

ALL LABOR HAS DIGNITY

By Martin Luther King, Jr. / 18 March, 1968

On February 12, 1968—President Lincoln's birthday—as Dr. King traveled from state to state, garnering rousing support for the Poor People's Campaign, more than a thousand sanitation workers in Memphis walked off the job. A month into the strike, on March 18, strikers and their supporters packed Bishop Charles Mason Temple of the Church of God in Christ in what the Reverend James Lawson would describe as a "sardine atmosphere." With few notes, King addressed the overflowing church by connecting the localized strike to the plight of all workers, especially those in the service economy.

[The following speech was delivered by Dr. King in support of the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, just two weeks before he was assassinated in the same city.]

My dear friend James Lawson and to all of these dedicated and distinguished ministers of the gospel assembled here tonight, and to all of the sanitation workers and their families and to all of my brothers and sisters—I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be in Memphis tonight, and to see you here in such large and enthusiastic numbers.

As I came in tonight, I turned around and said to Ralph Abernathy, "They really have a great movement here in Memphis." You are demonstrating something here that needs to be demonstrated all over our country. You are demonstrating that we can stick together and you are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and that if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down. I've always said that if we are to solve the tremendous problems that we face we are going to have to unite beyond the religious line, and I'm so happy to know that you have done that in this movement in a

supportive role. We have Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, members of the Church of God in Christ, and members of the Church of Christ in God, we are all together, and all of the other denominations and religious bodies that I have not mentioned.

But there is another great need, and that is to unite beyond class lines. The Negro “haves” must join hands with the Negro “have-nots.” And armed with compassionate traveler checks, they must journey into that other country of their brother’s denial and hurt and exploitation. This is what you have done. You’ve revealed here that you recognize that the no D is as significant as the PhD, and the man who has been to no-house is as significant as the man who has been to Morehouse. And I just want to commend you.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a situation like this and this lets me know that we are ready for action. So I come to commend you and I come also to say to you that in this struggle you have the absolute support, and that means financial support also, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

You are doing many things here in this struggle. You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs.

But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage, in the final analysis, is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.

But you are doing another thing. You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages. And I need not remind you that this is our plight as a people all over America. The vast majority of Negroes in our country are still perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. My friends, we are living as a people in a literal depression. Now you know when there is mass unemployment and underemployment in the black community they call it a social problem. When there is mass unemployment and underemployment in the white community they call it a depression. But we find ourselves living in a literal depression, all over this country as a people.

Now the problem is not only unemployment. Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day? And they are making wages so low that they cannot begin to

function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation. These are facts which must be seen, and it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income. You are here tonight to demand that Memphis will do something about the conditions that our brothers face as they work day in and day out for the well-being of the total community. You are here to demand that Memphis will see the poor.

You know Jesus reminded us in a magnificent parable one day that a man went to hell because he didn't see the poor. His name was Dives. And there was a man by the name of Lazarus who came daily to his gate in need of the basic necessities of life, and Dives didn't do anything about it. And he ended up going to hell. There is nothing in that parable which says that Dives went to hell because he was rich. Jesus never made a universal indictment against all wealth. It is true that one day a rich young ruler came to Him talking about eternal life, and He advised him to sell all, but in that instance Jesus was prescribing individual surgery, not setting forth a universal diagnosis.

If you will go on and read that parable in all of its dimensions and its symbolism you will remember that a conversation took place between heaven and hell. And on the other end of that long-distance call between heaven and hell was Abraham in heaven

talking to Dives in hell. It wasn't a millionaire in hell talking with a poor man in heaven, it was a little millionaire in hell talking with a multimillionaire in heaven. Dives didn't go to hell because he was rich. His wealth was his opportunity to bridge the gulf that separated him from his brother Lazarus. Dives went to hell because he passed by Lazarus every day, but he never really saw him. Dives went to hell because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible. Dives went to hell because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived. Dives went to hell because he maximized the minimum and minimized the maximum. Dives finally went to hell because he sought to be a conscientious objector in the war against poverty.

And I come by here to say that America, too, is going to hell if she doesn't use her wealth. If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life, she, too, will go to hell. And I will hear America through her historians, years and generations to come, saying, "We built gigantic buildings to kiss the skies. We built gargantuan bridges to span the seas. Through our spaceships we were able to carve highways through the stratosphere. Through our airplanes we are able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Through our submarines we were able to penetrate oceanic depths."

It seems that I can hear the God of the universe saying, “Even though you have done all of that, I was hungry and you fed me not, I was naked and you clothed me not. The children of my sons and daughters were in need of economic security and you didn’t provide it for them. And so you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness.” This may well be the indictment on America. And that same voice says in Memphis to the mayor, to the power structure, “If you do it unto the least of these of my children you do it unto me.”

