

Honoring MLK Six Decades After the Mass Struggles of 1963

African Americans in Birmingham, Detroit, Cambridge, Greensboro and other areas defied the ruling class demanding racial justice and self-determination

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On January 16 in the United States, the 94th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. will be commemorated as a federal holiday.

Since 1986, the third Monday of January has been designated in tribute to the martyred Civil Rights and Antiwar leader who was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia.

Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee during the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) intervention in support of the sanitation workers' strike for recognition from the racist city government of Henry Loeb. African American sanitation workers were subjected to near slave-like conditions despite the passage of legislation such as the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964-1965.

The mass Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. had gained momentum in the aftermath of the brutal lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi in August 1955. Mamie Till Bradley Mobley, the mother of Emmett, militantly condemned the racist lynching of her son prompting mass rallies in several cities such as Detroit.

Later on December 1 in Montgomery, Ms. Rosa Parks, a longtime labor and civil rights activist, was arrested for violating the segregation laws of the State of Alabama. Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white passenger. Several days later the African American community embarked upon a year-long boycott of the city buses. They defied the threats and intimidations by the racist city administration. Dr. King and other leaders were subjected to unjustified arrests and the bombings of their homes.

The case against segregation in Alabama was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court resulting in a victory in November 1956. After the highest court confirmed the unconstitutionality of the segregated bus system, the boycott was called off by the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).

[According to a source](#) on the historic ruling by the Supreme Court:

“Aurelia S. Browder v. William A. Gayle challenged the Alabama state statutes and Montgomery, Alabama, city ordinances requiring segregation on Montgomery buses. Filed by Fred Gray and Charles D. Langford on behalf of four African American women who had been mistreated on city buses, the case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld a district court ruling that the statute was unconstitutional. Gray and Langford filed the federal district court petition that became Browder v. Gayle on 1 February 1956, two days after segregationists bombed King’s house. The original plaintiffs in the case were Aurelia S. Browder, Susie McDonald, Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, and Jeanatta Reese, but outside pressure convinced Reese to withdraw from the case in February. Gray made the decision not to include Rosa Parks in the case to avoid the perception that they were seeking to circumvent her prosecution on other charges.”

After the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the movement accelerated. In 1960, African American college and university students began the mass sit-in struggles throughout the South including Greensboro, North Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee. In April 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed while the following year, the freedom rides commenced resulting in additional legal victories outlawing segregation in interstate travel.

Mass Demonstrations Erupt in 1963

Despite these victories beginning with the Brown v. Topeka case of May 1954, where segregated K-12 public schools were deemed unconstitutional, to the Montgomery campaign, the sit-ins and freedom rides, the overall objective for the total elimination of Jim Crow was stalled by 1963. Then President John F. Kennedy had an image of being sympathetic to the plight of African Americans, yet his administration had not initiated a comprehensive Civil Rights Bill to nullify the draconian state and municipal laws enacted after the failure of Reconstruction in the late 19th century.

In Birmingham, the SCLC opened up a campaign to force the desegregation of the most industrialized city in the South. The Birmingham movement resulted in the arrest of several thousand youth who refused to halt their demonstrations in the city. Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor became the public face of the intolerant institutional racists who refused to integrate public facilities, businesses and schools.

A split between the outgoing and incoming segregationist municipal administrations in Birmingham led to a political vacuum where Connor was able to take administrative control of the efforts to halt the demonstrations during April and May 1963. These dynamics proved the opening for the business leaders in Birmingham to speak directly with the SCLC and other organizations where they reached a settlement to end the protests. Thousands were released from detention along with the reinstatement of African American students expelled from schools due to their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

During this same period, demonstrations erupted in numerous cities across the U.S. In Cambridge, Maryland, the struggle to desegregate the city led to mass militant protests and a rebellion. National Guard troops were ordered into Cambridge where they remained for over a year, representing the longest military occupation of a city since the Civil War.



