

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Legacy of Organized Labor **Rev Gary Kowalski, UCOT September 1, 2019 sermon**

Bernie Sanders doesn't know the half of it. Vermont's fuzzy-headed Senator is fond of reminding audiences that Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis, Tennessee, the day he died, not to fight Jim Crow, but to support a strike by the city's sanitation workers. The garbage men there—almost all of them black—had recently formed a chapter of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees to demand better wages and working conditions. Two garbagemen had just been crushed to death when the big compactor on the trash truck malfunctioned. But the city refused to recognize their union, and when the 1,300 employees walked off their jobs, marching under picket signs reading “I Am A Man,” the police broke up the rally with mace and billy clubs. Tanks lined the streets. Go back and look at the images. It was like Tianamen Square, but in Tennessee. After the mayor threatened to fire every one of the striking workers and a local court issued an injunction against any further demonstrations, the union's leaders called on Dr. King to visit Memphis.

It was an invitation he couldn't refuse. For the biggest obstacles that kept people of color from participating fully in the American Dream were not just racial but social and economic in nature. “What good is it to sit at a lunch counter,” Dr. King often asked, “if you can't afford a hamburger?” So of course he had to go to Memphis to campaign for a workingman's right to earn an honest wage. Bernie's right about that. But to fully understand what drew Dr. King to that fateful balcony of the Lorraine Motel in 1968, you need to know more about the background of the civil rights movement, a story that is deeply intertwined with the history of American labor.

What Americans remember about Dr. King, mostly, is the famous “I Have A Dream” delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. But if King's voice carried that day, it was no thanks to his corporate sponsors, for he had none. Rather, the thanks went largely to the United Auto Workers, the union that supplied the microphones and paid for the electricity, funding most of the logistics of the march. Walter Reuther, the head of the auto workers' union, was on the platform along with King and the real instigators of the march. For although King was the first speaker on the rostrum, he was not the chief organizer of that massing of humanity. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, as it was officially called, was largely the brainchild of the labor leader A. Philip Randolph.

Randolph was president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest black union in the country. Like King, he was the son of a minister, but at age 74, Randolph was more of a father figure for the fledgling civil rights leader. According to one biographer “King all but idolized ‘Mr. Randolph.’ For A. Philip Randolph had overcome seemingly impossible odds to gain victory for his people. First, he had taken men who were dispirited and disorganized and given

them esprit de corps, a sense that they could be much more powerful united in common cause than singly, in isolation from each other. In an era when railroads were the powerhouses of the American economy, the Pullman Company stood as undisputed king of the railroads, with a near monopoly on passenger travel throughout the United States. Pullman's cars signified luxury and comfort for the weary traveler. They offered first class service, with lavish personal attention guaranteed by a small army of black menials who were the lowest paid employees on the line. Out of their meager wages, the porters were expected to pay for their own meals on the road. Brushes and polish for buffing the passenger's shoes had to be furnished out of the porters' own pockets. The cost of missing linens and other stolen items were also deducted from their pay. Any man "talking union" was automatically fired and blacklisted. But Randolph led a twelve year struggle against the world's most powerful corporation and won. In 1937, the nation's first black labor union signed its first contract, reducing the porter's hours from 400 down to 240 hours a month and winning other important concessions from management.

But for Randolph, that was only a beginning. Four years later, with the outbreak of war in Europe, the Depression was ending for most white Americans. But as usual, blacks had been last hired, first fired during the financial downturn. Randolph wanted African Americans to have their share of jobs in the defense plants and factories that were beginning to churn out war material, and with the Brotherhood's backing, he threatened a massive march on Washington to make it happen. As a result, Franklin Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Commission, which ended discrimination in government offices and companies with federal contracts. A few years later, while Martin Luther King Jr. was still in divinity school, Randolph and his union had an active Civil Disobedience Committee that worked with President Truman to end segregation in the U.S. Armed Forces. So for his most important models and mentors, King didn't need to turn to Thoreau or Tolstoy or Gandhi. His sources of inspiration lay much closer to hand.

Indeed, it's safe to say that most of the tactics of the Civil Rights movement were pioneered by organized labor. The picket sign and protest march, the sit in, the boycott and mass meeting didn't materialize out of thin air. They were tools developed by working men and women in the struggle for decent wages, safer working conditions, insurance, paid retirement and other job benefits. Even the song "We Shall Overcome" had labor roots. A. Philip Randolph had sung it back in the thirties. The modern chapter of the Civil Rights movement is usually traced back to Montgomery, Alabama, to the day in 1955 when a tired seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. But it's seldom mentioned that Ms. Parks had attended the Highlander Folk School, a southern center for training union organizers. And it's almost forgotten that the initial organizer of the Montgomery Bus Boycott was E.D. Nixon, a longtime member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

After Nixon conceived the idea of boycotting the buses, he started calling local ministers. His third or fourth call was to the brand new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. After explaining the plan, Nixon asked for King's support. King said he needed time to consider. While King thought it over, Nixon phoned the remainder of names on his list, then called back King, who finally agreed. "I'm glad you're on board, Reverend King," Nixon said. "Yours is the only church downtown and I've got eighteen people meeting there at 3 p.m. this afternoon. It would look kind of bad if you weren't present." That night, King's eloquence stirred the crowd. But as the boycott dragged on for months, Nixon's tale of how the Brotherhood held out for twelve long years against the Pullman Company helped strengthen the resolve of the black community, until they finally carried the day.

