

Resisting War & Racism, Fighting for Peace & Justice

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Over the spring and summer of 1967, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped forward to condemn the US war on Vietnam. In so doing, he risked his reputation, the support of most liberal allies, and, ultimately, his life to “Break the Silence” on the costs of war at home and abroad. King sharply denounced the systematic violence carried out by the US military in the name of democracy—defending, he said, “rights” in S.E. Asia that were denied most black Americans. (<http://icujp.org/king.html>)

Dr. King urged the maturing mass movement for black empowerment and the growing anti-war movement to recognize their common struggle against the “triple evils” of war, racism and economic exploitation. The triplets were “inextricably linked,” mutually-reinforcing and historically-constituted systems of oppression and violence that shaped the everyday life-outcomes for all poor people—and poor people of color in particular. He called for a multiracial social movement for peace and justice—one driven by “a divine dissatisfaction” with injustice and sustained by “an audacious faith in the future.”

“Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal opposition to poverty, racism and militarism.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967)

Today, some 40 years later, our nation is again mired in what appears to be a forever-war—this time against an amorphous enemy called “terrorism.” Intent on “starving the beast” of Big Government, the Bush administration is dramatically reducing government’s capacity to respond to basic human needs—all the while assuring the wealthy that their tax breaks will remain untouched. As usual, poor people of color absorb the costs of change.

US history reminds us that the accepted wisdom on “race” and racial superiority have stirred the

blood, masked the contradictions of class society, and mobilized support for war abroad and racist oppression at home. From the Mexican War to Vietnam to “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” a deluge of cynical appeals to patriotism, paranoia and race prejudice has always blurred our sense that democracy is the pursuit of peace and justice for *all* of “the people.”

And as the death-toll mounts in Iraq, it’s small wonder that so many people committed to the cause of peace and justice are asking each other: Where do we go from here?

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King posed this very question to delegates attending the SCLC’s annual conference in August 1967. The civil rights movement had reached a crossroads and Jim Crow was in retreat in the South—the color bar was being lifted from many areas of public life—and voting rights for southern blacks were now secured by federal statute and defended by federal marshals. Still, the hard-won *right* to sit at an integrated lunch counter remained little more than meaningless symbolism to someone lacking the price of a meal.

King believed that completing the struggle for equality would require a “second phase”: a massive effort to dismantle longstanding racist institutions maintaining unjust arrangements of white wealth, power and privilege.

But King also noted that by then, many of the Movement’s liberal white allies had “quietly faded away.*” Undaunted, he proposed a nation-wide Poor People’s Campaign to apply the principles of nonviolent direct-action to the conditions of persistent economic disparity.

Launched in the early months of 1968, the campaign would mount a permanent encampment of some 1500 people in the nation’s capital to bring the lived-reality of the “war on the poor” to

* Indeed, years later, they would resurface as Bush-loving *neo-conservatives* who publicly revile civil rights advocates for making “excessive,” “divisive,” and “unrealistic” demands. “Racism is dead,” they declare—anyone claiming otherwise is encouraging greed, envy or sloth.

the front door of the White House. The campaign would give birth to a broad, multiracial, popular movement for peace and social justice that linked increased US military spending for war abroad to the reality of poverty, racist violence and persistent inequality at home.

Sadly, the vision failed to survive the murder of the visionary. The campaign's momentum stalled; alliances fragmented into separate, sometimes competitive single-issue causes that stood largely divided on goals and priorities, segregated by race and social status, and mired in confusion and distrust; once vibrant movement organizations were reduced to "reluctant reformers" and consigned to the political margin of society. Since then, most initiatives attempting to build unity across the color line have faltered, failed and then faded away—sometimes quietly, more often bitterly.

Still, the pursuit of peace and social justice remains the unfinished business of democracy and we ask ourselves where *must* we go from here?

It's time to Fund the Dream

Domestically, the burden of the war in Iraq falls most heavily on poor colored folks: taking form in the deep cuts to social services, education, job training, and support for needy families; in the blatant racial profiling and intimidation of immigrants and practitioners of the Muslim faith; in the diversion of funds from community revitalization to Homeland Security; and in the "poverty draft" and the disgraceful "school-to-prison pipeline."

Likewise, the steady exodus of manufacturing jobs and the growth of a low paying service jobs and contingent employment (temp-work) have created a seemingly permanent class of unemployed and under-employed workers of color—many of whom are barred from gainful employment due to a prior criminal record.

And despite claims that the dream of a "color-blind" society has arrived, everywhere we look—in our prisons, or among the Katrina survivors—an individual's worth and life circumstances are still largely determined by their assigned "place" in the social hierarchy imposed by the color line.

Thus, confronting a war-without-end over the global pecking-order, rising costs and falling wages at home, and the persistence of racial profiling, discrimination and violence against people of color, we clearly have some unfinished business.

Embracing King's vision, the Fund the Dream (FTD) project places the "triple evils" concept at the heart of an action agenda for change. As a phi-

losophy and an organizing strategy, FTD seeks to build bridges between the multiple facets of a comprehensive progressive human rights agenda.

To this end, FTD has outlined a set of broad political demands speaking to both the immediate and long-term concerns of society's most vulnerable and ignored members, specifically:

1. **Bring US troops home, now**; reinvest the war budget in the complete recovery and restoration of New Orleans; subsidize the resettlement of its internally-displaced residents
2. **Significantly reduce the US military budget**; Congress must deny the President discretionary spending authority supporting military violence; Congress must use "the power of the purse" to redefine and reorder the core mission of the US armed services to assisting in global disaster relief efforts and to limited peace-keeping duties under direct UN command
3. **Rescind corporate tax cuts and tax-breaks to the wealthy**; direct recovered tax revenues toward the rehabilitation of our public schools, the production of affordable housing, and re-weaving the social safety-net
4. **Dismantle institutional racism**; reexamine the history, institutions and social practices that support white supremacy; adopt race-conscious restorative policies; and establish well-resourced, autonomous social change institutions built from the ground up

Taking care of business

To keep the promises of earlier generations, we must rededicate ourselves to taking up the task that Dr. King outlined so long ago: building a mass, multiracial social movement possessing the political clarity of purpose, the organizational capacity, and the inspired determination to sustain the struggle for deep and enduring social change—locally, nationally, globally.

Fulfilling this promise will mean questioning and discarding the myth that demands for full employment, at a living wage, with good benefits, are unrealistic in this competitive, globalizing economy. It will also mean consistently and fearlessly naming and challenging ingrained racist ideas and practices wherever and whenever they arise—especially among our professed "allies."

Lastly, and most importantly, this vision firmly rejects the wrong-headed conviction that government-financed oppression and violence abroad is somehow more essential to securing our nation's survival than funding The Dream at home.