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A Craving for Equal Justice
Rescuing Martin Luther King Jr.

By Nat Hentoff

Prisons have become our nation's substitute for effective public policies on crime, drugs, mental illness, housing, poverty, and employment of the hardest to employ.
-- *To Establish Justice, To Ensure Domestic Tranquility*, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, 1999

[American] voting rates average 20-40 percent lower than in almost all other advanced democracies. Furthermore, all other measures of political participation; such as working for a political party, attending a public meeting on town or school affairs . . . serving on a committee for any organization, or writing a letter to the newspaper; also declined sharply, in marked contrast to the trend in Western Europe.
-- *The Trouble With Government*, Derek Bok, Harvard University Press

When Martin Luther King Jr. publicly and repeatedly denounced American involvement in the Vietnam War as immoral--and for taking away resources needed to eliminate U.S. poverty--he was attacked by many mainstream black leaders, particularly Roy Wilkins, then head of the NAACP.

The focus of civil rights action, King's detractors insisted, had to stay on racism and inequality here. But King was driven by a broader passion for justice. After 1965, King--though no less committed to racial justice--also became a devoted advocate for economic justice, as well as an ardent opponent of the war.

He started organizing a Poor People's Campaign, including a Poor People's March on Washington. The demands were for funds for decent housing, a guaranteed annual income, and full employment. Thousands would march, in a mule cart procession, starting April 22, 1968, in Mississippi, and then moving on to D.C. He had all the poor in mind--"Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachians, and others."

That march never materialized as King had envisioned. On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, where he had come to support a strike by black sanitation workers. The strike had been organized by the workers and by Jerry Wurf, head of the national union of municipal employees (AFSCME). Wurf was Jewish and for years was the only member of the AFL-CIO executive committee

to defy AFL-CIO chieftain George Meany and join Dr. King's opposition to the Vietnam War.

Insofar as most Americans think of Martin Luther King at all these days, it is as the namesake of a holiday. People may have a general sense of his courage and his refusal to compromise his convictions, but his specific politics are not remembered.

I spoke to him when he came to a session of New York's District 65, the Voice's original union (later absorbed by the United Auto Workers). King told me of how, when he was a student in a theological seminary, a visiting speaker had first awakened him to the possibilities of direct-action pacifism. That speaker was A.J. Muste, later the chief strategist of the anti-Vietnam War movement. By the time we talked, King was already a vital part of the broad and deep coalition to end our involvement in the war in Vietnam.

It is long past time for King to be rescued from his present, rather misty image. To most Americans, he is not much more than a historic figure on a stamp or a portrait in some schoolrooms. The fire in the man, the craving for pervasive justice--is now largely unrecognized.

Jesse Jackson, for a time, understood and began to act on King's burning vision. Jackson went to Appalachia and started to tell the nation about the white poor, and he went to the Midwest, where most family farmers were hurting.

But Jackson mistook his own access to microphones and headlines as actual empowerment of those he professed to lead. And his urgency about the need to "feel the pain"--to use one of his mantras--of all the people who have been forgotten has increasingly diminished. He did not--as Salim Muwakkil points out in an In These Times article--"build on the multiethnic, left-populist movement" in his 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns. "He lost his direction, but not his ego."

Well into the Clinton presidency, and before Jackson became the wounded president's spiritual adviser, I ran into Jackson on a train to New York from Washington. He had just come from the White House, and I asked him what he thought of Clinton. Jesse Jackson said immediately, "He's a hollow man." Nobody ever said Jackson was dumb.

But he went on to become an instrument of Clinton, and his access to the White House did little to advance what A. Philip Randolph--in the 1950s--called "the unfinished revolution" for blacks in this nation.

Randolph, who first organized sleeping-car porters in the 1920s, became so insistent a presence as a labor leader that, by threatening President Franklin Roosevelt with a massive march of blacks and others on Washington, he got the

Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) established. Later, after forcefully moving on Harry Truman, Randolph pushed that president to desegregate the armed forces. Randolph was a believer in coalitions throughout the left.

Jesse Jackson could have become that kind of leader. In any case, what is required now is a convergence of "special interest" forces. I mean the special interests of those whom the late Supreme Court justice William Brennan had in mind when he said: "Ugly inequities continue to mar the face of our nation. We are surely nearer the beginning than the end of the struggle."

Although the AFL-CIO's membership is still falling, 26 percent of all the voters in the last presidential election came from union households--as John Sweeney justifiably boasts. And last year, the NAACP showed its ability to mount the most successful voter registration campaign it had ever attempted. And those voters came out!

If the AFL-CIO and black organizations can stop sitting shivah (mourning) for the "lost" election, part of a burgeoning coalition can begin to more actively strategize. Ralph Nader, in view of the expectations he raised among many who had not previously voted, should be organizing part of that truly democratic coalition--along with greens, Latinos, Asian Americans, gays, and those white liberals who are justly suspicious of the New Democrats. The latter applaud themselves for passing a Patients' Bill of Rights in the Senate--which does nothing for 43 million uninsured Americans.

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