

— THE KING LEGACY —

“All Labor Has Dignity”



Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Books by Michael K. Honey

*Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights:
Organizing Memphis Workers*

*Black Workers Remember:
An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom
Struggle*

*Going Down Jericho Road:
The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign*



African American women holding signs and wearing hats that show United Automobile Workers union support for civil rights stand in front of the White House during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963. © Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

EDITOR'S NOTE

PART I: Forging a Civil Rights–Labor Alliance in the Shadow of

the Cold War

CHAPTER I

“A look to the future”

—Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee, September 2, 1957

CHAPTER II

“It is a dark day indeed when men cannot work to implement the ideal of brotherhood without being labeled communist.”

—Statement of Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in defense of the United Packinghouse Workers Union of America, Atlanta, Georgia, June 11, 1959

CHAPTER III

“We, the Negro people and labor ... inevitably will sow the seeds of liberalism.”

—Twenty-fifth Anniversary Dinner, United Automobile Workers Union, Cobo Hall, Detroit, Michigan, April 27, 1961

CHAPTER IV

If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins

—AFL-CIO Fourth Constitutional Convention, Americana Hotel, Miami Beach, Florida, December 11, 1961

CHAPTER V

“I am in one of those houses of labor to which I come not to criticize, but to praise.”

—Thirteenth Convention, United Packinghouse Workers Union of America, Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 21, 1962

CHAPTER VI

“There are three major social evils ... the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice.”

—District 65 Convention, Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Laurels Country Club, Monticello, New York, September 8, 1962

CHAPTER VII

“Industry knows only two types of workers who, in years past, were brought frequently to their jobs in chains.”

—Twenty-fifth Anniversary Dinner, National Maritime Union, Americana Hotel, New York City, October 23, 1962

CHAPTER VIII

“Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.”

—Detroit March for Civil Rights, Cobo Hall, Detroit, Michigan, June 23, 1963

CHAPTER IX

“The unresolved race question”

—Thirtieth Anniversary of District 65, RWDSU, Madison Square Garden, New York City, October 23, 1963

PART II: Standing at the Crossroads: Race, Labor, War, and

Poverty

CHAPTER X

“The explosion in Watts reminded us all that the northern ghettos are the prisons of forgotten men.”

—District 65, RWDSU, New York City, September 18, 1965

CHAPTER XI

“Labor cannot stand still long or it will slip backward.”

—Illinois State Convention AFL-CIO, Springfield, Illinois, October 7, 1965

CHAPTER XII

Civil Rights at the Crossroads

—Shop Stewards of Local 815, Teamsters, and the Allied Trades Council, Americana Hotel, New York City, May 2, 1967

CHAPTER XIII

Domestic Impact of the War in Vietnam

—National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace, Chicago, Illinois, November 11, 1967

PART III: Down Jericho Road: The Poor People's Campaign and

Memphis Strike

CHAPTER XIV

“The other America”

—Local 1199 Salute to Freedom, Hunter College, New York City, March 10, 1968

CHAPTER XV

“All labor has dignity.”

—American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) mass meeting, Memphis Sanitation Strike, Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee, March 18, 1968

CHAPTER XVI

To the Mountaintop: “Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”

—AFSCME mass meeting, Memphis Sanitation Strike, Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968

Epilogue: King and Labor

Appendix: A Note on the Speeches

Acknowledgments

INTRODUCTION

The two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country are the labor movement and the Negro freedom movement. Together we can be architects of democracy.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., at the AFL-CIO National Convention, Miami Beach, Florida, December 11, 1961

During the last year of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr., put justice for poor and working-class people at the center of his agenda. He launched his Poor People's Campaign, demanding that Congress shift the country's spending from war to housing, health care, education, and jobs. He traveled the country in a whirlwind, scarcely sleeping, preaching the gospel of economic justice. Harking back to the nation's history of slavery and segregation, he demanded affirmative programs to overcome generations of denial and neglect for people once enslaved. But he didn't stop there. He sought an Economic Bill of Rights for Native Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and poorer whites, as well as for blacks. He sought to create a nonviolent army of poor people in jobless inner cities and barrios and in reservations and rural areas. He challenged the country to create an economy of full employment, or lacking that, a tax system that ensured a decent level of income for every American.

King's exhausting schedule brought him to the brink of collapse. And yet when his colleague and friend James Lawson asked him to Memphis to support black sanitation workers on strike for union recognition, King went. In Memphis, he renewed his faith in people's movements and found a powerful constituency of the working poor organized into a union-community alliance. In going to Memphis, King returned to an issue he had fought for all of his life: the right of working people to organize unions of their own choosing, free of employer harassment and police intimidation. Unions, he underscored, were the "first anti-poverty program" and they should be accessible to all who work for wages. Dignity for the working poor became another plank in his Poor People's Campaign.

