

MLK Jr., Had An Economic Dream Too

by vcmorris - Thursday, January 14, 2010

<http://thethinpinkline.com/2010/01/14/mlk-jr-had-an-economic-dream-too/>

It was 6:01 PM, April 2nd, 1968.

Just about everyone remembers where they were when they heard the news. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior had been shot and killed - assassinated while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee.

I was a senior journalism student at San Jose State University in northern California. I got the news as I walked back across campus from the J-School radio and television studios to my apartment. Only hours earlier, I had done two reports about Dr. King's trip to Memphis to support the city garbage workers who were on strike. I remember using video of the signs the strikers carried and wore that declared: "I am a Man". Dr. King, the 39-year old man known as the prophet for racial justice in America had finished what was to be his last speech with the words: "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land."

The question now 42 years later is: "When?"

The Memphis garbage workers strike for economic security is widely remembered as when Dr. King began contesting financial privileges and organized a mass, multi-racial protest called the Poor People's Campaign. The campaign's goal was to help poor people by uniting all races through their common hardship of financial desperation and provide a plan to start a solution.

Dr. King's solution was a \$30-billion anti-poverty package called the "Economic Bill of Rights" asking the federal government to make helping poor Americans a priority. The package included a commitment to full employment, a guaranteed annual income measure and more low-income housing. It truly was Phase Two of the Civil Rights Movement. Phase One had been exposing the problem/inequities of segregation. Phase Two was going to be about the money. It was going to focus on the inequities of money and the solution: increasing earning power and financial self-reliance.

That's what Dr. King was doing in Memphis April 2nd, 1968. He was at the turning point of the civil rights movement. Despite efforts to continue after his death, the earnest proposition for creating jobs, income and housing as contained in the "Economic Bill of Rights" was never passed.

The recession has emphasized that now 42 years after his death, on the eve of what would have been his 81st birthday - Dr. King's dream of racial *and economic* equality - remains unfinished business. Needing jobs, healthcare and homes are still the concerns and sorrows today's poor and newly poor are facing.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was president of the Southern Leadership Conference. He directed the 1963 March on Washington. He received 5 honorary degrees. He was Time Magazine's "Man of the Year". He was the youngest recipient of the Noble Peace Prize. He fought for equal rights for African

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Americans. He fought for improving the lives of all poor. He had an unfinished agenda:” *The problem indicates that our emphasis must be two-fold. We must create full employment or we must create incomes. People must be made consumers by one method or the other.*” - Martin Luther King, Jr., from his book “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html

As the nation pauses to honor him on Monday, remember that he lived and died for his belief in the importance of social and economic power as the tools people needed to seek self-improvement. Both were needed then - and now.

Here's to your health and wealth.

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