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USA

The New Poor People's Campaign

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In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. told a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staff retreat:

“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.”

King would be assassinated April 4, 1968, while organizing support to striking African-American sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. (For an extensive discussion of Martin Luther King's trajectory on the road “to the promised land,” see the interview with author Michael Honey elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*.)

He went to Memphis even as many civil rights leaders were dubious about King's decision to turn the movement to broader social issues — the Vietnam War, working-class battles for dignity and economic advancement, and human rights campaigns like the planned Poor people's camp in Washington, D.C.

King's push for a nonviolent “true revolution of values” centered under the banner of human rights at home and abroad. It reflected his evolution and radicalization. He recognized the validity of the call made years earlier by Malcolm X (assassinated in 1965) to internationalize the fight for Black Freedom.

King's view on human rights and the poor went beyond working-class Blacks who were his primary focus. He spoke of class issues that appealed to white workers. His famous April 4, 1967 speech at Riverside Church in New York City on the Vietnam War was not supported by most traditional civil rights leaders.

King showed his willingness to go outside the narrowly defined civil rights box. Many of his closest aides even in the SCLC saw this shift as a mistake; President Johnson had signed the civil rights legislation, many believed, so why rock that relationship?

King's March in the North

King had already pushed for taking the freedom fight from the South to the North as he did with his 1966 open housing march in southwest Chicago. When King arrived at Marquette Park he was met by a white racist mob as vicious as he'd seen in Selma and other southern cities.

King understood that real equality was not possible with important but limited legal rights. He frequently made the point that legal equality was like running a race 50 yards behind white runners. Positive steps, he argued, had to be taken by the government to level the playing field.

After King's murder most of the traditional leaders turned to opportunities in the Democratic Party. Many became elected officials. Yet the economic plight of working-class Blacks changed only modestly. Racism did not decline in

most urban centers like Detroit, Chicago and New York.

White supremacist backlash escalated, and most liberals were in retreat. Many were more focused on gaining support from backward racist white voters than the inequality facing African Americans. (Even today, this is seen among Democratic Party pundits who seek to water down demands in order to appeal to white working class Trump voters.)

Affirmative action programs and school desegregation laws came under attack. Even unionized Black workers in basic manufacturing in the 1970s had to challenge their own union leaders and the employers to get jobs in the skilled trades and as airline mechanics and pilots. As a result, court actions (consent decrees) were imposed on many companies and unions.

King saw the human rights revolution as a continuation of the civil rights revolution. He believed that the strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience was key to winning. The left wing of the movement contended that a more radical strategy was necessary to take on the state. The road to revolutionary change, however, had to begin with fundamental reforms.

The 2018 Poor People's Campaign

Why now? Since the election of the first African-American president in 2008 and his immediate replacement by a white nationalist president there has been a rapid rise of white nationalist policies.

Donald Trump won because anti-immigrant, anti-Black Lives Matter ideology convinced a majority of the white population that they would benefit with him as president. Whether or not they personally support his anti-immigrant or anti-Black policies, they still stand behind Trump.

The right wing had already taken over many state legislatures and made it harder to vote. Voter suppression is a key civil rights issue. The new Poor People's Campaign is a nonpartisan challenge to this narrow-minded white thinking.

It was initiated by the Reverend William J. Barber of North Carolina, who has led a campaign since 2013 against the far right in his state. Barber resigned as head of the state's NAACP in 2017 to run "The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival."

The campaign's objective is to train a massive network of grassroots activists to spark a multi-front movement challenging what Barber calls four systemic "evils" in American society: poverty, racism, ecological devastation and the war economy.

The first actions occurred in January in D.C. and states across the country. As reported by Waging Nonviolence newsletter:

"The movement aims to draw in labor unions, farm workers, civil rights groups and marginalized communities from around the country, focusing each week on a specific issue of injustice. Each week will include specific policy demands and voter education programs at the state and federal levels, as well as training in nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience. By organizing through local and state chapters, the campaign will maintain a relatively decentralized structure guided by a set of core principles and targets."

“What we face is not new,” Barber told a cheering crowd at a Raleigh, North Carolina, rally. “But when you get scared, remember the folks in power are scared too. They’re having nightmares!”

King’s Visionary Final Sermon

Martin Luther King’s final Sunday sermon in 1968 highlighted his nonviolent revolutionary vision:

“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 weapons 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 ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it 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.”

The campaign withered after King’s death. Its failure had much to do with the leadership’s turn to electoral politics. The traditional civil rights leaders saw the legal victories as a time to move forward.

There are now thousands of Black Elected Officials across the country. Yet for millions of African-American workers household income and wealth remains much less than those of other, particularly white workers.

Reverend Barber and a new generation of activists say that King’s vision is still valid and must be fought for. They recognize that electoral action is important, but as a strategy cannot change the system or protect human rights except as a product of a mass movement.

The 1964, 1965 and 1968 civil rights laws were passed by a Congress of primarily white men. Fear of rising social movements is why it happened. That’s the lesson of the 50 years since King’s assassination.

To achieve fundamental change in government requires a sustained street-based mass political and social struggle. The new Poor People’s Campaign can be an important contribution to that goal.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] [From Why a Poor People’s Campaign.](#)