



New Poor People's Campaign Organizing Packet



- a) Building a Poor People's Campaign for Today Concept Paper
- b) *A New and Unsettling Force* Introduction
- c) Walking to Save Lives
- d) "I cannot continue to live and work like this": How Wal-Mart drove me to shut down Park Avenue
- e) What Happens When an American City Shuts Off Its Residents' Water?
- f) Ferguson and the Watts Uprising
- g) The Right to Not Be Poor
- h) The MLK You Don't See on TV

Further readings are available at www.kairoscenter.org/study

The emergency we now face is economic, and it is a desperate and worsening situation. For the 35 million poor people in America – not even to mention, just yet, the poor in the other nations – there is a kind of strangulation in the air. In our society it is murder, psychologically, to deprive a man of a job or an income. You are in substance saying to that man that he has no right to exist. You are in a real way depriving him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, denying in his case the very creed of his society. Now, millions of people are being strangled that way. The problem is international in scope. And it is getting worse, as the gap between the poor and the 'affluent society' increases...The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life..." (Martin Luther King Jr., Massey Lectures, November-December, 1967)

The need

On December 4, 1967, the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr announced plans for a Poor People's Campaign and called for the nation to take dramatic steps to end poverty. Despite his assassination the campaign went forward but was cut short. The U.S. government, consumed by waging war in Vietnam, did not heed the call by King and the poor people who traveled to Washington.

Today, nearly 50 years later, we are experiencing unprecedented poverty in the midst of plenty; unnecessary abandonment in spite of unheard abundance. According to official data, at least 46.5 million people, including 1 of every 5 children, are living in poverty, an increase of more than 9 million since 2008. An additional 97.3 million people are officially designated as low income. Taken together, this means that 48% of the U.S. population, nearly one in every two people, is poor or low income.

Inequality meanwhile has reached record levels and continues to climb as the wealth of the richest among us continues to soar. The top 1% of the population own 43% of the nation's wealth; the top 5% own 72% of wealth and the bottom 80% are left with just 7% of wealth. At the same time, racial and gender inequality remains as deep as ever. For example, for 50 years the unemployment rate for blacks has consistently been twice as high as the rate for whites and the large gap in household income and in wealth between blacks and whites hasn't narrowed. Women, and especially women of color, are also disproportionately poor. In 2012 more than 5 million more women than men were living in poverty and two million more women than men were living in deep poverty.

Behind each of these statistics is massive human suffering and oppression to which there has been little if any government response. While the mass Occupy Wall Street protests succeeded for a time in focusing national attention on inequality and in changing the rhetoric of some politicians, there has been little serious discussion and even less action on plans to reduce, let alone end, poverty and soaring inequality.

Fighting back

What there has been, little mainstream media notice notwithstanding, is growing resistance and struggle pushed forward by people who are literally organizing and fighting for their lives, rights and deepest values. They are fighting on

a wide number of different issues: good affordable homes, health, education, reproductive choices, racial and gender equality, democracy, peace, a humane immigration system, living wage and good jobs, food, water, and an end to mass and cruel incarceration. When the issues begin to be joined and people unite in a common moral vision, as is happening with the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina and the fight for the right to water and all human rights in Michigan, the struggle can reach historic levels with tens of thousands mobilized and taking regular actions. In states such as Florida, Pennsylvania, Maryland, California, Vermont and others, important victories have been won through grassroots campaigns on a range of issues such as workers protections, higher wages, LGBTQ rights, health care, and rollback on mass incarceration.

We experience the power and joy of these campaigns and celebrate the gains from struggles led by those most directly affected. Yet we all are painfully aware of the limits of our victories as overall conditions worsen and inequality and poverty continue to grow. Traveling around the country meeting with leaders, as the Poverty Initiative did recently in a Pedagogy of the Poor National tour, one finds a growing need and yearning to connect better separated battles and begin creating a broader and deeper social movement with the power and vision to take on not just the rotten fruits of poverty, inequality, and oppression but the national and global systems and structures that produce them. Such a movement would incorporate and build on struggles now taking place, strengthening their connections to produce the unity that alone can move us from merely reacting to different disasters to transforming society. It was a vision of just such a transformative movement that led Dr. King to call for a Poor People's Campaign. It is the same urgent need today that leads to the call for a new Poor People's Campaign to abolish poverty.

The power of a movement led by the poor

With the experience of more than a decade of helping to build one of the most transformative social movements in U.S. history, Dr. King saw that poverty was not just another issue and that poor people were not a special interest group. Throughout his many speeches in the last year of his life describing the unjust economic conditions facing millions people worldwide, he held up the potential of the poor to come together to transform the whole of society. He knew that for the load of poverty to be lifted, the thinking and behavior of a critical mass of the American people would have to be changed. To accomplish this change a "new and unsettling force" had to be formed. He described this force as a multi-racial "nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor." In other words, the poor would have to organize to take action together around their immediate and basic needs, thereby becoming a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood, dispelling the myths and stereotypes upholding the mass complacency that leaves the root causes of poverty intact.

King knew that dividing the poor by creating different levels of oppression based on race and gender is critical to maintaining the power of the most privileged. He also understood, as we must, that you cannot fight poverty without fighting the social ills that cause or deepen it, the same social ills that threaten and damage the security and well-being of people everywhere. You cannot end poverty without ending racial, gender, and class inequality. Mass incarceration is mass incarceration of poor people. Climate change endangers everyone but has its most immediate and devastating effects on the poor. Immigrants are in movement to escape poverty and their mistreatment keeps them poor in new places. The lack of reproductive and child rearing choices hurts all women while pushing many into poverty and making it harder to escape. The denial of labor rights reduces wages for all workers while dramatically increasing the number of workers in poverty.

These and other struggles, far from being unrelated, must be an integral and essential component of any common fight to abolish poverty. Equally important, fighting to end poverty is essential to winning genuine victories against any of these injustices. This is the basis not just for the unity of people but the unity of struggles. How to build this unity can only be done by actively learning from those who have been engaged in particular struggles.

And this key lesson applies globally as well as nationally. In recent decades there has been a dramatic spread and development of global capital and the systems that serve it as well as the intensification of struggles against its horrific consequences. These have revealed more than ever that the work to abolish poverty in the United States can be won only as part of the struggle against an international order that inflicts suffering and fuels violent conflicts around the world. The challenge of building forms of global unity begins by learning about, listening to, and developing forms of mutual support and common action with as many movements and struggles as possible in other regions and countries.

Led by the poor; Involving everyone

The poor and dispossessed have come to embody all major injustices of our time. Their united actions give them the capability of providing a rallying point for this broader and more powerful social movement. Far from putting aside these issues to focus on yet another one, such a movement would strengthen these different struggles by recognizing them as inter-connected, inseparable and central to the fight to end poverty and create a moral and just society. The leading role of the poor in these struggles is critical to building this movement. As history has shown time and time again, from the fight to end slavery and wars and for women's, labor, LGBTQ, and civil rights, the first and essential step in building an effective movement is uniting those most deeply affected by the problem.

It is essential but not enough. History has also shown that powerful movements require the involvement and support of all sectors with an interest in a radically different society. This means nearly everyone. The poor today, representing the increasing breakdown of society and its economy, are drawn from every segment of society, from white collars as well as formerly industrial workers to students to the homeless. A recent study measuring "economic insecurity" found that 4 of 5 people living in the U.S. live in danger of poverty or unemployment at some point in their lifetime. A key objective of building the unity and power of the poor is to help those who feel they are still in the middle to realize their common interest in the fight to end poverty. This task is all the more crucial as the wealthy attempt to win the same battle by turning those who have little against the poor who have even less.

But the scale, extent, and endurance of the economic crisis and the lack of any adequate government response has made this long standing game harder to play. The permanent crisis has raised the most serious questions about the prevailing ideological orthodoxies, which for too long have defined what is "realistically" possible in terms of social change. And even those who feel economically secure can see that mass poverty and economic hardship amidst such wealth and productive power obscenely violates our most sacred values. As a religious thinker and leader, King understood well why the poor are at the heart of so many sacred texts and of diverse understandings of the divine. The presence of the poor and the way they are treated calls into question the core values and structures of a community, society and global order. People from all sectors will join and are needed in the fight for a different society that reflects their values. This is why King called for a revolution of values, and put forward not just a new political vision but a moral one of a society in which people are not treated as commodities to be thrown away but as precious brothers and sisters.

Not just commemorating but learning from & pushing forward the unfinished revolution

2017 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign launched by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was his last campaign, cut tragically short not only by his assassination and that of key allies like Robert Kennedy, but by growing disagreements within the broader movement around nonviolence and nationalism and deep divisions within the nation over the escalating war in Vietnam and its devastating impact on social programs. It is not an accident that relatively little national attention has been given to King's last campaign and his call for a radical restructuring of U.S. society. For that reason alone it will be important to honor the launch of the Poor People's Campaign. Given the conditions of poverty, inequality and injustice we face today, however, the only genuine way to commemorate the past struggle is to build a new Poor People's Campaign for today.

Lessons of the first Poor People's Campaign

A first step in building a new Poor People's Campaign is to learn from what happened in 1967-68 and analyze what is different in terms of obstacles and opportunities. Attached to this paper is a brief summary and history of the 1967-68 campaign including additional resources for further study.

There are many lessons to be learned. One of the clearest is that a campaign on the scale called for by the crisis cannot be launched by, or belong to, a few leaders or organizations. What is needed is a movement that reflects the needs, concerns, experiences and demands of as many, and as diverse, struggles taking place in communities, states and regions across the country as possible. While solidarity was the goal of the participant's march in 1968, the haste with which the campaign was created left little time for genuine relationship building between the many constituencies that needed to be involved and even less time for the development of a common sophisticated analysis of what people are experiencing that could lead to structural reforms. These tasks are no less urgent today. They will not be easy.

The divisions that have been created among us are real, deep, and long standing. Racism and sexism are not the simple outcome of class and economic oppression. Their utility and endurance depend on not only elaborate social structures but the creation and long standing forms of thinking and behavior that are historically evolved and pervasive. These do not simply disappear with a formal commitment to equality. They have to be constantly confronted and fought.

What must also be confronted and fought constantly is the other side of the use of race and gender oppression. This is the denial of the poverty and economic injustice and insecurity that afflict massive numbers of white people and the continual and myriad efforts to persuade them that whatever their suffering, their interests lie with the people and structures that cause it rather than with those people of color who are disproportionately impoverished but share with them the conditions of poverty and dispossession. As King knew and history has repeatedly shown, when this promoted narrative begins to falter and recognition of common interest and humanity begins to forge unity, the possibility of social transformation moves dramatically closer to reality. This is why the idea of uniting the poor was such a threat in 1967. It is why it still is.

To begin to overcome such deep divides and build such necessary unity will require multiple approaches. Space must be created to hear the stories of the people who will make up the body of this struggle. We must take the time to learn from one another, to critically understand problems we are facing, and the experience of our different struggles. We will need to build trust and this will be done not only by talk but by finding ways to join in key preliminary struggles. And because the struggle is also over ideas and values it is essential to address the values and principles that shape the consciousness of Americans. As King did then and many other heroes and heroines are doing so well today we need to draw on the resources for hope and commitment found in the world's religions, including the Bible.

Building hope by moving together

The first step of building the campaign is for all interested groups to reach out to and start talking with as many others as possible. We are beginning strategic dialogues both by bringing groups together and by going to different communities across the country where groups are fighting back. As these conversations develop so will the plans and the structures that will make the new Poor Peoples Campaign possible. Because the building of the campaign is so important all this has to be done thoughtfully, carefully, and inclusively. Because it is so urgent we have to start now. And together we can and will.

