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OPINION

Stuck Between Rich and Poor

An economic divide closely tied to race

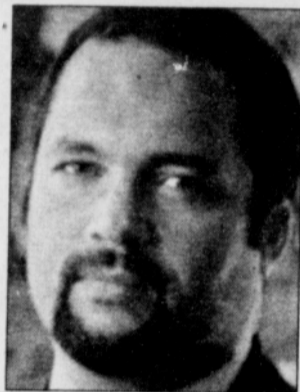
BY BENJAMIN TODD JEALOUS

Coming the day after the 45th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the new unemployment numbers show that unemployment is still high - and remains much higher for African Americans.

One thing hasn't changed in the last half century: if you're a person of color, you're more likely to be unemployed. Even though the black unemployment rate fell by .05 percent last month, it still sits at nearly 13.3 percent nearly double the overall rate.

This gap in employment has led

to an economic divide between the richest and the poorest in America that is about as bad as in the divide in Rwanda and Serbia. The top 20 percent of Americans earn 50.2 percent of income, while the bottom 20 percent earns just 3.3 percent.



Yet Congress continues to do nothing to directly address unemployment.

This is a dangerous trend. Recent studies - including one by the International Monetary Fund - show that countries with higher levels of economic inequality have slower growth rates, and that "economic inclusion corresponds with robust economic growth." Urban economies affect the prosperity of the entire sur-

rounding region, and ultimately the country as a whole.

As our country grows more diverse, we must also acknowledge that economic inequality is closely tied to race, due to decades of past and ongoing discrimination. And this inequality undermines the racial progress that we have achieved.

As Dr. King asked in 1968, "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?"

In the last year of Dr. King's life, he was organizing the Poor People's Campaign. He endorsed the Freedom Budget, a document that called for massive investments in public works and infrastructure, job training and education programs, and a higher mini-

mum wage. The budget insisted that smart investments with our most vulnerable citizens will spur economic growth.

Unfortunately, this plan never moved forward. But its message proved prophetic, and Dr. King's economic agenda is still relevant today.

A strong and sustainable economic recovery requires an economic climate in which all Americans - regardless of race or class - can expect hard work to be rewarded with a steady job. This is not a partisan issue, it is an American issue. And Congress needs to act now.

Earlier this year the National Black Leaders Coalition came up with solutions for fixing the current unemployment crisis. The proposals included implementing important parts of the American

Jobs Act to revitalize urban areas; funding the Urban Jobs Act to create youth jobs programs; and increasing the minimum wage. These policies echoed King's recommendations 45 years earlier.

In 1962 Dr. King said, "There are three major social evils in our world today: the evil of war, the evil of economic justice, and the evil of racial injustice."

Fifty years later, we need to recognize that inaction is not a policy option; it has been tried; and it hasn't worked. Let's try something new. Let's recommit ourselves to Dr. King's economic principles and advance an economic agenda that bridges our nation's divides and fosters an economic recovery in which all can benefit.

Benjamin Todd Jealous is president and chief executive officer of the NAACP.

Parallels from Birmingham to Boston

Justice means more than punishment

BY JOSE-ANTONIO OROSCO

Last month marked the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail." This letter is now a classic document in American history and compelling testimony to the power of nonviolence and the struggle for equality.

April was also marred by the horrific events at the Boston Marathon. At first glance, it may seem there is very little to connect the two: What does a document dealing with civil rights have to do with a terrorist bombing?

We ought to remember that, for decades, African Americans lived under constant threat of terrorist violence at the hands of white supremacist groups such as the KKK.

Those that were not victims of lynchings often had to live with the psychological scars of being treated as second-class citizens. Few people could understand, King wrote, how heartbreaking it is to explain to one's own children why they can't attend an amusement park because of segregation, or to try to come up with an answer to the question "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?" experiences that will not

somehow harden that child's heart forever.

In his letter, Dr. King tries to remind moderate white Americans who were concerned about marches and rallies getting out of hand that, in staging demonstrations around the country, civil rights activists were not trying to stir up trouble. Instead, they were trying to



deal with the trouble that already existed in the United States and were overlooked by most people.

For many of those suffering those conditions, violence seems to be the only way to give voice to their frustrations. King did not mean to justify the use of violence, but only to explain why so many people in despair might be tempted to pick up the gun or the bomb.

In using nonviolent civil disobedience, the activists were not attempting to create tension, but to find a way to give expression to the anger and "hidden tension" that boiled underneath the thin layer of normalcy generated by racist segregation. He called upon people to deal with the underlying causes of violence and not

frustrations. King did not mean to justify the use of violence, but only to explain why so many people in despair might be tempted to pick up the gun or the bomb.

Such observations ought not to diminish the pain and suffering of the victims in Boston, but to remind us, as King did in his letter, that there is but a thin veneer of civilization over a world plagued with misery.

Toward the end of his life, King taught us that our world is rife with various injustices - racism, militarism, poverty, and a culture of competitive materialism - that damage the flourishing of millions of people around the world and are the causes for much misery and anger.

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frustrations. King did not mean to justify the use of violence, but only to explain why so many people in despair might be tempted to pick up the gun or the bomb.

Some of the first responders in Boston commented that the scene at the finish line looked like a warzone. Media commentators pointed out that on the same day that the marathon bombings occurred there were several terrible explosions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

gression.

Terrorists ought to be brought to account and victims deserve compassion; but justice means more than punishment. It also means we have to consider how to think about building a world in which "in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine."

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The Portland Observer Established 1970
USPS 959-680
4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

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EDITOR: Michael Leighton

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Rakeem Washington

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Paul Neufeldt

OFFICE MANAGER/CLASSIFIERS: Lucinda Baldwin

ADVERTISING MANAGER: Leonard Latin

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Portland Observer,
PO Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208

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