candidates, the Commission cut off applications. Maria Garlington, who had lost her job as a typist, expressed her anguish saying, “I’ve tried everything. ... I’ll be happy to get any kind of job.”⁷⁸

And this was precisely the political role that unemployment served. As the *Chicago Tribune* headline announced, “1,000 Early Birds Wait for Prizes—Jobs.” Instead of viewing the conditions of labor as exploitation, with a boss appropriating the value that the worker produces, employers began to appear as veritable Santa Clauses. Three years prior to this, the Chicago journalist Studs Terkel had opened his famed book *Working* by writing: “this book, being about work, is, by its very nature about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations.”⁷⁹ Rather than viewing such experiences of work with repulsion—a curse to be avoided—the uptick in unemployment provoked those like Garlington towards greater desperation, fervently searching for the

violence described to Terkel by workers across the country, since it was better than the alternative. Unemployment then, as economist Joan Robinson had described a few decades prior, “has a definite function to fulfill... it maintains the authority of master over man.”⁸⁰ During this time, when wage growth was considered to be a key contributor to inflation, making workers more insecure took hold as a key element in public policy.⁸¹ And this effect of unemployment—the inculcation of the desire for exploitation—was prominently displayed at each of these job fairs where more people left without a job than with. From Arlington, Virginia to San Francisco and Marin County, all over the country, people scoured their communities looking for jobs that did not exist.⁸²

Atlanta had been seemingly the only site where violence broke out at these job fairs. But such explosions reflected the public pronouncement of the “private” violence endured by unemployed people; more commonly this manifested as blisters from walking all day, alcoholism, domestic abuse, stress, and depression.⁸³ In 1976, Congress’s Joint Economic Committee would publish a report by Dr. Harvey Brenner enumerating the social cost of policy that did not provide employment for all. Based on data from 1940–73, Brenner found that a 1% uptick in the unemployment rate over six years would likely lead to 36,887 deaths from cardiovascular disease, suicide, homicide, and cirrhosis of the liver. As Senator Hubert Humphrey wrote in the introduction to the report, “the human tragedy alone of unemployment revealed by this study is shocking—shocking enough to demand a persistent, priority effort by Washington policy planners to reduce unemployment and to keep it low.”⁸⁴ It was with a thorough understanding of this that Scott King had been saying for years that policies that inhibited people’s ability to survive were violent. As she emphasized, the role of the King Center was to confront “all forms of violence, not only criminal kinds of violence but institutionalized violence... any form of deprivation is a form of violence. Starving a child is a form of violence. Depriving a person of a job is violence.”⁸⁵ As Brenner’s research confirmed, the violence Scott King enumerated was literal and lethal. In this sense, the struggle for a nonviolent economy that Scott King led was twofold. It aimed to undermine the fear of wagelessness that undergirded the labor relation, and to decouple the U.S. economy from what President Eisenhower had called the “military industrial complex” by creating an economy that served human needs—especially education, medical care, and housing. As Scott King explained, “there are not enough hospitals and there is not enough medical care provided for people. There are not enough public schools. There are not enough teacher aids—nursing aids and that kind of thing. If we built more hospitals we could put a lot of people to work just building hospitals for the sick people... these would be areas of human needs.”⁸⁶

Scott King’s analysis showed that the central problem was what types of solutions were being proposed and who had political power. Although unemployment was as high as it had been since the Great Depression, the Keynesian remedies of that period were not possible in January 1975. Instead of pursuing an increase in federal funding for jobs to accommodate all those excluded at the aforementioned job fairs, President Ford argued for the type of “reactionary Keynesianism” that had been inaugurated by

