A New and Unsettling Force: Reigniting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign

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Raising up generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a movement, led by the poor, to end poverty.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

> I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out. ... This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. ... If it means dying for them, I'm going that way. —Martin Luther King, Jr,[1]

Christian scripture warns of false prophets—leaders who impress but fail to produce "good fruit." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no false prophet; he both talked the talk and walked the walk. His words and work, message and ministry endure as models of theoretical clarity and deep faith, embodied in meaningful and effective action. His faith and clarity supported a commitment which allowed him to stay the course despite mounting death threats against him. In the final sermon before he was assassinated, King exemplifies this courage, refusing to step away from the righteousness and necessity of his work despite the likelihood of his death:

> Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the prom-

1 Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 58

> ised land. 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. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.[2]

This legacy of clarity, commitment, faith and courage is a necessary and invaluable resource for thinking about social justice movements today.

In important ways, in the last years of his life King anticipated many of the economic, political, religious, and ethical problems of the present times. In the journey from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to planning the Poor People's Campaign, he became more than just a black civil rights leader (for 1950s and 60s America), but a bearer of a still-relevant vision, set of values and mission for the entire nation and globe. Today he stands as a model of leadership and commitment for all who are righteously concerned about the crying injustice and inhumanity of abandonment in the face of abundance, of poverty in the midst of plenty.

His historic "Beyond Vietnam" speech at Riverside Church reflected this broad vision and leadership. In his address he raised fundamental critiques of the Vietnam War, condemning it as an "enemy of the poor." While poor blacks and poor whites were set against each other at home, he noted, they were brought together in a brutal unity to massacre the poor in Vietnam—a "cruel manipulation of the poor." He described his prophetic stand against the war as part of a larger vision—a political movement against racism, militarism and economic injustice:

> ...we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered...[3]

In such statements King expressed a social vision that demanded both personal and social transformation, refusing any easy dichotomy between individual virtue and the character of our national life. Compassion was necessary, but needed to find expression

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2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 286.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 240-241.

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socially: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." Instead, "A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth."[4] King rejected both cynicism and sectarianism, arguing that more just foreign and domestic policies were both possible and necessary. The alternative was a road to "spiritual death."

This broader vision and analysis is expressed in his strategic turn from a civil rights to human rights framework. He laid this out in an address to the SCLC staff in May of 1967, which deserves to be quoted at length:

> We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society. We have been in a reform movement ... But after Selma and the voting rights bill, we moved into a new era, which must be the era of revolution. We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power...this means a revolution of values and other things. We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together...you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others...the whole structure of American life must be changed. America is a hypocritical nation and [we] must put [our] own house in order.[5]

This analysis suggests the necessity of building a broad-based movement in order to make plausible any significant "redistribution of economic and political power." The practical implication of this stance required the uniting of poor whites with poor people of color on the basis of what they have in common: their poverty and powerlessness.

On the one hand, this stance placed him at odds with those civil rights leaders who chose to remain silent about the injustice of the war in Vietnam and satisfied with stopping at civil rights and voting rights legislation that mainly benefited the black upper classes. King clearly recognized the social and class limitations of the legislative gains abolishing legalized Jim Crow segregation, realizing that it did no good to have the right to sit in a restaurant if you could not afford to eat there. He stated, "What good is it to be able

4 Ibid., 241

5 Martin Luther King, Jr 'To Chart Our Course for the Future', address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, South Carolina, 1967, 2-3 (King Library and Archives, King Center, Atlanta).

to sit at a lunch counter if you can't afford the price of a hamburger?"[6] Still today we see that the 'white only' sign in the restaurant window has been replaced by a new sign, that is, the menu with its itemized costs of meals. No matter what color your skin, there's no need to go into the restaurant if you can't afford the price of the food.

On the other hand, King's stance placed him at odds with many elements of the civil rights movement transitioning into a rigid Black Nationalist point of view.

> One unfortunate thing about [the slogan] Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. In this context a slogan 'Power for Poor People' would be much more appropriate than the slogan 'Black Power.'[7]

King recognized that for the load of poverty to be lifted, the thinking and behavior of a critical mass of the American people would have to be changed. To accomplish this change a "new and unsettling force" had to be formed. In late 1967, he described this force as a multi-racial "nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor." In other words, the poor would have to be organized to take action together around their immediate and basic needs, thereby becoming a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood, dispelling the myths and stereotypes upholding the mass complacency that leaves the root causes of poverty intact.

> The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize...against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.[8]

King proceeded to translate this analysis into activity. He got from behind the pulpit

6 "Leadership Conference Steps Up Anti-Poverty Efforts," in *Civil Rights Monitor* Vol. 17 No.1 Winter 2007, www.civilrights.org/monitor/winter2007/art13p1.html

7 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 586.

8 Ibid, 650-651

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and hit the pavement, launching the organizing drive of the Poor People's Campaign. He brought people together, across racial and regional lines to plan for the march to Washington. He aligned with the struggle of the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Their struggle for dignity, King suggested, was a dramatization of the issues taken up by the Poor People's Campaign—a fight by capable, hard workers against dehumanization, discrimination and poverty wages in the richest country in the world.

