

1963 March on Washington — it's time to march again

When labor unions join civil rights groups this month for 50th anniversary commemorations of the 1963 March on Washington, it will be to echo the original. Organized labor was a big part of the original quarter-million-strong event at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream."

The August 28, 1963, march — the largest demonstration in U.S. history up to that point — was planned and initiated by African-American labor leader A. Philip Randolph, who was vice president of the AFL-CIO and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The event's full name was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and it marked the 100th anniversary of an enormous human rights advance — Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation which freed the slaves in Confederate Southern states.

"But ... one hundred years later," King said in "I Have a Dream," "the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity."

King delivered the speech on a sound system union funds helped pay for, on a stage shared with fellow march co-chairs Randolph and United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther. In fact, according to UAW lore, King wrote an earlier version of the speech in borrowed office space at the union's headquarters in Detroit. And he delivered the speech in front of an audience that included tens of thousands of union



(PHOTO LEFT) At the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther (center) marches with AFL-CIO Vice President A. Philip Randolph (to the left of him). Reuther and Randolph were two of the 10 co-chairs of the march. (PHOTO RIGHT) Marchers carry placards articulating the demands of the carefully planned event, including equal rights, integrated schools, decent housing, and an end to police brutality.



members brought on buses and planes chartered by their unions. But labor's participation, and the economic justice agenda of the Jobs And Freedom march, have been written out of conventional narrative of the march.

"Unions were at the core of the march," says King historian Michael Honey, professor of history at University of Washington at Tacoma.

In fact, the march began as an effort by the Negro American Labor Council, a group Randolph and other black trade unionists had formed to protest segregation and discrimination within organized labor. But it expanded to a coalition of mainline civil rights groups and sympathetic labor unions united behind the slogan "Jobs and Freedom."

"King's job in that event was to say

something inspirational," Honey said. "What we remember is mostly that speech, and rightly so, because it's one of the greatest speeches of American history. But the event itself was full of substance about jobs and economic justice."

Following King's speech, Randolph led the crowd in a pledge to continue working for the march demands, which were aimed at "the twin evils of racism and economic degradation." March organizers had made it a priority to get unemployed workers to attend the march, and economic demands were

front and center. Those demands included a \$2-an-hour minimum wage, decent housing for all Americans, a federal program to train and place all unemployed workers on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages, and broadening the Fair Labor Standards Act to cover farmworkers, domestic servants, and public sector workers. The "freedom" demands included meaningful civil rights legislation, elimination of school segregation by year's end, a federal law prohibiting discrimination in public or private hiring, and reducing Congressional repre-

sentation of states that kept blacks from voting.

Congress did ban employment discrimination in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It cracked down on state laws that kept blacks from voting in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. It barred housing discrimination in the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Court orders continued to curtail school segregation. And Congress extended some of the protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act to domestics, farmworkers and public employees.

But other parts of the March on Washington agenda have yet to be accomplished, 50 years later. The 1963 March's call for a \$2-an-hour minimum wage would be \$15.26 in today's dollars, which is more than twice the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25. There's still no comprehensive program to train and employ all unemployed Americans. Federal support for housing is in decline, and programs to lift up the poor of all races have fallen out of favor. Welfare is capped and limited, and food stamps are being cut. And even the successful parts of the march agenda are under threat: In June, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the part of the Voting Rights Act that required federal approval for voting law changes in states that historically blocked blacks from voting.

"There's regression all along the line," Honey said.

So, say union and civil rights organizers, it's time to march again.



HAPPY LABOR DAY
FROM
ROOFERS LOCAL 49

Celebrating our 100th Anniversary
1913-2013

RUSS GARNETT, FINANCIAL SECRETARY/BUSINESS AGENT
5032 SE 26TH AVE. PORTLAND, OR, 503-232-4807

To the hard-working men
and women who serve our
community every day:

Thank you.



**Portland
City
Commissioner
Nick Fish**