

# THE Skanner

Challenging People to Shape  
a Better Future Now

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# Opinion

## Honoring MLK: The Unfinished Journey Towards Economic Freedom



Charlene Crowell

Guest Columnist

This January 15, our nation again will observe the only national holiday designated as a day of service. The Martin Luther King, Jr. federal was first observed in 1986. But it took another 17 years for all 50 states to recognize the holiday, according to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.

While Rev. King dedicated his life to the pursuit of freedom, peace, and justice for all Americans, too many economically marginalized people are reduced to fighting over scraps while others enjoy the nation's economic bounty.

In 2022, 37.9 million people – 11.5 percent of the nation – lived in poverty, according to the Census Bureau. Additionally, Black individuals made up 20.1% of the population in poverty in 2022 but only 13.5 percent of the total population. Black individuals made up 20.1% of the population in poverty in 2022 but only 13.5 percent of the total population, according to the Census Bureau.

The federal minimum wage, currently at \$7.25 an hour, has

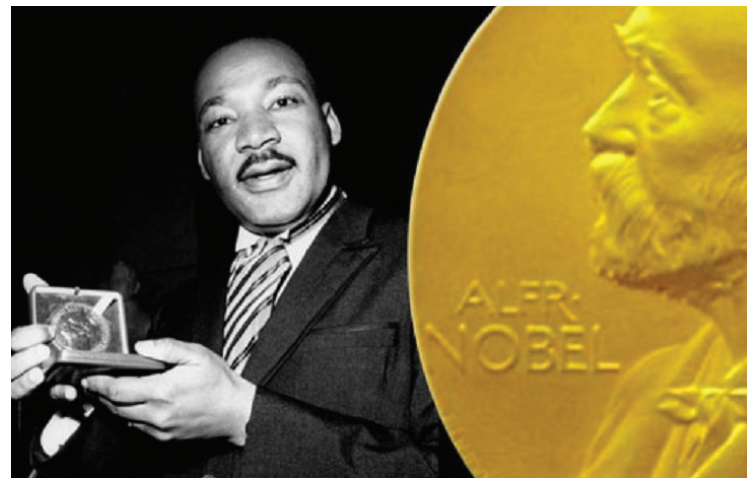
not increased since July 2009, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Standards.

And despite increases that take effect in many states in 2024, workers still earn only \$7.25 per hour in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and Wyoming, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).

On December 10, 1964, Gunnar Jahn, Chairman of the Nobel Committee presented its Nobel Peace Prize to Dr. King saying in part, "[D]iscrimination will still persist in the economic field and in social intercourse. Realistic as he is, Martin Luther King knows this."

Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, Dr. King said, "I am mindful that debilitating and grinding poverty afflicts my people and chains them to the lowest rung of the economic ladder."

"The tortuous road which has led from Montgomery, Al-



abama to Oslo bears witness to this truth," Dr. King continued. "This is a road over which millions of Negroes are traveling to find a new sense of dignity... I have the audacity to be-

**“I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up**

lieve that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up."

"This faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future," added Dr. King.

"It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom... Today I come to Oslo as a trustee, inspired and with renewed dedication to humanity. I accept this prize on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood. I say I come as a trustee, for in the depths of my heart I am aware that this prize is much more than an honor to me personally."

Dr. King would urge Americans to remain vigilant and vocal in fighting attacks against diversity, equity, and inclusion.

A true tribute to Dr. King would be a renewed groundswell of advocacy that ensures our march towards full freedom refuses to go back; but instead moves forward in the same determination of his life's work. Social equity cannot be sustained without economic parity.

As a people and as a nation, let us confront these and other challenges in his memory.

## Acting Like We Own It

When I was in prison for my nonviolent anti-nuclear actions, one of my disciplines was to write something for publication daily—a letter to the editor, an opinion piece, a book review, or even mediocre poetry. One hundred percent of my writing was in opposition to nuclear weapons.

I couldn't vote while I was incarcerated. But I refused to stop participating in our democracy. If I could convince even two people to care enough to vote who had not been voting even though they were able to, and if they voted for a candidate who was opposed to nuclear weapons, I felt like this was how I was still part of the democracy of my country.

Who are the people who cannot vote and who are yet a part of how our democracy functions? An incomplete list, but one that I hope gives some hope to those who wish they could vote in our American elections:

- Surviving students from the horrific 2018 Valentine's Day mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school were too young to vote and yet start-



Tom H. Hastings, PhD.

PSU

ed a movement that built enough pressure on politicians to achieve some legislative victories.

- Greta Thunberg was a young Swedish girl who

**“This is your democracy, even if you are 15, even if you are undocumented, even if you are incarcerated**

began the climate strike movement that prompted governments far beyond her own to act. Too young to vote, not a citizen of any place except Sweden, and yet she profoundly participates in democracies from the UK to New Zealand to the US and beyond, so influential she was Time magazine's Person of the Year in 2019.

- In the spring of 1963, more

than a thousand young students skipped school in Birmingham, Alabama, to protest segregation and the anti-democratic Jim Crow voter suppression that Black people endured in Alabama. They couldn't vote because they were too young and their parents were routinely stopped from voting because they were Black. Yet their campaign, called the Children's Crusade, was instrumental

in inspiring mass support across the US for both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

- In Liberia, dictator Charles Taylor rigged "elections" and maintained his iron grip on power, so there was no democracy in which to participate during his rule, which featured a particularly brutal 14-year civil war with child soldiers on both sides, rape and massa-

crs. The Liberian women united in nonviolent resistance, rose up and stopped the war and created a new real democracy. The countless stories of disenfranchised people around the world making a difference in their democracies—or even creating democracy where there had been none—can help motivate us when we feel like it's hopeless. It is never impossible to participate in democracy. People like Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Alice Paul, and so many more are still influential even though they've passed on.

This is your democracy, even if you are 15, even if you are undocumented, even if you are incarcerated. We all own it, we all can make it stronger and more responsive to what we need, to justice, to a world fit for life. Five minutes of action a day by millions of us can be the best protection of our hope, our rights, our freedom from fear, our freedom to love and live.

Democracy is way deeper than one vote every few years. It will live or die, depending on our commitment to it. We are powerful, every one of us.