

Building a New Poor People's Campaign: The Spirit of Struggle National Tent Revival Organizing Tour

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

Introduction

At this time of unprecedented inequality, growing racism and xenophobia, and massive and increasing poverty and hardship, leaders of grassroots movements and struggles are coming together to catalyze a multi-organizational Poor People's Campaign for today. Inspired by the unfinished work of Dr. Martin Luther King, the objective of the campaign is to promote the unity and leadership of the poor and dispossessed who—because they embody all the major injustices of our time—can rally the widest possible involvement of social justice and human rights organizations, networks and movements in a longer-term effort to end poverty and transform society. The campaign's formal launch will coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Poor People's Campaign. The aim is not to commemorate the past, but to learn from it in confronting the different and deepening crises faced today.

A New Poor People's Campaign

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 King's assassination just weeks before the launch of the campaign, it went forward, but was cut short. The attention and resources of the U.S. government were consumed by waging war in Vietnam. Political leaders were stoking and exploiting a growing backlash against the gains resulting from long struggles against racism, militarism and poverty. The vision of and call by, King and the poor people who traveled to Washington to make their voice heard, were not heeded.

Today, nearly 50 years later, we are living in a time of profound crisis, a time where virtually everywhere, nearly all systems and institutions fundamental to society—political, economic, social and religious—at best fail to meet people’s needs and at worst cause widespread suffering. Poverty and economic insecurity are pervasive with nearly 1/2 of the world’s population—more than 3 billion people—living on less than \$2.50 a day, 870 million people chronically malnourished, and millions more without health care, housing, food, education, and jobs that pay adequately. Climate change is wreaking havoc all over the planet, directly impacting our poorest and most vulnerable communities. There is racially and religiously motivated discrimination and violence across the United States and world. Indeed, in recent decades, we have seen a steady increase in war and violent conflict, leaving millions of people dead, displaced, and dispossessed.

In the United States we are experiencing unprecedented poverty and abandonment in the midst of record abundance. 1 in 7 people live below the federal poverty line. Half of all children will qualify for food stamps before they turn 18, including 9 out of 10 African American children. Nearly half of the US population is poor or low-income. Millions live with the violence of inadequate health care, housing, food, education, and employment, and with a criminal justice system that discriminates against people of color, perpetuates racial oppression, and criminalizes all poor people, denying millions of people access to justice. 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.

This intensifying inequality, injustice, and suffering is being met by growing resistance. People are organizing and fighting for their lives, rights and deepest values, in such powerful struggles as black led movements against police brutality, the Fight for 15, the Dreamers, the right to water battle in Detroit, and the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina. Yet it is also clear to more and more leaders, as it was to Dr. King fifty years ago, that injustice this pervasive and structural cannot be met by any single struggle alone. There is a growing urgency to more deeply connect these battles, which are too often treated as separate, and to confront the deep, longstanding, and deliberately created divisions and oppressions based on race, gender and other parts of our identities. The objective of a Poor People’s Campaign, then and now, is not only for those who suffer the most to win some improvements in their lives, but also to lay the groundwork for a much larger and longer-term movement to transform the social structures and systems, both national and global, that regularly produce such suffering. Its goal is not merely to change the minds of politicians, but to change the dominant cultural narrative that makes poverty and inequality acceptable by blaming those who suffer from it. It was such a vision of a transformative movement that led Dr. King to call for a Poor People’s Campaign in 1967-1968. It is the same urgent need that drives this work to build a New Poor People’s Campaign today.

To realize this vision a Poor Peoples’ Campaign must do more than simply realize concrete demands, as important as those victories will be. Its aim is also to contribute to what King called “a revolution of values.” This means the battleground is not only political and economic, but cultural in the deepest sense.

The Spirit of Struggle - Planning the Poor People's Campaign National Tent Revival Tour

The first stage of this effort has involved organizing tours led by leaders representing different issues and regions, going out and testing the idea of a new Poor People's Campaign with the leaders of other struggles. Learning from and based on the success of these first tours, and appreciating the enthusiastic response of local and national, as well as global leaders, we are now preparing to take these efforts to a new level. This next stage is aimed at building the broader unity needed to create a new narrative and movement with the power to transform society. We will begin to do this through the development of "The Spirit of Struggle" National Tent Revival Tour. The lead in coordinating this effort is coming from the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice and Sankofa.org (see the Appendix for profiles).