King ultimately lost his life when an assassin cut him down in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Today, that awful murder often blots out the history of the Memphis movement, as well as King's struggle for the poor and working poor. Too many people still think of King in a narrow sense as a "civil rights" rather than as a human rights leader, losing sight of the breadth of the

alliances and social movements he promoted. In contrast, union advocates remember King as a champion of labor rights, a working-class hero. Perhaps our own time of economic turmoil provides a moment in which we need to see King anew.

When most people imagine King, he's in a suit and tie at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. King's glorious "Dream" speech plays on television and radio on King's birthday, often to the exclusion of some of his other important messages. Looking at the television images more closely, we might ask, Who are the men with the little white paper hats standing with such evident satisfaction behind King? On the podium and throughout King's vast audience one can see these union members, women and men with picket signs, buttons, and hats demanding "Fair Employment, Full Employment" and "Jobs and Freedom." These messages of solidarity were produced in the thousands by unions that also subsidized the public address system and chartered buses and planes that brought tens of thousands of trade unionists to the March on Washington.

United Automobile Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther spoke from the podium calling for a "great moral crusade to arouse Americans to the unfinished work of democracy." John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) called for a revolution in southern race relations; Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women and Rosa Parks stood with King on the podium; the elderly president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, A. Philip Randolph, introduced King as "the moral leader of our nation."

Both civil rights and labor issues had been key to the mobilization. Black labor leader Cleveland Robinson, secretary-treasurer of District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) and vice president of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC), along with Randolph, had first proposed the march to pressure the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), a federation that included most labor unions, for stronger civil rights policies. Working with King and other civil rights leaders, they broadened their initial proposal into a March for Jobs and Freedom in order to focus the power of the mass movement rolling across the South on the federal government. Robinson served as treasurer while his union donated office space and salary for long-time activist Bayard Rustin to organize the March on Washington.

The AFL-CIO didn't endorse the march, but the federation's industrial union department and the UAW, both headed by Reuther, did. King's

cultivation of an alliance between unions and the civil rights movement helped to spur the mass participation of unionists in the March on Washington. King spoke regularly to unions that had strong civil rights programs and large proportions of minority workers. From Montgomery to Memphis, King had consistently aligned himself with ordinary working people, supporting their demands for workplace rights and economic justice. His life did not so much illustrate the “great man” theory that heroic individuals are the prime movers of the historical process, but rather showed the power of people working in alliances and building social movements from the bottom up.

Throughout King’s time of leadership, working-class and poor people and especially women played a major, if underestimated, role in the black freedom movement. Before the March on Washington came the spring 1963 mass movement in Birmingham, Alabama, in which over nine hundred young people went to jail and faced police dogs and fire hoses in an effort to desegregate that violent city. These sons and daughters of black steel workers, service workers, female domestic workers, and the city’s small black middle class of preachers, teachers, and businesspeople fought to compete fairly for jobs, be treated as equals, and have the infamous “white” and “colored” signs taken down.

Similarly in Montgomery in 1956, for 381 days black female domestic workers, janitors, and others had refused to ride the buses. These working-class foot soldiers, especially women, walked or hitched rides to their jobs in order to bring segregation on the buses to an end. King is well known for helping to build campaigns for civil and voting rights populated by students, preachers, and the middle class, but in these key struggles he also demonstrated the powerful affinity he felt with poor and working people who propelled these movements.

As this book documents, northern-based unions provided significant political and financial support to the civil rights movement in the South. King turned to unions repeatedly for help, and in turn also helped the unions. As early as 1958, he spoke out against deceptively worded “right to work” laws, and in 1964, he helped to defeat such a proposal in Oklahoma that he said “provides no ‘rights’ and no ‘work.’” In December 1963, he returned from accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway, to stand on picket lines with striking black women at the Scripto pen factory in Atlanta and then helped them to get a strike settlement in 1964. In 1965, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) considered training civil rights activists to be union organizers. King’s prodding on issues of racism, poverty,

and war also pushed many unionists to fuse their support for civil and labor rights into an even broader social justice agenda. In 1967, King keynoted a conference of unionists opposing the Vietnam War, opening a labor front for the peace movement.

Finally, in 1968, King fought to build the Poor People's Campaign and made explicit his commitment to work on behalf of unions to improve the conditions of the black working poor by going to Memphis. Declaring that "all labor has dignity," King stated that sanitation workers deserved a living wage and union rights, for what made labor menial was not hard and dirty work, but lack of union rights and poor conditions. As he told the Local 1199 hospital workers union a short while before he came to Memphis, "You see, no labor is really menial unless you're not getting adequate wages."

The civil rights and labor movements truly joined forces in Memphis. King perished in the struggle for union rights, but in large part due to his sacrifice, Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) won its strike. The victory in Memphis, though won at a great cost, gave added impetus to an organizing surge among public employees that made AFSCME into one of the largest unions in the country.

If in the past we have seen King primarily as a middle-class civil rights leader, it is now time to see him through the prism of his kinship to the poor, to working people, and to unions. From that perspective, we have much to learn about King and the movements of the 1960s.

