

Martin Luther King's Legacy: The Movement against National Oppression and Economic Injustice

The Developing Class Character of the Freedom Struggle

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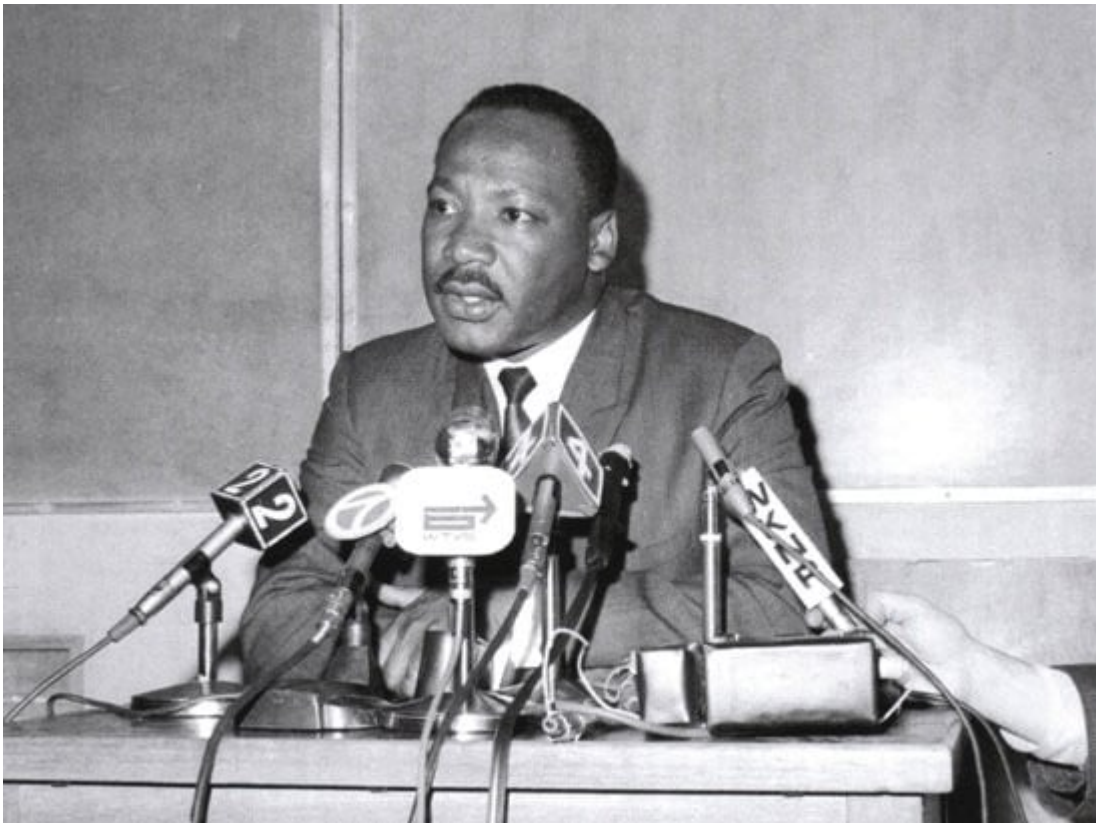
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During 1967-8 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to articulate a deeper program for the movement against national oppression and economic injustice

Just three weeks prior to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on March 14, 1968, the co-founder and President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) honored an invitation from the Grosse Pointe Human Relations Council to speak on the topic of "The Other America." He was to examine the-then debate over "open housing" for African Americans amid an unprecedented wave of urban rebellions across the United States.

On July 23, 1967, seven months prior to Dr. King's visit to Grosse Pointe High School, an affluent suburb on the border with Detroit- the city had exploded in a five day rebellion led by the African American community which resulted in 43 deaths, hundreds of injuries, 7,200 arrests, with estimates of property damage ranging into the tens and even hundreds of millions of dollars. The issues which sparked the social unrest were related to the abysmal conditions fostered by police brutality, labor discrimination, overcrowded housing districts contained through de facto segregationist policies, and inadequate schools with bulging classroom sizes and declining infrastructure.



Dr. King had been developing his views on the concept of the “Other America” for at least one year when he addressed the same subject in a major speech at Stanford University in California on April 14, 1967. After the enormous gains of the Civil Rights Movement between 1955 and 1965, the focus of SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) shifted substantially to the municipalities in the Northern and Western states where huge swaths of depressed neighborhoods housed millions of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Native Americans and poor whites.

The White Backlash and Opposition to the Vietnam War

Not only had SCLC moved into the city of Chicago during 1966 in an effort to test its evolving program centered around jobs, housing and income, the organization in early 1967 had come out solidly in opposition to the U.S. bombing and occupation of Vietnam. Dr. King saw the war as an enemy of the African American people as well as the poor people in general.

In Chicago, white working and middle class people resisted the demands of the Freedom Movement. They were supported and encouraged by the then administration of Mayor Richard Daley, who rejected the call for drastic action to eliminate slums, housing discrimination and poverty in the nation’s second largest city.

The eruption of a rebellion on July 12 which lasted four days was blamed on the work of SCLC even though the organization maintained its ideological commitment to a nonviolent methodology of struggle. Although the outcome of the Chicago Freedom Movement won limited results for the people of the city, it portended much for the developments over the next three years.



