Fifty Years Since King

Remembering Memphis and the Poor People’s Campaign.

by MICHAEL K. HONEY

Fifty years ago, on April 4, 1968, a bullet robbed us of one of the great human-rights leaders of the 20th century. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee, accelerated the racist backlash of the late 1960s. Along with the murder of Robert F. Kennedy two months later, this tragic trajectory led to the election of Richard M. Nixon, who escalated the Vietnam War and unleashed police and FBI forces against movements for change.

However, the bonds of memory cannot be so easily dissolved. Ending poverty and fighting for union rights are back on the economic-justice agenda today. Fifty years after King, Memphis remains an appropriate launch pad for these campaigns. “Fight for $15” organizers met there, picketing McDonald’s and marching on the anniversary of the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike. The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which will be meeting in Memphis on the 50th anniversary of King’s death, launched its “I Am 2018” campaign to fight for racial and economic justice and combat so-called right-to-work laws. The Rev. William Barber, the Rev. Liz Theoharis, and others also met in Memphis to begin their new Poor People’s Campaign to end poverty, which is modeled on King’s original crusade.
Yet even as Memphis’s now-multiracial political leadership celebrates the accomplishments of the civil-rights movement in the city, the challenges remain daunting. A majority-black city of more than 600,000 people, Memphis has among the highest rates of poverty and infant mortality of any US city its size. Although higher wages for working-class people would clearly benefit both a consumer-based economy and the city’s tax base, the traditional low-wage, anti-union business model is back in style in Republican-run Tennessee. Nationally, private-sector unions—which now represent less than 10 percent of the American workforce—are under attack, as are their public-sector counterparts.

In our own time of escalating crisis, why return to the story of Memphis and Martin Luther King? Activists and historians tell us why: Understanding the critical year of 1968 and King’s agenda for social change can help us clarify the organizing imperatives of today. In Memphis and elsewhere, the bonds of memory 50 years since King are helping people to remember, and to fight.

When King came to Memphis on March 18, 1968, as part of his Poor People’s Campaign, it appeared that the economic-justice movement he’d struggled to build was firmly on track.

Some 1,300 black workers in the AFSCME Local 1733 had gone on strike on February 12, after enduring years of abuse and the needless deaths of two members, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, due to faulty equipment on February 1. Police attacks on workers and their allies during a march on February 23 had angered the black community and brought together the working poor, church leaders, unions, students, and teachers. King was ready for this fight: He had long worked with the left-leaning side of organized labor to build a labor/civil-rights alliance.

In Memphis, King called for a second phase of the freedom movement that would go beyond its first phase—the struggle for civil and voting rights—and begin a fight for “economic equality.” Phase two would demand that the nation shift its priorities away from war and military spending and toward housing, health care, education, decent unionized jobs, economic opportunity, and a sustainable income for all. He also proposed a new tactic: During his riveting speech, King called for a “general work stoppage in the city of Memphis.”

Memphis provided an alliance of the middle class and the working poor that could stop the city’s anti-union campaign and help fuel King’s national movement to end poverty. It brought together direct action in the streets and in the workplace in order to create a new and powerful direction for the movements of the 1960s: a general strike for freedom and economic justice.

On March 19, King left Memphis for the Mississippi Delta. Here, he confronted the desperate poverty of the unemployed poor. During a visit to Marks, Mississippi, a town of less than 2,500, King told an interviewer, “I found myself weeping before I knew it. I met boys and girls by the hundreds who didn’t have any shoes to wear, who didn’t have any food to eat in terms of three square meals a day, and I met their parents, many of whom don’t even have jobs.” In Marks, he found poor people cast off from the cotton economy by the mechanization of cultivation and harvesting. They lived in shacks without plumbing, lighting, or ventilation through extreme heat and humidity, many subsisting on foraged berries, fish, and wild rabbits. Yet King also found here a core of poor people who would go to DC to energize his campaign and later help to elect scores of black leaders in the Delta.

King once recalled a conversation he’d had on a plane with a white man who told him that black people needed to lift themselves by their own bootstraps and advance through individual initiative. “It is a cruel jest,” King replied, “to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.”

Few black people received the kind of government support—the New Deal’s low-interest home loans, the homesteads and land-grant colleges and subsidies, the federal land acquisitions and military protection for

Michael K. Honey is the Haley Professor of Humanities at the University of Washington, Tacoma, where he teaches labor and civil rights history. He is the author of To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice (W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), from which this article has been adapted with the permission of the publisher.
railroad and oil magnates in the West—that had boosted some immigrants into the ranks of the middle and upper classes.

