TO THE PROMISED LAND

Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice

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“We can all get more together than we can apart.”

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AT MASON TEMPLE, MEMPHIS, MARCH 18, 1968
I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence. I call upon you to be maladjusted.

—KING AT HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL, SEPTEMBER 2, 1957

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Whether it be the ultra-right wing in the form of Birch societies or the alliance which former President Eisenhower denounced, the alliance between big military and big business, or the coalition of southern Dixiecrats and northern reactionaries, whatever the form, these menaces now threaten everything decent and fair in American life. . . . As we struggle to make racial and economic justice a reality, let us maintain faith in the future. At times we confront difficult and frustrating moments in the struggle to make justice a reality, but we must believe somehow that these problems can be solved.

—KING AT THE AFL-CIO CONVENTION, DECEMBER 3, 1961

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You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages. . . .

—KING AT MEMPHIS SANITATION STRIKE RALLY, MARCH 18, 1968
From left to right: King, Pete Seeger, Charis Horton, Rosa Parks, and Ralph David Abernathy at Highlander Folk School in 1957.
Chapter 2

“WE HAVE A POWERFUL INSTRUMENT”

Civil Rights Unionism and the Cold War, 1957–1963

There are three major social evils that are alive in our world today... the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice. . . .

—KING AT DISTRICT 65, RETAIL, WHOLESALE, AND DEPARTMENT STORE UNION (RWDSU) CONVENTION, SEPTEMBER 8, 1962

WHITE MASS MEDIA WRITERS PORTRAYED MARTIN Luther King, Jr., as a “civil rights” advocate whose success affirmed the progress of American democracy. On February 18, 1957, Time magazine put a picture of King on its front cover and characterized him as an “expert organizer” but “no radical.” Scholar/activist W. E. B. Du Bois and singer/actor Paul Robeson both had their passports lifted and public lives destroyed because they had spoken out against American militarism and imperialism and for détente with the Soviet Union. King’s beliefs were not so different, but his powerful appeals to Christian and American founding concepts of charity, love, fairness, freedom, and equality for a time allowed him to sidestep media and government attacks. Yet Time was wrong on both counts. King often proved to be better at articulating a larger vision than at organizing. And, based on his understanding of the Social Gospel, he was indeed a radical by American standards.
King did become a high-profile target of bigots of all stripes. By April 1960, as he wrote in an article titled “Suffering and Faith,” he had already been arrested five times (he would later lose count), while white supremacists had bombed his home and constantly threatened his family with hate mail and phone calls. In Montgomery, whites fired repeatedly on black bus riders, destroyed the home of a white minister who had supported the movement, and bombed at least four churches as well as homes. The city put some of the bombers, who admitted their crimes, on trial, but an all-white jury acquitted them. On January 27, 1957, vigilantes planted twelve sticks of dynamite in front of King’s parsonage but the lit fuse fizzled out. King responded by telling his church that “if I had to die tomorrow morning I would die happy because I’ve been to the mountaintop and I’ve seen the promised land and it’s going to be here in Montgomery.”

On September 20, 1958, a deranged black woman named Isola Ware Curry, who was armed with a pistol and tormented by fears of communism, had nearly stabbed him through the heart as he signed his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, in Harlem. After a delicate operation, King spent months recovering from the stabbing. Coretta Scott King later wrote that threats and “Martin’s repeated, unwarranted arrests” at times “pushed me to the breaking point.” As a way to cope, she and Martin clung to the Christian concept that “unearned suffering is redemptive.” Dr. King called suffering “an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains.” The atmosphere of violence or potential violence experienced by the Kings was experienced on a daily basis by African Americans across the South.

A willingness to suffer made it possible for Martin and Coretta King to continue to advocate for racial and economic justice at a dark time of repression, when the country had a crying need for moral leadership. Cold War anticommunism cast suspicion on anyone who criticized American capitalism and forced civil rights advocates to downplay economic issues. King’s allies on the labor left were fired from jobs and run out of communities. Segregationists and anticommunists inculcated the false idea that unions, civil rights, and communism were all the same thing. King walked a fine line. He decried communist state systems that repressed human personality, but he also condemned capitalism’s exploitation of workers and the poor, and demanded that the country live up to its stated goals of equality and equal economic opportunity.
On January 10 and 11, 1957, King and other black ministers met at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta hoping to replicate the Montgomery experience of mass-movement organizing through the black church. They started the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with a broad pledge to “redeem the soul of America.” Bayard Rustin had drafted papers for the conference, and he and Ella Baker and Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham, and other black ministers across the South, thought SCLC would foster a new generation of movement activists. On February 7, 1957, King met Oberlin student James Lawson and asked him to come South. Lawson moved to Nashville to take up graduate studies in theology at Vanderbilt University and simultaneously to work as a field secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. As school integration battles raged in Little Rock, Arkansas, and elsewhere, Lawson trained people in the philosophy and methods of nonviolent direct action. His workshops in Nashville developed an extraordinary cadre of nonviolence activists.

On September 2, King strengthened his connections with the union-based civil rights movement when he gave the closing talk at the twenty-fifth reunion of the Highlander Folk School. Rosa Parks, antiracist journalist Anne Braden, and a vanguard of black and white integrationists celebrated the school’s singular role in bringing together southerners, and particularly workers, across the racial divide. Rosa Parks had attended the school before the Montgomery bus boycott. King’s speech to the Highlander Folk School reunion, “A Look to the Future,” voiced his optimistic view that industrialization would spawn unionization, that unionized black and white workers would join together to fight for voting rights and elect progressive leaders and break the back of low wages and racial repression in the South. In hindsight, King and his labor allies may appear to have been naïve in hoping to transform working-class white southerners, but at that time organized labor was at its height of power and optimism. He declared, “Organized labor is one of the Negro’s strongest allies in the struggle for freedom.” Opposing Cold War orthodoxy with his Social Gospel critique of American capitalism, King also said, “I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence.” Using a phrase he would often repeat, he called on his audience to be “maladjusted” to “the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.”
At Highlander, King was preaching to the choir, so to speak. The Highlander sessions closed with singer Pete Seeger leading a rousing version of “We Shall Overcome,” a song first learned by Highlander’s Zilphia Horton from Lucille Simmons and black women in the Food and Tobacco Workers union on strike in 1945–46 in Charleston, South Carolina. Seeger and Guy and Candie Carawan of Highlander would later spread that song throughout the southern movement and the world. As a labor and Communist Party activist named Red Davis from Memphis and Anne Braden of Louisville left the 1957 Highlander meeting together with King, they shared a buoyant feeling that they were on the cusp of momentous change. However, while the Highlander gathering moved King more strongly into alliances with labor and civil rights activists, it also inaugurated the right-wing crusade against him.