The Poor People's Campaign Tent Revivals will bring together grassroots organizers of different struggles, testimonies of those directly affected by poverty and related injustices, local, national and global artists, social movement educators, religious leaders, and film makers who can all use their creative gifts to powerfully cast light on the current crisis and inspire actions to transform it. These gatherings will reawaken the spiritual and cultural dimensions of struggle that have driven every successful social battle in history. They will be revivals in the sense of tapping into, lifting up, and making stronger the spirit of change that has always been present in revolutionary moments in U.S. history and around the world and still lives on in poor and dispossessed communities today.

These public gatherings will be accompanied by workshops and strategic dialogues, aimed at developing a common platform and a plan of actions for the campaign. They will serve to strengthen and connect existing struggles, connect local and national struggles to global ones, and to lay the groundwork for the launch a new Poor People's Campaign in December 2017. The tent revivals will be a catalyst for related nationwide and global activities and actions that will take place simultaneously as part of the year of revival. Grounded in local organizing efforts, they will visibly demonstrate that in a very real sense the Poor People's Campaign is already taking place through a wide range of visionary actions and movements. The need that remains is to strategically connect and amplify these efforts in our public consciousness.

The vision for the Tent Revivals includes:

Local Focus on Poor Communities and Regions Across the Country. The revivals will take place in poor communities and regions across the country, paying special attention to the culture and history of these places. Rather than political and financial centers of Washington DC or New York City, the geographical and programmatic focus of this Poor People's Campaign will be on the people and communities who are most struggling with poverty and dispossession and coming up with cutting-edge and grassroots solutions to the problems they face. Some

locations will include: the Gulf Coast, Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, Pacific Northwest, the (Deindustrialized) North East, (Rustbelt)/Midwest, the Southwest (and Border areas in particular), and Sovereign Nations. These gatherings will put the plight, fight, and insight of those most impacted by poverty, discrimination, and dispossession, in the forefront. The gatherings will also involve leaders from other parts of the country and world who are experiencing similar problems and crisis in order to demonstrate the national and international solidarity and unity of the dispossessed. One of history's clear lessons is that a campaign on the scale demanded by the current crisis cannot be launched by, or belong to, a few leaders, organizations or nations. Such a campaign must develop from and contribute to a movement that reflects the needs, concerns, experiences, and demands of the diverse struggles taking place in communities large and small across the country and around the globe. There are committed and competent leaders emerging from these poor people's struggles on all fronts, who are sharing not only the successes, but also the limits of current organizing efforts, strategies and tactics. Therefore these revivals will focus on both the breadth and depth of involvement from the grassroots.

Week-long Cultural Events. The Tent Revivals will stand as a cultural and artistic presence in local communities for a sustained period of time as a way to make the less visible more visible. The use of art and culture will create a path for the narratives of the poor and dispossessed to come to life and will find ways to color these struggles with stories of the human spirit. Highlighting the work of artists and cultural organizers who come out of social justice struggles rooted in these communities, the Tent Revivals will include: music, visual arts, food, storytelling, quilting and local crafts, preaching, film, dance and movement, theater and more. These revivals will be the staging ground for a traveling film festival and on-going concerts/celebrations where social justice films and performing artists will have the opportunity to share their creative work and connect them to a larger fight for change. The artists involved will include community-based artists as well as nationally and globally recognized artists and performers who want to shine a light on the injustices in the area, country and world. Art performed in these cultural events will be commissioned work for the Tent Revivals, art produced during the course of the Tent Revivals as well as already existing art, films and music. The cultural events will become a powerful statement to that which gives meaning to people's lives and will raise up the necessity for a new Poor People's Campaign today.

Connecting the Issues. The Poor People's Campaign in general and the Tent Revivals in particular aim to address the tripartite evils that Rev. Dr. King laid out in 1967-1968: "Poverty, Racism and Militarism." Rev. Dr. King suggested that helping the poor and dispossessed organize into a "new and unsettling" force was the only effective way to actually confront these inter-related evils. Nearly 50 years later, we are adding "Ecological Devastation" as a fourth evil that demands such a Poor People's Campaign. Key fronts of struggle that will be addressed through community hearings, truth commissions, and workshops include: housing and homelessness, health care, hunger and food justice, work with dignity, immigration, police reform and accountability, voting rights, resource extraction, water, sanitation and utilities, criminal justice, education, and social supports and safety nets. The Tent Revivals will be a space to draw connections between the diverse

issues impacting local leaders and build unity between U.S. struggles and similar ones taking place in other countries.