the tax cuts of President Kennedy and President Johnson in 1962 and 1964.⁸⁷ Ford asked Congress for \$16 billion tax cut. His scheme called for a 12% tax rebate to individuals and an increase in the investment tax credit for businesses. While the idea behind this style of tax cut was to stimulate buying power of consumers, the tax cut went all the way up to the wealthiest instead of being solely directed at those struggling to survive, who had the greatest marginal propensity to consume. As the *New York Times* economics columnist, Leonard Silk, commented, “it will be difficult for many members of Congress representing working-class constituencies to explain why they should go along with a proposal that would give \$1,000 to a tax payer with \$40,000 income or more, but only about \$50 to the head of a family of four with an income of \$10,000, \$12 to a family of four with an income of \$5,000—and nothing at all to those with incomes too low for them to pay taxes.”⁸⁸ In this way, such a policy prescription was emblematic of what Scott King had decried years before as the “topsy-turvy morality” of tax laws favoring the wealthy. And not only that, but in Ford’s speech he warned Congress, saying, “I will not hesitate to veto any new spending programs.”⁸⁹ To the 2,600 people unable to get jobs at Atlanta’s Convention Center, these pronouncements presaged more pain. While President Ford had called for “personal sacrifice” and for “all to pitch in” in the economic recovery, the reality was that those who were unemployed were themselves being sacrificed to the inflation gods.⁹⁰

It was against this “religion” that Scott King and NCFE/FEAC attempted to create discursive and political space for alternative policy proposals to Ford’s. In the days before the President’s speech, they put out an advertisement in the *New York Times* that called for the federal government to issue “An Emergency Plan for Immediate Action!” to ameliorate the skyrocketing unemployment wreaking havoc across the country. The ad underscored how many more people were left uncounted in official unemployment statistics; it ominously, but correctly, predicted that unemployment would go higher.⁹¹ In response, NCFE/FEAC put forward a number of different proposals including: (1) expanding public service jobs; (2) doubling the duration of unemployment benefits to 52 weeks; (3) encouraging the Federal Reserve to lower interest rates; and (4) arguing against President Ford’s proposed budget reductions. In addition, astutely noting that the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo was a major cause of the inflation that was sapping workers’ purchasing power, they asked Congress to (5) “encourage the development of new energy sources and prevent the abuse of monopoly power by energy corporations.” But they also insisted that unemployed people should not be forced to bear the weight of the inflation crisis. Inflation, they noted, “provides no legitimate excuse to neglect the unemployment crisis, especially since unemployment itself is a sign that our current inflation is not caused by a general excess of demand.” And further they maintained that the current problem of unemployment, in fact, contributed to the inflationary circumstance by reducing supplies, thus enabling demand-pull inflation (when scant supplies of a given good or service force increases in its price).⁹²

NCFE/FEAC were not alone in these efforts to undermine the ideas propagated by President Ford. A few days later, 1,000–1,500 people rallied to demand similar

goals. Honoring what would have been Dr. King’s birthday, the Coalition Against Unemployment, Hunger, and Inflation marched from Dr. King’s grave to some of the key places for the reproduction of power in Atlanta: the Chamber of Commerce, the Fulton County Courthouse, City Hall, and the state Capitol.⁹³ The group of marchers, described in the newspaper as a combination of “Marxists Leninists, socialists, poor people, Southern Christian Leadership Conference members, university system students opposed to tuition hikes and union representatives,” also attended a groundbreaking ceremony at the King Center. Scott King, though unable to join the march, praised it, saying that had she not needed to attend the groundbreaking, she would have been in the streets with the marchers. And she echoed their demands, highlighting that she “believed in jobs for people.”⁹⁴

Unfortunately for Scott King and the protesters, and more so for those whose lives were imperiled by unemployment, President Ford was committed to refusing any new expenditure programs to alleviate the crisis. Some of Ford’s key advisors—head of the Council of Economic Advisors Alan Greenspan, Federal Reserve Chair Arthur Burns, and Treasury Secretary William Simon—were all pushing for spending cutbacks, which would have created even greater degrees of unemployment.⁹⁵ In this policy environment, winning the type of legislation that NCFE/FEAC knew to be necessary would be an arduous task. This was confirmed over the following months in the winter and spring of 1975 as unemployment remained high and people continued protesting for relief.