Unknown to the participants at Highlander’s twenty-fifth reunion, Ed Friend had “infiltrated” (a favorite word usually used against supposed Communists) the meeting as an agent of Georgia’s misnamed Commission on Education (GCE), which sought to prevent black and white students from attending school together. Friend photographed King sitting next to New Deal liberal Aubrey Williams, a few seats away from Rosa Parks. A Communist Party Daily Worker reporter named Abner Berry, an African American, sat in front of King. The Georgia Commission spread the photo far and wide under the caption, “King at a Communist Training School,” and identified the men, some of whom did not know each other, as the “‘four horsemen’ of racial agitation.” The commission claimed these men had “brought tension, disturbance, strife and violence in their advancement of the Communist doctrine of ‘racial nationalism.’” Groups with names like the “Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties,” in Virginia, and “Aryan Views and White Folks News” in Waco, Texas, would follow Georgia’s line on King for years to come. The commission also published a pamphlet with this picture and others depicting blacks and whites dancing and swimming and eating together at Highlander. It named a raft of supposed “Communist fronts,” and indicted integration as a communist doctrine.
Segregationists and the John Birch Society portrayed King’s visit as a part of an integrated Communist plot.

The John Birch Society, one of the most paranoid anticommunist organizations of the era, put the picture and the slogan on a postcard and mailed it across the country. Among the Birch Society’s eleven founders was Fred Koch, a sympathizer with Nazi Germany and southern segregationists and an opponent of civil rights groups and unions; he and his sons would go on to invest a fortune in right-wing causes. Koch promoted “right to work” legislation in Kansas that became law in 1958, and his successors continued to campaign everywhere for antiunion laws. The Birch Society paid to put the image of King at Highlander on billboards, one of which King and others passed in 1965 when they marched on Highway 80 from Selma to Montgomery for the right to vote. The Memphis Commercial Appeal carried the “King at a Communist Training School” photo and phrase, which reappeared in other newspapers and racist leaflets throughout the South. Investigating committees and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) would cite the photo with its false caption as evidence against King.
This ludicrous characterization of one of the world’s great Baptist ministers as a Communist became a staple for government and police agencies that promoted what historian Jeff Woods calls a distinctive “southern red scare” designed to use anticommunism to frighten whites away from integration. The antiunion Southern States Industrial Union Council and segregationist groups had used anticommunism since the 1930s to divide workers and break up union organizing. James Lawson saw the red scare as part and parcel of racism: it dehumanized the “enemy” and created an “other” to victimize. When I interviewed Myles Horton some years later, he cautioned me against thinking that the red scare was really about Communists, because there were very few of them in the South. Rather, he said, anti-communism was used as a means to close the minds of white southerners to needed change.

Some have analyzed the red scare as providing leverage for the civil rights movement to pressure the U.S. government to live up to its boast as “the leader of the free world.” More directly, however, the red scare gave bigots in the South a rationalization for the beatings, whippings, and murder inflicted on civil rights workers, and it gave segregationists in Congress a justification for upholding racism and Jim Crow as if they were in the national interest.

Federal and state governments used the red scare to attack and undermine labor and civil rights activists. A Tennessee investigative committee and a U.S. Senate committee run by Mississippi senator James Eastland persecuted Horton and Highlander, and in 1959 the State of Tennessee took away its legal charter and closed the school. Vandals burned it to the ground. (Undeterred, Horton and friends reorganized the school and moved it from west Tennessee to the mountains of east Tennessee, where it remains today.) Since the 1920s, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had sought to use police and government power to destroy the Communist Party, the independent labor left, and the black freedom movement. Raised in a segregated, white environment in Washington, D.C., Hoover neither understood nor appreciated the importance of equal rights or unions. Like most segregationists, he could not believe that black people themselves had thought up their own liberation; he believed it had to be a communist plot. Under his leadership, the FBI provided HUAC with constant information and leads of people to go after.
Employers used anticomunist hearings to destroy interracial unions fighting for contracts. In southern states, legislatures created “little HUACS” to ostracize anyone who spoke up for labor and civil rights. U. S. Senators James Eastland of Mississippi and John McClellan of Arkansas held hearings to drive out leftist and black labor leaders, as well as white liberals like Grace Lorch, who had protected Elizabeth Eckford from a white mob in Little Rock Central High during its school desegregation struggle. Eastland hearings and media-sensationalized anticomunist attacks forced her and her husband, Professor Lee Lorch, out of Arkansas and silenced numerous leftists and civil rights advocates within unions.

HUAC and its state affiliates especially targeted white allies of the civil rights movement. In 1954, the year of the Brown v. Board of Education desegregation ruling, labor journalists Anne and Carl Braden had helped African American Andrew Wade and his family to buy a home in a white neighborhood in Louisville. Whites bombed the home but the state claimed the Bradens bought the home in a conspiracy to instigate race riots and overthrow the state of Kentucky. Although the U.S. Supreme Court later overturned state sedition laws, Carl nonetheless spent eight months in prison. Blacklisted from their profession of journalism, the Bradens became codirectors of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, dedicated to organizing white support for King and the civil rights movement. SCLC’s Fred Shuttlesworth courageously served as president of SCEF, the most red-baited of all southern movement groups.

Although strongly opposed to state communism, when pushed to do it King stood against the red scare, which he accurately saw as a threat to civil liberties. In 1958 Carl Braden and Frank Wilkinson refused to testify about the integration movement before HUAC in Atlanta, citing their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech, press, thought, and association. King petitioned for clemency on their behalf and, on the night before they began a yearlong prison sentence, held a celebratory dinner for them. In 1964 Anne Braden published a pamphlet that explained how the red scare stifled integration, in House Un-American Activities Committee, Bulwark of Segregation. King signed on as a sponsor of the National Committee to Abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Although he hesitated to be associated with people branded as radicals, and often spoke against communism from his religious and humanitarian point of view, King signed petitions for victims of the red scare and stood
for First Amendment rights during the 1950s and into the 1960s. The red scare caused people to lose jobs, homes, reputations, and even their lives. Along with state antiunion laws and the Taft-Hartley Act, the red scare pressured unions to focus on servicing union members and on legal and contractual issues, and to shy away from social movements.

Meanwhile, King forged powerful relationships with unions that had strong civil rights platforms, most of them associated with labor’s left. By the end of his life, King had became virtually an honorary member of the Distributive Workers District 65 and Local 1199 hospital workers in New York City; the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE); and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), based in San Francisco. All these unions except District 65 had been purged from the CIO for leftist associations. The United Packinghouse Workers Union (UPWA), and its president Ralph Helstein, introduced to King by Bayard Rustin, also became one of King’s strongest and earliest union supporters. In October 1957 King made his first union speech at the UPWA’s biennial wage and contract and national women’s conference in Chicago. He virtually repeated the speech he gave at Highlander, calling the organized labor movement the civil rights movement’s greatest potential ally, and said a union and civil rights coalition provided a “powerful instrument” to overthrow economic and racial oppression. The UPWA was the one union that had maneuvered through the anticommunist minefield and survived within the AFL-CIO to create a model of civil rights unionism.