Once this organizing campaign took to the streets, the representatives of the "power and principalities" launched a series of countermoves to preempt what they perceived to be a legitimate social and political threat. Elements from every level of government conspired to have him killed. King's international prestige combined with his real potential of bringing together three major currents at that time: (1) the proven southern-wide networks of civil rights organizations, (2) the national anti-war movement, and (3) the new energy of militant poor youth of the northern cities ghetto uprisings. Such a threat had to be stopped. This was clearly confirmed by the proceedings and conclusion of the 1999 trial on King's assassination in Memphis, largely ignored by the media. For more information see trial transcripts on the King Center web site, http://www.thekingcenter.org/KingCenter/Transcript_circuit_court.aspx and read the book by the King family's attorney, William F. Pepper's, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King.*

In a number of respects the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 anticipated the challenges of our times. We are in a time of acute economic crisis, both in the United States and globally. The acuteness of the crisis has revealed its unique chronic aspects as expressed in the impoverishment of increasing segments of the middle income strata, the so-called "middle class." Alongside rising hunger, homelessness and economic inequality we find hints of a growing protest movement at the grassroots level. At the same time, the current economic crisis has seriously questioned the prevailing ideological and theological orthodoxies, which have defined the limits of the "realistically" possible for at least the last forty years. The global financial collapse has shown that economic arrangements are contingent and fallible, and that we can legitimately imagine new and different ways to structure economic institutions. But without a movement issuing from the bottom demanding a more just set of arrangements, it is unlikely that the current crisis will be resolved in a direction qualitatively different than that of the past two decades, which saw a historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth upward. An accounting of the lessons of King's Poor People's Campaign and a study of their application to the contemporary struggles of the dislocated and dispossessed is thus both timely and necessary.

Almost all discourse about King has focused on his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, his theological critiques of Jim Crow, his oratory skills and even his shortcomings in gender politics. Little has been said about his commitment to ending poverty and

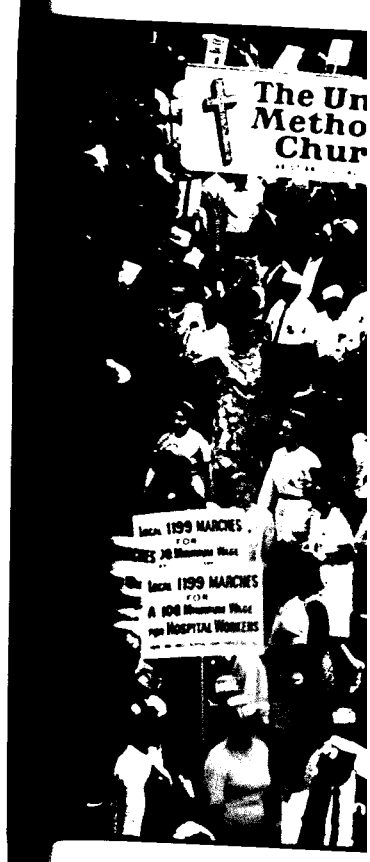
Resurrection City day care center
Washington, D.C., June 1968
Special Collections & Archives,
George Mason University Libraries

even less about his vision for a Poor People's Campaign as a historic effort of the poor to unite across racial, gender, ethnic, religious and geographic lines. Little has been said about how, in devising the strategy and tactics of that Campaign, he drew on the historical lessons provided by similar efforts of previous campaigns, such as the struggles in the 1930s of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, an organization of the poor cotton pickers united across color lines, and of the unemployed white and black veterans united in the famous Bonus March on Washington D.C. Nothing has been said about how this pivotal aspect of the Poor People's Campaign was a counter to the age-old 'divide and conquer' strategy applied as far back as the old slave plantation days. The slaveocracy utilized the poor whites to hold down the black slaves, while utilizing the wealth and power derived from the exploitation of the black slaves to entice and manipulate poor whites. For more information on these plantation politics see W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction.*

Concerned about the lack of careful and systematic study of the Poor People's Campaign—both its goals and the reasons for its demise—the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary decided in 2008 to concentrate much of its energies on a yearlong study and historical analysis of King's last years. This project brought together leaders from different poor communities who agreed to join this effort mostly because they felt that networking with other community and religious leaders would greatly strengthen their struggles and organizations. This joint exploration led to the Poverty Initiative's decision to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign with the development of a Poverty Scholars Program. With these leaders, the Poverty Initiative began by identifying and connecting with local organizing work in impoverished communities and holding strategic dialogues. Learning from the crippling effects of King's assassination, it becomes clear that there is a need to develop many "Martin Luther Kings." Such leaders are not developed naturally—they must be systematically educated and trained.