While thousands protested in Washington, Congress tried to pass another jobs bill, but Ford made good on his veto threat. His veto was guided by the long-promoted ideology that compelled the lives and possibilities of people like those at the January jobs fairs to serve as human sacrifices for the interests of price stability. As one of Ford’s economists told the *New York Times*, “only 10% [of people] really worry about unemployment,” though—to his mind—“one hundred per cent of the people have been hit by inflation.”⁹⁶ With the unemployment rate for Black teenagers at 42%, such a viewpoint was steered by an embrace of the way that racism and patriarchy structured the labor market. President Nixon’s Treasury Secretary John Connally vocalized this in 1972 when he told the Joint Economic Committee of the Congress that, “we can’t be carried away by an unemployment figure of say, 6%.” Connally’s reason for such an assessment: “if you take the unemployment rate for males, heads of families, you get down to an unemployment rate figure of 3%.” As Helen Ginsburg, a professor and NCFE/FEAC supporter noted, from this standpoint, “apparently, only adult males matter. Preferably white.”⁹⁷ It was this attitude that NCFE/FEAC sought to challenge. But, as Ford’s veto announced, the legislation they were pursuing was near impossible with him as President.

The Legislative Pursuit of Guaranteed Jobs

The subsequent year saw more energy and attention to the issue of unemployment. But the obstinate attitude of the Ford administration remained. Alan Greenspan argued in June 1975 that “the recession for all practical purposes is over.” Greenspan’s optimistic

prediction saw the unemployment rate dropping to 7.5% by the end of 1976—a rate that put it on par with the worst months of the 1949 and 1957–58 recessions.⁹⁸ Refuting Greenspan's assessment however, the Joint Economic Committee of Congress held unemployment hearings throughout the country in order to reveal an unvarnished description of what Greenspan's alleged recovery looked like.

Scott King was among those who testified at the Atlanta hearings. She followed the testimony of Annie Smith, a widow and mother of seven who had been laid off from General Motors for the prior twenty-one months. Having lost her home and her car, Smith was living with her sister and her four nieces and nephews. Smith described to the committee her experience searching for work: "I have gone and looked for jobs, filled out applications, taken physicals. I have walked so much I have holes in the bottom of my shoe ... they take your application and then you get your hopes build up ... then, [they say] we'll call you later, and you sit by the phone and you sit by the phone and read the paper." As Smith relayed, if there was a recovery, she had not seen it. The Atlanta hearings took place eight months after Greenspan's comment on the end of the recession. As if responding to Greenspan directly, Scott King told the committee: "we are not actually talking about a recovery from high levels of unemployment, but an acceptance of high unemployment as a permanent part of American life." She further noted that "whatever the trends of industrial production or the GNP may be, they will have little human meaning if they ignore the literally millions of Americans, black and white, who are now suffering under the impact of the current recession." Scott King emphasized that for Black people "the economic policies and actions of the past few years have been nothing less than a frontal assault on all the gains and victories of the 1960s." She asked the members of Congress, "what good is the promise of fair employment when there is no employment." And she further stressed that "for black Americans, the deliberate creation of high unemployment has meant nothing less than the denial of the basic human right to live as full-fledged members of the American system." She highlighted all the proposals that NCFE/FEAC had created, as well as proposed legislation from Senator Hubert Humphrey and Congressperson Augustus Hawkins that would have alleviated some of the brutality confronted by unemployed people. Scott King implored her congressional audience, demanding that, "it is time we put a stop to this antisocial and antihuman strategy. The unemployed are not pawns to be sacrificed in some economic chess game."⁹⁹

