‘All Labor Has Dignity’ Offers Depth, Intelligence and Passion—and an Eerie Sense of Timeliness

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By Mark Reynolds

Thanks to Wisconsin’s Scott Walker and other Republican governors, the labor movement has taken one on the chin this year. Efforts to roll back the collective bargaining rights of public sector workers have struck at the basic premise behind American unions. The week of 4 April, labor struck back, with a series of protests, teach-ins and actions across the country reminding America that labor rights issues are also civil rights issues.

It’s no accident that movements like We Are One chose that week to trumpet their cause. After all, 4 April marked the 43rd anniversary of the assassination of a passionate supporter of the union movement: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Of course, King has always been best known, and most studied, for his activism on racial matters, from the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott through the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Past those triumphs, he turned his attention to poverty as the central issue defining equality (or the lack thereof) in America. In 1967, he added his voice to the chorus speaking out against the Vietnam War. But throughout his public life, King was in kinship with organized labor’s progressive and multicultural forces. Such unions provided the Civil Rights Movements with money and shock troops, and King spoke often at union gatherings to support their battles.

Indeed, it was a bitter union fight that brought King to Memphis several times in the spring of 1968, where he was murdered. A new collection of his speeches to union audiences makes clear not only his long fellowship with the labor movement, but the progression of his thinking on the connections between labor, race and class issues.

All Labor Has Dignity, edited by labor scholar Michael K. Honey, begins with a 1957 speech to the Highlander Folk School, a quasi-academy for activists in Tennesse. With Rosa Parks in the audience, King laid out his vision of nonviolent social change in the South, referring to organized labor as "one of the Negro's strongest allies in the struggle for freedom.

But some unions were stronger allies than others, and King was careful to note the difference. Before the United Automobile Workers in 1961, King drew clear parallels between the civil rights and labor movements (the UAW was a longtime supporter of King's work). But later that year, King took the AFL-CIO to task for not following through on a pledge to raise funds for the civil rights battles, and big labor in general for not doing enough to confront its own racism.

The King-UAW connection bore additional fruit in June 1963, when King supported a civil rights march in Detroit in which unions played a central role. Before more than 100,000 people, King exhorted Detroiters to combat southern racism by confronting northern discrimination. "I have a dream," he announced, "that one day, right here in Detroit, Negroes will be able to buy a house or rent a house anywhere that their money will carry them and they will be able to get a job." (This speech was the forefather of the "I Have a Dream" speech two months later at the Washington Monument.

As the '60s moved on, King became more forthright in linking the labor and civil rights movements. He forged that common ground by drawing out the economic issues that fueled both causes, and urged labor to take a leading role in the evolving struggle. "If our nation does not find its way to brotherhood, it is not going to find security and it is not going to find self-respect," King told a New York City audience of Teamsters in 1967. "I hope you will raise your voices and demand to be heard because you have something to say and the future of the nation may well depend upon how carefully it listens to those who had the courage to pioneer and the character to be right.

All the themes of King’s activism – including opposition to the Vietnam War, and the role of the religious community in the fight for justice – came together in his Poor People's Campaign, launched in early 1968. Forty years before John Edwards attempted to brand the phrase as a political campaign hook, King told Local 1199 in New York, "there are literally two Americas. One America is flowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality…that other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair." Later in that speech, King recounted the history of black struggle in America as prologue to the contemporary issues of peace and economics he was confronting with his current campaign.

It was a strike by garbage workers in Memphis that February that lent context to the campaign, and prompted King's greatest moments as a labor orator. After two workers had been crushed to death by a defective garbage truck, 1,300 of their colleagues walked off their jobs to protest their working conditions. When they tried to meet with Memphis' political leadership, they were met by mace from the police and ridicule from the white business community.

Organized labor – and King – had their back. In a March 18 speech to the strikers and their supporters, King noted that their battle, marked by signs proclaiming "I Am a Man", had raised the ante for the entire progressive movement. "Now you are doing something else here," he told a fever-pitched audience. "You are highlighting the economic issue. You are going beyond purely civil rights to questions of human rights.

A 28 March demonstration led by King turned violent, but he remained unbowed. He returned to Memphis on 3 April, with storm clouds literally gathering all around him. The speech he delivered that night – his last public address – is best remembered for his proclamation of the view from the mountaintop ("I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land"). But it took its inspiration, and built its momentum, from the example of the courageous strikers:

Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again to put the issue where it is supposed to be. And force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights, wondering how this is going to come out... And we've got to say to the nation: we know how it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory.

All Labor Has Dignity is an illuminating argument that King was concerned with much, much more than just the plight of black people. His public career may have started in that arena, but it ended with him as a champion for progressives around the globe. While many might not consider his impact beyond the famous soundbites, this collection offers far more depth, intelligence and passion, as well as an eerie sense of timeliness for activists in 2011. Again, from his final speech:

Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us rise up tonight with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.

Mark Reynolds was an intern at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Social Change in 1978. He wrote about his experiences there for PopMatters in his 2005 essay, "The Long Shadow of the Dream".
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