While researching labor and civil rights history in 1992, I discovered a cache of King's speeches to unions in the archives at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. Since then, I have chronicled the struggles of black and white workers to organize unions in the South and also tracked King's support for civil rights unionism in the searing battle in Memphis. But I continued to look back to these largely unknown speeches, trying to understand their context and significance. In these documents, King continually tried to connect the labor movement with the civil rights movement and to connect them both to broad efforts for social reform.

As part of Beacon Press's King Legacy series, this collection brings to light fifteen of King's speeches (and one non-speech document) relating to union rights and economic justice, twelve of them never before published in book form. Introductions provide details and context for the reader. These documents help us connect King's movement activity in Montgomery, Albany, Birmingham, Selma, Detroit, Chicago, New York, and Memphis to

his evolving agenda for what he called “economic equality”—a belief that everyone be assured of a decent life in one of the richest countries in the world. King hoped for a future in which racism, poverty, and war would be relics of the past.

Other people had similar hopes and had struggled for years to transform them into reality. In this book, King constantly refers back to the American labor movement of the 1930s and links its sit-ins, sit-downs, picket lines, strikes, and boycotts to the civil rights battles of the 1960s. King saw the two movements as twin pillars of social progress in twentieth century America. But he wanted to go further, to create an ever more articulated, powerful labor and civil rights alliance.

King’s kinship with the poor and his support for unions and economic fairness goes back to his youth and to his family’s own struggle for an equal place at the American table. Born at the onset of the Great Depression, in 1929, King grew up in the striving black business district on Atlanta’s Auburn Avenue. His father, “Daddy” King, protected Martin and his siblings and presented the model of a respectable, middle-class patriarch. Yet, in reality, the King family’s experience was not far removed from poverty and labor exploitation. At least three of Martin’s great-grandparents were slaves, and one of his grandfathers celebrated his birthday as January 2, 1863, the day after President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect.

After emancipation, the Williams (on his mother’s side) and King families worked on land owned by whites and spent most of their lives in debt. They lived difficult lives that offered neither the certainty of being fed and clothed, nor the true freedom to engage in economic, social, and political pursuits. Both men and women did hard labor. Delia Linsey, Martin’s grandmother, worked for white folks, washing and ironing, trying to supplement the family’s meager income as she and James King moved from place to place sharecropping and working for wages. King’s grandfather, A. D. Williams, lost a thumb in a sawmill accident and moved to Atlanta, doing hard labor in order to escape lynching and labor exploitation in the countryside. King’s father also escaped the plantation districts of Georgia, arriving in the city in 1913 with little but the clothes on his back.

King’s family turned to the black church and the social gospel of Jesus to climb out of the poverty and demoralization of the Jim Crow system. “I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher,” Martin explained in 1965. “This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher, and the great-grandson of a Baptist

preacher.” In that same lineage, he was the descendant of slaves, sharecroppers, urban workers, and religious entrepreneurs. Both the men and the women in this lineage faced political, economic, and racial discrimination that kept them out of skilled jobs and blocked their educational opportunities.

As historian Clayborne Carson emphasizes, and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University documents, the black Christian social gospel demanded that all of God’s children should have equal rights. King’s grandfather, A. D. Williams, and his wife, Jennie, and King’s father, Michael King, and his wife, Alberta, built Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. From a tiny congregation, it became a powerhouse for civil rights and voting rights agitation that also took care of the social welfare of its congregants.

Coming from such a family, the young Martin Luther King, Jr., naturally empathized with the plight of poor and working-class people in the neighborhood surrounding his family home. In the 1930s, his father took him to see the unemployment lines, and although Martin later became critical of his father’s materialism, he never forgot Daddy King’s respect for the poor, a respect that King, Jr., also exhibited throughout his life.

The Great Depression further sensitized Martin to the gap between rich and poor and animated what he later called his “anti-capitalistic feelings.” He witnessed people standing in bread lines and the effects of poverty within his father’s congregation. As a teenager, he worked for a summer on a Connecticut tobacco farm and saw the damage that poverty and racial hatred did to poor whites as well as to blacks. In both the South as well as the North, what King later called the “malignant kinship” between race and class remained readily apparent.

In short, although King was indeed “middle class” in demeanor, his family heritage, his own experiences, and the black Christian social gospel also provided King with a life-long framework within which to demand justice for workers and the poor. King’s college education also created an intellectual foundation for understanding these inequalities. At age fifteen, Martin entered Morehouse College in an accelerated program during World War II. As the U.S. pledged to fight fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, and colonialism, King was profoundly influenced through courses in sociology, history, philosophy, literature, and religion. Morehouse president Dr. Benjamin Mays (and others King later encountered) popularized Mahatma Gandhi’s respect for the poor, highlighting his success in nonviolent organizing against colonialism, caste systems, and labor exploitation. Even as a young student, King began to fuse

religion, academic knowledge, and his family's long-standing activism on behalf of equal rights and social justice.