Now you are doing something else here. You are highlighting the economic issue. You are going beyond purely civil rights to questions of human rights. That is a distinction.

We’ve fought the civil rights battle over the years. We’ve done many electrifying things. Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956, fifty thousand black men and women decided that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to ride segregated buses in humiliation. Fifty thousand strong, we substituted tired feet for tired souls. We walked the streets of that city for 381 days until the sagging walls of bus segregation were finally crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice. In 1960, by the thousands in this city and practically every city across the South, students and even adults started sitting in at segregated lunch counters. As they sat there, they were not only sitting down,

but they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and carrying the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy, which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

In 1961, we took a ride for freedom and brought an end to segregation in interstate travel. In 1963, we went to Birmingham, said, "We don't have a right, we don't have access to public accommodations." Bull Connor came with his dogs and he did use them. Bull Connor came with his fire hoses and he did use them. What he didn't realize was that the black people of Birmingham at that time had a fire that no water could put out. We stayed there and worked until we literally subpoenaed the conscience of a large segment of the nation, to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights. And then in 1965 we went to Selma. We said, "We don't have the right to vote." And we stayed there, we walked the highways of Alabama until the nation was aroused, and we finally got a voting rights bill.

Now all of these were great movements. They did a great deal to end legal segregation and guarantee the right to vote. With Selma and the voting rights bill one era of our struggle came to a close and a new era came into being. Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know now that it

isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee? What does it profit a man to be able to eat at the swankiest integrated restaurant when he doesn't earn enough money to take his wife out to dine? What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our city and the motels of our highway when we don't earn enough money to take our family on a vacation? What does it profit one to be able to attend an integrated school when he doesn't earn enough money to buy his children school clothes?

And so we assemble here tonight, and you have assembled for more than thirty days now to say, "We are tired. We are tired of being at the bottom. We are tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. We are tired of our children having to attend overcrowded, inferior, quality-less schools. We are tired of having to live in dilapidated substandard housing conditions where we don't have wall-to-wall carpets but so often we end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. We are tired of smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. We are tired of walking the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. We are tired of working our hands off and laboring every day and not even making a wage adequate to get the basic necessities of life. We are tired of our men being emasculated so that our wives

and our daughters have to go out and work in the white lady's kitchen, leaving us unable to be with our children and give them the time and the attention that they need. We are tired."

And so in Memphis we have begun. We are saying, "Now is the time." Get the word across to everybody in power in this time in this town that now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to make an adequate income a reality for all of God's children. Now is the time for city hall to take a position for that which is just and honest. Now is the time for justice to roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. Now is the time.

Now let me say a word to those of you who are on strike. You have been out now for a number of days, but don't despair. Nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice. The thing for you to do is stay together, and say to everybody in this community that you are going to stick it out to the end until every demand is met, and that you are gonna say, "We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around."

Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you are also struggling for the right to organize and be recognized.

We can all get more together than we can apart; we can get more organized together than we can apart. And this is the way we gain

power. Power is the ability to achieve purpose, power is the ability to affect change, and we need power. What is power? Walter Reuther said once that “power is the ability of a labor union like UAW to make the most powerful corporation in the world—General Motors—say yes when it wants to say no.” That’s power. And I want you to stick it out so that you will be able to make Mayor Loeb and others say yes, even when they want to say no. Now the other thing is that nothing is gained without pressure. Don’t let anybody tell you to go back on the job and paternalistically say, “Now, you are my men and I’m going to do the right thing for you. Just come on back on the job.” Don’t go back on the job until the demands are met. Never forget that freedom is not something that is voluntarily given by the oppressor. It is something that must be demanded by the oppressed. Freedom is not some lavish dish that the power structure and the white forces in policy-making positions will voluntarily hand out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. If we are going to get equality, if we are going to get adequate wages, we are going to have to struggle for it.

Now you know what? You may have to escalate the struggle a bit. If they keep refusing, and they will not recognize the union, and will not agree for the check-off for the collection of dues, I tell you

what you ought to do, and you are together here enough to do it:
in a few days you ought to get together and just have a general
work stoppage in the city of Memphis.

And you let that day come, and not a Negro in this city will go to
any job downtown. When no Negro in domestic service will go to
anybody's house or anybody's kitchen. When black students will
not go to anybody's school and black teachers . . .

*[After conferring with his aides, King returned to the microphone
briefly to say he would return to Memphis to lead a mass march
within a few days.]*

Delivered at the American Federation of State, County,
and Municipal Employees mass meeting, Bishop Charles
Mason Temple, Church of God in Christ, Memphis,
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