Addendum: The 1967-68 Poor People's Campaign

In order to build a new Poor People's Campaign in the twenty-first-century, we must first study and learn from the 1967-68 Campaign. In December 1967, Rev. Dr. King announced the plan to bring poor people from across the country for a new march on Washington. This march was to demand better jobs, better homes, better education—better lives than the ones they were living. Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy explained that the intention of the Poor People's Campaign was to

“dramatize the plight of America’s poor of all races and make very clear that they are sick and tired of waiting for a better life.”¹ Rev. Dr. King proposed,

If you are, let’s say, from rural Mississippi, and have never had medical attention, and your children are undernourished and unhealthy, you can take those little children into the Washington hospitals and stay with them there until the medical workers cope with their needs, and in showing it your children you will have shown this country a sight that will make it stop in its busy tracks and think hard about what it has done.

King aligned with the struggle of the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee in March and April 1968. He suggested their struggle for dignity was a dramatization of the issues taken up by the Poor People’s Campaign—a fight by capable, hard workers against dehumanization, discrimination and poverty wages in the richest country in the world.

The first gathering of over fifty multiethnic organizations that came together with SCLC to join the Poor People’s Campaign, took place in Atlanta, Georgia in March 1968. Key leaders and organizations who gathered at this session included: Tom Hayden of the Newark Community Union, Reis Tijerina of the Federal Alliance of New Mexico, John Lewis of the Southern Regional Council, Myles Horton of the Highlander Center, Appalachian volunteers from Kentucky, welfare rights activists, California farm workers, and organized tenants. Rev. Dr. King addressed the session saying that it was the first meeting of that kind he had ever participated in. Indeed, meetings where leaders of different sections of the poor and dispossessed come together on the basis of their common needs and demands remain rare and politically taboo. In his last Sunday sermon, he stated:

There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. In a sense it is a triple revolution; that is a technological revolution, with the impact of automation and cybernation; then there is a revolution of weaponry, with the emergence of atomic and nuclear weapon of warfare. Then there is a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion that is taking place all over the world. Yes, we do live in a period where changes are taking place and there is still the voice crying the vista of time saying, “Behold, I make all things new, former things are passed away” ... Now whenever anything new comes into history it brings with it new challenges ... and new opportunities ... We are coming to Washington in a poor people’s campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses ... We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But if a man doesn’t have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists ... We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that is signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic non-violent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible.²

The triple revolution that Rev. Dr. King highlighted in this sermon emphasized: 1. a technological revolution, 2. a revolution of weaponry, and 3. a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion taking place all over the world. He argued that social transformation was not inevitable, arising solely out of the historic conditions, but rather needed the commitment, consciousness, capacity and connectedness of the “new and unsettling force” to build a credible and powerful campaign.

The Rev. Dr. King, along with the input of other leaders of the poor such as Johnnie Tillmon of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), helped work out the major elements of the platform for the Poor People’s Campaign. An important aspect of his leadership of the Campaign was to petition the government to pass an Economic Bill of Rights as a step to lift the load of poverty.

- \$30 billion annual appropriation for a real war on poverty
- Congressional passage of full employment and guaranteed income legislation [a guaranteed annual wage]
- Construction of 500,000 low-cost housing units per year until slums were eliminated³

The Campaign was organized into three phases. The first was to construct a shantytown, to become known as Resurrection City, on the National Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. With permits from the National Park Service, Resurrection City was to house anywhere from 1,500 to 3,000 Campaign participants. Additional participants would be housed in other group and family residences around the metropolitan area. The next phase was to begin public demonstrations and mass marches to protest the plight of poverty in this country. The third and final phase of the Campaign was to launch a nationwide boycott of major industries and shopping areas to prompt business leaders to pressure Congress into meeting the demands of the Campaign.

Although Rev. Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, on April 29, 1968, the Poor People's Campaign was launched. It began in Washington where key leaders of the campaign gathered for lobbying efforts and media events before dispersing around the country to formally initiate the regional start-ups of the nine caravans going to Washington: the "Eastern Caravan," the "Appalachia Trail," the "Southern Caravan," the "Midwest Caravan," the "Indian Trail," the "San Francisco Caravan," the "Western Caravan," the "Mule Train," and the "Freedom Train."⁴

The efforts of the Poor People's Campaign climaxed in the Solidarity Day Rally for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom on June 19, 1968. Fifty thousand people joined the 3,000 participants living in Washington to rally around the demands of the Poor People's Campaign on Solidarity Day. This was the first and only massive movement to take place during the Poor People's Campaign.

Bayard Rustin put forth a proposal for an "Economic Bill of Rights" for Solidarity Day that called for the federal government to:

- Recommit to the Full Employment Act of 1946 and legislate the immediate creation of at least one million socially useful career jobs in public service
- Adopt the pending housing and urban development act of 1968
- Repeal the 90th Congress's punitive welfare restrictions in the 1967 Social Security Act
- Extend to all farm workers the right—guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act—to organize agricultural labor unions
- Restore budget cuts for bilingual education, Head Start, summer jobs, Economic Opportunity Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Acts

The Legacy of MLK's Poor People's Campaign

Unfortunately, the unity and organization that King and the SCLC needed for the Poor People's Campaign to complete all three stages and succeed in forming the "new and unsettling force," disrupting "complacent national life," and achieving an economic bill of rights was not easy to come by. And the assassinations of Dr. King and Senator Robert Kennedy, a key proponent of the Campaign and Presidential candidate, only served to cripple the Campaign and greatly limit its political impact. King emphasized the need for poor whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans to unite. He asserted that the Poor People's Campaign would only be successful if the poor could come together across all the obstacles and barriers set up to divide them and could overcome the attention and resources being diverted because of the US engagement in the Vietnam War. In August 1967, he preached:

One unfortunate thing about [the slogan] Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context a slogan 'Power for Poor People' would be much more appropriate than the slogan 'Black Power.'

And the night before his assassination, in his “Promised Land” speech, he reminded the people that being disunited only benefitted the rich and powerful:

You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery.

Shortly before the Poor People’s Campaign came into fruition, King described the kairos moment they were in. His words still ring true today:

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee — the cry is always the same: “We want to be free.”... Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we’ve got to stay together. We’ve got to stay together and maintain unity. (April 1968)

King and his Poor People’s Campaign asked fundamental questions about the contradictions in his day, which many of the groups interested in re-igniting the Poor People’s Campaign, continue asking today. They are the problems of inequality, power and class:

We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the oil?’ You begin to ask the question, ‘Who owns the iron ore?’ You begin to ask the question, ‘Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that’s two-thirds water?’ These are words that must be said. (August 1967)

King exemplified the clarity, commitment, capability, and connectedness needed to build a movement to end poverty: I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out...This is the way I’m going.

This commitment is needed from all leaders interested in taking up King’s mantle. He demonstrated the difficulty and necessity of uniting the poor and dispossessed across race, religion, geography and other lines that divide. In our efforts to commemorate and build a Poor People’s Campaign for our times, we will undertake an analysis of the 1967-68 Campaign. We aim to stand on the shoulders of those who came before and put effort into learning lessons and getting into step together.

Notes

¹ Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered*. (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 90.

² Martin Luther King Jr., *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution* (sermon delivered at the National Cathedral [Episcopal] in Washington D.C. on March 31, 1968)

³ Thomas Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Politics and Culture in Modern America; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 343.

⁴ Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice*, 343.



A family living in Resurrection City
Washington, D.C., June 1968

Photo: Oliver F. Atkins, copyright Oliver Atkins Collection, Special Collections & Archives,
George Mason University Libraries

INTRODUCTION

I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out. ... This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. ... If it means dying for them, I'm going that way.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.,¹

Christian scripture warns of false prophets—leaders who impress but fail to produce “good fruit.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no false prophet; he both talked the talk and walked the walk. His words and work, message and ministry endure as models of theoretical clarity and deep faith, embodied in meaningful and effective action. His faith and clarity supported a commitment which allowed him to stay the course despite mounting death threats against him. In the final sermon before he was assassinated, King exemplifies this courage, refusing to step away from the righteousness and necessity of his work despite the likelihood of his death:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the prom-

1 Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 58

ised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.²

This legacy of clarity, commitment, faith and courage is a necessary and invaluable resource for thinking about social justice movements today.

In the last years of his life King anticipated many of the economic, political, religious, and ethical problems of the present times. In the journey from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to planning the Poor People's Campaign, he became more than just a black civil rights leader (for 1950s and 60s America), but a bearer of a still-relevant vision, set of values and mission for the entire nation and globe. Today he stands as a model of leadership and commitment for all who are righteously concerned about the crying injustice and inhumanity of abandonment in the face of abundance, of poverty in the midst of plenty.

His historic "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church in New York City reflected this broad vision and leadership. In his address he raised fundamental critiques of the Vietnam War, condemning it as an "enemy of the poor." While poor blacks and poor whites were set against each other at home, he noted, they were brought together in a brutal unity to massacre the poor in Vietnam—a "cruel manipulation of the poor." He described his prophetic stand against the war as part of a larger vision—a political movement against racism, militarism and economic injustice:

...we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered...³

In such statements King expressed a social vision that demanded both personal and social transformation, refusing any easy dichotomy between individual virtue and the character of our national life. Compassion was necessary, but needed to find expression socially: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 286.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 240-241.

and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” Instead, “A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.”⁴ King rejected both cynicism and sectarianism, arguing that more just foreign and domestic policies were both possible and necessary. The alternative was a road to “spiritual death.”

This broader vision and analysis is expressed in his strategic turn from a civil rights to human rights framework. He laid this out in an address to the SCLC staff in May of 1967, which deserves to be quoted at length:

We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We have been in a reform movement ... But after Selma and the voting rights bill, we moved into a new era, which must be the era of revolution. We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power...this means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together...you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others...the whole structure of American life must be changed. America is a hypocritical nation and [we] must put [our] own house in order.⁵

This analysis suggests the necessity of building a broad-based movement in order to make plausible any significant “redistribution of economic and political power.” The practical implication of this stance required the uniting of poor whites with poor people of color on the basis of what they have in common: their poverty and powerlessness.

On the one hand, this stance placed him at odds with those civil rights leaders who chose to remain silent about the injustice of the war in Vietnam and satisfied with stopping at civil rights and voting rights legislation that mainly benefited the black upper classes. King clearly recognized the social and class limitations of the legislative gains abolishing legalized Jim Crow segregation, asking, “What good is it to be able to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford the price of a hamburger?”⁶ Still today we see that the ‘white only’ sign in the restaurant window has been replaced by a new sign, that is, the menu with

4 Ibid., 241

5 Martin Luther King, Jr ‘To Chart Our Course for the Future’, address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, South Carolina, 1967, 2-3 (King Library and Archives, King Center, Atlanta).

6 “Leadership Conference Steps Up Anti-Poverty Efforts,” in *Civil Rights Monitor* Vol. 17 No.1 Winter 2007, www.civilrights.org/monitor/winter2007/art13p1.html

its itemized costs of meals. No matter what color your skin, there's no need to go into the restaurant if you can't afford the price of the food.

On the other hand, King's stance placed him at odds with many elements of the civil rights movement transitioning into a rigid Black Nationalist point of view.

One unfortunate thing about [the slogan] Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context a slogan 'Power for Poor People' would be much more appropriate than the slogan 'Black Power.'⁷

King recognized that for the load of poverty to be lifted, the thinking and behavior of a critical mass of the American people would have to be changed. To accomplish this change a "new and unsettling force" had to be formed. In late 1967, he described this force as a multi-racial "nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor." In other words, the poor would have to be organized to take action together around their immediate and basic needs, thereby becoming a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood, dispelling the myths and stereotypes upholding the mass complacency that leaves the root causes of poverty intact.