King went on to graduate school at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, but he had already joined a special generation of human rights activists. Black students and war veterans of the 1940s mainstreamed a more militant civil rights consciousness at a time when the U.S. government promised to overturn the old ways of imperialism and inequality throughout the world. It was a powerful time, what one historian called the "seedtime" of the black revolution. Organized labor played an essential part in undergirding that revolution. The 1935 Wagner Act had established the right to freedom of speech and the right to organize on the job for the first time in U.S. history. Millions of workers in steel, auto, meatpacking, electrical, rubber, and other basic industries joined unions under the banner of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). W. E. B. Du Bois, in 1944, saw this as a great turn of events and wrote that the CIO provided the best hope for equal rights in the postwar era.

Unfortunately, the vision of anti-colonial, liberationist struggles abroad and expanded union and civil rights at home got fractured by the great Red Scare of the post-World War II era. The Red Scare undermined both the civil rights movement and the American labor movement and constricted the broader vision for change wrought by the war. Some argue the U.S. government's anti-communist crusades of the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s provided additional leverage to demand full civil rights. King and others rightly said that if the U.S. wanted to be a global model of freedom, it would have to eliminate segregation at home. The strength of this argument and the need to get black votes in the urban North caused President Harry S. Truman to desegregate the U.S. armed forces and call for civil and political rights for African Americans. The U.S. Supreme Court also made this argument in its historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to overthrow segregation as the law of the land.

From the perspective of labor history, however, scholars increasingly recognize the damage done by the postwar Red Scare. At the height of the labor movement's power, when approximately a third of workers (and 50 percent of industrial workers) belonged to unions, the Red Scare's big squeeze against labor radicalism eliminated some of the most persistent and militant voices for interracial working-class mobilization. It also helped to block unions from expanding into difficult-to-organize areas of low-wage employment, where workers of color and women predominated. Operation Dixie, an effort begun by the CIO in 1946 to fully organize the workers of the

South, might have created powerful union allies for civil rights reform. Instead, red-baiting, race-baiting, violence, and laws restricting the right to organize left the South a bastion of anti-unionism.

Without unions, African American, Mexican American, and Euro-American workers in the South lacked a means to improve their conditions at work or to build independent political power. As is apparent from his speeches in part I of this book, King clearly understood the importance of unionizing the South. He saw it as a way to elevate wages, enfranchise African Americans and workers, and to vote more labor-friendly and less racist people into power. He particularly wanted to remove the “Neanderthals” in the U.S. Senate who used the filibuster to block all significant change. He believed the unions and civil rights forces together could push history in a better direction. The Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, the United Mine Workers, and many industrial unions had at times followed a path of interracial labor solidarity, and left a promising history of labor-based social change.

But King also knew that the American union movement had a contradictory, dual character regarding racial minorities and women. If the CIO offered hope to black workers and women, building trades unions and brotherhoods of railroad workers in the older American Federation of Labor (AFL) still largely excluded or segregated minority and women workers. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) did not require unions using its services to ban union discrimination. Even blacks in unionized industries still experienced exclusionary union and apprenticeship programs, segregated locals and workplaces, and outright violence and bigotry at the hands of white workers. And supposedly progressive CIO unions often codified discriminatory job assignments and seniority lines in their contracts, despite equal rights provisions in their own constitutions.

From the 1930s onward, Communists and assorted non-aligned labor radicals had fought segregationist practices at work and in society, and led the way in organizing women and men into unions across color and gender barriers. But especially after the war, labor radicals fought their way upstream against a torrent of institutionalized racism and Cold War anti-communism. The Republican-dominated Congress elected in 1946 imposed the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which amended the Wagner Act to force union leaders to swear they were not Communists or lose federal election supervision protections through the NLRB. Taft-Hartley tied up unions in legal bureaucracy and fatally weakened them by allowing states to ban the union shop, thus allowing workers to benefit from a union contract without joining

the union. Taft-Hartley also restricted union political action and undermined organizing in various other ways.

CIO unions initially resisted Taft-Hartley and disliked Democratic president Harry S. Truman, whose loyalty-security and anti-communist foreign policies helped start the Cold War and the Red Scare. But during the presidential election of 1948, the CIO grew desperate for unity and required all of its member unions to support Truman. After union votes sealed Truman's victory, the CIO expelled its eleven supposedly Communist-led unions with nearly one million members that had supported Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace, who advocated détente with the Soviet Union. Disagreements over U.S. foreign policy thus polarized the CIO. Although unions went on to reach their high point of institutional power, hard-line anti-communism would divide many of the unions from King and the burgeoning movements of the 1960s.

Organized labor from 1949 on presented a confusing picture to civil rights advocates such as King. On one hand, unions made substantial contract gains and became key political players that helped to establish the basis for the Great Society and civil rights victories of the 1960s. Conversely, the CIO expelled some of its strongest civil rights unionists in the South and raided major unions such as the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union (UE) for following the "Communist Party line."

