

21st Annual MLK Day Event Focused on Labor, Community and Palestinian Struggles

A host of speakers and artists addressed the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the present century

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Shawn Fain, President of the UAW International, noted during his major policy address at the 21st Annual Detroit MLK Day Rally that the labor movement and the struggle for civil rights remains at the center of change and transformation in the United States.

Speaking at the beginning of a year following monumental developments in the labor and civil rights movements, Fain has gained widespread recognition for his work in placing the working class back at the center of social change in the leading economy in the world.

Image: Shawn Fain



The UAW President who only took office over the last year said at MLK Day that:

“Today, we find our government backing the destruction of lives in villages – not in Vietnam – but in Gaza. We hear the boosters of war claiming that ‘real patriots’ support the bombing. But we know in this room that there is nothing more patriotic than the pursuit of justice no matter where that takes us.

Economic justice cannot end at the doors of the factory or worksite. Social justice cannot end at the border of our country.

We must not be silent when it comes to the pursuit of peace and justice for working class people, the poor, for all of humanity.

The fight against hate and greed is never ending. The fight for economic and social Justice – the fight for humanity – is eternal, and there is no more of a just cause in all of the world.”

Only when we stand up – together – will we rise up and realize the dream of Dr. King; not just for ourselves, but for all of humanity.”

Image: Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib



On January 15, the actual date of the 95th anniversary of the birth of civil rights and peace activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was celebrated as a federal holiday in the United States. Shawn Fain and Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib were the featured guest speakers at the most significant and progressive event in Detroit which is committed to the upholding of the actual legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated on April 4, 1968, while embroiled in supporting a strike by the largely African American sanitation workers seeking union recognition in Memphis, Tennessee during the early months of that year.

Dr. King had linked the movements for an end to institutional racism, poverty and the opposition to the war in Vietnam which had cost the people of the U.S. billions of dollars along with shifting the focus from reform to imperialist intervention between 1965 to 1968. The ongoing war resulted in the refusal of then President Lyndon B. Johnson to seek reelection in 1968 as well as the assassination of Dr. King right on the verge of the launching of the original Poor People’s Campaign to occupy Washington to demand the passage of legislation to end the impoverishment of African Americans and all other nationalities in the U.S.

2024 Represents Six Decades of Mass Struggles in Labor, Civil Rights and Peace

In the city of Detroit, the MLK Committee chaired by veteran activist Dorothy Dewberry Aldridge, held its 21st consecutive rally and march at the St. Matthew's-St. Joseph's Episcopal Church located in the North End district.

This MLK Day manifestation came just months in the aftermath of the largest upsurge in industrial action and international solidarity in years. Hundreds of thousands of members of labor unions in the automotive, entertainment and service sectors of the United States economy went out on strike demanding higher wages and improved working conditions.

Also, the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip in Palestine for more than three months has resulted in a burgeoning solidarity movement which is unprecedented in history. Millions of people in the U.S. and billions more around the world have rallied and marched calling for an immediate ceasefire and the liberation of the oppressed people of this settler-colonial occupied state.

Both featured speakers at the rally have come out solidly for a ceasefire. Shawn Fain, President of the UAW International and Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib of Detroit.

Over the last several months, Detroit has been designated as "Strike City." There was the UAW "Stand-Up Strike" which resulted in advances for not only the automotive employees. These industrial actions brought about an increase in wages for workers in non-union shops. The UAW under President Fain has pledged to enhance its recruitment efforts in the auto industry throughout the South which remains a bastion of anti-union labor production.

Therefore, having Fain and Tlaib as key speakers at the event symbolized the reemergence of a broad coalition between civil rights, labor and the antiwar movements. Congresswoman Tlaib, who has been censured by the U.S. House of Representative based upon false information, racial bias and political discrimination, has been elected three times by a diverse spectrum of people within the Detroit metropolitan area. The UAW brings together people from various ethnic and cultural groupings who are committed to improving the situation among its members as well as promoting the notion of social unionism. This approach recognizes that working people are also members of communities which are engaged in struggles related to environment, quality food and water access, universal healthcare, police misconduct, housing and education.