Public Events, Community Tours, and Truth Commissions. Although the Tent Revivals will be on-going but time-focused cultural events in local communities, a focus of these convenings will be to bring public attention to the problems of poverty and dispossession impacting communities across the country. Therefore there will be large public events held throughout the revival that will feature the stories and testimonies of community leaders and organizations. For such Truth Commissions, prominent local, national, and international leaders will be selected to serve as commissioners to assess the conditions people are facing in local communities and to illuminate connections that exist across issues and region. The commissioners' task will be to collect testimony from across the country in an attempt to identify clear issues that are uniting the poor and dispossessed and can become the foundation of a campaign platform for a new Poor People's Campaign. There will also be opportunities to do poverty reality tours of local communities for media and anyone interested in learning about the state of poverty and the struggles for justice in these locales.

Religion and Spirituality. Modeled after traveling revivals throughout US history and in particular revivals that served as a launching pad for the Abolitionist Movement during the 1830s, the Poor People's Campaign Tent Revivals will serve a deeper moral and spiritual purpose. While there will be no particular faith tradition promoted nor any type of religious proselytizing or evangelizing present in these events, the purpose of the tent revivals is to revive the spirit of struggle – one that presents hope in the face of hopelessness, life in the face of death and destruction. The religious dimensions of the Tent Revivals will include preaching and teaching by leaders of various faith traditions, large scale public demonstrations, and events embedded in the revivals that lift up the values of human dignity and rights that everyone deserves. Condemning the moral indefensibility of growing poverty in a time of plenty, the tent revivals will focus on awakening the spirit of a people who can no longer ignore the dire poverty that surrounds us and the suffering of our sisters and brothers. There will be spaces created to share what sustains participants in the struggle for justice as well as time to honor those who have come before and paved the way. The Tent Revivals will help develop a sense of our human relationality and responsibility to one another in building a new social order.

Shifting the Narrative. Much of the focus on this initial stage of calling for a new Poor People's Campaign for today is about shifting the narrative around poverty today and what we can do to end it. We must ask who are the poor and why are we poor in an age of unparalleled wealth and innovation. Indeed as more and more people are thrust into the ranks of a global poverty class, the system is finding new ways to shed its accountability and to criminalize the poor. As more people die each year as a result of structural violence than armed conflicts, the ideology of free market capitalism is well at work in masking class conflict and the reality that poverty is created by the laws and structures of our global capitalist system. While everyday people suffer the reality of unemployment, depressed wages, expanding homelessness, increased criminalization, forced overtime, and a continued reduction of benefits, the economic system that produces and allows for these consequences to exist is deemed infallible. We plan to bring leaders together with a

platform/program that will unite those most impacted by poverty and strike a blow at poverty, racism, militarism and ecological devastation. We will begin to shift the narrative. We will acknowledge that “the poor” is not an identity group that lies on the margins of our society – today we are the many. We are the 1 in 2 Americans exploited and dispossessed by a system that prioritizes profit over human needs and dignity. Experiencing the glaring contradiction of impoverishment in a time of plenty, we are also the leaders, who if organized to take action together, can become the new and unsettling force needed to transform this cruel and unjust society. Leading up to and during the Tent Revivals will be a strong media and communications focus and presence. We will create PSAs, social media campaigns, and sound-bytes about how a Poor People’s Campaign is the best response to the evils of poverty, racism, militarism and ecological devastation today. These will be backed up by larger writing and analysis that will illuminate the weakness of the current political and economic systems, collectivize alternative solutions to problems facing our communities, and will help develop a global platform for a new Poor People’s Campaign. When the Poor People’s Campaign is launched in December 2017 an initial platform, list of endorsers, organizing committee, and communications plan will exist.

Leadership Development, Education and Training. An important aspect of the Tent Revivals will be to create spaces for the development of a shared political, economic and social vision. To achieve this goal, the tent revivals will provide opportunities for the exchange of experiences, informational workshops and leadership development. Much of the organizing of each revival will draw on local leadership and provide an occasion for these leaders to develop and share their talents and strengths (in feeding people, organizing media and communications for the events, creating films, leading songs, etc). Indeed a major goal of the Tent Revivals and overall Poor People’s Campaign is to identify and develop leaders with deep and broad clarity, competency, commitment, and connection to a united struggle to end poverty led by the poor and dispossessed. The workshops at the Tent Revivals will include both capacity-building skills as well as historical and theoretical knowledge-building experiences. Local groups will be able to propose workshops on the topics that they identify as needed. These training sessions will also offer opportunities for national and global participants to share their work.

The Spirit of Struggle: National Tent Revival Tour like the Poor People’s Campaign cannot and will not belong to particular organizations but to all who are engaged in the common struggle to end poverty and transform the structures that cause it. Its purpose is nothing less than to create “ a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life”. To do this we need everyone and we ask for your help.

Appendix.