These matters might seem somewhat removed from the civil rights struggle, but they would have momentous consequences for King's attempt to build a labor-civil rights alliance. In 1955, CIO and AFL unions merged to create a larger, stronger federation, but because the CIO had five million members and the AFL had twice that many (and because the CIO was on the verge of disintegration), the more racially conservative AFL took the greater share of leadership. Many unions became more bureaucratic, top-down institutions. The Red Scare also tied the AFL-CIO to a U.S. foreign policy establishment that King came to oppose.

Tragically, led by President George Meany and International Affairs Director Jay Lovestone, the AFL-CIO aggressively supported the U.S. as it abrogated elections scheduled for 1956 in Vietnam and supported a string of corrupt governments hated by their own people. Lovestone worked with the CIA in undermining leftist unions in Europe and in overthrowing nationalist governments in poor countries such as Guatemala (the CIA also helped to overthrow an elected government in Iran, leading to generations of conflict). The AFL-CIO became the government's strongest foreign policy supporter

and condemned those who opposed military intervention as unwitting dupes of supposed Communists.

As the Red Scare undermined international and interracial labor solidarity, the Montgomery Bus Boycott introduced the world to King and King to the world of civil rights unionism. There he found his strongest allies in black and left-led unions in and outside of the AFL-CIO.

King's relationship with unions began in Montgomery in December 1955, when King unleashed his extraordinary power to use the spoken word to evoke feelings of unity and determination to overcome frightful barriers to change. President A. Philip Randolph and local president E. D. Nixon of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union approached other unions for financial support. Soon King began speaking, raising funds, and garnering political support from unions for the freedom movement in the South. Union support for the bus boycott cemented King's belief in their importance in building a cohesive national force for social change.

One of the CIO's left-led unions, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) in the 1950s had the strongest union program for civil rights in the country. Even before the bus boycott, twenty-six members of an Atlanta local of the UPWA went to jail for protesting bus segregation. UPWA members had already faced down racists who tried to prevent housing integration in the Chicago area, and raised funds and protested on behalf of Mamie Bradley, the mother of Emmett Till, a black teenager murdered by racists in Mississippi on August 28, 1955. The UPWA refused to sign contracts unless they had an anti-discrimination clause and insisted that employers promote African Americans, Mexican Americans, and women to all levels of work and management in the packinghouses.

Three months into the Montgomery boycott, King met with UPWA activists in Chicago to plot strategy. The union threatened the company that owned the Montgomery bus system with a national boycott and raised a Fund for Democracy, not by fiat by the union's officers, but by a fund-raising campaign among its members. Black women, such as Addie Wyatt, became especially active in civil rights, and workers at the Chicago Armour meatpacking plant held a prayer vigil in support of the Montgomery campaign. After its triumph, black UPWA leaders Russell Lasley, John Henry Hall, and Charles Hayes attended the founding conference of King's SCLC. Lasley and Hayes served on its board along with District 65 black leader Cleveland Robinson.

All of this demonstrated to King the power of a national union network.

Soon, he began working with the United Automobile Workers union and other unions that had significant black membership and supported civil rights. These included District 65 and Local 1199, both associated with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Employees Union (RWDSU). These unions tenaciously organized African American, Puerto Rican, and other Hispanic workers in the expanding service and health-care industries in New York City. Jewish labor radicals with roots in the 1930s thus helped to create two unions that, in the 1960s, became important supporters of King's civil rights movement in the South. District 65 and Local 1199 also became powerful sources of civil rights unionism in New York City itself.

Unions turned to building alliances with A. Philip Randolph, King, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). District 65—with strong leadership from Jamaican-born Cleveland Robinson, its secretary-treasurer and leader of its Negro Affairs Committee—organized New York City minority workers in department stores and various service industries. It set up picket lines and rallies supporting the civil rights movement, and, in 1959, Robinson and Randolph organized the NALC to pressure the AFL-CIO to attack racism within its ranks. In association with RWDSU and District 65, Local 1199 also attacked sub-minimum wages, high rents, and restrictive racial hiring. Black and Puerto Rican women in hospital employment became especially active in Local 1199. As Local 1199 president Leon Davis put it, “This is more than just another union; this is part of the freedom struggle.”

This was the kind of labor movement King so desperately needed to build the labor–civil rights coalition in northern cities. King spoke repeatedly at District 65 and Local 1199 meetings, and King also found a home within the West Coast's International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). In 1963, ILWU president Harry Bridges threatened to refuse to load ships with goods made in Alabama in support of King's battles there. Bridges, an Australian seaman and longshoreman, fought and defeated federal government attempts to deport him as an “alien” Marxist for twenty years. He became a naturalized citizen, a fierce equal rights supporter (he broke the West's anti-miscegenation laws by marrying Japanese American Noriko “Nikki” Sawada), and a leading opponent of the American war in Vietnam. Black longshore workers in San Francisco's Local 10 welcomed him to speak there in 1967 as part of the ILWU family.