The Poverty Scholars Program has become the cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative, reflecting its mission to raise up "generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a movement, led by the poor, to end poverty," —a mission inspired by the historical and strategic conclusions King arrived at about the poor united across color lines being "a new and unsettling force." One of the products of the strategic dialogues, immersion trips and classes sponsored by the Poverty Initiative was the compilation of the text before you. It hopes to help facilitate larger in-depth discussions and debates about this important period in history. Its purpose is to draw the kind of lessons that would help guide us in our work on accomplishing what is most needed in this country today—the reigniting of the Poor People's Campaign and finishing the unfinished business of King. The first part of the book includes chapters on the history of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968, the role of religion and the Bible, and the importance of Art and Culture in the

struggle to end poverty, along with an interview of Bertha Burres (Queen of the Mule Train). The second part of the book consists of essays submitted by those from what we call the modern day Sanitation Workers' struggles—organizations fighting for the same basic needs and demands for which the Poor People's Campaign fought.



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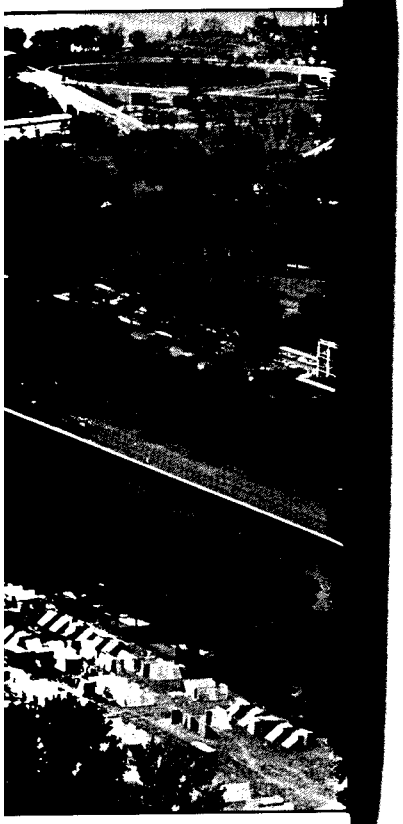

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Chapter 2

The History of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968

The vision to build a unified constituency of poor people to bring their grievances to Washington was a long time in the making. Dating back to labor union organizing in the 1930's and to the first Poor People's March on Washington staged by five hundred poor welfare mothers in October 1966,[1] the desire for economic change was an urgent request of the poor and low-wage workers in America. The mission to confront the U.S. government with the reality of poverty in America was affirmed by the development of the Poor People's Campaign in 1967. As many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement began to focus on bringing the plight of poverty into the nation's consciousness, it was Marian Wright, then director of the Mississippi office of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, and Robert Kennedy who encouraged Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to bring the poor to Washington.

Organizing a campaign that would unite the poor in our nation's capital was not foreign to King. Throughout his career, King insisted upon recognizing the structural nature of poverty and racism in the United States as he worked to end such inequities. He believed that "Poverty was not reducible to poor people's cultural deficiencies or family pathologies. Racism was not mere prejudice, but foundational to a divided working class, to the institutional structure and political economy of the urban ghetto, and to larger

1 Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 335.

landscapes of metropolitan apartheid."[2] The only way King believed structural inequality could be eliminated was for the poor to gain political power—poor people needed to become active participants in the institutions that governed their lives. In his words:

> The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man [or woman] who has nothing to lose. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.[3]

It was under these principles, principles that demanded the agency of the dispossessed, that King announced the Poor People's Campaign in December 1967. Three thousand people from around the United States were organized to travel to Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1968 and petition the government for an "economic bill of rights."

The Need for a Poor People's Campaign

By 1967, King and other civil rights leaders realized that the War on Poverty declared by Lyndon Johnson in January 1964, along with the passing of the Civil Rights Act, neglected to confront the reality of racism and exploitation that was affecting poor and working class black people. The goal of Johnson's War on Poverty was to create change for the poor and deter the rising conflicts that were emerging in poor urban environments. While Johnson's campaign focused on education, job training and social services (all of which lacked funding due to increasing expenditures on the War in Vietnam), it did little to encourage the political empowerment of the poor and made no attempt to critically examine the edifice that continued to produce poverty. It was just such political empowerment and social restructuring that King believed was necessary if this country was going to end poverty. King insisted that the existence of poverty in America, the richest nation in the world, was

2 Ibid, 368. Note: this quotation is by Jackson about King; not a direct quotation of King.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Social Change," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.,* ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 650-651.

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5 Jackson, 342.

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a reality created by an unequal distribution of wealth:

> There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, 'Why are there forty million poor people in America?' And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth.[4]

Those in Washington needed to acknowledge that the problem of poverty in America and around the world was a result of a structural imbalance of political and economic power. King believed that real social change would require the federal government to be held accountable for its role in maintaining racial and class privilege in this country. During his December 4th press conference announcing the Poor People's Campaign, King argued that, "The President and the Congress...have a primary responsibility for low minimum wages, for a degrading system of inadequate welfare, for subsidies to the rich and unemployment and underemployment of the poor, for a war mentality, for slums and starvation, and racism."[5] He maintained that the problem of poverty was not a problem of scarcity, but a problem of priorities and values that must be challenged. King claimed that "only the federal Congress and administration can decide to use the billions of dollars we need for a real war on poverty. We need, not a new law, but a massive, new national program."[6] Through its March on Washington, the Poor People's Campaign would demand a radical revolution of value to spark real social change.