Then too, Africans didn’t come to America looking for prosperity, as Ben Carson, the black Republican who heads up the Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Trump, ludicrously suggested recently. Rather, they were ripped from their freedom in Africa to work as slaves in America. “My grandfather and my great-grandfather” helped build the wealth of this nation as slaves and sharecroppers, King said, but ended up in poverty. In contrast to the stereotypical “self-made man,” King spoke of a man unjustly kept in prison for years: “And you just go up to him and say, ‘Now you are free,’ but you don’t give him any bus fare to get to town. You don’t give him any money to get some clothes to put on his back or get on his feet again in life. Every court of jurisprudence would rise up against this. And yet, this is the very thing that our nation did to the black man.”

Remarkably, given the brutality that people had faced in the civil-rights struggle, King warned that the second phase of the freedom movement would be even harder. “It is much easier to integrate a lunch counter than it is to guarantee an annual income,” he said, and the resistance from capitalist elites as well as Southern sheriffs would be much worse. Yet King insisted that the country needed a moral revolution that would “raise certain basic questions about the whole society.” Like Malcolm X, he saw the agenda for organizing as global and revolutionary.

King had spoken out sharply against the Vietnam War and wasteful military spending but went even further, criticizing capitalism itself. He told his congregation at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church that a system that put the wealth of a few ahead of a decent life for the many needed fundamental transformation. He envisioned the Poor People’s Campaign as a way to gather the sick, the hungry, and the destitute in a shantytown in the nation’s capital to “demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty.”

N THE 50 YEARS SINCE KING’S DEATH, THE MEDIA and most historians have cast the Poor People’s Campaign as a failure, and Memphis has come to be remembered primarily as the site of his tragic assassination. Instead, as the people taking up the struggles to end poverty and create a living wage today point out, we should embrace King’s final effort as a necessary turn that we can emulate. In the Poor People’s Campaign, dispossessed people learned skills and crossed cultural boundaries, beginning a fight for economic justice that many continued for the rest of their lives.

In the Memphis strike, black workers declaring “I Am a Man” paved the way for AFSCME’s successful national campaign to unionize thousands of public employees, including many African Americans and women. The percentage of public employees who are unionized is now five times the percentage of private-sector employees. Unions look back on King as a labor hero as well as a prophetic advocate for the disinherited and the working poor. AFSCME’s “I Am 2018” campaign seeks to rekindle the memory of what happened 50 years ago and spark a nationwide movement to organize workers and poor people in the fight for racial and economic justice.

The national media love to focus on anniversaries, but 50 years after King’s death, we should remember that he dreamed of much more than simply winning the fight for civil and voting rights. We should remember, as former AFSCME secretary-treasurer (and Memphis organizer) William Lucy told me some years ago, that “Dr. King really highlighted the great contradiction.… If you re-"view the civil-rights shackles or barriers, that does not necessarily guarantee that your economic situation will change. There is something wrong with the social structure. There is something wrong with the economic structure.” As King put it, when “profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

It might also be time to dispense with the standard notion of King as a top-down leader and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the New Left as the bottom-up movements of that time. Movements require many kinds of agitators, organizers, and leaders. We should embrace the many different movements fighting for rights and freedom today—women’s rights, immigrant rights, LGBTQ rights, peace and nonviolence—as well as people of all ethnicities. But we should also bring labor issues and union rights to the forefront of our concerns, as Coretta Scott King did after her husband’s death. Advocating for a federal holiday in his memory, she pointed out that it would be the first one to honor an American who “gave his life in a labor struggle.”

Fifty years after his death, King’s message of agape love, or love for all, lives on. He urged that, while most of us think that “self-preservation is the first law of life,” in fact “other-preservation is the first law of life.” Ending racism, poverty, and war in a global economy and on a global scale requires everyone to develop an “overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole,” to choose love instead of hate. From Memphis to Seattle and beyond, people who march and organize continue to draw inspiration from King, remembering him as a hero for the American working class, the poor, and the world’s oppressed peoples.

In Memphis, King called for “dangerous unselfishness” and declared “either we go up together or we go down together.” Years earlier, he had told the AFL-CIO that the key human ideal must be solidarity, “a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity.”

Are we moving in that direction? Many are still asking, as Martin Luther King did in the last year of his life: “Where do we go from here: chaos or community?”