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize...against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.⁸

King proceeded to translate this analysis into activity. He got out from behind the pulpit and hit the pavement, launching the organizing drive of the Poor People's Campaign. He brought people together, across racial and regional lines to plan for the march to Washington. He aligned with the struggle of the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Their struggle for dignity, King suggested, was a dramatization of the issues

7 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 586.

8 Ibid, 650-651

taken up by the Poor People's Campaign—a fight by capable, hard workers against dehumanization, discrimination and poverty wages in the richest country in the world.

Once this organizing campaign took to the streets, the representatives of the “power and principalities” launched a series of countermoves to preempt what they perceived to be a legitimate social and political threat. Elements from every level of government conspired to have King killed. His international prestige combined with his real potential of bringing together three major currents at that time: (1) the proven southern-wide networks of civil rights organizations, (2) the national anti-war movement, and (3) the new energy of militant poor youth of the northern cities ghetto uprisings. Such a threat had to be stopped. This was clearly confirmed by the proceedings and conclusion of the 1999 trial on King's assassination in Memphis, largely ignored by the media. For more information see trial transcripts on the King Center web site, http://www.thekingcenter.org/KingCenter/Transcript_circuit_court.aspx and read the book by the King family's attorney, William F. Pepper's, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*.

In a number of respects the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 anticipated the challenges of our times. We are in a time of acute economic crisis, both in the United States and globally. The acuteness of the crisis has revealed its unique chronic aspects as expressed in the impoverishment of increasing segments of the middle income strata, the so-called “middle class.” Alongside rising hunger, homelessness and economic inequality we find hints of a growing protest movement at the grassroots level. At the same time, the current economic crisis has seriously questioned the prevailing ideological and theological orthodoxies, which have defined the limits of the “realistically” possible for at least the last forty years. The global financial collapse has shown that economic arrangements are contingent and fallible, and that we can legitimately imagine new and different ways to structure economic institutions. Without a movement issuing from the bottom demanding a more just set of arrangements, it is unlikely that the current crisis will be resolved in a direction qualitatively different than that of the past two decades, which saw a historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth upward. An accounting of the lessons of King's Poor People's Campaign and a study of their application to the contemporary struggles of the dislocated and dispossessed is thus both timely and necessary.

Almost all discourse about King has focused on his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, his theological critiques of Jim Crow, his oratory skills and even his shortcomings in gender politics. Little has been said about his commitment to ending poverty and even less about his vision for a Poor People's Campaign as a historic effort of the poor to unite across racial, gender, ethnic, religious and geographic lines. Little has been said about how, in devising the strategy and tactics of that Campaign, he drew on the historical lessons provided by similar efforts of previous campaigns, such as the struggles in the 1930s



Resurrection City day care center
Washington, D.C., June 1968

Photo: Oliver F. Atkins, copyright Oliver Atkins Collection, Special Collections & Archives,
George Mason University Libraries

of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, an organization of the poor cotton pickers united across color lines, and of the unemployed white and black veterans united in the famous Bonus March on Washington D.C. Nothing has been said about how this pivotal aspect of the Poor People's Campaign was a counter to the age-old 'divide and conquer' strategy applied as far back as the old slave plantation days. The slaveocracy utilized the poor whites to hold down the black slaves, while utilizing the wealth and power derived from the exploitation of the black slaves to entice and manipulate poor whites. For more information on these plantation politics see W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*.

Concerned about the lack of careful and systematic study of the Poor People's Campaign—both its goals and the reasons for its demise—in 2008 the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary decided to concentrate much of its energies on a yearlong study and historical analysis of King's last years. This project brought together leaders from different poor communities who agreed to join this effort because they felt that networking with other community and religious leaders would greatly strengthen their struggles and organizations. This joint exploration led to the Poverty Initiative's decision to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign with the development of a Poverty Scholars Program. With these leaders, the Poverty Initiative began by identifying and connecting with local organizing work in impoverished communities and holding strategic dialogues. Learning from the crippling effects of King's assassination, it becomes clear that there is a need to develop many "Martin Luther Kings." Such leaders are not developed naturally—they must be systematically educated and trained.

The Poverty Scholars Program has become the cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative, reflecting its mission to raise up "generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a movement, led by the poor, to end poverty,"—a mission inspired by the historical and strategic conclusions King arrived at about the poor united across color lines being "a new and unsettling force." One of the products of the strategic dialogues, immersion trips and classes sponsored by the Poverty Initiative was the compilation of the text before you.

The first part of the book includes chapters on the history of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968, textual reflection on the last week of Jesus Christ and the last year of King, and the importance of Art and Culture in the struggle to end poverty, along with an interview of Bertha Burres, Queen of the Mule Train. The second part of the book consists of essays submitted by those from what we call the modern day Sanitation Workers' struggles—organizations fighting for the same basic needs and demands for which the Poor People's Campaign fought.

A New and Unsettling Force hopes to help facilitate larger in-depth discussions and debates about this important period in history. Its purpose is to draw the kind of lessons that

would help guide us in our work on accomplishing what is most needed in this country today—the reigniting of the Poor People’s Campaign and finishing the unfinished business of King.



Religious groups at the Poor People's Campaign Solidarity Day
Washington, D.C., June 1968

Photo: Oliver F. Atkins, copyright Oliver Atkins Collection, Special Collections & Archives,
George Mason University Libraries



Walking to Save Lives

By Larry Cox, Kairos Center Co-Director

Mayor Adam O'Neal of Belhaven, NC marches to D.C. to draw attention to the rural health crisis in his town and across the country



*Bob Zellner, Mayor Adam O'Neal, and NAACP NC President Rev. Dr. William Barber at the Save Our Hospital Press Conference
Credit Byron Buck*

The Pungo District Hospital in Belhaven has been helping people in rural North Carolina give birth, get healthy and stay alive for more than 60 years. On July 1, Vidant, a corporation that took over in 2011 with a promise to “improve, sustain, and expand” the hospital, shut it down in the name of profitability. On July 5, a 48 year old woman named Portia Gibbs had a heart attack. With the closing of Pungo, the nearest hospital was now more than 80 miles away. She was unable to get there, and died in the back of an ambulance.

On July 14, Mayor Adam O'Neal, a self-described conservative Republican, began walking 273 miles from Belhaven to Washington, DC. He walked in Portia's name and for the countless people in rural areas

across the state and country who are being denied lifesaving health care by the pursuit of profit. Walking with him was 75 year old Bob Zellner, an early SNCC organizer and current Moral Mondays activist. Mayor O’Neal was sent off at the beginning of his walk and greeted at the end of it by Rev. William Barber, North Carolina NAACP President and a leader of the Forward Together/Moral Mondays movement. When the Mayor arrived in DC there was a rally and press conference on the national mall



that I attended. Rev. Barber, Bob Zellner, Mayor O’Neal, and all of us at the rally were united by a core belief — that stopping people from dying in the name of profit is not an issue of left or right but of right or wrong.

The denial of Medicaid expansion to more than 300,000 people in North Carolina was one of the factors in Vidant’s hospital closure decision. Twenty rural hospitals have closed recently in states refusing

medicaid expansion. At the DC rally Crystal Price, a 27 year old worker at Wendy’s with cervical cancer and no health coverage, spoke of what it means to put ideology ahead of lives. Rev. Barber ended the rally with the words of Langston Hughes’ call to “Let America be America Again” –

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

...

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

You can learn more about this fight for “America to be America again” and see how you can help at www.saveourhospital.org. For more information on the rural health crisis and Mayor O’Neal’s march, you can read this article from Al-Jazeera America.

“I cannot continue to live and work like this”: How Wal-Mart drove me to shut down Park Avenue

By Cantare Dayunt

Tuesday, Oct 21, 2014

http://www.salon.com/2014/10/21/i_cannot_continue_to_live_and_work_like_this_how_walmart_drove_me_to_shut_down_park_avenue/#

Despite having a job, I forgo electricity in the summer. My car was repossessed. My day-to-day life would shock you.



Cantare Davunt

I'm a worker at Wal-Mart, and last week risked arrest because I cannot continue to live and work like this at America's largest employer. In fact, I actually was arrested in New York City last week outside of Alice Walton's luxury penthouse apartment. In protests that shut down Park Avenue in Manhattan and the intersection of 18th and K streets in D.C. yesterday, 41 other Wal-Mart workers and our supporters took our calls for change directly to the people who own Wal-Mart – the Waltons.

Here's my story. I was recently promoted to be a customer service manager at my store in Apple Valley, Minnesota. But even with that promotion, I'm paid only \$10.10 an hour – about \$322 a week. I'm pretty frugal, but still, I am constantly deciding which bill isn't absolutely necessary so I can pay rent.

In the summer, I forgo electricity. Other months, it's my cellphone bill. For a few months this year, it was car payments.

I thought that I was making the juggle work. Then, in August, my car was repossessed. It has been both devastating and humiliating. In Minnesota, it's hard to do anything to get ahead without a car. I need to take public transportation for three hours each day so I can get to work, and I don't have a way to visit my family or friends.

That's my life – and the life of hundreds of thousands of workers like me who make less than \$25,000 a year at the country's largest employer: no electricity, no phone and no car.

One week, after I paid rent, I only had \$6 leftover for groceries and bills. That is no way to live. Now, I'm looking for a third roommate in my small two-bedroom apartment to try to stretch paychecks.

That's why Wal-Mart workers and OUR Walmart members launched a petition for Wal-Mart to publicly commit to pay associates \$15 an hour and have full-time, consistent hours. To date, workers from 1,710 stores have signed the petition.

We shouldn't have to live and work like this when we work for the largest employer in the country, with \$16 billion in profits and run by the richest family in the country.

Earlier this week, Wal-Mart CEO Doug McMillon made headlines when he indicated that Wal-Mart will increase its minimum wage, impacting about 6,000 workers, according to the company. That's a nice gesture – but it doesn't do nearly enough. It doesn't do anything for workers at my store in Minnesota who make a few cents above the minimum wage and struggle to feed and clothe their families each month.

Cantare Davunt, 30, is a Walmart customer service manager from Apple Valley, Minnesota.

What Happens When an American City Shuts Off Its Residents' Water?

By Laura Gottesdiener

Oct 28, 2014

<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/news/a32575/maureen-taylor-detroit-water/>

At least 27,000 households in Detroit have had their water turned off this year. Maureen Taylor says that's unacceptable.



Maureen Taylor, Credit Messiah Rhodes

After decades of organizing for the rights of low-income people in Detroit, city resident Maureen Taylor is facing one of her biggest battles yet: the fight to ensure all residents have access to running water. Earlier this year, embattled by bankruptcy and under the governance of an unelected emergency manager, Detroit began block-by-block mass water shutoffs for residents behind on their bills. In total, 27,000 households have had their water shut off this year.

Taylor, who acts as the state chairperson for the all-volunteer Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, invited the United Nations to investigate whether the shutoffs constituted a human rights violation. Earlier this month, two U.N. experts agreed that they violated international human rights law and called upon the city to immediately reinstate water service for residents unable to pay.

But the U.N. officials don't have the power to compel the city to reinstate water service, so, in thousands of households, the water remains off — and Taylor's fight continues. She spoke to Cosmopolitan.com about the situation in Detroit.

