King's Fight for Unions Is Still Essential

In light of the clash of wills in Wisconsin, we should remember the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One of King's slogans that we rarely hear is this one: "all labor has dignity."

King spoke these words in Memphis on March 18, 1968, in the midst of a strike of 1,200 black sanitation workers that had lasted over a month. After rousing them to a fever pitch, King called for a general strike by all workers to shut the city down on behalf of the sanitation workers.

What was the demand of these workers? Improved wages and benefits, yes, but their key demand was that the City of Memphis grant collective bargaining rights and the collection of union dues, without which they knew they could not maintain their union.

These are the very two items that Wisconsin's Gov. Scott Walker wants to take away from public employees. He knows, as did Mayor Henry Loeb in Memphis, that if you can kill union bargaining rights and dues collection, you can kill the union.

Also like Loeb, Walker is a fiscal conservative. As he cuts taxes for business he raises costs for workers and says ending union power will benefit the fiscal health of the state. Walker wants to end the right of public employees to bargain collectively, even though the workers have accepted a tripling of their health-care costs and a wage cut to help offset the state's fiscal crisis.

In nearby Ohio, Gov. John Kasich wants to take away the right to join a union for 14,000 state-financed child-care and home-care workers, among the most overworked and underpaid of public servants. In other states, Republicans want to adopt "right to work" (for less) laws that would take away the requirement that workers in unionized jobs pay union dues. This would undermine the unions while, in King's words, providing "no rights and no work."

Even in Midwest states that have been union strongholds, Republicans now have public-employee unions in their cross-hairs. This is the latest and potentially most deadly phase of government assault on unions. Ever since the Reagan counterrevolution, government policies joined with private sector profiteers have vastly worsened racial-economic inequalities, created a gambling casino on Wall Street and paved the way for the current economic crisis.
Conservatıves rationalize their attacks on unions by saying unionized public workers are unfairly privileged. But they only look privileged by comparison to the rest of the working class, which is suffering economic catastrophe and has almost entirely lost the benefits of unionization. Yet class envy is an easy means to divide and rule.

Racism is another part of the Republican arsenal of divide and rule. Thanks to the destruction of manufacturing jobs and unions, black and Latino workers in manual occupations have disproportionately suffered high rates of poverty and incarceration as many of their families disintegrate. The one two-hold many black and minority workers (and especially women among them) still have in the economy is in unionized public employment. Now, the Republicans want to take that away.

In one stroke, by eliminating both bargaining rights and union dues, Republicans can insure that organized, dues-paying workers and particularly minorities and women will no longer provide a potent base for the Democratic Party. There will be few grassroot organizations left to counter the huge infusion of money into politics by the rich.

Workers in Wisconsin have agreed to make sacrifices to get state government out of its budgetary hole. But it would be a huge mistake for anyone to go beyond that and buy into attacks on public employee unions. Loss of unions will further decimate the spending power of working people, thereby intensifying the economic crisis while further removing the voice of workers from politics. That’s a downward spiral.

Republicans most especially wants to undermine the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Founded in Wisconsin, AFSCME flourished after King died in the fight for union rights in Memphis in 1968. AFSCME became one of the largest unions in the country, with King regarded as an honorary member and practically a founder of the union.

In King’s framework, killing public employee unions today would be immoral as well as foolish. He said the three evils facing humankind are war, racism and economic injustice, and that the purpose of a union is to overcome the latter evil. King said the civil rights movement from 1954 to 1965 was “phase one,” to be followed by a second phase—the struggle for economic advancement. We are not doing very well in phase two, and unions remain essential to carry it out.

I’ve recently finished a new collection of King’s remarkable speeches, titled “All Labor Has Dignity,” which shows that throughout his life, King stood up for union rights. There is no more important time than the present for us all to follow his lead.

*Michael Honey is a historian and Haley Professor of Humanities at the University of Washington, Tacoma. He is editor of “All Labor Has Dignity” (Beacon Press, 2011) and author of “Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike: Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign” (W.W. Norton, 2007).*

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