Detroit march 125,000 during 1963 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Other municipalities impacted included Somerville, Tennessee; Danville, Virginia; Greensboro, North Carolina; and northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit where youth and workers took to the streets to protest the monumental injustices related to housing, police brutality and substandard education. In 1963, there were at least two cities where the demonstrations turned violent, providing a preview of the urban rebellions that became the focus of the Black struggle after 1964. In Cambridge, arson attacks and other forms of property damage occurred after many people became frustrated with the repressive tactics of the police. In Birmingham, there were occasions where youth and workers utilized unconventional methods to resist the brutality of Bull Connor's law-enforcement agents.

On June 11, there was the historic admission of two African American students to the segregated University of Alabama, where then Governor George Wallace symbolically stood at the administration building to block the entrance. The admission of the two students had been authorized through a federal court decision which was supported by the Kennedy administration. These events and a speech by Kennedy suggesting he would introduce a Civil Rights Bill for deliberations in Congress, outraged segregationists in the South.

The following evening on June 12, Medgar Evers, a longtime Field Secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi, was assassinated outside his home in the capital of Jackson. The murder of Evers by a well-known racist businessman who boasted about committing the execution, infuriated people across the country.

In Detroit, a mass demonstration took place just two weeks later on June 23, representing a major departure for the overall movement for racial justice. This march known as the "Walk to Freedom" attracted hundreds of thousands of people within the city. The manifestation was led by Dr. King and the Rev. C.L. Franklin, a nationally-renowned minister based in Detroit and the father of the later designated "Queen of Soul" Aretha Franklin. This

demonstration culminated at Cobo Arena where Dr. King delivered an early iteration of his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, over two months prior to the March on Washington. The speech was captured by Motown Records and released as a recording, the first of LPs featuring Dr. King.

Image: Cynthia Scott, 24, killed by Detroit police on July 5, 1963 (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)



Although the Detroit Walk to Freedom was an overwhelming success attracting the participation of then UAW President Walter Reuther and liberal Democratic Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh, less than two weeks later, a 24-year-old African American woman, Cynthia Scott, was gunned down by two police bullets in her back during the early morning hours of July 5. Scott was walking on the street in the lower eastside when she was accosted by two white police officers. They demanded that she get into a police cruiser and when she refused, one of the officers shot her in the back while Scott walked away.

This incident mobilized the African American community in Detroit. The Wayne County Prosecutor and the Recorder’s Court refused to indict the officer who killed Scott. Thousands of people marched to police headquarters to protest the killing. Later a civil suit filed by Attorney Milton Henry was dismissed by the courts. A public rally was held at the Central Congregational Church attracted 700 people demanding justice for Cynthia Scott.

The corporate press during this period in Detroit attempted to criminalize Scott after her murder, citing previous arrests. The police claimed Scott had attacked them with a knife. Nonetheless, eyewitnesses to the killing gave statements to the police and the press saying that the shooting of Scott was completely unprovoked. (See [this](#)).

It would take another four years for the African American community to erupt in Detroit on July 23, 1967, with the largest urban rebellion in U.S. history. These events led to the election of the first African American mayor, Coleman A. Young, a decade after the Walk to Freedom and the police murder of Cynthia Scott, in 1973.

Lessons from the Mass Struggles of 1963

Today in 2023, there are no local or national elections for this year, therefore leaving the African American people largely abandoned by politicians who are not compelled to seek their votes. As in 1963, some six decades earlier, a Democratic administration will be in office which could not have been elected three years before without the electoral support of African Americans.

Similarly, as in 1963, the reformist program adopted by the Democratic National Convention in 2020 has not been fulfilled. African Americans are still suffering from police misconduct, impoverishment, unequal educational opportunities and increasing environmental degradation.



MLK at 1963 Detroit march with CL Franklin (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

The Pentagon war budget and the subsidization of the ruling class by the U.S. government continues to hamper the capacity of the state to meet the immediate needs of the masses of people. Dr. King in early 1967 began to speak out forcefully against the U.S. intervention in Vietnam demanding that the troops be withdrawn from Southeast Asia. He viewed the imperialist war machine as an enemy of the poor and oppressed.

Dr. King linked the struggles against poverty, racism and war into a program of action which the U.S. government feared. In 2023, we must study these developments which took place during previous decades to gain guidance and inspiration for the impending mass struggles ahead aimed at ending all forms of racism, national oppression, economic exploitation and imperialist war.

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