

King's legacy, today's struggle



by Larry Holmes

Millions of people throughout the world commemorate Martin Luther King Jr., on the occasion of his birthday.

The Reaganite courts, in complicity with the Justice Department, have taken note of King's birthday as well by delivering what is perhaps the biggest legal attack on the 1964 Civil Rights Law that King fought for since the Supreme Court's infamous Bakke decision five years ago.

After decades of protest and years of lawsuits against Chicago's racist school board's refusal to desegregate the city's public schools through busing, last week a federal judge upheld the school board's racism as "constitutional."

Under the direction of Reagan, scores of top echelon Justice Department officials intervened in the case to insure the blow to busing and mandatory desegregation laws.

The NAACP, which initiated lawsuits against the school board along with other groups in Chicago's black community, was barred from final arguments in the case due to strong objection by the Justice Department. Federal Judge Milton L. Shadur ruled that the NAACP's arguments were not necessary because the Justice Department is capable of representing the interests of the public including the minority community.

Reagan using civil rights division to destroy civil rights

The Justice Department fully intends to use the Chicago ruling as a precedent to overturn school desegregation plans across the country.

In the past, civil rights advocates have complained that the civil rights division of the Justice Department was underfunded, understaffed and relegated to low priority. Under Reagan, however, the civil rights division has been elevated to top priority with more lawyers and money than any other division. Only now the so-called "civil rights" unit has been forged into the principal weapon in Reagan's war on anti-racist laws and affirmative action programs from coast to coast.

In the last three weeks alone, the Justice Department has intervened in local courts in support of a group of racist fire-fighters seeking to overturn an affirmative action order in Boston's fire department, and has actually initiated legal action to overturn an affirmative action program in the New Orleans Police Department.

Chicago: most segregated major Northeast city

The local impact of the Chicago ruling is no less significant than its national implications. Of the major cities in the Northeast, Chicago is the most segregated. After World War II more black families migrated from the rural South to Chicago than to any other Northern city, including New York, seeking jobs in the steel mills. Forced segregation in housing and schools in Chicago is as rigid and visible as anywhere in Mississippi. Twenty years ago 96 percent of the public school system was segregated. Officials say 83 percent of the city's public schools are segregated today.

The Chicago school board's notorious history of resistance to any change in their apartheid-like education system rivals the militancy of their bigoted counterparts on Boston's School Board. A few years ago, the School Board chose to shut down the schools rather than acquiesce in a desegregation plan. The board defied community protests and a threat to withdraw funds by the federal government for violating the law. The School Board doesn't have to worry about charges of violating the law anymore.

King fought Nazis, Chicago political machine

Ironically, King himself wrote a chapter in the struggle to rout racism in Chicago. In 1965 King met with Chicago civil rights leaders to plan a campaign against discrimination in public schools and housing. He rented an apartment in the black

community in Chicago's South Side which he held for the better part of a year.

In addition to his outspoken opposition to the Vietnam war, King's interest in Chicago was one of the mounting reasons that led the ruling class to conclude that he had gone too far.

Some of the more moderate civil rights leaders hoped that King's stay in Chicago would cool the city's frustrated blacks in the wake of the Watts Rebellion a year earlier which foreshadowed uprisings against an intolerable existence in Detroit and Newark. However, the presence of the popular black leader had the opposite effect. Northern politicians who gave lip service to King's crusade against Jim Crow in the South did not want him arousing the black masses in their own cities.

In July 1966, after addressing a crowd of 45,000 people in Soldier's Field, King led a march through the

city to the steps of City Hall, where he posted a list of demands on the office door of powerful machine boss Mayor Daley.

Mayor Daley, also a national force in the Democratic Party, was enraged by the protests led by King in "his" streets. Daley decided that unlike Bull Conner, he would restrain his police and leave King to the local fascist thugs. King's marches against housing discrimination in all-white neighborhoods were pelted with bricks by uniformed Nazis. On Sept. 4, 1966 a large mob of racists led by the Nazis and the Klan attacked King's march with baseball bats and sticks in Cicero, a white suburb of Chicago.

If nothing else, King's work in Chicago graphically showed the world that racism flourished north of Mississippi, and can be found in its most ugly and violent form in Chicago.

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