These events in recent months are reflective of the developments which occurred during 1964 when hundreds of youths were deployed to the South in Mississippi and Southwest Tennessee to register people to vote and assist in building independent political movements. In Mississippi, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the state National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), along with other groupings, formed the Coalition of Federated Organizations (COFO) which led to the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP challenged the seating of the all-white segregationist delegates from the state at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Although the MFDP was not seated as the official representatives of the state of Mississippi despite their democratic practices of selection during 1964, the protest by their delegation and its allies changed the character of party politics in the South. Today, the Democratic

Party is facing a challenge to maintain unity amidst rising labor militancy and the movement to end the war against the Palestinians in Gaza and to seek a permanent solution to the situation in West Asia.

Other events in 1964, such as the St. Augustine movement in Florida, prefigured the militant struggle for equality and the need to extend the tactics of the civil rights organizations based upon the objective conditions of the people. Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed by President Johnson in early July 1964, the repression and deaths of the people continued. Three civil rights workers from the Summer Project of 1964 were killed by the Ku Klux Klan and the police in Neshoba County, Mississippi.

Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney died that faithful summer at the hands of racist violence. In the third decade of the 21st century, the existence of racist violence remains a major challenge for African Americans and other oppressed peoples in the current period.

A Broad Alliance of Progressive Forces

This year's MLK Day event in Detroit brought together many organizations who provided speakers, artists and other forms of support. In addition to Fain and Tlaib, the program featured cultural worker Sarah Torres providing land acknowledgement for Indigenous people at the beginning of the program.

Image: Atty. Nancy Parker



Other speakers included: Atty. Nancy Parker, Executive Director of the Detroit Justice Center; Libations were delivered by Moratorium NOW! Coalition and MLK Committee member Yvonne Jones; The Rev. Anthony Estes of the St. Matthew's-St. Joseph's Episcopal Church welcomed the participants to the event; Jazz musicians Allen Dennard and Bill Meyer performed a rendition of the Black National Anthem; the LaShelle's School of Dance performed a tribute to the history of African Americans; Piper Carter, Artist, Community Organizer and Activist spoke on the environmental crisis in Detroit; Wardell Montgomery, Detroit poet and songwriter read a piece in tribute to the struggles of the people in the city and the country; DJ Righteous delivered a spoken word contribution; Russ Bellant of the Detroiters for Tax Justice talked about the large-scale transfer of wealth from working people to the billionaires in the city and the need to defeat this trend; Aurora Harris, co-chair of the event alongside this author, read a poem by veteran SNCC organizer Maryam Lowen as well as a piece of her own; Harris also spoke as a steward for the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO) on the conditions at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, which was the

focus of a strike of the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) last year; Shushanna Shakur, Poet and Community Activist and Educator, addressed the plight of political prisoners and the need for fundamental change; Ben Will, Motown MIC and Spoken Word Winner for 2022, made a presentation; representatives of the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) spoke on the role of young people along with a poetic contribution; and Joshua Feinstein of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) addressed the audience on the objectives of the work being done by this local and national organization.

The event was attended and supported by veteran SNCC activists John Hardy and Dr. Gloria Aneb House. A community meal was served at the conclusion of the event by the Detroit Wobbly Kitchen.

A host of co-sponsors and endorsers made this event possible. These organizations and individuals included: Detroit Coalition for Police Transparency and Accountability (CPTA); Jennifer Fassbender; Autoworker Caravan; Rev. Denise Griebler & Rev. Bill Wylie-Kellerman; Nelson and Yvonne Jones; Metro Detroit A. Philip Randolph Institute; General Baker Institute; Detroit Active and Retired Employees Association (DAREA); Buck Dinner Fund; Chuck Altman; Michigan Emergency Committee Against War & Injustice (MECAWI), founders of MLK Day in Detroit; Central United Methodist Church; Huntington Woods Peace Project; Detroit Communist Party, USA; Detroit Action; Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP); Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR); Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO); Moratorium NOW! Coalition; People's Water Board Coalition; Senior Water Systems Chemists Association; Linda Szysko; The Ron Allen Project; Unite All Workers for Democracy; Viola Liuzzo Park Association, We the People of Detroit; Wisdom Institute; Detroit Wobbly Kitchen; Pan-African News Wire; Communist Workers League (CWL); Michigan Peace Council; U.S. Palestinian Community Network, among others.

This rally was covered widely by the local media along with the UAW International. The MLK Committee is already thinking about future activities which will advance the organization and unity of progressive forces going forward in 2024.

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Featured image: Detroit MLK Day 2024 audience in sanctuary and balcony (All images in this article are from Abayomi Azikiwe)

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