A long time ago — and this is before this new set of mass water shutoffs — when water started to be shut off in places like Highland Park, a separate city that is surrounded by Detroit, we would tell people, "If your water gets cut off on Monday, we'll show you how to turn it back on on Tuesday." In those days, there was just a single nozzle that would come up through the grass. When they turned it off, we had the right kind of key to turn it back on again. Then we would put rocks and cement on top of the nozzle so that when the water department came out again several weeks or months later to re-disconnect it, it would be much harder. So that's what we did for a very long time, and we showed people how to do it.

I recall many years ago when I was a little girl, I saw somebody in a contraption called an iron lung. It was a boy who had polio, and the iron lung breathed for him. This family was a neighbor. Later, this woman's electricity was turned off, so what she did was she reconnected her electricity. When the neighbors went over to find out what was going on, they found this woman standing behind the door, and she said, "I had to save my little boy's life. And as a mother, I am responsible for him." That stuck with me. So even though we're not able to turn water on as readily and as quickly as we used to do it in the past [because of new water and sewage infrastructure], that's what a mother or father is supposed to do. And that's why we asked the United Nations to come in and review whether there were any violations of international law.

There's a document that's called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was signed December 1948. What it says in Article 25 is that human beings have certain rights that are inalienable rights — and I think somebody else used that word a long time ago. So there's a right to affordable housing; there's a right to adequate living; there's a right to an existence that does not challenge your right to breathe. There's the right to some kind of health care, so if I fall down and get hit by a car, nobody should ask me if I have health insurance. They should take me to a hospital and ask me where it hurts. That's the way it's supposed to operate. Remember: poor folks have children; they have feelings; they have rights; they have aspirations; they have futures; they have anger; they have all of the things that everybody else has. And we should not be — that constituent group should not be — harmed because they don't have as much money.

One of the women whose water was shut off had four little girls. She had two jobs, two full-time jobs, and a part-time job on the weekend. But as the economy began to shut down, she began to lose work. She lost her part-time job, and then she lost one of her full-time jobs, and then she lost the other full-time job. And after two to four weeks, she started to lose utilities. She lost the lights and then the water was turned off, but the gas was still on. Well, the children went to school, and they smelled a little ripe. Teachers began to notice it, and they sent protective services to the house. After a short investigation, protective services decided that it would be best for the four little girls to be moved. So they took the oldest child and put her in a foster care family for \$465 a month. They took the next one and put her in a second foster care home for \$465 a month. The two littlest girls were very small, and so they put them in a foster care home together for \$465 a month each. So that's \$465 times four, almost \$1,800 [paid by the federal government]. And the water bill was \$1,900. So in the first month, they had just about paid it. The children were separated from their mother for 18 months.

I'm ashamed of what they do in the United States against poor people. It's shocking and shameful. If you can't wash your hands, there are certain things that are going to happen. And there are certain diseases, certain germs that will occur in places where hands are not able to be clean. Well, we have 17,000 or 18,000 families that can't wash their hands! If you can't flush your toilet on a regular basis, there's certain things that are going to happen. If you can't wash your hair on a regular basis, there are certain things that are going to happen. If you can't get into the bathroom, and wash your body, there are certain things that are going to happen. After three, four, five, or six days, we are looking at disease potentials. Enterovirus, the regular flu season is coming up, colds, measles, and everything else, all these things are prevalent if you cannot wash your hands.

I'm ashamed of what they do in the United States against poor people. It's shocking and shameful. I'm ashamed and shocked at the kinds of devastating environments and existences that poor people are allowed to live in. I've traveled around the country, and I cry when I go down south and I see poor, black women living in shanty houses with corrugated roofs. I cry when I go to Texas and I see little Mexican children picking pickles, and they are 2 or 3 years old. I'm incensed when I go to Arizona and see Native American children standing along the road selling turquoise. This is supposed to be the richest country in the world, and we should not live this way.

I'm trying to retire in the next few years, but between now and then, I'm a tough opponent, and I will be going out of here fighting this devil every step of the way. We do not have to live this way.

Ferguson and the Watts Uprising

By Willie Baptist and Foster Pickney

The killing of a black youth in Ferguson is not an isolated racist event. It is part of a bigger picture, the causes and effects of which suggest a kind of solution that is much broader than what is being discussed right now in the mass media.



On September 9th, 2014, John Wessel-McCoy, our Poor People's Campaign Program Organizer, interviewed Foster Pinkney, a student at Union Theological Seminary and a Poverty Scholars fellow with the Kairos Center, and Willie Baptist, our Poverty Scholar in Residence and Coordinator of the Poverty Scholars Program, about the conditions in Ferguson, MO and the political developments there. Foster had just returned from a visit to Ferguson to bear prophetic witness to the events there with members of the Union Student Senate. Willie Baptist was asked to reflect on what's happening in Ferguson in the context of his experiences of the uprisings in poor black urban communities in the 1960s.

John Wessel-McCoy: Foster, can you talk some about what stood out to you from what you saw and learned in Ferguson when you were down there?

Foster J. Pinkney: One of the things that hit me the most was going to the site where Mike Brown was shot. What struck us was how small this place was. It was just a small community. He was killed in between two apartment buildings on a narrow twisty street. And what was powerful for us, is that we had all grown up in neighborhoods like this.

This was working class people that worked hard to get these apartments and took care of their neighborhood. But they had to come home to a body in the middle of their street just ten, twelve feet away from their doorway. And the fact that his body lay there for four hours in the heat in the middle of the day, when people were going to and from work and kids were coming home and all that...that was the frustration, that's where the anger grew out of. That they just wanted to throw his body in the back of a car because the [the police] were afraid to bring the ambulance there. Even though St. Louis was fifteen minutes away, [the police] were

just afraid of the crowd and they didn't know what to do. They were trying to gather evidence and get themselves together while the body was lying in the street. The crowd did grow and they started to gather because the anger that this body was just laying there in the middle of their street in their community was just too much, especially for the younger kids around Mike Brown's age. [The police] did, actually, just end up putting his body in the back of an SUV; they didn't bring an ambulance in.

That's when the so-called riots started because it was just too much for the community I think. To see his body just lying there, disrespected in that way and the fact that he was shot with his hands up. That was the horror, that he had given up and that he wasn't armed and he was still shot. And what can you do with the police that will shoot you when you have given up and you're unarmed? How do you protect yourself? How do you live in that condition? I think that opened a lot of eyes up, and that certainly opened our eyes up when we saw where he was shot and saw the makeshift memorials that had been set up.

We also went to the QT [Quick Trip] around the corner where all of the protests were staged. The woman who showed us around – I didn't get her name – she's a PhD student at Eden [Theological Seminary in St. Louis] and she co-pastors with her husband in a local church. She was based at that QT, handing out water, basically providing triage, pouring milk on people who had gotten tear gassed and getting people who had been hit with rubber bullets back to their homes and all that. She was with a group of pastors in the back taking care of people and giving pastoral care. So she gave us a different perspective on what had happened. She comes out of that community and she said the way it was represented on TV was the opposite of what she experienced – just a small working class community where if there is gang activity or drugs, it's not on the scale where someone can say it demands that kind of police presence. And when we saw the street where the tanks, and the tear gas, and the rubber bullets had been used, that was shocking also because it was just so small. It was a four lane street, but it wasn't a highway and there are shops on both sides. Tear gas was landing on people's front yards. On Twitter they would always point out when the police would say to people to return to their homes, before curfew and before the tear gas started, and people would shout back, "This is our home." And literally it was. We can't return home! This is where we live.

At an event organized by Metropolitan Congregations United we met a woman named Sierra Smith who lived in the Canfield apartments where Mike Brown was shot. She talked about her kids sleeping in their clothing – how they had to be on the edge, always ready to leave, how Ferguson had shut down their school system, so these children were stuck at home all day in that tense atmosphere with tear gas seeping through their windows. It gives you a sense of how small this little community was and how vicious that response was when there are families there and children there getting tear gassed out of their own homes.

JWM: What insights do you think you can share in terms of the terrain, of the conditions there, in terms of what really isn't being talked about or is being misrepresented or is being missed through the mass media coverage, whether that's social media or the corporate media?

FJP: The first take that I have is that this is a long-term problem. On the news it seemed like this sudden burst of anger. What we don't realize is that these places like Ferguson are basically modern ghettos where people are housed and patrolled in a military way, so the police had a military response to this uprising. And it was the constant living under these conditions where you can be killed or arrested, at the drop of a hat for no reason, that's what led to these protests – that's what led to that anger and why they responded in that way. The fact that Mike Brown was the last straw in that way, that's not being reported. They are not talking about the history of suppression and oppression in just that small community.

JWM: How did what you saw, what you experienced, impact you personally? How do you situate yourself in this?

FJP: I was really angry just seeing where Mike Brown was shot. It was very much like the community I grew up in where there are poor people, but they're not criminals because of their poverty and their blackness. The fact that they're viewed that way by people who are supposed to be protecting them brought up deep anger. I saw the same anger in the protest there and figuring out for myself how to transform that anger into action that can be sustained has been difficult for me.

There's also the frustration- the whiter communities we were working with just didn't understand privilege. They didn't understand white supremacy, and they didn't understand what was happening ten minutes away.

We went to this restaurant and this waitress, once she found out we were seminarians, sort of opened up about her experience living in Ferguson in that community and how when she went to work, she had to shut all that down. Because she was working where everyone else was white, she couldn't speak to her experience about what was going on. And how she had two boys that she was raising and how to talk to them about dealing with the police and dealing with murder in their neighborhood and that was powerful for me because there are so many women in that situation. There are so many black parents that have to have that talk with their kids again about how to deal with the police, but what do you tell them when putting your hands up and surrendering isn't enough anymore? So, what's left?

So I brought that sadness back I guess. And that rage is still there, but I am trying to come to terms with how to transform that, work with that.

JWM: I want to shift here to Willie and get some of your reflections. And it may be good to just set a bit of the context and for you to give an overview of your relationship to Watts in 1965.

Willie Baptist: Well, I'm 66 now and I was 17 years old, growing up in Watts, just a year younger than Michael Brown, when particularly oppressive police relationships in the black ghettos triggered mass uprisings in Watts. Aggressive police acts and killings had precipitated smaller outbreaks of protests in black ghettos such as in Harlem, which predated the larger uprisings of the last half of the 1960s. However, it was the much larger 1965 ghetto uprising in Watts, California that inaugurated the largest violent social upheaval since the United States Civil War.

Watts was a mostly segregated poor black neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. It was one of poorest, if not the poorest, communities in the entire state of California. The uprising erupted in the small Watts community. However, the police and the National Guard cordoned off an area much larger than Watts. Watts had anywhere between 40- to 50,000 people, but the area they cordoned off had from 400- to 500,000 people, which was a broader black community. It was an area in which the events, which were sparked in Watts, began to spread throughout South Central Los Angeles.

Back then we were also confronted with a militarized police force backed by the National Guard. Military helicopters and other such equipment that had been used in Vietnam were deployed. The accumulation over the years of abusive police practices reached a boiling point at which pent-up rage and mass resistance were unleashed. Incidents of the escalated movement of police and military forces, the mass arrests and the killings left an indelible stain on my brain. Today I'm still a student of what happened during those times of ghetto revolts in Watts and throughout the country. Since then, I've been able to come to conclusions about things I couldn't have come to while in the midst of those events. Even so I still find myself personally reliving these

events every time I hear about police abuses, particularly as it concerns black youth who are the dead victims of those abuses. So the rage I've been building up since the age of 17 is still there and it's often re-triggered. I find it hard not to respond emotionally to these situations and I tend to revisit those times over and over again.

JWM: What kind of comparisons do you think we can make between Ferguson and Watts?