Who Would Go?

As King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) began to focus their efforts on bringing the reality of the economic exploitation of the black community into public consciousness, they quickly discovered that poverty was a prolific problem that permeated not only the South, but also the North; not only the urban ghetto, but also rural America; not only the unemployed, but also the low-wage worker; not only poor black Americans, but also poor white Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans. They realized they could not confront the problem of poverty in the black community without confronting the way the oppressive evils of poverty, racism and militarism were plaguing poor people of all races and ethnicities around the globe. In his "Beyond Viet-

4 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 250.

5 Jackson, 342.

6 King, "Nonviolence and Social Change," 651.

nam" speech at the Riverside Church in April 1967, King exclaimed,

> I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. ... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth.[7]

Challenging the edifice that produced poverty required this country to acknowledge the sacredness of humanity. It was upholding the dignity and worth of all human life that inspired King and SCLC to build a unity across racial lines to confront the status quo that perpetuated the exploitation and oppression of the poor in the United States and around the world.

> "I'm here because when I was a child, I got taken out of school and put to work on the farm helping my family. They didn't pay us in money, but in food, in the crops so we could eat. Then I got married and had kids, and my husband worked in the cotton fields in season and fixing cars and trucks and stuff. But he got sick and don't work much no more and there ain't hardly no cotton to get picked by hand anyway. ... So I came here with the Campaign to tell people that we got to be treated like human beings—that we have a right to live because we've earned the right but we've yet to be paid."
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> —Henrietta Franklin, an African American farm wife from Mississippi cited in Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City."

Planning a multiracial campaign to march on Washington required SCLC to reach out to groups across the country that were organizing in poor communities and to under-

7 Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 240-241.

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stand the particular needs of those different groups. The first gathering of such leaders took place in Atlanta, Georgia in March 1968. There, over fifty multiethnic organizations came together with SCLC to join the campaign. Key leaders and organizations who gathered at this session included: Tom Hayden of the Newark Community Union, Reis Tijerina of the Federal Alliance of New Mexico, John Lewis of the Southern Regional Council, Myles Horton of the Highlander Center, Appalachian Volunteers from Kentucky, welfare rights activists, California farm workers, organized tenants, and the American Friends Service Committee. The common experience evoked in building multiethnic unity among poor people was that the "established powers of rich America [had] deliberately exploited poor people by isolating them in ethnic, national, religious and racial groups."[8] It was believed that the only way to break this isolation was to build a united force that could stand together and challenge such exploitation.

While the need to organize a campaign to confront the reality of poverty and racism in this country was apparent, organizing a Poor People's March in Washington did not come without reservations. One major challenge that the campaign faced was a concern that organizing a national march that would take place in Washington would take away energy from local movements. Local groups were unsure a national campaign would help them achieve their particular goals at home. While uncertainty loomed among the various constituencies during the planning of the Poor People's Campaign, King insisted that the social problems of poverty and racism would require a national campaign to confront the scope and scale of these problems. His call for a radical redistribution of economic and political power in American society would demand that the campaign bring the reality of poverty in the United States to the front steps of Congress.

The Sanitation Workers Strike in Memphis and King's Assassination

In March 1968, King was invited to Memphis, Tennessee by James Lawson to support the black sanitation workers' strike against the city. Black sanitation workers in Memphis had been fighting the city against "arbitrary firings, filthy and dangerous working conditions, low wages, and negligible job mobility."[9] They also fought against the city's banning of public employees' right to unionize. The strike was turning into a significant conflict between the black community and the city as the workers continued to demand better

8 Jackson, 348
9 Jackson, 350

wages, overtime pay, safety programs and union recognition.[10] Many of King's associates protested his involvement in the Memphis sanitation strike suggesting that King should remain focused on planning the Poor People's Campaign. King, however, responded to their objections saying, "These are poor folks. ... If we don't stop for them, then we don't need to go to Washington."[11] King did not view the conditions in Memphis as unique, but rather saw them as an example of the exploitation experienced by poor blacks in particular and poor Americans of all races across the country. The Poor People's Campaign would have to focus both locally and nationally if the needs of those affected by poverty were going to be met.

King did go to Memphis to support the sanitation workers. On March 18, he spoke to a crowd of 15,000 people at the Masonic Temple and encouraged African Americans to come together across class lines to demand economic equality. King realized that the middle class must be involved in a movement that was working to restructure the system that produced poverty. While King's vision for nonviolence accompanied him to Memphis, the Memphis march did not uphold that vision. Instead, the march turned into what the New York Times deemed a "mini-riot" and King's Poor People's Campaign was placed in jeopardy. Civil rights organizers, reporters, and public officials alike began to suggest that a Poor People's March on Washington was sure to erupt into violence. If King was unable to prevent violence amidst a crowd of black sanitation workers in Memphis, how would he control a multiracial coalition from across the United States in Washington?[12] Despite the allegations that nonviolent protest was not possible for the upcoming campaign, King insisted he would lead another nonviolent march in Memphis and a nonviolent campaign to Washington.