After that, King went on to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which continued to have close ties with labor. Along with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Packing House Workers of Chicago and New York's District 65 of the Distributive Workers of America all contributed generously to SCLC's coffers. In fact, King was so closely associated with District 65 that he became an honorary member of the union. When King was stabbed signing copies of his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, it was A. Philip Randolph who paid the hospital bills. When King was later arrested and confined behind bars in Alabama, where he wrote his famous letter from a Birmingham jail, the United Auto Workers were the ones who came up with the rather formidable bail needed to set him free. It's no overstatement to say that Martin Luther King Jr. owed his much of his influence and perhaps his very life to the help of organized labor.

And he shared something more with the unions as well: a concern for the little guy, the manual laborer, the ladies who mopped floors or took in other people's laundry for a living, the children who were forced to leave school to go to work, the families over their heads in debt because their kids had gotten asthma because they lived next door to the smokestacks and because they couldn't pay their doctor's bills. King saw people without enough to eat or affordable healthcare or adequate shelter--islands of deprivation in the midst of a sea of material abundance and his conscience was stirred, because he'd read the Hebrew prophets and the Christian gospels that told him to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and care for the widow and orphan. And he knew that this was a commandment not intended solely for the individual, to be fulfilled through private charity, but rather directed toward the entire community, which was under obligation to provide a share in the goods of life for all of its members, not just a privileged few. It wasn't enough to be a Good Samaritan on the road of life, he said, helping our neighbors who had fallen by the wayside. A social ethic had to challenge a system where so many were robbed, or imprisoned, or forced into bankruptcy and destitution on life's highway. King believed that the role of government in a democracy was not only to provide for the common defense but to promote the general welfare, and that a nation that continued year after year to spend more money on missiles and aircraft carriers than on programs of social

uplift was a nation approaching spiritual death, and he said so in his speeches again and again. If he were alive today, he'd be talking about it still.

If King were still alive, I think he would be talking about the raids by ICE last month in Mississippi, where hundreds of undocumented workers in the chicken slaughterhouses for Koch and Pecos Foods had just won a multi-million dollar lawsuit against their employers for sexual and racial harassment. It's part of a pattern. Those workers belonged to the United Food and Commercial Workers, and they were arrested to be deported, just like workers a year before at Fresh Mark, in Salem, Ohio, where laborers belonging to the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union got raided after winning a \$200,000 judgement against their employer for unsafe working conditions, just like a restaurant worker in Brooklyn who was arrested by ICE two weeks ago while actually giving a legal deposition against his employer for unpaid wages. It's intimidation. In Mississippi, two Pecos workers suffered amputations as the speed of the slaughter line accelerated and the number of federal inspectors plummeted. They'd deny it, but their bosses called ICE to retaliate against their bellyaching.

I think King would be talking about Walmart, which fired all their butchers when they voted to form a union, and which now only sells pre-packaged meat, like Koch and Pecos brand chicken cravers parmesan bacon filled nuggets. Cheap meat from underpaid, overworked, often underage and at-risk workers on the killing floor, sometimes trafficked kids like the ones from Guatemala who were rescued from slave like conditions on an Ohio egg plant, Trillium Farms, that now produces almost four billion eggs a year. "Every day the work is the same," said one teen interviewed by the PBS news show Frontline, speaking in Spanish. "You sweat, and the chickens, they crap in your face. The manure falls in your eyes. Your eyes burn. Your clothes, they get dirty, completely filthy. We pick up the chickens that have fallen from the cages. There are lots of dead chickens. They reek and they're rotting. That's how the work is, very hard." Walmart used to buy their eggs from DeKoster Farms, which went out of business in 2010 after poisoning 56,000 Americans with salmonella and then DeKoster sold out to Trillium. Does Trillium now sell these same "cage free" eggs to Walmart? I don't know. It's very hard even in this age of information to find out where your eggs come from, or what's happening behind the closed doors of agribusiness. Please, I invite some of you to help research this for me. Confirm or refute me. But I think that's how they can sell eggs so cheap at Walmart, partly, with forced labor. The bosses hire subcontractors to supply workers. The subcontractors entice kids from El Salvador or Nicaragua with promises of a bright future, a future that becomes eight people living in a trailer with no heat and no running water and twelve hour days paying back the \$15,000 they owe the coyotes who smuggled them across the border, in debt peonage, kept in line with threats to kill their families or take the deeds to their parent's farms. There is plausible deniability at every step. But the Walton heirs now earn \$4 million an hour. Their workers start at \$11. It's a crime. King would be asking why Amazon pays no taxes while Jeff Bezos, CEO and ba-zillionaire, earns almost \$9 million

an hour, which would take an Amazon employee 170 years to accumulate, working 24 hours a day.

Martin Luther King Jr. would give hope to his listeners and remind us all that progress has been made. But he would say that having Ben Carson in the cabinet and Clarence Thomas on the Supreme Court is less a measure of how far we've come than of how far we still have to go to realize the dream that would give equality to all. He would tell us again that he'd seen the Promised Land of brotherhood and sisterhood, but that there's a long journey still ahead. It's going to take work and discipline and sacrifice to get there, he might say. It's going to take voter registration drives and coalition-building between churches and labor unions and students and environmentalists. There are going to be dark times ahead and moments of frustration, he'd warn. But don't give up, don't give in, and don't get mad. Instead, get organized.

Happy Labor Day!