It is easy to see why the packinghouse union became one of King’s most committed allies. The owners of the factories that packaged meat for America’s growing and increasingly industrialized food industry—“packers,” as they were called—had used racism to break up union organizing. During the 1930s, Communist and leftist organizers in the packinghouse industry overcame employer intimidation and racial division by making black and white unity and antidiscrimination the union’s guiding principle. The UPWA developed strong, predominantly black locals, and in the 1950s fought white mob violence in Chicago to help its black members obtain housing in white neighborhoods. The UPWA also succeeded in breaking down racist and sexist hiring and promotion practices at its home base in Chicago, where Addie Wyatt and other black women played leading roles.
The UPWA had provided critical financial support to the Montgomery bus boycott, and during King’s appearance at the 1957 UPWA convention, President Ralph Helstein turned over to King $11,000 created as a “fund for democracy” that largely funded SCLC’s first year. Without the UPWA’s funds and organizational support, SCLC might have failed in its first year. While people with large treasuries at their disposal, such as the UAW’s Walter Reuther, would subsequently write larger checks to the civil rights movement, the UPWA did something special: workers themselves raised funds donated by UPWA locals and members. And at a time when White Citizens Council and Ku Klux Klan activists took over some union locals in the South, the UPWA challenged whites to join with black workers and to elect them to union office. African American Russell Lasley, UPWA vice president and director of the union’s antidiscrimination department, and President Helstein both attended the SCLC founding convention. Helstein also worked on a research committee for King; Myles Horton was the union’s educational director for a time. When the union was threatened with charges of “Communist domination” within the AFL-CIO, King wrote a letter vouching for the union. WhenHUAC decided to investigate UPWA, King and SCLC issued a statement saying, “It is a dark day indeed when men cannot work to implement the ideal of brotherhood without being labeled communist.”

King’s experience with the UPWA raised his hopes for a strong labor-civil rights alliance. Unions represented about one-third of American workers, often had large treasuries, a vigorous labor newspaper network, and lobbying arms in Congress. However, both the CIO and the AFL supported U.S. foreign policy that overthrew democratically elected governments and replaced them with dictatorships that repressed labor movements in the name of anticommunism, in Guatemala in 1954, and elsewhere. After the AFL and CIO merged in 1955–56, the new federation’s American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) continued to support right-wing dictatorships in Latin America that killed thousands of leftist unionists, peasants, and indigenous people, all in the name of winning the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1966 Walter Reuther’s brother Victor revealed to the press that the AFL-CIO’s AIFLD worked as a front for the CIA in developing countries.

Mainstream labor unions walked in lockstep with the country’s anticommunist foreign policy, but King had visited Ghana, Africa, and
India in 1957–58, and spoke against Western capitalist exploitation of their resources and American military interventions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The AFL-CIO’s myopic anticommunism would make it difficult for King and the black freedom movement to court AFL-CIO unions to build a labor-civil rights alliance.

Between 1957 and 1960, King tried to develop SCLC with mixed results. The organization sponsored some big events, such as a May 1957 prayer pilgrimage for integrated schools held in Washington, D.C. King continued to give marvelous speeches, and funded SCLC in large part through a life of perpetual preaching and writing that often put him on the road for three hundred days a year. Incessant travel and his ministry kept him too busy to do grassroots organizing.

In 1958, SCLC hired Ella Baker, the executive secretary of In Friendship, the New York City group providing financial support to the southern civil rights struggle. Baker was a community activist and had been the key organizer of NAACP branches that doubled their membership across the South in the 1940s. She focused on leadership development, saying that “strong people don’t need strong leaders.” Baker, senior to King and others in SCLC, and with much more organizing experience, quickly found herself uncomfortable with SCLC’s preacher-leader model. SCLC ministers knew how to run a church from the top but she knew much more than they did about how to organize a movement from the bottom up. She recalled, “The role of women in the southern church was that of doing the things that the minister said he wanted to have done.” That was not her mode of operation. “It was not a comforting sort of presence that I presented,” said Baker. She felt the “magic man” idea of saviors and messiahs reinforced dependency and undermined organizing capacity among people at the grass roots. Meanwhile, SCLC in its first years did not find a way to repeat the mass nonviolent resistance of the Montgomery movement.

Myles Horton believed people had to learn to think and do for themselves, yet he also appreciated how King’s oratory and ideas awakened people to their self-worth and helped them to push forward. The Citizenship Education Program became one of SCLC’s best grassroots efforts. It began as a program at Highlander when Horton hired Septima Clark, a black schoolteacher blacklisted for her civil rights activity in South Carolina. Traveling to various communities and holding workshops at Highlander,
she explored ways to teach people literacy and citizenship consciousness to counteract years of indoctrination that black southerners could not vote and function as citizens. In collaboration with Highlander, SCLC more or less adopted the program. In July 1961 King hired Andrew Young to supervise and expand the program, and also put Virginian Dorothy Cotton in charge of its field operations. Through nurturing citizenship and literacy skills in African Americans who were denied the vote, Cotton, Clark, Young, and others in citizenship education prepared thousands of working-class people to take charge of their lives across the South and to fight for their rights.

During the civil rights movement, debates often erupted over the effectiveness of organizing versus mobilizing, but activists, including those in SCLC, typically did some of both. And women were always involved in SCLC, as in other organizations.

* * *

ON FEBRUARY 1, 1960, King moved back to Atlanta to copastor Ebenezer with Daddy King, resigning from Dexter Avenue Baptist church and freeing himself to spend more time as SCLC’s president. On the same day, four black students in Greensboro, North Carolina, staged the first sit-in, demanding to be served at a Woolworth lunch counter that excluded African Americans. A powerful core of organizers, including C. T. Vivian, John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, and others also emerged out of Lawson’s Nashville study groups. They had extraordinary success in the spring of 1960 desegregating downtown Nashville and opening jobs to African Americans. Nonviolent resistance spread like wildfire across the South. By the end of the year, an estimated 70,000 black students had held sit-ins or other protests; some 3,600 were arrested. In Memphis, black student sit-ins, a strong NAACP, and court orders proved especially successful in desegregating many public places.

On April 15–17, a new moment emerged with the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ella Baker organized a conference and insisted that the students needed their own, independent organization rather than becoming part of SCLC or the NAACP. King and Lawson gave powerful speeches at the conference and supported the SNCC students, and Baker left SCLC to become SNCC’s adult adviser. In May 1961 black and white activists defied segregation by riding together on buses across the South. In Alabama, the police let local thugs firebomb
buses and nearly kill freedom riders by beating them with tire irons and chains. Rev. Lawson and other freedom riders spent harrowing days in Mississippi’s state penitentiary, Parchman Prison. Despite horrific violence, nonviolent sit-ins, freedom rides, and community-based desegregation and voter registration campaigns exploded across the South from 1960 to 1965, arguably the most dynamic phase of the black freedom struggle. SNCC members and students became the movement’s shock troops, with Baker, Lawson, King, Shuttlesworth, and others in support.

King did not start the civil rights movement, nor was he always at the center of it, but he remained a powerful spokesperson frequently called upon to support local movements or to negotiate with the power structures that repeatedly tried to eliminate him. In April 1960 A. Philip Randolph led the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King that rallied thousands of trade union leaders and others in New York to defeat the State of Alabama’s indictment of King on false charges of perjury and income tax evasion. Unions co-sponsored “A Night of Stars for Freedom” at Carnegie Hall that helped lead to his acquittal. On October 19, 1960, after King was arrested for sitting in with SNCC workers at an Atlanta department store, a judge vindictively sentenced King to a potentially life-threatening four months at hard labor on a chain gang in the notorious Reidsville Georgia State Prison. Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy helped to get him out, galvanizing blacks who could vote to provide a margin of victory in electing Kennedy to the presidency of the United States in November.