At the Labor Leaders Assembly for Peace in November 1967, King's allies in District 65, Local 1199, the UE, the UPWA, and the ILWU provided strong civil rights and peace advocates. King said he felt himself an honorary

member of many unions, and, indeed, many of them had given him awards for his civil rights leadership. King's leftist union associations had helped him to develop an experiment in labor-civil rights solidarity that lasted until his death.

In part I of this collection, the difficulties and contradictions of building labor-civil rights alliances in the shadow of Cold War anti-communism can be seen in King's speeches. King's Christian social gospel vision proved popular with union members, yet he also followed a pragmatic agenda. Many of his early labor speeches are straight-out appeals for funds and support in which he outlines the triumphs and tragedies of the freedom movement. His early speeches to the Highlander Folk School (previously a meeting place for CIO organizers) and the UAW suggest a perhaps unfounded optimism and hope for an easy alliance of progressive forces to change the politics and priorities of the country. Yet his Highlander speech also set off a segregationist campaign that depicted the Highlander meeting as a "Communist training school." From that time forward the FBI and the American right wing perpetually portrayed King as a Marxist-Leninist deceiver.

King's speeches in part I cover the highlights of the movement he is associated with: the Montgomery Bus Boycott; the student sit-ins and freedom rides; the Albany and Birmingham movements for desegregation and the hiring of black workers; the mass march in Detroit leading to the March on Washington in 1963; civil rights and labor lobbying that led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act; and the Selma to Montgomery march that led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

King's main goal was to garner financial and political support for the southern movement, but he also developed a second objective: supporting efforts by his labor allies to fully desegregate unions and bring people of color into union leadership. King was advised by Randolph, Robinson, Rustin, and others who knew the labor movement better than he did, and they helped to shape his speeches and approach to unions. (Among these advisors, former Communists with strong labor perspectives Stanley Levison and Hunter Pitts (Jack) O'Dell became special targets of the FBI and the White House.)

Others who could have been helpful to King in developing his perspective in his labor speeches might also have included Ralph Helstein, UPWA president, and black leaders of the UPWA in Chicago, as well as President Reuther and others in the UAW in Detroit. Levison counseled King on his 1961 AFL-CIO speech and King incorporated some of the text from his last

book, 1967's *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, in his last speeches to Local 1199 and the Teamsters in New York City in 1968.

In his speeches, King did not shrink from criticizing unions when they failed to eliminate racism and discrimination within their own ranks. Even as King repeatedly declared that a history of struggle had created a special relationship of solidarity between blacks and unions, he also insisted that this special relationship required a frank discussion of weaknesses as well as strengths.

King's address to the AFL-CIO in 1961 proved especially prescient. He argued that the "duality of interests of labor and Negroes" made them natural allies. But he also sharply criticized the federation for not going far enough to eliminate union racism and discrimination and for its efforts to silence the critical voice of A. Philip Randolph, who asked why unions could purge reds but not racists. "Negroes are almost entirely a working people. Our needs are identical with labor's needs," King declared. Yet he also warned of impending disaster if organized labor did not discard its racial and political conservatism to create a center-left political movement.

Prophetically, he warned that an "ultra-right wing" alliance, including "big military and big industry," and a reactionary grouping of southern Democrats and northern Republicans in Congress "now threaten everything decent and fair in American life." With automation grinding factory jobs into dust, King warned, "This period is made to order for those who would seek to drive labor into impotency." He urged unions to stop worrying about "scattered reds" and pay attention to the gathering storm of the center-right alliance trying to wipe them out.

Among the more leftist-led unions, King also moved beyond civil rights to the deeper and thornier problems of racial-economic inequality and war, telling a District 65 meeting in 1962 that "the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice" were all intertwined. Such concerns are readily apparent in his speeches in part II, which encompass a period when King's agenda shifted from attaining civil rights to creating a basis for "economic equality." Fortunately, organized labor provided a critical force to push the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of 1964 and 1965 through Congress. Federal laws now made employer and union-employment discrimination on the basis of race and sex illegal, and made it possible to register black voters to build the kind of labor-civil rights alliance King had long sought. But as soon as these victories sealed "phase one" of the civil rights movement, a new challenge arose. After the violent 1965 inner-city

upheaval in Los Angeles called the Watts Riot, a sense of dire emergency increasingly animated King, who felt he had failed to fully address the problems of the poor and urban workers beyond the South. “The explosion in Watts reminded us all that the northern ghettos are the prisons of forgotten men,” King wrote in a speech prepared for a District 65 convention in September 1965.

