

Martin Luther King Jr. talks about the labor movement

“The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome. When in the ‘30s the wave of union organization crested over the nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society.”

—Speech to the state convention of the Illinois AFL-CIO, Oct. 7, 1965

“Less than a century ago the laborer had no rights, little or no respect, and led a life which was socially submerged and barren ... American industry organized misery into sweatshops and proclaimed the right of capital to act without restraints and without conscience. The inspiring answer to this intolerable and dehumanizing existence was economic organization through trade unions. The worker became determined not to wait for charitable impulses to grow in his employer. He constructed the means by which fairer sharing of the fruits of his toil had to be given to him or the wheels of industry, which he alone turned, would halt and wealth for no one would be available...”

“History is a great teacher. Now everyone knows that the labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed-of levels of production. Those who attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them.

“Negroes are almost entirely a working people ... Our needs are identical with labor’s needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor’s demands and fight laws which curb labor. That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature, spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.”

—Speaking to the AFL-CIO on Dec. 11, 1961

“In our glorious fight for civil rights, we must guard against being fooled by false slogans, such as ‘right to work.’ It is a law to rob us of our civil rights and job rights. It is supported by Southern segregationists who are trying to keep us from achieving our civil rights and our right of equal job opportunity. Its purpose is to destroy labor unions and the freedom of collective bargaining by which unions have improved wages and working conditions of everyone ... Wherever these laws have been passed, wages are lower, job opportunities are fewer and there are no civil rights. We do not intend to let them do this to us. We demand this fraud be stopped. Our weapon is our vote.”

—Speaking on “right-to-work” laws in 1961

“Negroes in the United States read the history of labor and find it mirrors their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.

“We want to rely upon the goodwill of those who oppose us. Indeed, we have brought forward the method of nonviolence to give an example of unilateral goodwill in an effort to evoke it in those who have not yet felt it in their hearts. But we know that if we are not simultaneously organizing our strength we will have no means to move forward. If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits and our hope. In this way, labor’s historic tradition of moving forward to create vital people as consumers and citizens has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.”

—Speaking to the AFL-CIO on Dec. 11, 1961



“Today Negroes want above all else to abolish poverty in their lives and in the lives of the white poor. This is the heart of their program. To end the humiliation was a start, but to end poverty is a bigger task. It is natural for Negroes to turn to the labor movement because it was the first and pioneer anti-poverty program...”

“Negroes are not the only poor in the nation. There are nearly twice as many white poor as Negro, and therefore the struggle against poverty is not involved solely with color or racial discrimination but with elementary economic justice...”

“Now most serious thinkers acknowledge that dislocations in the market operation of our economy and the prevalence of discrimination thrust people into idleness and bind them in constant or frequent unemployment against their will. The poor are less often dismissed from our conscience today by being branded as inferior and incompetent. We also know that no matter how dynamically the economy develops and expands, it does not eliminate all poverty.

“To a degree, we have been attacking the problem by increasing purchasing power through higher wage scales and increased Social Security benefits. But these measures are exercised with restraint and come only as a consequence of organized struggles... Those at the lowest economic level, the poor white, the Negro, the aged, are traditionally unorganized and have little or no ability to force a growth in their consumer potential. They stagnate or become even poorer in relation to the larger society.”

—Speaking to shop stewards of Teamsters Local 815 and the Allied Trades Council, May 2, 1967

(Source: *Now Is the Time*. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on Labor in the South: The Case for a Coalition. Booklet prepared by the Southern Labor Institute under the auspices of the Labor Subcommittee of the King Holiday Commission, designed by the American Federation of Teachers and printed by AFSCME. January 1986.)



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Your brothers and sisters in AFSCME Local 88 encourage all our brothers and sisters to enjoy and celebrate the freedoms we have that Martin Luther King fought so hard to achieve for all Americans.

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘wait’ has almost always meant ‘never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

Quoted from “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, from Martin Luther King Jr. to his fellow clergymen.

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