Organizational profiles

The Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice and Sankofa.org have come together to play a role in calling for and planning “Poor People’s Campaign Tent Revivals” in different regions of the country.

Sankofa is a social justice organization founded by Harry Belafonte that enlists the support of today's most celebrated artists and influential individuals in collaboration with grassroots partners to elevate the voices of the disenfranchised and promote justice, peace, and equality. Sankofa focuses on issues of injustice that disproportionately affect the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the underserved, which left unaddressed will continue to impact the lives of too many individuals and remain a scar on our nation's moral character. In support of its grassroots partners, Sankofa enlists artists, performers, and prominent individuals to deliver messages of moral and political consequence. It stages a wide range of events to further amplify its message and elevate the voices of those already doing this critical work. Additionally Sankofa employs online and offline media to increase the awareness and spirit of activism.

The mission of Kairos: the Center for Religion, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary is to contribute to transformative movements for social change that can draw on the power of both religions and human rights. "Kairos" is an ancient Greek word for a time that calls for opportune and decisive action and a biblical term for a moment when the eternal breaks into history. A "Kairos" time is marked not only by the breakdown of unjust structures and systems, but by the breakthrough of new movements and awakenings that point society in a radical new direction. The cornerstone of the Kairos Center is the Poverty Initiative which over the past decade has been working to raise up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor. In relation to our work to catalyze a new Poor People's Campaign for today, the Kairos Center's "Rights and Religions" program area focuses on studying and highlighting the crucial role played by religions, and by faith more broadly, in movements for dignity and human rights, especially movements led by the poor.

Select List of Endorsers of the Poor People's Campaign:

ACRE (Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise)
Alabama Multi-Cultural Fisher and Seafood Worker-Owned Cooperative
Alabama Save OurSelves Coalition
Alabama's Young, Black & Green
Bob Zellner (SNCC/North Carolina NAACP)
Coalition Against Corporate Higher Education
Committee on US-Latin American Relations (Cornell University)
Defend Job Philippines
Dr. Vandana Shiva
Earth News Channel
Ebenezer Baptist Church
Equal Justice Initiative
Faith In New York
Food Bank of the Southern Tier
Highlander Research and Education Center
Judson Memorial Church
Labor Religion Coalition of New York State
Media Mobilizing Project

Mercy Junction Justice and Peace Center
National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (Sri Lanka)
National Union of Domestic Employees (Trinidad and Tobago)
Navdanya
On Earth Peace
People's History of Elkhart (Indiana)
Picture the Homeless
Put People First! PA
Rev. Dr. Raphael G. Warnock
Rev. Dr. William J Barber, II
Sankofa
Southern Maine Workers' Center
Student Labor Action Movement (SLAM) - New York
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
The Assembly to End Poverty
The Kairos Center
The Micah Institute
The People's Movement Against POSCO (India)
Union Theological Seminary
United Workers of Baltimore City
US Human Rights Network
Vermont Workers' Center
World Student Christian Federation - North America
WRFG 89.3 FM - Community Radio Atlanta

The 1968 Poor People's Campaign:

Just a year before his assassination, at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff retreat in May 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights...[W]hen we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement...That after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution...In short, we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.

Later that year, in December 1967, Rev. Dr. King announced the plan to bring together 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. 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.

Recognizing the interconnected evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism, King's 1967 call for a Poor People's Campaign echoed the spirit of former revolutionary moments like the Bonus March on Washington in 1932, the struggles of the Southern Tenant Farmers, and the General Strike of 1934. 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, he described 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 of consciousness a "new and unsettling force" had to be formed. In other words, the poor would have to organize to take action together around our immediate and basic needs. In doing, we could become a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood and dispelling the myths and stereotypes that uphold the mass complacency and leave the root causes of poverty intact. He described this force as a multi-racial "nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor."

As a first step in building the power needed to achieve the goal of a radical redistribution of political and economic power King, along with 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 of 1968. An important aspect 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 eliminated

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, mass nonviolent civil disobedience, and mass arrests 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 went forward. It began in Washington where key leaders of the campaign gathered for lobbying efforts and media events before dispersing around

the country to formally launch the nine regional caravans bringing the thousands of participants 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."

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 at Resurrection City to rally around the demands of the Poor People's Campaign on Solidarity Day. This was the first and only massive mobilization to take place during the Poor People's Campaign.

Unfortunately, the unity and organization needed for the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 to complete all three of the planned stages and form the "new and unsettling force" capable of disrupting "complacent national life" and achieving an economic bill of rights was not easy to come by. 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 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 us and if they could overcome the attention and resources being diverted because of the US engagement in the Vietnam War. 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.