On April 3, King returned to Memphis and that evening delivered his "Mountaintop" sermon at Mason Temple. Here, King discussed the necessity of confronting the oppression of the times and spoke out about masses of people around the world who were rising up against exploitation—crying out for freedom. King proclaimed that:

> We are saying that we are God's children. And that we don't have to live like we are forced to live. ... It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity. You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to

10 Jackson, 351

11 Jackson, 350

12 What is often not mentioned in the reports on the violence that erupted during the sanitation workers' march in March of 1968 in Memphis is the involvement of the FBI and local law enforcement in planting agitators in the crowd to provoke violence during the march (Jackson, 352).

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> prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.[13]

The next evening, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel—one month before the Poor People's Campaign was to be launched. King's death brought tremendous grief to SCLC organizers and the participants in the campaign. It became the first strike against achieving King's vision of the Poor People's Campaign. Yet, knowing King would have insisted that the campaign continue, SCLC leaders persevered and launched the Poor People's Campaign. On April 19, 1968, Dr. Ralph Abernathy officially announced that the Campaign would proceed as planned. While many of the details were rushed or left unattended, the need to carry on King's vision provided the energy for the Campaign to continue.

The Campaign

Initial Goals of the Poor People's Campaign

- $30 billion annual appropriation for a real war on poverty
- Congressional passage of full employment and guaranteed income legislation [a guaranteed annual wage]
- Construction of 500,000 low-cost housing units per year until slums were eliminated.

—Announcement by King at a Press Conference about the Poor People's Campaign on February 2, 1968, cited in Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 343.

The plan was to bring poor people from across the country to Washington to demand better jobs, better homes, better education—better lives than the ones they were living. Dr. Ralph Abernathy explained that the intention of the Campaign was to "dramatize the

13 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 280-281.

plight of America's poor of all races and make very clear that they are sick and tired of waiting for a better life."[14] The Poor People's Campaign would pursue King's desire to petition the government to pass an Economic Bill of Rights that would genuinely respond to the needs of poor people in this country.

The Campaign was organized into three phases. The first was to construct a shantytown, to become known as Resurrection City, on the National Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. With permits from the National Park Service, Resurrection City was to house anywhere from 1500 to 3000 Campaign participants. Additional participants would be housed in other group and family residences around the metropolitan area. The next phase was to begin public demonstrations and mass marches to protest the plight of poverty in this country. The Poor People's Campaign was coming to Washington to demand that the federal government in particular and the American people in general open their eyes to the economic inequality that existed in the U.S. The third and final phase of the Campaign was to launch a nationwide boycott of major industries and shopping areas to prompt business leaders to pressure Congress into meeting the demands of the Campaign. If the Campaign was going to generate constructive democratic change, it would have to impact communities across class lines.

Phases of the Poor People's Campaign

Phase One

- Constructing a highly visible shantytown with people of different racial backgrounds in Washington
- Daily demonstrations and a mass march on Washington

Phase Two

- Mass arrests throughout the Capital

Phase Three

- A national economic boycott of America's most powerful corporations

—Cited in Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City."

On April 29, 1968, the Poor People's Campaign was launched. It began in Washington where key leaders of the campaign gathered for lobbying efforts and media events

14 Roland L. Freeman, *The Mule Train: A Journey of Hope Remembered.* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 90.

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before dispersing around the country to formally initiate the regional start-ups of the nine caravans going to Washington: the "Eastern Caravan," the "Appalachia Trail," the "Southern Caravan," the "Midwest Caravan," the "Indian Trail," the "San Francisco Caravan," the "Western Caravan," the "Mule Train," and the "Freedom Train."[15]

"I Had a Dream": Mule Train wagon
Marks, MS, April, 1968
Photo: copyright Roland L. Freeman, 1998

On May 12, 1968, the first of the Campaign caravans—the Memphis Freedom Train—arrived in Washington. On May 13, the first stake was driven into the ground to begin the construction of Resurrection City. The encampment included not only tem-