WB: The global 2008 crisis has given rise to mass economic and social dislocations and an acceleration of police abuses and violence. This has precipitated resistance and significant protests – so called “riots” – in black communities.

I'm reminded of the impoverished economic conditions in Watts during the time of the uprising where we had upwards of 60-70% unemployment among the youth. Unemployment and bad economic conditions basically described the black ghettos throughout the country. It's clear that what made the ghetto the ghetto was this economic situation, not just police racial oppression. This is true despite the official findings of the riot commission set up by President Johnson. The Kerner Commission [officially called the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, appointed July 28, 1967 by Lyndon B. Johnson] characterized the ghetto uprisings as “race riots,” as essentially caused by the continuing divide between white America and black America. This finding appealed to and reinforced a historically evolved, extremely limited and emotionally charged, racialized view in American thinking.

The killing of Michael Brown and other similar killings have triggered the feelings of rage that have existed deep inside of me dating as far back as my traumatic experiences of Watts. So reflecting on what I've come to know about the Watts situation and the Ferguson situation and all the other recent “race riots,” I see how mainstream media has limited most people's view of these outbreaks. They have the people only focusing on and discussing the tree and not the “forest of factors” involved in these processes- the complex of connected issues and problems coming out of the present economic situation. The conditions that gave rise to the Watts uprisings are today beginning to develop and worsen in other distressed communities including working class white communities. And bad economic relations give rise to bad police relations and we can expect the increase and spread of explosive events like what's happening in Ferguson.

In the '60s the impoverished conditions in the black ghettos found expression in the mass resistance of the uprisings. One of the main forms of mass participation, for young and old, was looting- the all-out violation of legal property relations. People protested by taking what they needed economically. They took things like food, clothing, baby diapers, and so on. That right there shows the relationship of the ghetto uprisings to the economic situation. And while poverty among blacks and other nonwhites has always been disproportionately greater and more concentrated in segregated ghettos, barrios, and other deprived areas, poor whites have always in absolute terms outnumbered poor blacks and other poor nonwhites.

JWM: What do you mean by the “forest of factors”?

WB: I mean we've got to put events such as the Ferguson outbreak into context. It's connected to the stepped up police activities in relationship to the Occupy eruptions, which included many students who are accumulating debt and facing a situation where they have very low economic prospects. So they took initiative to protest these worsening conditions and then that reverberated across the country in terms of other Occupies and then we witnessed the police reaction to that. But also globally with the role of the police in the situations in Greece and in Spain. And the police brutality in the favelas has intensified in Brazil. Here every year, something like 400 youth, or black youth, are killed during police activities, but in Brazil you have

thousands, I mean thousands and thousands, dying. Vast sections of the youth in the Mideast and in northern African countries like Egypt and Tunisia are unemployed and educated with little or no prospect of being absorbed into the economy. With no jobs and an imperiled future they are being compelled into a fight for their lives and livelihoods. They are finding themselves in the forefront of these uprisings and being beaten back by police and military activities. And there's this relationship between economic conditions and the problems of race relations and the problems of police relations. But the discussions about these problems are limited in such a way that their full scope and their causes are not understood and dealt with.

JWM: Were there similar limits in the discussions about and the responses to the Watts uprising?

WB: When you take a deeper look at what happened during the '60s black ghetto uprisings you see three major responses that were of major significance and hold some very important lessons for understanding the social problems we are dealing with today. First, the largest response was an all-white, all-classes, Law-and-Order backlash to the police-sparked mass black ghetto protests. As I mentioned, during the Watts uprising I also saw a militarized police force. Like what has gotten a lot attention in the media around Ferguson, we had this militarization of police and it was stepped up in response to the unfolding of the 1960s' ghetto uprisings throughout the country. Like similar governmental programs today, LEAA [Law Enforcement Assistance Administration] programs were set up to further promote, among other things, this militarization with police departments purchasing military gear and weaponry. The all-white all-classes Law-and-Order backlash movement really served to strengthen these police policies – it was their main social base of support.

JWM: And it's no mistake that the state of California produced Reagan out of Watts. It was Reagan's launching pad.

WB: Yes, Ronald Reagan's reactionary gubernatorial campaign successfully used the mass Law-and-Order backlash sentiments. He campaigned loud and long against what he called the "black criminals of Watts" and he was elected Governor on that basis of it. The all-classes, all white Law-and-Order movement also added to Richard Nixon's successful Presidential campaign declaring that this movement constituted the new "Silent Majority."

The second response, which was related to the all-white response, was the all-black, all-classes Black Power movement, which eventually resulted in the advocacy of black capitalism, black businesses, more black cops and the election of impotent black politicians. It was reduced to being utilized as an added excuse and supplement for the backlash despite its legitimate but limited and ineffectual protests of police wrongdoings. With the lack of political consciousness I had at that time, I got caught up in the Black Power movement. So I also got caught up into this cruel manipulation of the Powers That Be.

And both of these two responses fed off each another and combined to maintain and deepen the historic disunity and mutual fear between poor whites and the poor blacks. This disunity has meant the pre-emption of the united action of the social forces necessary for attacking the exploitive and oppressive economic conditions and the racism that have largely created the ghettos and the bad police-community relations in the first place.

Racist attitudes and fears continue to dominate our thinking. And the Kerner Commission reinforced and encouraged this thinking as well as the two racialized movements this thinking contributed to.

It is a thinking that has the mass of the people seeing only the surface and separateness of things. It is a thinking that is fixated on a tree and not the forest or at most it only sees the separate trees and not their

connections to each other and to the ecosystem of the forest as a whole. The prevailing focus on racial oppression as a factor isolated from the economy as a whole is derived from this long established mindset and in turn reinforces a narrow and categorical thought process and approach. And this approach like a broken record keeps us repeating history, keep us on a seemingly interminable merry-go-round of police killings of black youths and then black protests with a few left or liberal whites in support.

But there was importantly an attempt at a third response to police brutality and the ghetto uprisings. It was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s launching and organizing of the nonviolent Poor People's Campaign, which aimed at uniting the poor and dispossessed across color lines on the basis of their common economic needs. Most strategically, this included poor whites. This third response was tremendously crippled by the political assassination of Dr. King. All the evidence presented in the 1999 civil court case [King vs. Jowers] proved that Dr. King was a victim of police and military violence. The case proved that a poor white man was falsely scapegoated as a diversionary device. The American public, both black and white, was susceptible to believing in this false accusation, which had been manufactured by federal agencies, particularly the FBI.

The trial also proved that Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign, his last initiative, posed both a political threat and an immediate military threat involving the demoralization of the front-line US troops in Vietnam, which consisted mostly of poor whites and poor people of color. The threat on these two levels was not about Dr. King the man but about the message he communicated through the launch and organization of the campaign.

JWM: Those last years of King's life – his opposition to the Vietnam War and especially the Poor People's Campaign, they aren't talked about very often. What do you think the significance of that is?

WB: I think the obscuring of the last years of King's life is obscuring the fact that neither the "right-conservatives" nor the "left-progressives" are in power. It's the dominance of big capital that manipulates both left and right from a more or less center position, manipulates both the liberal-progressives and the conservatives, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. This manipulation is the application of the political formula of divide and conquer specifically evolved out of US history.

Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois in his magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction*, explained the origins of this doctrine. He described what could be called the old "Plantation Politics." Du Bois showed us how the poor whites were used to police and control the black slaves and how the super-profits attained through the super-exploitation of the black slaves were used to entice and bribe the poor whites. Throughout history and in my lifetime this formula of power and control has been replayed over and over again. And even in my militancy in joining the Black Power movement and resisting these attacks on black youths, I unknowingly played the part of manipulated pawn in a much larger power game. At that time I didn't have the political consciousness to get out of the box of this kind of formula of power.

Dr. King on the other hand developed a consciousness that allowed him to begin to get out of the box of being another manipulated pawn piece. His third response was an alternative to the police riots and the two race-based all-classes responses I talked about earlier. His response was a direct challenge to the replay of the old "Plantation Politics" of racial division and manipulation of the bottom classes Du Bois described, the old pattern of power and control that has evolved out of US history. His response was a strategic departure from a Civil Rights Movement that was largely limited to ending only de jure segregation and discrimination, or legal apartheid, in the United States. His response was to begin to pull together the economically exploited and impoverished sections of all ethnic and racial groups despite the de facto segregation of these communities in the ghettos, the barrios, the slums, etc. He was assassinated before he could complete this mission behind his message.

Military intelligence had done surveys during the course of the uprisings and they found that despite his well-known commitment to the nonviolent philosophy, Dr. King was polled as the most respected of all the leaders, by [even] the most militant and youthful rioters. Malcolm X came second. Dr. King had gained this respect because of his bravery in risking death and going to jail, because of the religious values deeply embedded element in most everybody even if they don't go to church. By the time of the uprisings he had been awarded the Noble Peace Prize and acknowledged as the main leader of a fairly wide network of civil rights organizations. By taking up opposition to the Vietnam War he at once moved to the forefront of the largest struggle for peace in US history. All told, between the ghetto uprisings, the Civil Rights movement, and the peace movement he had become a leader of the three major currents of resistance in the country, along with having attained international legitimacy and influence. With his launching of the Poor People's Campaign he threatened to unite these major currents against the economic interests and foreign and domestic policies of the Powers That Be.

In my study of Dr. King's last years I see how he came to understand the interconnections of the major problems he called the triple evils: the evil of economic poverty, the evil of militarism, and the evil of racism, and how they are all inseparable and you can't resolve one without resolving the others. What he came to realize is that all those issues and more are embodied in the position of the poor. And if you can unite the poor you are uniting and dealing with all of those issues at the same time. The way the issues of poverty and police brutality have been framed is as separate categorical silos. Poverty is looked at as something over here, the housing crisis and all the other symptoms of poverty—the healthcare crisis, food and water crises, the crisis in education, and the deadly consequences of environmental degradation and disaster for the poor are all seen as disconnected issues. This superficial and false view serves to preempt the kind of motion that Dr. King was trying to enlighten and organize.

The killing of a black youth in Ferguson is not an isolated racist event. It is part of a bigger picture, the causes and effects of which suggest a kind of solution that is much broader, and much more encompassing, than what is being discussed right now in the mass media. And what is being discussed right now is more or less a repeat of history.

Since 2008 and with the continuing stagnation and devastation of global economic crisis, similar conditions of economic depression and political repression that caused the mass eruptions in Watts and other ghettos during the late '60s are spreading to white neighborhoods. We are now beginning to witness more political instability globally and more eruptions of protests breaking out globally.

The new situation is requiring more than ever that we reignite the strategic approach Dr. King inaugurated in the last years of his life. I think that one main lesson we must take from the 1968 Poor People's Campaign is that we do not need just one Martin Luther King but that we need instead many Martin Luther Kings. In other words, we need the replication of many leaders who are clear and committed to his strategic approach of uniting the poor and dispossessed as a leading rallying point for the marshaling a broad and powerful movement to abolish all want, all injustices and human indignities.

JWM: On Dr. King, you know we are working toward reigniting Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign for today. The fundamental strategy for Dr. King and the Poor People's Campaign then and now is uniting the poor and dispossessed across color lines on the basis of what they have in common. The killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson really exemplifies the disunity of the poor and dispossessed; it's an important and clear sign of the relationship between race and class in this country. How do we approach Ferguson and the many other Ferguson's that we anticipate are going to break out as conditions worsen?