From this point on, King called for a “phase two” of the black freedom movement that would move beyond civil rights and voting rights to “economic equality.” He asked unions to step to the forefront in the reordering of the nation’s priorities to benefit ordinary people. In 1966, King went to Chicago (with help from the UAW and the UPWA) to organize a mass movement against institutionalized racism and poverty, and he marched against fear in Mississippi with Stokely Carmichael. But in both of these struggles King came away with very little to claim as victories. As the Vietnam War escalated and unemployed inner-city youth revolted, “black power” became the dominant rhetoric of black liberation portrayed in the mass media. King embraced the call for black power as legitimate, but he also felt increasing despair over the violent direction in which the country seemed to be heading and searched for a framework to create a new kind of coalition for change.

In 1967 and 1968, it seemed the country was at a crossroads and would either move forward toward more fundamental transformation or become increasingly embroiled in conflict over unresolved problems. In part III, King speaks in a prophetic voice of “two Americas,” one composed of the rich and well-off, the other of poor people with little hope living on “a lonely island of poverty” in the midst of a seemingly affluent society. In a biting, critical, and prophetic commentary about the failure of American-style racial capitalism, he reminded his labor audiences that African Americans began in the chains of slavery and through their unpaid labor made cotton the king of the economy. But capital subsequently mechanized agricultural and industrial production and discarded their labor while increasingly moving unskilled factory employment to cheaper facilities abroad.

King had always called on his country to live up to the creed that “all men are created equal,” with inalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But he now asked America to go beyond formal rights in the law to substantive forms of economic justice: jobs, health care, education, housing, and a hand up for those on the bottom of society. Although many whites had supported a “phase one” for civil and voting rights, King complained that they rejected a “phase two” demand for “economic equality.”

King warned that in order to remain relevant, the labor movement needed to become more radical and build alliances with poor and working-class communities beyond the workplace.

By 1967, King found himself at polar opposites from many national union leaders. At the National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace in November, he expressed the hope that unions would reject militarism and become a part of the peace movement and what he called “forward-looking” America. He described Congress as “single-mindedly devoted to the pursuit of war” but “emotionally hostile to the needs of the poor.” King now openly opposed a war in Vietnam that many union leaders supported. The UAW’s international affairs director, Victor Reuther, Walter Reuther’s brother, had already exposed the AFL-CIO’s ties with the CIA. The West Coast ILWU leader Harry Bridges called U.S. policies, supported by most unions, “American imperialism with a union label.” Although the peace assembly spurred King’s call for a broader alliance of peace, labor, and civil rights organizations, the AFL-CIO seventh annual convention that followed it in Miami Beach fully embraced the war. King’s hopes seemed to be “blowing in the wind.”

Not only did King’s anti-war position alienate him from many union leaders, but his economic analysis exceeded where most of them were willing to go. As he had said in his famous speech at Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967, against the Vietnam War, “When machines and computers and profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.” Unfortunately, King implied, that’s the nation America may have become. He now placed his demands for economic justice in the context of a plea for a “moral revolution” to “shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society.”

In 1968, King tried to move his economic agenda forward. In a speech to New York City’s Local 1199 on March 10, King explained the need for a more transformative movement. He demanded a sharp reversal in American priorities by shifting money from bombs and war to health care, jobs, housing, and education. He said the U.S. had the wealth to eliminate poverty in the world but lacked the will to do it. He proposed to generate that will in a movement of the poor. King in previous statements had already told reporters he was “going for broke,” in what he called the Poor People’s Campaign.

In the middle of his mobilization to take poor people to Washington, King went to Memphis and reemphasized his belief that organized labor could move mountains when joined to a community-based movement. AFSCME

national president Jerry Wurf and organizers William Lucy, Jesse Epps, and Joe Paisley worked in the trenches throughout the strike. As women mounted a boycott of downtown businesses, and raised funds and collected food to keep the strike alive, black ministers led by James Lawson mobilized the community through the black church. The workers' movement in Memphis escalated stunningly, but so did blunt resistance from a paternalistic, condescending, and ferociously anti-union mayor, Henry Loeb. The city's intransigence and violent police attacks on marchers changed a strike into a racial issue.

In the heart of the Mississippi cotton economy, Memphis exemplified the historic racial-economic system that King said must be changed. In Memphis, 80 percent of African Americans, women as well as men, remained stuck in unskilled jobs at the bottom of the economy. The sanitation workers' strike for union rights threatened the racial pattern of white supremacy as well as a low-wage system based on cheap black labor. It was a classic civil rights strike, bringing together many of the issues King sought to address in the Poor People's Campaign. King told AFSCME workers and their supporters in Memphis on March 18 that the lowly sanitation worker is as important to the community's health as the doctor—literally true in a town nearly wiped out by yellow fever plagues after the Civil War for lack of an efficient public sanitation system. King's ability to merge moral and religious philosophy with labor and human rights issues illustrated once again why people constantly called on him to join their struggles.

“All labor has dignity,” King reminded the workers and their supporters.

