

The Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King: Continuing the Legacy of the Great Walk to Freedom of 1963

The Detroit MLK Committee and the ongoing struggle for peace, jobs and justice

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These remarks were delivered at a panel on the 50th anniversary of the “Great Walk to Freedom” held in Detroit on June 23, 1963. The panel was part of the 55th Annual Michigan in Perspective Local History Conference in Livonia. The conference was sponsored by the Historical Society of Michigan on March 22-23, 2013.

2013 represents the 50th anniversary of the historic “Walk to Freedom” down Woodward Avenue in Detroit. This coming June 23 five decades will have passed since this momentous occasion which was a turning point in African American and United States history in general.

The march was the largest of its kind in history. The mass phase of the civil rights movement had been ignited with the lynching of Emmett Till in August 1955 and the national outpouring of grief and anger in the subsequent months.

Till’s mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted that there be an open coffin at the funeral. The photographs were published in Jet magazine sending shockwaves throughout the U.S. and the world.

By December 1, 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had erupted and tens of thousands of African Americans in this southern city had been thrust on to the international scene. Mrs. Rosa Louise Parks, whom we just celebrated the centenary of her birth, was the spark for the modern day movement for civil rights.

Of course it was the Montgomery Bus Boycott that catapulted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. into world history. King would form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 and served as its president until he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

Detroit played a significant role in the beginning weeks and months of the modern civil rights movement. In April 1956, 1500 people organized by UAW Region 1A members would come out to hear E.D. Nixon speak on the struggle in Alabama.

Nixon, a labor organizer and official in the NAACP in Alabama, was the founder of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the group which led the bus boycott. The civil rights movement would build upon this alliance throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The efforts surrounding the “Great Walk to Freedom” were precipitated by several factors.

Detroit at the time was the heartland of the automotive industry but the process of capital flight was well underway.

Between the 1950s and the 1960s thousands of industrial jobs would leave the city creating the early phenomena of structural unemployment. This was aggravated by institutional racism in housing, employment and education.

June 23, 1963 also represented the 20th anniversary of the worst race riot in the 20th century that took place in Detroit. This racial unrest erupted during the U.S. involvement in World War II when there were mass migrations of people into the city from both the Black Belt South and the Appalachian region.

The competition for jobs and housing as well as the racist attitudes of the police, stoked racial tensions in 1942 and 1943. The unrest would leave over thirty people dead and its aftermath would prompt along with federal government policy, the suburbanization of the metropolitan Detroit.

In 1961, the heart of the African American community in Detroit was ripped out with the destruction of what was known as Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. This was done as part of a so-called urban renewal program leading to the construction of the Chrysler Freeway.

Anger at these developments would lead to increased mobilization. Rev. C.L. Franklin, the pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church, was forced to move his entire congregation to the west side as a result of the razing of the church located on Hastings and Willis.

The Church would set up a temporary home on 12th Street and eventually move to Linwood at Philadelphia in 1963. Franklin was a key figure in the organization of the march along with Walter Reuther, James Del Rio, Rev. Albert Cleage and many others.

Of course the "Great Walk to Freedom" set the stage for the March on Washington two months later. Earlier that month, on June 12, Medgar Evers, the field secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi was assassinated in his driveway in Jackson- just hours after President John F. Kennedy had announced that he would be introducing a civil rights bill in Congress.

Continuing and Reclaiming the Legacy

The latter years of Dr. King's life would be focused on the problems of poverty and war in addition to racism. In 1966, he would move into a housing project in Chicago to dramatize the plight of the urban African American.

That same summer a rebellion would erupt on the west side of Chicago along with dozens of other cities throughout the country. In 1967, the rebellion in Detroit would represent the largest and most violent of these incidents in the country.

Dr. King would come out in official opposition to the war in Vietnam on April 4, 1967. Later that year he would announce the organization of the Poor People's Campaign that would take thousands to Washington, D.C., this time to stay and make demands on the Congress to enact legislation aimed at eradicating poverty.

In route to building the Poor People's Campaign, King would enter the sanitation workers strike in Memphis which sought recognition for AFSCME in that southern city. He was

assassinated on April 4, 1968 which led to outbreaks of unrest in over 125 cities across the U.S.

Just three weeks prior to King's martyrdom, he would visit Detroit and speak before 2,700 people at the Grosse Pointe High School on open housing and the war in Vietnam. He would also speak that same day, March 14, at the Central United Methodist Church on Woodward.

King had delivered an annual Lent sermon at Central since the late 1950s and was well known by the congregation. Consequently, the Detroit MLK Committee would approach Rev. Ed Rowe in late 2003 to host a MLK Day Rally and March to commemorate the federal holiday in King's honor.

This week we commemorated as well the tenth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. There was widespread opposition to the Iraq war as there was to the Vietnam conflict decades earlier.

We sought to reclaim the actual legacy of Dr. King by recognizing his anti-war positions, his struggle for the elimination of poverty in the U.S. and around the world, the ongoing battle against racism and the fact that King was part of a social movement and could not have accomplished what he did without the support of large segments of the population.

Over the last decade we have hosted the Annual MLK Day Rally and March at Central. We have drawn thousands to this event since 2004.

Some of the featured speakers have included Rev. Lucius Walker of IFCO, former Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Senator Debbie Stabenow, Prof. Gloria House, Rev. Tom Smith of Pittsburg, Mary Ann Williamson, Willie Mukasa Ricks of SNCC, the women of SNCC and this year, Rev. C.D. Witherspoon of Baltimore, a youth minister and president of the SCLC in that city.

The mission of Dr. King, the "Great Walk to Freedom" and the civil rights movement as a whole is just as important today as it was during the 1960s. We have still not conquered poverty, war and racism.

Let us learn from these historical developments in order to move forward in constructing the world that most realize is necessary for the survival of humanity.

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