Fearful of alienating segregationist southern Democrats, however, President Kennedy shied away from supporting the civil rights movement, but it kept forcing his hand. On May 21, 1961, a mob with guns and torches barricaded King and freedom riders in Ralph Abernathy’s church in Montgomery. Those inside only escaped when a new U.S. attorney general, Robert Kennedy, the president’s younger brother, rescued them with federal marshals. On October 16 King met with President Kennedy and called for racial reform as the nation approached one hundred years since emancipation in January 1863. President Kennedy resisted introducing a new civil rights law, but King and the movement would ultimately prevail.

In December 1961, King’s advocacy of the labor–civil rights alliance came once again to the fore when he spoke at the annual convention of the AFL-CIO in the resort town of Bay Harbour, Florida. King was not among clear allies. George Meany, a white plumber from New York, claimed he
had never walked on a picket line and supported the American business model, euphemistically called “free enterprise.” On day one of the convention, Meany began his fourth two-year term to a standing ovation of three thousand overwhelmingly white male delegates, and made a vitriolic speech condemning communism and putting unions on the side of U.S. foreign policy. President Kennedy followed Meany, praising unions as a bulwark of American freedom. King’s chance to speak came on Monday, only after a holiday weekend at the beach for the convention’s delegates.

King faced both Cold War and racial obstacles to building a civil rights–labor alliance with the AFL-CIO. Labor anticommunism did not fit King’s worldview. In the Cold War and hot war context of the 1960s, civil rights advocates often appealed to the American power structure to support civil rights as a necessary part of the country’s crusade for capitalist freedom in the world. In contrast, King took a more critical stance. He rejected a bipolar struggle between communism and capitalism and viewed the anticolonial independence movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the context of the Social Gospel. He hoped that people could create a “third way” between capitalism and communism that combined economic justice with individual initiative and democratic rights. His support for third-world liberation would continue to put him in conflict with U.S. and AFL-CIO anticommunist foreign policy.

A. Philip Randolph—King’s guide to the contested terrain of labor and civil rights—and George Meany were also in heated conflict over racial issues. As an anticommunist Socialist Party member and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters since the 1920s, Randolph had spent his life forging powerful links between labor and civil rights while avoiding identification with the communist left. He left the presidency of the National Negro Congress in 1940 because he thought communists had too much control. In 1941, by threatening a march of black workers on Washington, he won a presidential executive order mandating equal hiring within America’s burgeoning military industries, albeit with few enforcement powers. Randolph continued to spearhead efforts to break down racial discrimination while going along with the expulsion of the left unions. These internal labor and civil rights politics created a minefield for a relative outsider like Dr. King.

NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill, in his pamphlet “Racism Within Labor,” had thoroughly documented how some craft unions barred blacks
from skilled employment by denying them union apprenticeships and some even banned them from union membership. Many industrial-union contracts institutionalized departmental and occupational seniority that forced blacks to hold on to the least desirable and worst jobs, losing their seniority if they tried to move into another department. Hill wrote that automation of laboring jobs where blacks were concentrated combined with union racial barriers was creating “a permanently depressed economic group” of black workers. Randolph insisted that discriminating unions should be censured or even expelled. Instead, Meany responded by denouncing and censuring him, while King defended him.

On December 3, 1961, King came to the AFL-CIO convention exhausted, not only from his constant travel but also from his hair-raising confrontations with southern segregationists. In the midst of his harrowing and frenetic life, King at Bal Harbour found himself speaking to an audience of older white union leaders. Many of them had gained ascendancy in the 1930s, but now smoked cigars and discussed union issues near the seashore in upscale hotels. (“Nothing’s too good for the working class,” went a self-serving joke.) With King at the podium, Randolph and Meany remained locked in battle over whether union antidiscrimination resolutions would just be window dressing or bring about substantive change.

Unlike his more lively talks to civil rights unions like the UPWA, King gave a sober and careful speech. He recalled the exploitation of workers in pre-union days and pointed to the “unity of purpose” between organized labor and blacks, who “are almost entirely a working people.” The civil rights movement, he said, had adopted many of the tools of the labor movement, including “sit-ins, civil disobedience, and protests.”

In this and other speeches to unions, King repeatedly referred to the methods and demands common to unions and the civil rights movement. In the 1930s, workers had fundamentally changed the rules of American capitalism through nonviolent direct action in the form of strikes, factory sit-ins, boycotts, and picket lines. In 1936, workers had massively voted to reelect President Roosevelt, who produced his “second New Deal” laws mandating minimum wages, social security, and union protections. What the New Deal did not do was pass civil rights and antilynching laws, or extend labor protections to agricultural and domestic workers, where African Americans, women, poor whites, and Latinos remained
concentrated. Nor did government administrators provide equal access for racial minorities to Federal Housing Administration loans and other forms of economic support to working-class families. Southern white administrators of the New Deal and subsequent government programs largely shut black people out. The U.S. Department of Agriculture and state and local agencies withheld loans and information that decimated the ranks of black farmers in the South.

King and his labor advisors knew all this, but in coming before the AFL-CIO sought to build an alliance based on what blacks and organized labor had in common. African Americans were mainly “a working people,” King declared—“our needs are identical with labor’s needs,” including the need for good wages and working conditions, secure jobs, housing, old-age security, education, and respect. But he also warned that both labor and civil rights movements confronted a virulent right-wing and racist crusade. The twin-headed “labor-hater and the labor-baiter” typically spews “anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor epithets from the other mouth.” This description mirrored union experiences in many locales and industries, especially in the South.

The Southern States Industrial Council, the Chambers of Commerce, and businesspeople had long adopted the idea that the South’s main advantage was low wages, enforced by destroying unions. However, low wages reduced consumption, stifled economic growth, and kept the South’s people poor. King did not have to explain this, because everyone in the AFL-CIO knew it. The question was what to do about it. King sounded a theme of unity between labor and civil rights forces and cited the role of black voters in defeating a ban on the union shop in Louisiana as one example of how the civil rights movement could help labor.

In summing up, King asserted that “the two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country are the labor movement and the Negro freedom movement,” and that they could together open the South to progress. He affirmed the idea that “if the Negro wins, labor wins.” Since his first labor-related talk at Highlander in 1957, King had held to the position that if black voters in the South could be enfranchised, a voting coalition of labor and civil rights forces could change the South. This was not a utopian fantasy. A good example was Memphis, Tennessee, where blacks had never lost the right to vote, and combined with unionized voters to help elect relatively moderate Democrats like U.S. senators Albert Gore (elected
1952) and Estes Kefauver (elected 1949) at the state level, and others at the local level.