King's speeches to unions might help us to more fully appreciate the significance of King's connection to labor issues and to working-class people as part of his broad and unfinished agenda for human rights. If he were alive today, perhaps King would again be called a Communist for pursuing his Christian social gospel campaign for “economic justice.” These previously unavailable speeches may help people in the current explosion of unemployment, homelessness, hunger, poverty, and war to think anew about issues that bedevil us today: continuing racial division and the politics of hate; machines and corporations taking people's jobs away; senators who filibuster to stop social progress; the waste of economic resources on failed military solutions to human problems; a widespread business-promoted culture of opposition to unions; and a mass media that fails to examine the intertwined destructive effects of racism, poverty, and war.

The destructive effects of deindustrialization and union decline on workers

in places such as Detroit and Memphis cause King's speeches to resonate powerfully in our own times. Our purpose in publishing them is to fully bring back the legacy of King and the alliance for labor rights and economic justice that he tried to create. King's labor speeches will thus help us to deepen our understanding of the King era as one part of the longest of movements, the struggle for working people to live a decent life.

King's last two unscripted and poetic speeches in Memphis suggest that King's links to worker struggles for labor rights lay deep within his Christian philosophy and stretched back over a lifetime. King said the Constitution provided no guarantees but that the Declaration of Independence implied a promise of economic justice. "If a man does not have a job or an income, at that moment you deprive him of life. You deprive him of liberty. And you deprive him of the pursuit of happiness," he declared on March 18.

King also preached the power of "dangerous unselfishness" on the night before his death, on April 3, asking us to risk ourselves for the good of others as we travel down life's perilous Jericho Road. He asked everyone to be a Good Samaritan.

King preached in Memphis, "Either we go up together, or we go down together." Perhaps it is not yet too late to look over the mountaintop and see the promised land.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Two types of documents were used in this collection. One consists of speeches transcribed from tape recordings by people associated with King during his lifetime or shortly after his death, particularly by his book agent, Joan Daves. Often, such a transcript from a King audio, such as King's last two speeches in Memphis, provides the only version we have.

The other kind of document is a typed or partially handwritten (often in King's hand) text of a speech as King planned to deliver it. Sometimes scholars can verify how that speech was given through an audio recording and make corrections to the transcript.

In some cases, however, it is impossible to know whether King delivered all or only part of a speech, or in what order the words were delivered. For example, District 65, at that time affiliated to the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), reproduced two of King's speeches on a heavily edited record that did not match the typed speech I found in the King archive in Atlanta. I relied upon the printed text and used the audio to verify or add to parts of it, since King clearly delivered more of the speech than is in the audio version. In such cases, I present the speech the way it appears King gave it.

In all cases, I verified speeches through recordings when we could find them, and researchers at Beacon took great care to correct the typed versions that we have been able to locate. In some cases, original transcripts noted crowd response, and we have also included crowd response when reviewing audio tapes and adding our own revisions to speeches. In other cases we had only a text and not a recording and so no crowd response is noted.

Through careful listening to the audio versions we could find and comparing them to written texts, we have produced what we think are the most accurate and complete versions of these speeches. I verified both transcribed audio and typed texts through union newspapers and secondary sources and draw my sometimes lengthy introductions from that same material. (See details in the appendix.)

I found two King labor speeches that others delivered on his behalf, including one given at the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union (UE) convention in 1962, which I did not think especially significant and therefore excluded from the collection. In the case of the convention of

District 65, on September 18, 1965, King's representative, Andrew Young, gave a completely different speech from the one King had written, but King's written text was very significant and so is included in this collection.

As a rule, I intervened as little as possible in these speeches. Transcribers of King's recordings or typists of his original speech texts sometimes introduced minor typing errors, and I silently omitted these and removed other minor errors of spelling, syntax, or grammar, or illegible sections. In a few cases, I also removed text that repeats material from an earlier speech. King gave speeches constantly, so he frequently repeated certain phrases and themes, but repeating them in a written collection does not seem necessary or helpful to the reader. I have tried, however, not to remove material that would undermine the rhythm or content of the speech. All deletions in the text are marked with ellipses (...). In a few cases, I have inserted the full names or identification of people mentioned in King's speeches or added a word for clarification. All such editorial insertions are shown in brackets ([]). Any text shown in parentheses, except for audience response, existed in the original document.

Reading and hearing King's speeches are two different experiences. For that reason, we include with this book audio from two of King's speeches. Please note that the two audios accompanying this volume are incomplete. For that reason, they will not be identical to the text, particularly in the case of "The Unresolved Race Question." Please refer to the appendix for more information. The listener will immediately notice how King's inflections and the crowds' responses make his speeches come alive. His speech to District 65 in 1962 and his March 18, 1968, speech in Memphis demonstrate King's ability to capture important ideas that move an audience to action.



King speaking during “phase one” of the civil rights movement at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, sometime before Ku Klux Klan members bombed it on September 15, 1963. © Joseph Chapman

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