WB: This is the reason we need more Martin Luther King-like leaders who can see the more complicated, deeper and bigger picture of social reality in terms of the interconnections of the problems and injustices and the necessary in-separateness of their solutions. Corporate mainstream and elite media would have us not see the truth of this reality. That is why they are focusing public attention on the police killing of Michael Brown and the response of protests in such a way as to present the problem as an isolated one and simply about race. National and global debate has been focused on the images of a militarized police force and the issue of police brutality in a way that limits the discussion to only violations of civil rights and covers up the deepening problems in communities like Ferguson of violations of economic human rights. The worsening economic situation is resulting in an increasing death toll of poor people, including from among growing ranks of poor whites. If you are a youth with no decent job prospect and therefore join the armed forces to die needlessly in war, along with the massive numbers of war deaths of unemployed and poor Iraqis and Afghans, you are just as dead as if you were shot dead by the police. The same is true with drug-related killings and deaths from the epidemic of diabetes. According to the World Food Program more people die from hunger than in the wars that are currently being waged around the world.

So I think that it's incumbent upon us to take up the mantle of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., not just the man but the message of his ministry, which would mean going beyond the leaves and branches of social problems and getting at the root cause. It would mean stepping from behind the pulpit and hitting the pavement and working toward the true and just solution.

Because otherwise, the problems as have been manifested in Ferguson are going to be framed in the way that they can't be solved...They can only be repeated again and again. Like Dr. King once stated, we are not going to have the accurate prescription for the disease if our diagnosis of it is inaccurate. In other words, if your diagnosis of Ferguson is that it is just a race issue, when in fact it involves and is connected to all these other questions, then you're not going to be able to build the right kind of solution to the problem, we're just going to have to relive the inhumane horrors of history.

JWM: Looking at the media coverage of this event, I don't know how many times I've heard someone in the news say, "Ferguson is an example of how we as a nation are overdue for a real deep and honest conversation about race." And they say it over and over again. I really want to know exactly what people imagine that conversation would be like and who would be having that conversation. The events that happened in the wake of Michael Brown's murder, and his being gunned down, strike me in a very personal way. I grew up not very far at all from St. Louis. And coming from where I come from in down state rural Illinois – I see what's been happening to my home town: the real economic devastation that's been happening there and that's been impacting people across color lines, always disproportionately impacting the black community in my home town, but more and more becoming something that has a generalized impact.

I know Illinois better than Missouri, but it's true in both states that if you go outside the cities, things are getting tough there, and a big thing that is not being said is how much this violent repression and control of communities of color through the police and the criminal justice system there are just as much about how you control poor whites and the white masses. The justification for this system of repression can, and will, be turned against anybody, ultimately, as things get worse. It's a real clear example of "plantation politics", but I don't think it's a done deal, I don't think that the dis-unity of the poor and dispossessed is inevitable.

I find it really curious that even when people try to suggest this question around class and the class nature of Ferguson, there's almost a knee jerk reaction to say, "Hold on, you're not talking about race." And I think that's very interesting. That response really indicates something about how dominant views or understandings

are propagated and sustained. I think the challenge of leadership today is to figure out how to tie all these issues together.

WB: There are parallels in history that we can learn from in understanding and responding to the problems of economic and racial injustices that we are being increasingly confronted with today. One is the struggles and organizing of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the 1930s. Due largely to the economic devastations of the Great Depression, which hit people no matter what their color, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union out of necessity brought together poor whites who were influenced by the Klan and poor blacks who were influenced by the Marcus Garvey movement. They came together based on what they had in common, and the agitation around that allowed for a discussion of race that got more to its deep economic roots and political complexity. W. E. B. Du Bois's discussion in his 1935 *Black Reconstruction*, is a deeper discussion of the questions of race and class and the struggles around them as they found expression during that pivotal period of US history following the Civil War. His magnum opus reveals how he had developed a far deeper grasp of race than his earlier understanding of racial oppression. His more famous and more often referenced book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, from 1904, discussed race relations separate from economics and class relations. In contrast *Black Reconstruction* is not just a discussion of how Wall Street and big industrial capital, after abolishing slave capital and through defeating Reconstruction, came to dominate the country economically and politically. It is also a discussion of the central role race played in that violent drama. He describes how both Slave Power and eventually Wall Street utilized the time-worn "Plantation Politics" formula to manipulate and ultimately defeat a disunited class of the dispossessed, that is, property-less, black and white workers.

You can't understand class and its consequence, poverty, in this country unless you understand race and you can't understand race and its consequences, like police brutality, unless you understand class. All of the one-sided racial propaganda that has been bought and paid for by the rich ruling class down through US history has led to the current limited appreciation and approach we are witnessing today in the responses to injustices like those in Ferguson. If we are going to change the prevailing misconception of race and class that most people have and if we are going to change the wrong and dehumanizing direction this country is heading, we've got to organize to change it – there's got to be an organized effort to do it. The solution to these injustices is not going to come spontaneously.

And that effort has to include an understanding of the relationship of conditions with consciousness. In conditions where people are being evicted and laid off no matter their skin color, the discussion of race has to be much deeper than simply white people don't like black people. And yet that's the predominant way people understand the problems that beset this country. This thinking is no easy thing to shake and change because it's historically rooted in a culture and in systems of education and entertainment dominated and paid for by a profit-making and poverty-producing economic system. This economic system and dominant thinking are upheld by an exploiting and ruling class which has vested interests in the maintenance of that system and thinking.

And so today, when incidents like this happen, you have basically two battlefields: one is in the streets and the other is the new global media – Facebook, Twitter, and so on – that has opened up an interactive ideological and political battle on the mental terrain of world public opinion. We didn't have that kind of global interactive mass media in the '60s, so we couldn't fight on that level. In this new era of ideological and political conflict, the struggle for the unity of the poor and dispossessed must be fought on both offline and online. In other words, Dr. King's concept of "a freedom church of the poor" will have no walls and everyone will be welcome into this fight for human dignity and abolition of all poverty forever.

But without an organized effort to wage a battle on that ideological field alongside the battlefields in places like Ferguson, people are going to respond in a way that doesn't resolve but in fact prolongs the problems. What makes matters worse is that events like those in Ferguson are going to continue to happen and multiply as the economic and social conditions that give rise to them get worse. History teaches that bad economic relations give rise to bad police relations as well as other forms of social and political oppression.

That's why we have to finish the unfinished business of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by reigniting the Poor People's Campaign along the lines of the key principle he preached and practiced: uniting the poor and dispossessed across color lines as a "new and unsettling force," the only social force that can awaken the critical mass of the American people necessary if we're going to abolish unnecessary human misery and human indignities. A new Poor People's Campaign is needed more now than ever. It would highlight and unite the struggles around needs we have in common. It would constitute a force whose interest it is to abolish racial and all other inequalities and prejudices in the context of these struggles. This campaign would provide a space and an opportunity to have the newly emerging leaders, the particularly young leaders, unite in strategic dialogue and coordination of their efforts.

The initial goal of this Poor People's Campaign must be the identification and uniting of leaders in these different communities that are hurting and that, in one form or another, are facing police violence or economic violence or whatever the form that the violence takes. What's needed is what we didn't have in the uprisings in the '60s: leadership from people of all races that could understand the issue beyond just the issue of race. This is what we're challenged with. If you study American history, the basis of police brutality, and the racial elements to it, is this alignment that has this all-white across-class union versus the all-black union or all-people of color union. To me that unity is the social base of racial injustice and conflict. The disproportionate mass incarceration of people of color, all the different discriminatory situations, even the attack on immigration, are grounded, are all based on this kind of racial divide that has been maintained by every possible means. The whole idea of class unity of the poor and dispossessed cuts into and breaks up the predominant all-white all-classes unity, whether it manifests itself in complacency or in repressive measures. In other words, the unity of the poor and dispossessed means disunity with class exploitation and the oppression of the black community, all the communities of color, as well as the white community. And that is necessary to break up the social base of police brutality and eliminate it altogether. As long as we fall into the trap of this racial divide, like developing an isolated and all black movement that can then be used by the right wing element, we won't be able to avoid repeating history.

I see this period of unprecedented and tremendously productive technological revolution and great global economic shift as a moment of great danger and great opportunity. This is indeed another kairos moment to build a new movement of global proportions to move the world to a better place with dignity and justice for all of God's children. Every major turn in history attended by great economic shifts has necessitated and made possible changes in economics, politics, and ideology. This kairos moment is giving rise to a great opportunity to develop a new theology and a new consciousness and new theories and a new and powerful social movement for social transformation. And while we can expect more Fergusons and worldwide social eruptions as economic conditions continue to deteriorate, we can also expect that people are going to question things much deeper and if we can answer those questions, we can organize a network of leaders and teachers who can then agitate. One day when asked by a youth "What do we do?" Frederick Douglass answered, "Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!" Well today we need to be agitating, agitating, agitating so as to educate and activate toward a deeper and broader understanding of the race question, the economic question, the global question and how the injustices defining all these questions connect.



The Right to Not Be Poor: The Growing Global Struggle for Economic Human Rights

By Willie Baptist, Shailly Barnes and Chris Caruso
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"We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men [all human beings] are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men [human societies], deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness." -- Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, July 4, 1776

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate--we cannot consecrate--we can not hallow--this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work, which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." -- Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln, November 19, 1863

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

-- Article 25, United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948

"We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society."

-- Address to SCLC Staff Conference, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., May 1967

"We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists."

--"Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Dr. King, March 31, 1968

I. THE NEW GLOBAL POOR AND THE CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

The United States today is rent with a profound leadership crisis caused by a profound economic crisis. This crisis has revealed the fundamental weakness in our global economic order: although we have the technical means to produce an unheard of abundance, we continue to witness a massive expansion of poverty and deepening economic inequality.

On the one hand, the depth and comprehensiveness of technological changes in production, circulation and communications have made it possible to advance the pursuit of human achievement and happiness for all. This technological revolution is of an intensity and magnitude that, even in its initial stages, has made the major industrial revolutions of the past two centuries seem like storms in a coffee cup. Consequently, neither our economy nor our consciousness need be constrained by scarcity any longer – this revolution has made poverty completely unnecessary. On the other hand, the current social and economic order continues to produce a mounting toll of human misery. Whole communities, countries and continents are having their populations rendered superfluous and stripped of the ability to purchase the basic necessities of life. As the momentous increase in the world's production capacity is overwhelming global purchasing capacity, it is portending a collapse of the world market and resulting in huge social dislocations. Already, growing numbers of the world's poor and dispossessed¹ are being thrown into life and death situations. Their ranks are being increased daily with the accelerating destruction of the so-called "middle-income strata." This is all taking place alongside an intense concentration and centralization of wealth arising out of the most recent and ongoing technological revolution. Thus, poverty today exists in the midst of plenty with millions and billions abandoned in the midst of abundance.

In a globalized era, this is resulting in an inhumane and insane "race to the bottom" that is equalizing poverty everywhere. Poverty today knows no color, ethnicity, gender nor border.² It exists in every country, rich and poor, developed and undeveloped. Further, the global poor today are not like the old slave poor, the old feudal poor, nor the poor of an industrial society. It is a new social group arising out of a globalized capitalism and forming out of all sections of society that are being cast out from the ranks of the exploited to those of the excluded.

As the ongoing and emerging struggles of the new global poor reveal the injustices of a poverty-producing system, they are at the same time presenting a vision of economic justice and human rights: there should be no poverty when there is plenty; there should be no abandonment amidst abundance. One major way this is finding expression is the struggle to deepen, update and implement the founding creed of this country – the Declaration of Independence – and find fuller meaning in our rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Indeed, at its birth the U.S. declared loudly a demand for these "unalienable" human rights, articulating a revolution that moved the social consciousness of the

¹ Subsequent use of the word "poor" is to be considered shorthand for the classes of people who have been made "poor and dispossessed" by global capital.