15 Ibid., 90

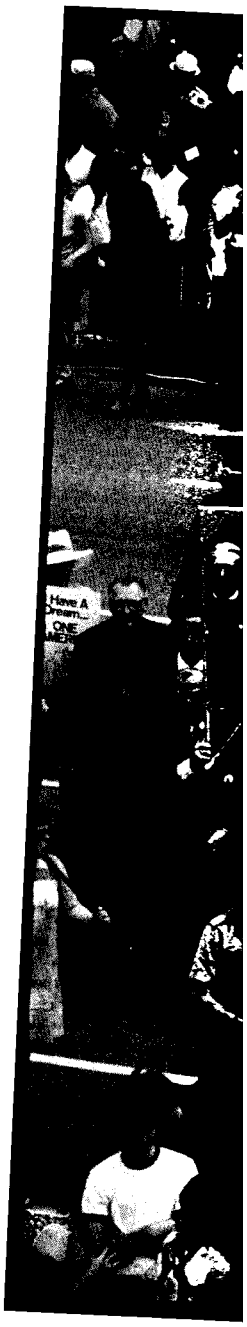
porary housing for Campaign participants, but also "a city hall, a dispensary, a dining tent, a 'Poor People's University,' a cultural ('Soul Center') tent, a psychiatrist, and even its own zip code."[16] Resurrection City was to become a fully functional city that could sustain residents through the duration of the Campaign as they worked to organize rallies, demonstrations and lobbying efforts in Washington. Abernathy proclaimed in his opening dedication of the city that "We will be here until the Congress of the United States decide that they are going to do something about the plight of the poor people by doing away with poverty, unemployment and underemployment in this country."[17]

> "We will be here until the Congress of the United States decide that they are going to do something about the plight of the poor people by doing away with poverty, unemployment and underemployment in this country"
>
> —Rev. Ralph Abernathy

While Resurrection City showed great potential, conditions in the encampment deteriorated as the Campaign continued. In Roland L. Freeman's account of Resurrection City, he explains that, "With its minimal living conditions, the weather, overcrowding, undercover agents, troublemakers, and conflicts among political and social constituencies, Resurrection City soon became virtually a metaphor for the very conditions being protested by the campaign."[18] With such internal tensions rising, the assassination of Robert Kennedy[19] on June 6 became the next major blow to the Poor People's Campaign. Having not yet taken time to mourn the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Kennedy's death brought further grief to an already emotionally depleted community.

The efforts of the Poor People's Campaign climaxed in the Solidarity Day Rally for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom on June 19, 1968. Fifty-thousand people joined the 3,000 participants living in Washington to rally around the demands of the Poor People's Campaign on Solidarity Day. This was the first and only massive movement to take place during the Poor People's Campaign.

By this time, the permit for Resurrection City was about to expire. SCLC requested a 30-day extension of their permit, which was to end on June 14. However, the Parks



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16 Robert T. Chase "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City." Essays in History 40 (1998): http://salemwitchtrials.org/journals/EH/EH40/chase40.html

17 Freeman, 110.

18 Freeman, 109.

19 Robert Kennedy was the democratic presidential candidate in 1968. He was a long time champion of Civil Rights and a strong proponent for economic reform.

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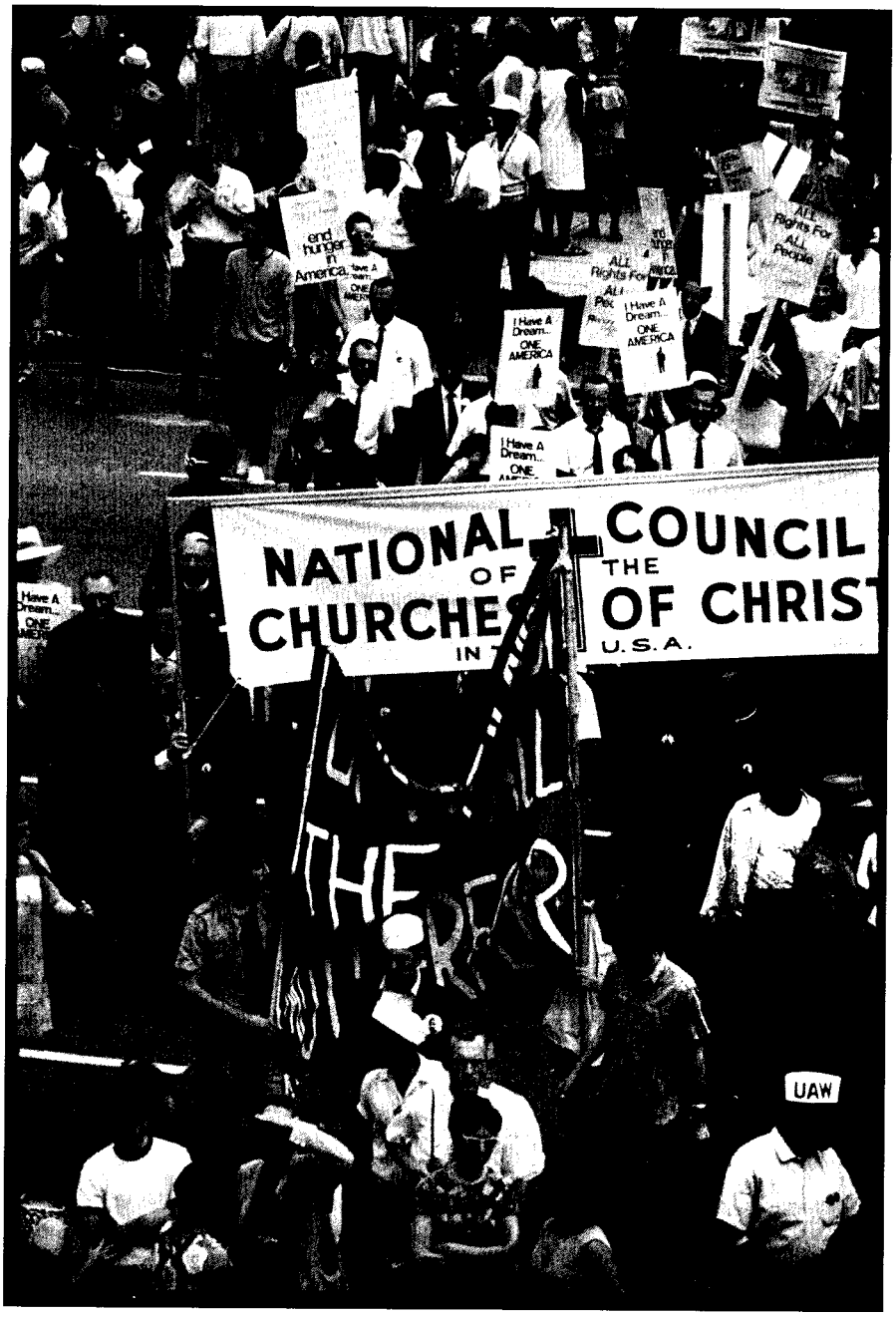