Over the following months, as the presidential primaries moved forward, NCFE/FEAC continued their educational campaigns to ensure that full employment was central to the political conversation. Under the leadership of Scott King, the King Center sponsored a full employment conference honoring what would have been Dr. King's 47th birthday. In addition to panels featuring leading civil rights and trade union leaders like Cleveland Robinson and William Lucy of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, as well as many of the mainstays of NCFE/FEAC, the 750-person conference also recalled Scott King's commitments to Paul Robeson's influence bringing together music and politics. The convening featured a concert by the singer Freda Payne.¹⁰⁰ But perhaps most noteworthy was its 25,000 person march to downtown Atlanta calling for full employment. With the prime rate standing stubborn at

7% (its lowest point in almost three years), they brought the protest from the famed Ebenezer Baptist Church to its end point at the Atlanta Federal Reserve bank. Scott King commented that “outside of the Congress, the Federal Reserve has perhaps more power to correct our economic ills than any other agency or institution.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, concerts and protests such as these were part of a panoply of tactics to do popular education around the economic issues of the period, and develop grassroots power for the full employment agenda.

But despite many protests such as these, NCFE/FEAC struggled over the coming years to construct the type of power necessary to overcome their political opponents. As Greenspan recalled, “the response to these higher levels of unemployment was remarkably mild.” For him, this circumstance allowed the Ford administration to take such policy actions that put the preference for price stability above the needs of unemployed people. “Essentially,” he remembered, “that [staid] political milieu enabled us to stay fairly well on stream.”¹⁰²

Such a trend continued into the Carter administration, despite the best efforts of NCFE/FEAC. While Carter had initially been encouraging, even nominally serving on the board of directors of NCFE/FEAC, he vacillated on his support soon after becoming president. Scott King and NCFE/FEAC continued their work generating support for the full employment bills sponsored by Augustus Hawkins and Hubert Humphrey. Scott King circulated a pamphlet titled “Why We Still Can’t Wait” that announced the need to further push the issue of unemployment. As she explained, “accepting unemployment to control inflation amounts to choosing the people at the very bottom of the economic pyramid to bear the entire economic burden. In the so-called war against inflation, America’s 10 million unemployed have been the Administration’s conscript army.”¹⁰³

NCFE/FEAC continued to hold teach-ins, coordinate rallies, and garner media attention on the issue. They sponsored the vibrant and successful Full Employment Action Week, which featured actions in 300 cities and mobilized over 1.5 million people from September 4–10, 1977. The Massachusetts Coalition for Full Employment organized a solar-heating and weatherizing “work-in” with building trades officials to show what types of work needed doing. And they began plans to coordinate with the Clamshell Alliance and Science for the People to show how full employment could be utilized for new energy sources.¹⁰⁴ In Des Moines, a local coalition organized an unemployment hotline and began an unemployed people’s union with the support of public sector workers.¹⁰⁵ 60,000 people attended the 24-hour vigil in Buffalo where they signed petitions to deliver to President Carter.¹⁰⁶ In Kansas City, where 25,000 people rallied for full employment, a member of the Laborers Union held a sign reading, “Jobs are Human Rights: We Stand for Full Employment.” And Erie, PA, had a full employment parade with 130 floats and saw 40,000 people come out to support.¹⁰⁷ Congressperson Hawkins believed that the organizing for the week of protests was the greatest since the March on Washington.¹⁰⁸

But despite all of this, these efforts were not enough. Andrew Levison, who worked closely with Scott King and NCFE/FEAC recalled, “it never really became a bottom-up, grassroots movement... It was basically a lobbying effort by

default.”¹⁰⁹ Without an enormous grassroots base pushing the more ambitious Humphrey-Hawkins bills, the prospect for passing the type of program that NCFE/FEAC had hoped for was severely hampered, especially as business interests became much better organized during this era.¹¹⁰

A version of the Humphrey-Hawkins bill eventually passed at the end of the session of the 95th Congress. In the midst of the high pressure legislative bargaining, NCFE/FEAC helped fight off the worst parts of the Senate Banking Committee's bill that included an inflation goal of 0% and a governmental spending limit at 20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, in order to defeat the Banking Committee bill, NCFE/FEAC was forced to accede to ambiguous demands to maintain low governmental spending so long as it was “consistent with national needs and priorities.” And, they compromised on the inflation goals with a 3% inflation target “at the earliest possible time.”¹¹¹