At Grosse Pointe High School Dr. King was met by 2,700 people who crowded the gymnasium where he was to deliver his talk. Nonetheless, there was a completely hostile response to his presence in the suburb as well. Members of the ultra-conservative racist organization called Breakthrough along with the Grosse Pointe Property Owners Association argued that his presence could prompt violence and consequently should be banned. A vote by the Grosse Pointe School Board in favor of allowing the meeting by a 5-2 margin was accompanied by the requirement of taking out a one million dollar insurance policy in the event that people were injured or killed. (Grosse Pointe News, Jan. 5, 2017)

Breakthrough, which was headed by a City of Detroit Recreation Department employee Donald Lobsinger, led a picket line outside of the school. Approximately 200 Breakthrough members and supporters chanted against Dr. King's appearance denouncing him as a "traitor" and "communist" for his stance in opposition to the Vietnam War among other issues.

Later members of the neo-fascist group infiltrated the audience at Grosse Pointe High School and repeatedly interrupted the speech. Dr. King said that they would never discourage him from doing the important work of linking the Civil Rights and Peace movements together. He clearly identified the African American struggle as having a decisively class character due to the economic exploitation of the people.

One of the most important sections of the address came when Dr. King observed: "Now let me get back to the point that I was trying to bring out about the economic problem. And that is one of the most critical problems that we face in America today. We find in the other America unemployment constantly rising to astronomical proportions and Black people generally find themselves living in a literal depression. All too often when there is mass unemployment in the Black community, it's referred to as a social problem and when there is mass unemployment in the white community, it's referred to as a depression. But there is no basic difference. The fact is that the Negro (word used to describe people of African descent in the U.S. at the time) faces a literal depression all over the U.S. The unemployment rate on the basis of statistics from the labor department is about 8.8 per

cent in the Black community. But these statistics only take under consideration individuals who were once in the labor market, or individuals who go to employment offices to seek employment. But they do not take under consideration the thousands of people who have given up, who have lost motivation, the thousands of people who have had so many doors closed in their faces that they feel defeated and they no longer go out and look for jobs, the thousands who've come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. These people are considered the discouraged and when you add the discouraged to the individuals who can't be calculated through statistics in the unemployment category, the unemployment rate in the Negro community probably goes to 16 or 17 percent. And among Black youth, it is in some communities as high as 40 and 45 percent.

The SCLC then went on to say: "the problem of unemployment is not the only problem. There is the problem of under-employment, and there are thousands and thousands, I would say millions of people in the Negro community who are poverty stricken – not because they are not working but because they receive wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our nation. Most of the poverty stricken people of America are persons who are working every day and they end up getting part-time wages for full-time work. So the vast majority of Negroes in America find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. This has caused a great deal of bitterness. It has caused a great deal of agony. It has caused ache and anguish. It has caused great despair, and we have seen the angered expressions of this despair and this bitterness in the violent rebellions that have taken place in cities all over our country. Now I think my views on non-violence are pretty generally known. I still believe that non-violence is the most potent weapon available to the Negro in his struggle for justice and freedom in the U.S."

Towards a Principled United Front in Opposition to Racism and Fascism

During Labor Day weekend in the previous year 1967, Dr. King was a featured speaker at the National Conference for New Politics (NCNP) held in Chicago. Thousands attended the event which sought to draft anti-nuclear weapons activist and Vietnam War opponent, Dr. Benjamin Spock, the renowned pediatrician and writer, as a presidential candidate for 1968, with Dr. King as his running mate.

The concept of the NCNP was to build a broad-based alliance purportedly independent of the Democratic Party which took a position against the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, there were other issues that hampered the smooth operation of such a united front strategy.

Paralleling the NCNP was the Black Congress, also held in Chicago, which demanded that the question of African American liberation be not only placed on the NCNP agenda but also the granting of the nationally oppressed delegates to the conference veto power over all resolutions and platforms. Elements of the Black Congress program were manifested in the NCNP Black Caucus demands. These issues related to taking a principled stand against Zionism, support for armed struggle in the liberation of Southern Africa, recognition of African Americans as the vanguard of the people's movement in the U.S., and other questions.

In addition, there were grave concerns that the appeals to adopt this agenda supporting African American liberation, the question of Palestine self-determination, opposition to Israeli aggression against Egypt, Jordan and Syria and a halt to support for the State of Israel by Washington, were conveniently left off of the NCNP agenda. James Forman, who was

serving at the time as the SNCC International Affairs Director, addressed the NCNP Black Caucus raising the demands for veto power and solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed.

Forman emphasized in his address to the NCNP Black Caucus that: "I hardly need to talk about the exploited labor of all us who are Black and who tilled the fields without pay while the white man reinvested the capital from our labor. Therefore, even today, here in the United States we are the lowest class on the economic ladder." (Sept. 2, 1967)

The SNCC leader went on to note: "There can be no new concept of politics, no new coalitions unless those of us who are the most disposed assume leadership and give direction to that new form of politics. If this does not happen we are going to see the same old liberal-labor treachery of very rich white folks and Democratic Party oriented whites and Negroes trying to determine what they can do for us."

These words are quite useful to the current developing struggle in 2017 in the aftermath of the assumption of power by President Donald Trump. Millions have taken to the streets in support of women's and immigrant rights, the question of self-determination for the indigenous people at Standing Rock, against police brutality, the suppression of the African American vote, etc.

However, unless the alliances that are forming are based upon principled political positions, these efforts will inevitably lead right back into the Democratic Party with its betrayal of the working class, poor and nationally oppressed. A revolutionary leadership must emerge to provide a programmatic thrust aimed at exposing and defeating the exploitative and dictatorial system of capitalism and imperialism.



Note: The author covered the 49th anniversary commemoration of Dr. King's speech at Grosse Pointe High School South (as it is now known) on January 14, 2017. An audio file of the actual address was played to the audience before a discussion on the historic event. This program was sponsored by the newly-formed Grosse Pointe Chapter of the NAACP.

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