² Although aggravated by such social ills as the oppression of women, racism, ethnic/national oppression, assaults on immigrants, the drug epidemic, criminalization, pollution, and militarization, poverty is not caused by these social ills and inequalities. Rather, they are the effects or symptoms caused by the present economic system in which an expanding poverty is produced by the historically unheard of concentration, consolidation and accumulation of wealth in few hands.

American colonies from recognizing the “Divine Rights of Kings” to the God-given rights for all. While these rights were once reserved for white, property-holding men, successive social movements for abolition, women’s enfranchisement, industrial union rights and civil rights for African-Americans, and others, have called for a broader and deeper redefining of the human rights declared in this founding creed. This historic cry of the Declaration of Independence has also echoed worldwide through important documents like the United Nations’ Universal Declarations of Human Rights (UDHR), and in poor people’s struggles like that of the shack-dwellers in South Africa and the landless workers in Brazil.

Given present economic and social conditions, the fight of the poor today is for economic human rights – the rights to food, housing, education, health care, etc. This essentially is a global fight for the Right to Not be Poor. Compelled by these conditions to come together, and with their life threatening problems being publicized en masse, the new global poor are convening a legitimate world forum that can unite the struggles of the global poor majority across color, religion, gender, and geography. They are opening the way for what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called a “revolution of values,” or a major shift in social consciousness.

Historically, every social movement to change an unjust status quo begins with this battle for political and moral legitimacy. To abolish poverty domestically and globally, the bulk of the 300 million people in the United States will need to have their hearts and minds changed about the necessity and possibility of ending poverty today. Today’s crisis of leadership is, therefore, the challenge of uniting the poor into a force capable of awakening the American and global public around this defining issue of our time.

II. HUMAN RIGHTS AS CONTESTED TERRAIN HISTORICALLY AND TODAY

Human rights have been historically contested on the mental terrain of the American people in a war of ideas and values. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, “endowed by their Creator,” was the American colonies’ rallying battle cry against the British Empire. Less than one century later, in the epic struggle to abolish slavery in the United States, President Lincoln affirmed in his famous Gettysburg Address this basic principle of the Declaration of Independence – that God had created and endowed all human beings with equal rights. This statement directly challenged the 1857 Taney Decision and the 1861 Cornerstone Speech made by the Vice-President of the Southern Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, which both stated that black slaves, being property and less than human, had no rights that whites were bound to respect. Lincoln also affirmed that the United States was conceived as a government of, for, and by the people. In this way, the Gettysburg Address directly opposed the Confederacy’s call for “State’s Rights” and its objective of curtailing human rights, while also opposing in principle the related current debates arguing for “small government” against the evil “big government.”

The contest over rights continued in American and world history. As expressed in the UDHR, human rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights: civil and political human rights were born out of the Enlightenment era struggles against the aristocracy in the 18th century; economic

and social human rights were born out of the struggles against the exploitation resulting from the industrial revolution in the 19th century. More recently, the 20th century experience of the Great Depression and the horror and destruction of two world wars raised serious concerns about global economic stability; the drafters of the UDHR -- signed in 1949 -- concluded that insuring basic rights and a minimum standard of living were the most important ways to maintain and secure stability and peace. As Paul Gordon Lauren writes in his book, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*,

“They came to regard the economic and social hardship suffered during the course of the Depression as contributing greatly to the rise of fascist regimes, the emergence of severe global competition, and ultimately to the outbreak of war itself...They believed that poverty, misery, unemployment, and depressed standards of living anywhere in an age of a global economy and a technological shrinking of the world bred instability elsewhere and thereby threatened peace.”³

To be sure, World War II's devastation of Europe left the direct colonial imperialist powers weakened. This allowed for the unleashing of an era of national liberation movements worldwide. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement drew inspiration from these liberation movements of oppressed peoples and became an expression of them inside the country. At the same time, the American ruling class subversively discouraged the call for human rights at home by offering judicial and legislative “support” of the Civil Rights Movement and projecting a pro-people of color world image, while launching what Malcolm X called the “U.S. Dollar and Philanthropic ‘neo-colonial’ imperialist” takeover of former direct colonies. From the very beginning, the drafters of the UDHR, including Eleanor Roosevelt and other prominent U.S. leaders, never intended for human rights, especially economic human rights, to be applied at home.

This found support in the language of civil and political rights, which had evolved into a prevailing influence in the United States. Since the founding of this country, the ideas of constitutional rights and due process have been deeply ingrained in our culture and mental terrain. While the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the similar struggles for women rights, union rights, and immigrant rights utilized this framework, this tactical approach limited the full meaning and effect of human rights.

However, leaders like W.E.B Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Dr. King refused to submit in this struggle, even though they were targeted, isolated and attacked for doing so.⁴ In his last years, Dr. King began to articulate a strategy for human rights based on the unity across color lines of those most exploited and excluded by the economic system. In his 1966 essay, “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” he highlighted the need to move beyond the limitation of constitutional rights and to take up the moral responsibility of ensuring human rights.

³ Paul Gordon Lauren. *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*. University of Pennsylvania Press; 2nd edition (July 22, 2003). p. ---.

⁴ For more on this point, see Paul Gordon Lauren on Dubois' petition to the United Nations in *The Evolution of International Human Rights: a Vision Seen*; Carol Anderson's *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955*; and Malcolm X's speech *The Ballot or the Bullet*.

“So far, we have had a Constitution backing most of the demands for change, and this has made our work easier, since we could be sure that the federal courts would usually back up our demonstrations legally. Now we are approaching areas where the voice of the Constitution is not clear. We have left the realm of constitutional rights and we are entering the area of human rights. The Constitution assured the right to vote, but there is no such assurance of the right to adequate housing, or the right to an adequate income. And yet, in a nation which has a gross national product of 750 billion dollars a year, it is morally right to insist that every person has a decent house, an adequate education and enough money to provide basic necessities for one’s family. Achievement of these goals will be a lot more difficult and require much more discipline, understanding, organization and sacrifice.”⁵

Two years later, when he launched the Poor People’s Campaign in 1967-68, Dr. King made an epochal shift from a period that emphasized problems of color and national liberation to one that emphasized economic oppression across color and national borders.

Changing Times, Changing Tactics

Today human rights, and especially economic rights, remain a deeply contested terrain in the American economic and political landscape. Although the language of human rights – including the use of the “human rights framework” – is being adopted and adapted by all corners of society, these actors do not always operate from the same definition or objective. Indeed, as current conditions are exposing weaknesses in both the economy and the prevailing mega-narratives that support it, those who benefit from the status quo are fighting with all their might to maintain it. Through new strategies, new theories, and new theologies, new responses are being developed and propagated by the powers that be to address the renewed demands for rights to basic economic necessities that are bubbling up in the United States and the world over. Given the history of this terrain in the United States, what they ascribe to “human rights” emphasizes civil rights and restricts economic rights.

Their responses may be categorized into three broad types:

(1) Acknowledge economic human rights, but claim that they are merely ‘aspirations’ that can never be met, because they are impractical and unenforceable.

This is a widely held objection from liberals to conservatives in the U.S. and worldwide. The objection is based on a false distinction between so-called “positive” and “negative” rights. According to this view, negative rights limit the power of the government, while positive rights expand it. Freedom from torture is said to be a negative right because it limits what the government can do (it can’t torture), while the right to housing is a positive right because it makes a demand on government to do more (it must provide houses). Additionally, negative rights do not cost anything and are therefore the proper role of government (they are ‘immunities’), while positive rights have considerable costs so they are not the proper role of government (they are ‘entitlements’).

⁵ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Non-violence: The Only Road to Freedom,” May 4, 1966.

The argument is completely one-sided. For instance, the protection of corporate investments and corporate contracts are considered negative rights, even though they amass enormous costs in enforcement.⁶

(2) Champion “economic human rights,” but reduce them to the “cheap” and “feasible” “Millennium Development Goals” officially agreed to by most governments.

In 2000, the United Nations established the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as part of its Millennium Summit in New York City. All 193 members of the United Nations have since agreed to achieve these eight goals⁷ by 2015. The goal on poverty – eradicating extreme poverty and hunger – appears to be far-reaching in its vision; however, it is not in fact about ending poverty. Instead, it is about ending “extreme poverty,” narrowly defined as making little more than one dollar a day. And, because this goal is satisfied by merely cutting in half the numbers of people living on less than \$1 a day and the numbers of people who suffer from hunger, even “ending” extreme poverty will leave millions of the world’s poor both poor and hungry. Under the guise of declaring economic rights for the poor, these goals *at best* relegate at least half of the world’s poor – and threaten many millions more – to continuing and worsening conditions. Limiting the struggle for economic justice to the MDGs has the effect, therefore, of keeping in tact a poverty-producing system, the very edifice that undermines all human rights and human dignity.

It also sets up a situation that divides the global poor into the “extreme poor” and the “relatively poor”: those who live without homes, food, jobs or health in South Africa are “extreme poor”, whereas those who live without homes, food, jobs or health in the United States are “relatively” poor. This false dichotomy obscures the fundamental nature and causes of global poverty and compromises the vital principles underlying the UDHR – universality, equality and indivisibility. This is especially misleading and alienating insofar as the psychology and consciousness of the American people are concerned. For them and their history, the origins and legitimacy of these principles are that rights are “God-given,” “endowed by the Creator,” and, therefore, equally endowed to all human beings, owing to what the American people deeply believe as the equal worthiness of all God’s children.

(3) Champion economic rights, but redefine them as civil and political rights

This is the most subtle of the responses to the challenge of economic rights. While human rights have become increasingly indispensable to the important work of poor people’s organizations, non-profits, foundations and others, the battle around what it is that rights are and can be is being waged in an increasingly narrowed space.

On the one hand, it seems that the debate over rights – and especially economic rights – plays out along predominantly partisan lines, with politically conservative actors claiming economic rights are

⁶ For more on this argument see *The Cost of Rights: Why Liberty Depends on Taxes* by Cass R. Sunstein and Steven Holmes.

⁷ The eight MDGs are: (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieving universal primary education; (3) promoting gender equality and empowering women; (4) reducing child mortality rates; (5) improving maternal health; (6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

contrary to American values and liberal or progressive actors claiming they are central to them. On the other hand, this entire debate is itself contained within a particular narrative that limits even the most progressive grassroots work within a civil rights framework.⁸ This narrative appeals to deeply embedded fears, ignorance and stereotypes and is rooted in the assertion that we must choose whose rights – and what rights of theirs – are realized. In the United States, therefore, instead of a right to housing, we have the right to due process in eviction proceedings; instead of a right to food, we have food stamps and assistance programs that provide limited access to food; instead of a right to health or social and economic security, we have a declining welfare system that relies on a shrinking tax base resulting from increasing unemployment and underemployment. Economic rights are not defined as protected guarantees, but rather as “opportunities” made available alongside limited advocacy for legal due process and anti-discriminatory practices.

This interpretation of rights does not allow for rights to be rights, i.e., inalienable, universal and inseparable in their application for everyone to meet our basic human needs, but rather divisible privileges for only some to enjoy. Once again, the strategic objective of this narrative is to both misinform the masses on the real causes of their growing economic insecurity and to maintain their disunity and disorganization, even though the causes of their poverty and misery are one and the same.⁹ It also has the effect of limiting any potentially transformational economic rights work by conceding to certain demands of certain groups, thereby dividing and manipulating the poor and dispossessed. Thus, for instance, the Philadelphia-Delaware Valley Homeless Union/Kensington Welfare Rights Union’s militant takeovers in 1990s of vacant HUD housing in Philadelphia did not resolve the fact that someone was made homeless every 30 minutes; important advances made by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ “penny per pound” campaign, which brought the big businesses of the food industry to the negotiating table, have not fundamentally ended the poverty of farm workers; and United Workers’ historic victory for living wages for workers at Camden Yards did not realize the *right* to a living wage for all.