Nonetheless, Scott King explained the significance of the new law. No longer would the Federal Reserve be allowed to make choices “which forced up the jobless rate.” In contradistinction to those who suggested that the Act was merely symbolic, she argued that “it is so significant that it rivals the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.” While this may have been conscious hyperbole on the part of an activist who had just suffered a disappointment, it also presented a framework to continue to struggle with a new political tool at her disposal. As she explained in a letter to her supporters, “Humphrey-Hawkins is the vital first step. All of the gains of the Movement my husband led in the Fifties and Sixties were not all accomplished at once.” So, she announced, “we will be back in Washington year after year after year until there is full employment.”¹¹² And indeed this was the case; Scott King continued to work with NCFE/FEAC far into the 1980s, even as the promise of full employment receded further and further.

“Will You be the Next Casualty of Reaganomics?”

Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 severely hampered NCFE/FEAC's plans to continue to pursue full employment. Instead of struggling for funding to achieve the promise of the Humphrey-Hawkins draft bills, Scott King and the coalition found themselves on their heels, arguing against budget cuts and the turn toward “Reaganomics.” Scott King recognized how President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher helped overturn the Keynesianism of the prior decades, instead of reforming it like she had attempted. As she explained in a 1981 speech that was entered into the congressional record, “right wing economic policies have failed dismally in Great Britain, and now threaten to add to the unemployment rolls and worsen inflation here ... our coalition will not sit idly by while 19th century policies destroy the hopes of American workers for a decent life.”¹¹³ And Scott King and NCFE/FEAC did not slip into complacency. They continued to organize, rally, and attempt to educate people and Congress about the violence of unemployment. One poster for a series of 1983 NCFE/FEAC teach-ins asked “WILL YOU BE THE NEXT CASUALTY OF REAGANOMICS?”¹¹⁴ But the human and intellectual casualties mounted in such a hostile political moment. NCFE/FEAC was never again

presented with the opportunity that they had during the mid-1970s. Already by the 1990s, the proposals of NCFE/FEAC that had once been mainstream now appeared as “radical.” They were kept alive by political formations like the Black Radical Congress and the Labor Party, but these served more to “correct the condition of . . . historical amnesia,” than as policy proposals capable of becoming legislation.¹¹⁵

Like many efforts of social movements that have been cast as “lost causes,” the campaign for guaranteed jobs can seem quixotic. Such an assessment accepts Margaret Thatcher’s infamous talking point that “there is no alternative” to the aforementioned right-wing economic policies. NCFE/FEAC was unsuccessful. But it remains important to recall these alternative policy programs and their social visions.¹¹⁶ In the two decades after her husband’s death, Scott King devoted herself to achieving governmental guarantees to employment and disentangling militarism and violence from the economy. For her, this was the continuation of the civil rights movement; as she explained in the heat of these contests, “we gave birth to the Black vote—[now] we are trying to serve as midwife to economic and social justice.”¹¹⁷ With the problems of unemployment having deepened in the years since NCFE/FEAC pursued such innovative solutions to the crisis of unemployment, the vision of an economy that produces for human needs and not for profit retains its moral power. Such principles were taught to Coretta Scott King and others by people like Shirley Graham and Paul Robeson; Scott King then attempted to translate them into effective legislation. These struggles can provide insight for the present conjuncture as organizers continue to seek ways to ameliorate the plight of unemployed people and create an economy that is no longer predicated on violence.¹¹⁸ NCFE/FEAC’s efforts give an indication of the types of social movement strength that will be necessary to quell those opposing such policies. As many celebrate and honor the 50th anniversaries of the civil rights movement, the unfinished tasks of Coretta Scott King compel questions of what was won, and what remains to be achieved. If such struggles occur, perhaps the efforts of prior organizers—rather than being cast as *failure*—will then resemble *preparation*.

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