Religious groups at the Poor People's Campaign Solidarity Day march, Washington, D.C., 1968
Photo: Oliver F. Atkins, copyright Oliver Atkins Collection, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries

Director only granted them a one week extension. This affirmed the overarching desire in Washington to shut down Resurrection City. While the numbers from Solidarity Day demonstrated a successful march, many suggested that marchers came out of a sense of obligation rather than hope that the Campaign could bring about real change in the country. The organizers of the Campaign continued to insist that the goals they had accomplished were only the beginning and that the setbacks hindering the Campaign would not lead to its defeat. Abernathy expressed the continued promise he saw in the Campaign during his speech on Solidarity Day: "Today, Solidarity Day, is not the end of the Poor People's Campaign. In fact, today is really only our beginning. We are only just beginning to fight. We will not give up the battle until the Congress of the United States decides to open the doors of America and allow the nation's poor to enter as full-fledged citizens into this land of wealth and opportunity."[20]

A Proposal for an "Economic Bill of Rights" put forth for Solidarity Day by Bayard Rustin

1. Recommit the Federal Government to the Full Employment Act of 1946 and legislate the immediate creation of at least one million socially useful career jobs in public service
2. Adopt the pending housing and urban development act of 1968
3. Repeal the 90th Congress's punitive welfare restrictions in the 1967 Social Security Act...
4. Extend to all farm workers the right – guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act – to organize agricultural labor unions
5. Restore budget cuts for bilingual education, Head Start, summer jobs, Economic Opportunity Act, Elementary and Secondary Education Acts

The Campaign's persistence and determination was not matched by support in Washington. Many of the marchers left Washington immediately after Solidarity Day ended. Those who remained at Resurrection City were forced to leave on June 24, 1968. That day, as two hundred marchers gathered for a rally at the Department of Agriculture, the residents remaining at Resurrection City were surrounded by police dressed in riot gear and told they had 56 minutes to leave the premises peacefully in order to avoid arrest. After one hour passed, the police forcibly removed and arrested the remaining residents. Shortly after, Resurrection City was bulldozed—no remnants remained.

20 Fager, 81.

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The closing of Resurrection City was the final blow to the Campaign. Eight additional demonstrations, some with mass arrests, took place after June 24, but the energy and resources for the Campaign were quickly depleted. SCLC leaders attempted to rally people around the idea that the Campaign in Washington had not been defeated and that it was simply moving to a new phase which would encompass nationwide boycotts of city centers. Attention to this final phase of the Campaign, however, was deflected by the 1968 elections, the continued growth of the middle class and the ongoing challenges of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The Success of the Poor People's Campaign

Many talk about the Poor People's Campaign as a failure, primarily because the Campaign did not result in the creation of an "economic bill of rights," and did not end poverty. When we think about the unceasing rain that turned Resurrection City into a pool of mud, the violence that occurred within the encampment, or the shrinking resources left to foster the Campaign we are led to dismiss this moment in history as a failed campaign. However, there are deeper lessons that must be examined when studying the history of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. We must explore what it achieved and what goals have been left unfinished.

When we listen to the people who participated in the Poor People's Campaign and their responses to questions around how the Campaign affected their lives, we begin to see the long-term achievements of the Campaign. When we reflect on the impact of the Poor People's Campaign on the agency of poor people today, the assumption that the Campaign was a failure comes into question. While the specific, concrete goals of the Campaign may not have been achieved, King's vision to recognize and develop the leadership of poor people around this country is a reality that remains strong today. While the participants of the Poor People's Campaign were forced to leave Washington, they did not stop working for change in our society. Those working to end poverty today stand on the shoulders of the women and men who caravanned to Washington in 1968. It is the efforts of the organized poor across this country who demand real change in our society and inspire a new movement to reignite the Poor People's Campaign.