In his AFL-CIO speech, King offered not only hope for the future but a dark and unfortunately prophetic challenge to unions. They seemed to be at the height of their power, but labor economists also forecast that automation, as King put it, “will grind jobs into dust as it grinds out unbelievable volumes of production.” King also warned against the rise of what he called an “ultra-right” alliance between business, Republicans, and southern Democrats. Unless countered by a powerful labor–civil rights alliance, he argued, the ultraright would threaten “everything decent and fair in American life.” In a chilling prediction of organized labor’s future decline, he said failure to meet this challenge with a united interracial movement could “drive labor into impotency.” King emphasized that the ultraright, not “scattered reds,” posed the real threat to unions.

King challenged his audience to undertake “thoughtful examination of Randolph’s criticism of labor’s efforts to end discrimination within its own ranks.” He pointed to “shameful conditions” of union discrimination and complained that a plan by AFL-CIO unions to raise two million dollars for the civil rights movement had never materialized. (In fact, the relatively tiny UPWA had done much more than the awesome AFL-CIO to help finance the southern movement). “Labor should accept the logic of its special position with respect to Negroes and the struggle for equality,” asserted King, and should also recognize that “the standard expected of you is higher than the standard for the general community.” These comments elicited grim silence from his audience. King finally roused the delegates from their seats with his vision of a different kind of future with his invocation of the words of the old Negro spiritual: “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

King’s AFL-CIO speech opened a discussion on civil rights the next day. UPWA’s black leaders Russell Lasley and Charles Hays pointed out that there were “only a handful of Negro delegates present here,” and called on the AFL-CIO “to close the gap” between fine resolutions and real action. The AFL-CIO convention passed a civil rights resolution and Meany praised King and pinned a union button on his jacket. Various unions subsequently donated to SCLC; the Transport Workers Union of America published thousands of copies of his speech. But the federation did not raise the funds for civil rights that King hoped for and he never spoke at another
AFL-CIO national convention. Less than a week after his AFL-CIO speech, King returned to a jail cell in Albany, Georgia, for demonstrating for civil and voting rights.

King subsequently took his message of civil rights and labor alliance to dozens of unions, and Meany and the AFL-CIO would prove crucial to passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, powered by President Lyndon Johnson’s ability to defeat filibusters and get key Republicans to support these laws. Yet despite successes in mobilizing the union–civil rights alliance, it would always be strained by a deep history of racial and gender discrimination that more often than not kept blacks and other minorities and women from higher-skilled jobs and union office holding. King had warmer relationships with civil rights unions on the left of the American labor spectrum than with the AFL-CIO. The interests of working-class whites, who had jobs and seniority to hold on to, remained at odds with civil rights demands to open those jobs to people of color and women. The zero-sum game of capitalism always seemed to ensure that if someone made gains, those gains came at the expense of someone else. Conflicts over jobs, housing, and school integration would split the progressive forces for change, as would American foreign policy and the Vietnam War.

In July and August 1962, King experienced repeated incarcerations as he continued to work with a mass movement to integrate jobs, businesses, schools, and public accommodations. Returning from Albany, Georgia, to the North on September 8, King gave a speech to some of his strongest allies at a convention of District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Unions (RWDSU), held in upstate New York. African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Jewish workers comprised most of the members of this union of department store and wholesale workers based in New York City. Its African American secretary-treasurer, Cleveland Robinson, over the years raised about $100,000 to support King’s work, and would play a crucial role in the coming March on Washington. King repeatedly returned to give speeches, stand on picket lines, and express solidarity with workers in RWDSU and 1199 Hospital Workers Union, who represented some of the poorest workers in New York City.

Among these committed supporters, King went right to the heart of his Social Gospel critique of American capitalism. Naming war, economic injustice, and racial injustice as the world’s three major evils, King repeated
his mantra, “There is something wrong with a situation that will take the necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.” Sounding like someone from the Occupy movement in the twenty-first century, King decried the fact that “here in America, one-tenth of one percent of the population controls almost 50 percent of the wealth.” He called segregation a “cancer” rooted in slavery. Although he didn’t name his ancestors, he could have been thinking about them: “We worked right here two centuries without wages. We made cotton king. And we built our homes, and the homes of our masters, in the midst of injustice and humiliation . . . if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn’t stop us, certainly the opposition that we now face will not be able to stop us.”

* * *

J. EDGAR HOOVER’S tracking of King’s activities began during or right after the Montgomery boycott, and escalated after King’s AFL-CIO speech, when Hoover learned that Stanley Levison, whom he considered a closet communist, had written the first draft. The FBI began conveying warnings to the White House that Levison had “infiltrated” King’s movement, even though it had no evidence that connected Levison to the CP for at least five years. On March 6, 1962, the FBI broke into Levison’s home office, installed a microphone, and began wiretaps, conveying conversations between King and Levison to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and others. On May 11, 1962, the FBI added King’s name to one of its “enemies” lists, making Levison and King targets of detention if the United States ever declared a national emergency.

Hoover and his agents worked with HUAC and other governmental agencies and selected news media outlets to “expose” King. Hoover believed, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that “Communism is the agitator of every social crisis in America.” And he cited the civil rights movement—the most American of movements, based on the ideals of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence—as “the most artificial of all such social crises, instigated by the Communists within America to add racial hatred to class hatred.”

Hoover’s anger at King grew during the Albany campaign in the summer and fall of 1962. Spelman College professor Howard Zinn commented that the FBI’s white agents collaborated with local police and did nothing but take notes while police and white supremacists arrested, beat, and even
killed civil rights workers. When in answer to a reporter King confirmed that Zinn’s comments were true, and commented that all the agents he saw were white and worked closely with the local white police, Hoover was enraged—not by the behavior of his agents but by King’s critique.

In response to demands to protect civil rights activists, Hoover insisted the FBI was merely an information-gathering agency—despite its history of destroying Al Capone and the Mafia in the 1930s with machine guns, as well as the FBI’s relentless campaigns to destroy communists and assorted radicals. Hoover knew Levison had completely broken any presumed ties with the Communist Party in 1957, but he led presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to believe Levison was a communist infiltrator into the civil rights movement. Astonishingly, the FBI also continued to intimate that the Baptist King was either a Marxist-Leninist or was following a Communist Party line.

On October 23, 1962, the FBI began a “Communist infiltration” (COMINFIL) investigation of SCLC, including wiretaps on various people related to King. A year later, between November 1 and 8, 1963, with the approval of Attorney General Robert Kennedy (who had worked with Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anticommmunist investigating committee in the 1950s), the FBI installed wiretaps on King’s home phone and four phones at the SCLC office in Atlanta. It set up a secret office across the street to monitor the wiretaps, with clerks listening in twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Agents began to spend hundreds of hours at taxpayer expense monitoring King and his key associates, following King around the country in a labor-intensive operation that required breaking into homes and offices and churches and hotel rooms to place electronic devices. Agents sat in cars or rented rooms, often around the clock, listening to private conversations of dozens of people. Hoover’s relentless efforts to spread disinformation on King to the government and the media and toHUAC all helped to foment a right-wing campaign to destroy King.