⁸ One example comes from the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. In an article in *Human Rights Quarterly* titled “Defending Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Practical Issues Faced by an International Human Rights Organization”, Kenneth Roth writes:

“When international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch take on ESC [economic, social, and cultural] rights, we should look for situations in which there is relative clarity about violation, violator, and remedy. Broadly speaking, I would suggest that the nature of the violation, violator, and remedy is clearest when it is possible to identify arbitrary or discriminatory governmental conduct that causes or substantially contributes to an ESC rights violation....To illustrate, let us assume we could demonstrate that a government was building medical clinics only in areas populated by ethnic groups that tended to vote for it, leaving other ethnic groups with substandard medical care. In such a case, an international human rights organization would be in a good position to argue that the disfavored ethnic groups’ right to health care is being denied. This argument does not necessarily increase the resources being made available for health care, but it at least ensures a more equitable distribution. Since defenders of ESC rights should be concerned foremost with the worst-off segments of society, that redistribution would be an advance. Moreover, given that the government’s supporters are not likely to be happy about a cutback in medical care, enforcement of a nondiscriminatory approach stands a reasonable chance of increasing health-related resources overall.” (For full article, see Kenneth Roth, “Defending Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Practical Issues Faced by an International Human Rights Organization,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 26 (2004) p. 63-73.)

In other words, in the view of the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, the “right to health” does not actually mean that everyone has the right to health care. Rather, it means that everyone has the right not to be discriminated against when they are denied health care. The economic human right to health care has been transformed into the civil right to be free from discrimination. The enforcement of this perverse “right to health” has the virtue of “not necessarily increasing the resources being made available for health care”.

⁹ The escalating and persistent deprivation of rights that is emerging in foreclosures, homelessness, joblessness, hunger and malnutrition cannot be contained within particular identities of race, gender, nationality or culture.

These three responses are, therefore, an attempt to shift the discussion away from the economic reality that the poor are becoming poorer *because* the rich are getting richer, a reality that is becoming harder to ride as the ranks of the poor and dispossessed are growing. Current economic and social conditions are forcing people to question the way our core values have been defined and how we might redefine our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness today.

III. ECONOMIC HUMAN RIGHTS AND BUILDING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT TO END POVERTY

Over 40 years ago, Dr. King understood that the deep crises of his time – racism, war, social and economic inequality – were, and still are, rooted in an economic system that deprives millions of people the right to a decent life. After the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 he realized that,

We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole of society – this means a revolution of values...We now see that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together – you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others.¹⁰

Anticipating the necessary strategic response, he launched the Poor People's Campaign in 1967-68, which took deliberate steps to unite the struggles of the poor across color lines. In this regard, he stated:

The dispossessed of this nation -- the poor, both white and Negro -- live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize... against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.¹¹

In the context of organizing this campaign for economic justice, Dr. King raised the battle cry of "moving from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights."¹² Today more than ever, we are confronted with the urgent need to finish the unfinished business of the Poor People's Campaign. In the past 40 years, through the 2008 economic crisis and its continuing aftershocks, we have seen an unprecedented polarization of wealth and poverty. In the U.S., more and more Americans are finding themselves in the ranks of the downsized, outsourced and outcast, while welfare, food stamps, Medicare and Medicaid, and Social Security are under attack. Following in Dr. King's footsteps, the

¹⁰ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Address to the SCLC Staff Meeting, May 1967.

¹¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Massey Lecture Series for the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), December 1967. *See also, Trumpet of Conscience.*

¹² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Riverside Church, New York City, May 4, 1967.

Right to Not be Poor provides a way to unite these poor and dispossessed millions against the system that is immiserating them.

The demand for the rights to basic economic necessities for all means:

- **Building a broad social movement to end poverty, led by the poor and dispossessed as a social force united and organized across color lines and other lines of division.** Economic human rights can only be secured through this type of movement. The demand for the rights to these basic economic necessities necessarily challenges the existing economic and power relationships. As Frederick Douglass once stated, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will.”¹³ Power grows from unity and organization.
- **Uniting the poor and dispossessed as a “new and unsettling force.”** Economic human rights offer a framework to unite the poor on the basis of their common needs and demands. This unity brings together millions of small and separated voices into one powerful voice that must be heard, awakening the world masses to the urgent necessity and moral imperative to end poverty in the midst of plenty.
- **Uniting struggles arising out of different immediate issues into one powerful social movement.** Economic human rights offer a framework to unite the poor and dispossessed as a social force across individual issues of struggle. In this way, the unity of actions of the poor can target the forces arrayed against them at their weakest point - morally, politically, strategically and tactically - that is, around the fact of poverty existing in the midst of plenty.
- **Giving legitimacy to locally emerging struggles.** Using the demand for economic human rights as a battle cry can give historic and global legitimacy to today’s struggles of the poor. This is because the growing mass struggles worldwide are becoming an undeniable source of moral and political importance. In addition, these growing mass struggles evoke the core religious and spiritual values or justice and dignity embodied in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and its current global expression in the UDHR.
- **Framing the issues in a proactive way.** The demand for economic human rights offers a comprehensive vision of a world free from want. It begins to suggest a world vision of a society where the meeting of our basic needs is guaranteed and non-negotiable. This view allows for the increasing struggles for life and livelihood to go beyond immediate defensive efforts to an all out offensive to end the conditions causing our poverty.
- **Encouraging global solidarity of the poor.** Framing our local struggles around economic human rights embraces the values of this vision and also appreciates the new globalized character of the polarization between wealth and poverty. It thereby facilitates global solidarity of the developing struggles of the poor to abolish that polarity.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress,” August 3, 1857.

- **Orienting the fight for the proper role of government.** The demand for the Right to Not be Poor is essentially a demand for the right to basic economic necessities. It begins to indicate how government can function to secure human rights for all as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. It therefore insists on what President Abraham Lincoln once called the “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

History has shown that struggles for rights have always been struggles for power. During the Abolitionist movement and leading up to the Civil War, when a class of big slave-owners held economic and political power, slavery was legal. It was protected and enforced through the state apparatus as well as by every societal institution and constituency that had any interest in maintaining the status quo, including through the prevailing and entrenched mental and moral terrain of the American people. Consequently, slaves had no rights that society was bound to respect.¹⁴ In many aspects, poverty today is the political and moral equivalent of slavery then. Poverty, too, is legal in all its manifestations – lack of healthcare and adequate housing, underemployment and structural unemployment, hunger, poor education, etc. It is, in other words, the law of the land. Consequently, the poor have no rights that society is bound to respect.

Because slavery was legal at the time, the social and political movement to abolish slavery was essentially a movement to secure the right to not be a slave. Similarly today, when poverty exists in the midst of plenty, a movement to abolish poverty must aim to secure the human right to not be poor. These movements are necessarily about power, not pity or limited legal concessions; therefore, the right to basic economic, social, and cultural necessities such as healthcare, housing, education, and jobs that ensure a quality life is necessarily the product of nothing short of a broad and powerful movement led by the poor and dispossessed united as a social force.

In his last speech, Dr. King said,

You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery.¹⁵

The unity of the poor is, in the same way, the beginning of the ending of poverty. The Right to Not be Poor provides leaders committed to the challenge of uniting the poor with strategically important guiding principles, especially as millions of people are being placed in a position where they are compelled to kill the status quo before the status quo kills them. With little or no stake in the economic and political edifice that produces beggars and billionaires, and united as the poor and dispossessed, they will emerge as the “new and unsettling force” that can awaken the American and global masses and end poverty for all.

¹⁴ In the landmark case *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (60 U.S. 393 (1857)), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that people of African descent who were brought into the United States and held as slaves, or their descendants, whether or not they were slaves, were not protected by the U.S. Constitution and were not U.S. citizens. As part of the majority opinion, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney wrote that blacks had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

¹⁵ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land (I’ve been to the Mountaintop),” April 3, 1968.

The Martin Luther King You Don't See on TV

By Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon

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<http://fair.org/media-beat-column/the-martin-luther-king-you-dont-see-on-tv/>

It's become a TV ritual: Every year in mid-January, around the time of Martin Luther King's birthday, we get perfunctory network news reports about "the slain civil rights leader." The remarkable thing about this annual review of King's life is that several years — his last years — are totally missing, as if flushed down a memory hole.

What TV viewers see is a closed loop of familiar file footage: King battling desegregation in Birmingham (1963); reciting his dream of racial harmony at the rally in Washington (1963); marching for voting rights in Selma, Alabama (1965); and finally, lying dead on the motel balcony in Memphis (1968).

An alert viewer might notice that the chronology jumps from 1965 to 1968. Yet King didn't take a sabbatical near the end of his life. In fact, he was speaking and organizing as diligently as ever. Almost all of those speeches were filmed or taped. But they're not shown today on TV.

Why?

It's because national news media have never come to terms with what Martin Luther King Jr. stood for during his final years.

In the early 1960s, when King focused his challenge on legalized racial discrimination in the South, most major media were his allies. Network TV and national publications graphically showed the police dogs and bullwhips and cattle prods used against Southern blacks who sought the right to vote or to eat at a public lunch counter.

But after passage of civil rights acts in 1964 and 1965, King began challenging the nation's fundamental priorities. He maintained that civil rights laws were empty without "human rights" — including economic rights. For people too poor to eat at a restaurant or afford a decent home, King said, anti-discrimination laws were hollow.

Noting that a majority of Americans below the poverty line were white, King developed a class perspective. He decried the huge income gaps between rich and poor, and called for "radical changes in the structure of our society" to redistribute wealth and power.

"True compassion," King declared, "is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

By 1967, King had also become the country's most prominent opponent of the Vietnam War, and a staunch critic of overall U.S. foreign policy, which he deemed militaristic. In his "Beyond Vietnam" speech delivered at New York's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967 — a year to the day before he was murdered — King called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."

From Vietnam to South Africa to Latin America, King said, the U.S. was "on the wrong side of a world revolution." King questioned "our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America," and asked why the

U.S. was suppressing revolutions "of the shirtless and barefoot people" in the Third World, instead of supporting them.

In foreign policy, King also offered an economic critique, complaining about "capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries."

You haven't heard the "Beyond Vietnam" speech on network news retrospectives, but national media heard it loud and clear back in 1967 — and loudly denounced it. Time magazine called it "demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi." The Washington Post patronized that "King has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, his people."

In his last months, King was organizing the most militant project of his life: the Poor People's Campaign. He crisscrossed the country to assemble "a multiracial army of the poor" that would descend on Washington — engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience at the Capitol, if need be — until Congress enacted a poor people's bill of rights. Reader's Digest warned of an "insurrection."

King's economic bill of rights called for massive government jobs programs to rebuild America's cities. He saw a crying need to confront a Congress that had demonstrated its "hostility to the poor" — appropriating "military funds with alacrity and generosity," but providing "poverty funds with miserliness."

How familiar that sounds today, more than a quarter-century after King's efforts on behalf of the poor people's mobilization were cut short by an assassin's bullet. As 1995 gets underway, in this nation of immense wealth, the White House and Congress continue to accept the perpetuation of poverty. And so do most mass media. Perhaps it's no surprise that they tell us little about the last years of Martin Luther King's life.