Reigniting the Poor People's Campaign, however, does not mean we should simply reproduce the actions that took place in 1968. There are lessons we must learn from the Campaign as we take up the unfinished business of creating King's vision for a new America. We will examine three particular lessons here.

Leadership Development

When King spoke of building the leadership of the poor, his vision did not end when poor people arrived in Washington. King's understanding of leadership required an analysis of the unjust systems creating oppression. King recognized the complex relationship that existed between racism, poverty and militarism. His objection to the Vietnam War spoke to his larger opposition to policies that created exploitation and oppression around the globe:

> There is something seductively tempting about stopping there and sending us all off on what in some circles has become a popular crusade against the war in Vietnam. I say we must enter the struggle, but I wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing. The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing clergy—and lay [persons]—concerned committees for the next generation. ... We will be marching for these [Guatemala, Peru, Thailand, Cambodia, Mozambique and South Africa] and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.[21]

Understanding the interconnected webs of oppression that plagued our society was a task King intended for all members of this movement. However, in the midst of the daily struggles and disorganization of Resurrection City, little effort was left to attend to King's vision of leadership development.

Massive Civil Disobedience

The structural change King envisioned called for a revolution of values that would demand a restructuring of current economic and political systems around the world. In his words:

> These are revolutionary times. All over the globe, [people] are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are rising up as never before.[22]

Such change would not come from the demands of a few hundred or even a few thousand people. King's vision was of an international nonviolent movement of the masses, led

21 King, "A Time to Break Silence," 240.

22 Ibid, 242.

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by the dispossessed. The Poor People's Campaign of 1968, however, was unable to produce such a movement. Aside from Solidarity Day, many of the marches that took place during the Poor People's Campaign consisted of a few hundred participants. King's vision of massive civil disobedience was deterred by a complacent American middle class. While the Poor People's Campaign emphasized leadership from the ranks of the poor, this movement would require participation across class lines. The lack of solidarity from the growing middle class in confronting the root causes of racism and poverty in this country proved to be a major stumbling block for the Poor People's Campaign.

Multiracial Unity

The campaign's vision of building a multiracial coalition that could respond to the particular needs of all members in the coalition was never fully achieved. While representatives from Native American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, African American and Euro American communities participated in the campaign, relationships between these various racial and ethnic constituencies were never fully fostered. As the major organizer of the Campaign, the concerns put forth by SCLC seemed to dominate the demands made to Congress. Reis Tijerina and Corky Gonzales often contested that the land rights and issues surrounding culture and education brought forth by the Native American and Mexican American communities were being ignored. Looking back, we begin to realize that time was not on the side of the Campaign in building the relationships needed to foster a unified coalition. As documented in this article, the first multiethnic meeting took place in March, the Campaign was launched in May and the Campaign ended by July. The time required to understand the particular struggles that the various groupings were facing, to build genuine relationships that could help to support individual struggles, and to develop leaders within these groups who shared an advanced analysis of the social system did not exist.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The need for a Poor People's Campaign today is apparent. In a country where more than 30 million people are living in poverty, where more than 50 million people lack health care, where the average age of a homeless person is 9 years old, and the where the existence of a middle class is rapidly diminishing, there is a need for people to come together and demand that their basic human rights to food, shelter, education, healthcare, and a living wage cannot be overlooked. We must learn from the lessons of those who have gone before us. The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 is not a model to replicate, but a lesson from which we can learn. Looking back, we recognize the tremendous stumbling blocks

that hindered the Campaign, from King's assassination to conflict surrounding the War in Vietnam. The context in which the Campaign took place must be examined. We must also remember the success of the Campaign in illuminating the need to build unity across racial, ethnic, and class lines and to promote the development of new leaders in that process.

One immediate step that can be taken is to explore what it means and looks like to reignite a Poor People's Campaign today. Examining the history of the 1968 Campaign illustrates the tremendous work that remains to be done in building a coalition of leaders that can truly address the needs, fears, and demands of all the diverse groups involved. While solidarity was the goal of the participants' march on Washington, the haste in which the Campaign was created left little time for genuine relationship building between the various constituencies involved and overlooked the necessity of developing a sophisticated analysis capable of provoking structural reform. As we look at what it means to reignite the Poor People's Campaign today, we must make space to hear the stories of the people that will make up the body of this struggle. We must take the time to learn from one another, to critically understand the problems we are facing, and to build a movement that embraces the uniqueness of who we are in our attempt to come together to work for justice and equality. Like King, we may not get to see the fruits of our labor, but if we are truly committed to taking up King's vision of the Poor People's Campaign, we must realize that our commitment to ending injustice extends beyond our individual lives. In King's words, the time has come to break the betrayal of our own silences. It is the stories of those who have made this commitment and who are working to reignite King's vision of a Poor People's Campaign today that are beginning to be told in this book.

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