On September 28, 1962, when King spoke at the annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Birmingham, Alabama, he had mentioned approvingly how entertainers Sammy Davis, Jr., an African American, and May Britt, a blonde considered the beauty of Hollywood, had married. Enraged, White Power advocate Roy James bolted from his aisle seat, jumped onto the stage, and smashed King with a right cross to the face. King staggered, as James then slugged him in the side of the head,
followed that with two kidney punches, and then hit King on the trunk again. Faced with this unexpected physical assault, King dropped his hands at his side and put up no resistance. Confused, James stopped his assault as King’s aides Wyatt T. Walker and Ralph Abernathy seized him. King spoke calmly to James, and then returned to his talk. King refused to press charges, but a judge sentenced his assailant to thirty days in jail and a $25 fine. Dorothy Cotton remembered King’s presence of mind and self-control under assault.

As a result of his assault on King, James became a hero to the American Nazi Party. The Rockwell Report published an interview, “How I Bashed Nigger King,” in which James claimed to be “administering justice to a vile communist race-mixing nigger agitator.” Four months after the Birmingham assault, James jumped onto a speaker’s podium in Chicago and punched King again. James and an entourage of Nazis threateningly approached King in a reception line after his talk, but then left. The party’s leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, renamed the U.S. Nazi Party the National Socialist White People’s Party, and turned his anti-Semitic movement into a broader defense of white privilege under the slogan, “The color of your skin is your uniform.” Rockwell dismissed others on the ultraright because they engaged in talk instead of action. In 1963, The Rockwell Report published an article headlined, “Is Martin Luther King a Communist? The Shocking Record!”

Rockwell’s stormtroopers specialized in startling public attacks on individuals. One of Rockwell’s followers published a magazine called Kill! A group of Nazis assembled to confront civil rights marchers outside the White House on June 14, 1963, with signs saying, “Separation or Death!” and “They Don’t Want Civil Rights; They Want Special Rights.” As always, when black people demanded change, some whites claimed themselves as victims. Rockwell’s thuggish followers initiated other assaults. They physically attacked people involved in the civil rights movement at various protest gatherings. But Rockwell had a special hatred for King. He complained that communists directed King’s actions and called him “Martin Luther Coon,” a phrase favored as a point of pride by many white supremacists in the South.

Some media commentators in the era of the supposed “liberal consensus” viewed right-wing bigots as merely a handful of ignorant crackpots. A disgruntled follower of Rockwell would assassinate the Nazi leader in 1967.
The president of the American Jewish Congress at the time said Rockwell had “made no impact on American life.” But King could not dismiss Rockwell or the radical right so easily. They were after his blood. In Chicago in the summer of 1966 Rockwell’s followers fomented mobs of young white men with their shirtsleeves rolled up to the shoulder, pounding baseball bats on the ground, chanting “We want King!” King remembered this mob attack as his most threatening encounter with white supremacy. Rockwell’s movement would pave the way in later years for skinheads, White Power, and Christian identity movements. The Southern Poverty Law Center continues to track hundreds such groups from its Montgomery, Alabama, headquarters.

In the 1960s, right-wing groups demonized King and the movement he represented. The Ku Klux Klan in Alabama and Mississippi bombed black churches, murdered civil rights activists, and made life hell for SNCC organizers in Mississippi. A segment of evangelical white Christians based in the Southwest also demonized the civil rights movement. The Christian Anti-Communist Crusade mass-distributed a vituperative pamphlet with a drawing of King wearing a mask, titled, “Unmasking the Deceiver, Martin Luther King, Jr.” This eight-page flyer outlined the standard anticommunist lines: “King Associates With Communist School”; “King Lauded by Communist Press”; “King Works with Communists”; “Lawlessness and Violence Accompany King”; “King Aids Communist Party Objectives”; “Top Communists Speak for King.” This pamphlet flooded the South and showed up in Memphis around the time of the March on Washington in 1963.

The leader of the Crusade, Rev. Billy James Hargis, graduated from Ozark Bible College in Bentonville, Arkansas, also home to Sam Walton and the emerging WalMart business empire. Hargis parlayed a rudimentary education into a frenzied life of preaching against the devil communism. He promoted a national evangelical movement through whirlwind tours attacking the United Nations, UAW president Walter Reuther, the Kennedys, King, and the federal government. His Christian identity movement spouted a patriotic and militantly nationalistic doctrine in which American power would spread across and transform the globe, with white Americans taking the place of the Jews as God’s chosen people. Hargis swore he would turn the world into a Christian, freedom-loving, white empire. He claimed the country’s founders advocated a “Christian
Americanism” and unlimited property rights. The Crusade aimed to turn back all forms of modernism and liberalism, especially the integration and civil liberties rulings of the U.S. Supreme Court since 1954.

Hargis developed a formidable army of followers. In 1963 the Crusade took in three-quarters of a million dollars, paid seventy-eight employees, and distributed Hargis sermons to over 450 radio stations and a dozen or more television stations in forty states. The right wing across America took flight based on its own media empire. Twenty-four-hour radio telethons raised money and promoted thousands of books and pamphlets with titles such as “Communism and Labor Unions,” and “Communism and Racial Tension.” A monthly magazine, Christian Crusade, a summer school for young people, and fifty to sixty youth chapters called “Torchbearers” all worked on behalf of anticommunism and Christian America. Hargis constantly toured, giving speeches and interviews and holding mass rallies in which white nationalists shouted out their beliefs. Hargis called the civil rights movement a “crisis bred in the pits of Communist debauchery and conspiracy,” and declared that “segregation is a law of God.”

Harding College in eastern Arkansas created a National Education Program that propagated paranoia on private religious campuses and on U.S. military bases. It passionately promoted free enterprise, the Christian gospel, and anticommunism through “Freedom Forums” hostile to labor, civil rights, and the New Deal. Christian identity speakers built an impressive network among Protestant, white, working- and middle-class southerners. Christian anticommunists drew upon social elements in the Southwest that Sam Walton would also draw upon to create his Walmart empire: alienated, semirural, and suburban whites; antiunion businesspeople enamored of right-to-work laws and angry at New Deal protections for workers; and whites fearing that equal rights for blacks would somehow take away their own rights. The right-wing network produced “Project Alert,” which claimed to have held 520 meetings including 50,000 people by the early 1960s, and organized groups to watch for subversives. It circulated a John Birch Society film called “Communism on the Map,” showing the nation riddled with subversives and encircled by communist powers. Bob James in Memphis screened to dozens of organizations that would help to elect him to the Memphis City Council in 1966.

Moderate Republicans outside the South scratched their heads when looking at the southern-based radical right. Oregon’s moderate Republican
U.S. senator Mark Hatfield saw Hargis as a harbinger of strife and predicted that the Far Right would reshape his party. “Instead of participating in an exchange of ideas, one finds himself listening to a monologue of conditioned responses to emotional slogans.” Hatfield complained. “This unholy marriage of religion and politics has produced a perverted Christianity based not on love but hate, not on charity but persecution.” As he predicted, the “white backlash” would lead to more and more tragic incidents of violence, affecting King and everyone on the progressive side of labor and civil rights and political activity.

Beyond white backlash politics lay something even more threatening to King’s hope for an alliance of labor and civil rights in the South. The idea for “right-to-work” laws emerged in the Texas-based Christian American Association, funded by southern oilmen and northern industrialists. The Association helped to institute a right-to-work law in Arkansas in 1944, prohibiting requirements that workers in unionized shops belong to the union, while fighting against black civil rights tooth and nail. This was the antilabor, antiblack alliance that King warned the AFL-CIO about. “Right to work,” King explained, was a fraud: such a law guaranteed “no rights, and no work.” Rather, “it is a law to rob us of our civil rights and job rights. Its purpose is to destroy labor unions and the freedom of collective bargaining by which unions have improved wages and working conditions of everyone. Wherever these laws have been passed, wages are lower, job opportunities are fewer and there are no civil rights.” The so-called National Right to Work Committee and the American Legislative Exchange Council, backed by the Koch brothers, oil and extractive industrialists, continued to lobby and extend right-to-work laws even into previous union strongholds such as Wisconsin and Michigan.

However menacing the machinations of the right-wing campaign, during the first phase of the black freedom movement King insisted progress was not only possible but inevitable. He believed segregation would fall when a majority of Americans turned against it, and that was just a matter of time. But what about the madness and insecurity of the Cold War, and of the possibility of nuclear destruction following President Kennedy’s April 1961 failed Bay of Pigs invasion? What about the madness that white supremacy had inculcated for generations? James Baldwin, writing *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, ruefully noted that too many whites had accepted slavery and segregation while failing to examine themselves or their “white” identity.
“It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also [claim to] be innocent,” Baldwin wrote.

* * *

IN 1963, THROUGH blood and tear gas and jail, King and the movement would bring the country to a new high point of hope. Drawing on lessons King and the movement had learned during over a year in Albany, Georgia, that had produced few victories, SCLC set out methodically to combine demonstrations with economic withdrawal in order to create a crisis in one of the most violent centers of white supremacy in the South. In Atlanta, Coretta and Martin King had their fourth child on March 28, 1963, but, as was often the case, King was not there for the birth. SCLC had begun its campaign of nonviolent resistance in the steel-making city of Birmingham, Alabama, known by a young freedom-movement militant named Angela Davis and its other black residents as “Bombingham.” The city had a large black working class, many of them unionized, yet they had little power. The KKK had bombed people’s homes and even castrated a black man as he walked down the street, with no legal consequences. On April 23, William Moore, a white postal service worker from Baltimore nicknamed the “Freedom Walker,” was shot to death as he tried to demonstrate support for the civil rights movement by walking down an Alabama highway with a sign supporting black civil rights.

Jailed for leading protests in this frightening setting, King wrote his powerful “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” It was a classic explanation of nonviolent refusal, addressed to clergymen who called the movement’s demonstrations ill timed and ill advised. King explained the four steps of nonviolent resistance—research, negotiation, self-purification in nonviolent principles, and then, when nothing else worked, direct action—to confront the source of oppression. King explained, “The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” In his letter, written on the margins of newspapers and on toilet paper and smuggled out of the jail in pieces, King called on white clergy to join him in opposition to segregation and the violence unleashed on demonstrators by Police Commissioner Bull Connor, who claimed the movement was a communist plot. King also called on ministers to identify with the movement as a protest for justice that affected everyone and to likewise recognize the worldwide revolution against injustice taking
place across the colonized, colored world of Asia, Africa, and South America.

King’s succinct phrase “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” would be repeated by later generations, including the Black Lives Matter movement. From Birmingham City Jail, King held to the position that noncooperation with evil laws required breaking them and paying the price through redemptive suffering. King and a nonviolent army of high school student demonstrators filled the jails and pursued an economic boycott of downtown businesses. On May 7, cameras and newsreels picked up brutal images as Bull Connor unleashed fire hoses and attack dogs on teenagers. Black workers in steel and related industries could not risk arrest and lose their jobs, but many of their children marched. As oral-history interviews demonstrate, informal black working-class networks supported efforts on the job, in the courts, and in direct action by younger people to bring down all the barriers of Jim Crow.

Tragically, however, many working-class and union whites went over to the KKK and even to the ferociously antunion White Citizens’ Councils and John Birch Society. Not only in Birmingham but across the union spectrum “divided we stand” often supplanted the labor–civil rights solidarity King promoted. This split in the working class forced black civil rights movements to operate without the support of white union members at the local level, even as national unions put up tens of thousands of dollars in bail money to get protesters out of jail. Only a near-riot among inner-city blacks caused an extremely reluctant President Kennedy to send in federal marshals and force white businesspeople to settle the conflict. But the 1963 movement in Birmingham did not lead to the kind of conciliation King hoped for as a fourth step in campaigns of nonviolent direct action. Instead, “white voters flocked to the Republican party, which promised solutions to all social problems in the free market,” as historian David Montgomery wrote. “The dynamiting of homes and churches in Birmingham was replaced by the blasting of a highway route through the Red mountain so that white residents could move to new suburbs.”

However, responding to movement pressures, on June 11, 1963, President Kennedy proposed a limited civil rights act to guarantee equal protection of the laws to all citizens under the protection of the Fourteenth Amendment. The next day, in Jackson, Mississippi, an assassin killed NAACP leader Medgar Evers in his driveway. Despite such repression,
demonstrations and sit-ins accelerated and swept through some eight hundred southern cities and into the North. In Homewood, Pennsylvania, and other places local people picketed and put pressure on companies that did not hire black workers or refused to open up skilled jobs to them.

Meanwhile, King, Randolph, Rustin, and black working-class and union organizers merged their demands. In 1961, the Negro American Labor Council had proposed a mass demonstration outside of AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, D.C., to protest its failure to implement strong civil rights policies. Now black labor activists turned this protest of AFL-CIO policies into a much broader march to support both economic and civil rights. A flyer promoting the march warned, “TOKENISM IS DEAD. The Negro is the Last Employed and the First De-employed.” And it also warned of the danger to white workers: “THROUGH AUTOMATION WHITE AND BLACK LABOR IS EQUALLY ENDANGERED.”

But before Washington came Detroit.

On June 23, 1963, twelve days after the murder of Medgar Evers, labor and civil rights joined forces. The UAW had supported the Montgomery bus boycott, provided bail money to get freedom riders and Birmingham freedom fighters out of jail, and according to one estimate ultimately donated $100,000 to SCLC. King and Walter Reuther had formed a strong alliance, and led a massive march of 125,000 through the streets of a then-prosperous Detroit. The march produced powerful feelings of fellowship that shaped people for the rest of their lives. In Detroit, King spoke directly to the urban North, saying, “I have a dream this afternoon 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.”

King unabashedly called on marchers “to engage in that something called love,” not by asking oppressed people to love their oppressor but rather by adopting the ideology and practice of nonviolent direct action. Speaking of agape love, King’s expansive ideology aimed not just to help one group, be they workers or oppressed African Americans. Rather, he said, “I’m talking about a sort of understanding, creating redemptive goodwill” for all people. King exulted that someday everyone would be able to say together, in the words of a spiritual from slavery days, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.” King used this now-famous invocation in a number of speeches, but in 1963 it came
directly out of his hopes for a labor and civil rights majority coalition that would change the nation and end America’s apartheid both at work and in the whole society.

The Kennedy administration had tried to persuade King and his associates not to organize a march on Washington, but when the president realized that the movement would go ahead no matter what he said, he tried to line it up with a demand for a moderate civil rights bill. King came to the nation’s capital to confer with the president on July 22, 1963. While discussing the proposed March on Washington with King, the president took him into the White House rose garden. Perhaps, Kennedy feared that the FBI had tapped his office. In a confidential tone, the president insisted that King disassociate himself from Stanley Levison, whose knowledge and advice proved invaluable to King, especially in regard to writing and arranging his labor speeches. King was taken aback and made no promises.

President Kennedy also asked him to distance himself from Hunter Pitts O’Dell, who King was planning to promote to executive director of SCLC. As it turned out, King had already been forced to change his mind but had not made it public. Prior to King’s meeting with Kennedy, the FBI had released files to southern newspapers to “expose” O’Dell as a communist. The negative publicity had the intended effect. In a letter to O’Dell even before he met with the president, King wrote, “The situation in our country is such . . . that any allusion to the left brings forth an emotional response which would seem to indicate that SCLC and the southern freedom movement are Communist inspired. In these critical times we cannot afford to risk such impressions.” Along with King’s letter was an SCLC statement against the “ethical relativism,” “metaphysical materialism,” and “crippling totalitarianism” of communism.

However, O’Dell had quit the Communist Party around 1958, and both King and the FBI knew it. In a letter to King, O’Dell explained his journey as a merchant mariner and member of the National Maritime Union (a Communist-led union) during the war, as a volunteer organizer in Operation Dixie, and then as a civil rights organizer in the 1950s. O’Dell wrote to King that his ancestors had been slaves on the Hunter Plantation in Louisiana, and he would like “to finish the job of emancipation” through full-time work for King. He denounced “the big lie technique” of Hoover, and said he left the CP because he thought the civil rights movement now was the best means to advance the cause of black freedom.
O’Dell brought invaluable organizing experience as a working-class intellectual and activist. Nonetheless, the NMU had expelled him when it turned anticommunist after the war, and HUAC questioned him in two separate hearings, where he denounced it as a tool of segregationists. O’Dell actually had views not too different from King’s, seeing slavery and racism as part of American capitalism’s search for profits based on dividing the working class. King believed neither Levison nor O’Dell belonged to the CP, and he also believed in civil liberties, but he could not go against the president. King broke his formal ties with both men. Letting go of O’Dell, he said, was a painful experience. He would still communicate with Levison through other people, and increasingly relied upon him after President Kennedy died. O’Dell remained an important supporter of King and went on to edit Freedomways, a theoretical journal of the freedom movement, to teach at Antioch School of Law in the District of Columbia, and to advise Jesse Jackson and others on strategy and politics.

On August 23, 1963, a month after Detroit, the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” brought to fruition the vision of A. Philip Randolph back in 1941, when he had proposed such a march in order to open up jobs for blacks in defense industries. Historian William Jones documents how women and men since the 1940s had put together a labor-based campaign to create the mass interracial coalition of labor, civic, religious, and civil rights movement groups that ultimately brought together a quarter of a million participants in 1963. Malcolm X decried it as “the farce on Washington” because organizers made a strategic decision not to disrupt the nation’s capital. Randolph persuaded SNCC leader John Lewis to temper his rhetoric and the criticisms of Kennedy’s bill he had intended to make from the podium. Randolph laid out specific demands long sought by black workers and, Jones summarized, the rally “linked struggles for racial and economic justice more effectively than any other mobilization in the postwar era.” Although the AFL-CIO did not endorse the march, King’s allies in the UAW, 1199, Distributive Workers, and other unions brought tens of thousands of workers to the march carrying signs demanding both jobs and freedom.

The March on Washington provided a great and hopeful moment in American history. King’s speech has been written about and viewed millions of times, and rightly so. It is important to remember that King began by reminding the nation that in 1863 the country had emancipated the
slaves, but one hundred years later African Americans were still not free. Befitting the purposes of a march for “Jobs and Freedom,” King began with the economic dimension, indicting a prosperous nation for leaving African Americans stranded “on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” and saying the country had given a “bad check”—the promise of freedom—to the sons and daughters of former slaves. In a far shorter version of the speech than the one he had previewed in Detroit, with his soaring rhetoric at the end of the speech King opened the minds of millions of white Americans. King made the idea that “all men are created equal” integral to the American dream for men and women alike, and helped people to commit themselves to make freedom real.

The march culminated the civil rights–labor alliance, with thousands of trade unionists brought to the march by unions from industrial and urban centers across the country. In October, Distributive Workers District 65 and other unions put together a massive labor-based rally in New York City’s Madison Square Garden to raise thousands of dollars for the civil rights movement. The labor–civil rights alliance established at the march in the next two years succeeded in pressuring Congress to pass the most important civil rights laws since Reconstruction.

The great blot on the history of the march is that only one woman, activist leader Daisy Bates of Little Rock, spoke, briefly, as part of a tribute to Rosa Parks and other women who had fought for equal rights. No women’s names were on the call to the gathering, and they were almost entirely absent from the podium, despite the key role of women labor activists in initiating and organizing the march. “That’s how chauvinistic the leadership was at that time,” wrote Coretta Scott King. She ruefully recalled that the men organizing the event would not even allow her to march in the front line with King. Nor did she get to go with King afterward to meet and thank President Kennedy, whom she had spoken to on the phone in 1960 to get her husband out of jail.

Through mass media coverage, the March on Washington reached into the homes of millions of Americans, linking the promise of economic justice and equal rights for working people to the American creed of individual freedom. Even Charlton Heston, who later became an icon of the National Rifle Association, appeared at the march with many other Hollywood celebrities. But only three weeks later, on September 15, white supremacists linked to the KKK bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, the
gathering place for the Birmingham children’s crusade. The murder of black teenagers Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Cynthia Diane Wesley, and Carole Robertson reminded everyone of continuing violent white resistance and the suffering borne by civil rights advocates. It weighed heavily on movement organizers and especially King, who had approved bringing teenagers out of school to stand up to police dogs and water hoses. Wrote Coretta Scott King, “What could be more evil than bombing children in church on a Sunday morning?”

In an eulogy at the church on September 18, 1963, Dr. King declared, “we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.” Even in this dark moment, he called on people to believe that, among our “white brothers,” even “the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality.” A month later, November 22, 1963, in Dallas, a city fraught with a poisonous climate fostered by right-wing hate for the president and his civil rights bill, an assassin shot and killed Kennedy. Watching the story unfold on television, King told Coretta, “This is exactly what’s going to happen to me. I keep telling you, this is a sick society.” Coretta attended Kennedy’s funeral and thought, “If they could kill a president, what did that say about Martin’s chances for survival in America?”

Before the country could even begin to grieve for the dead president, nightclub owner Jack Ruby stepped in front of police escorting alleged Kennedy killer Lee Harvey Oswald to jail and shot him to death. With witnesses claiming to see evidence of a second shooter in the Kennedy assassination, a deeply unsettled country would doubt who killed the president and why. Meanwhile, King’s prophetic calls for peace, for economic justice, and for racial equality kept him on the “enemies list” of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. King’s season of suffering for economic justice and equal rights had only just begun.