

Dr. King's Vision: The Poor People's Campaign of 1967-68



Why a Poor People's Campaign?

Just a year before his assassination, at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff retreat in May 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:



I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights...[W]hen we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement...That after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution...In short, we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.

Later that year, in December 1967, Rev. Dr. King announced the plan to bring together poor people from across the country for a new march on Washington. This march was to demand better jobs, better homes, better education—better lives than the ones they were living. Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy explained that the intention of the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 was to “dramatize the plight of America’s poor of all races and make very clear that they are sick and tired of waiting for a better life.” Rev. Dr. King proposed, “... If you are, let’s say, from rural Mississippi, and have never had medical attention, and your children are undernourished and unhealthy, you can take those little children into the Washington hospitals and stay with them there until the medical workers cope with their needs, and in showing it your children you will have shown this country a sight that will make it stop in its busy tracks and think hard about what it has done.” King aligned with the struggle of the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee in March and April 1968. He suggested their struggle for dignity 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.

Dr. King saw that poverty was not just another issue and that poor people were not a special interest group. Throughout his many speeches in the last year of his life, he described the unjust economic conditions facing millions people worldwide. He held up the potential of the poor to come together to transform the whole of society. He knew 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 of consciousness a “new and unsettling force” had to be formed. In other words, the poor would

have to organize to take action together around our immediate and basic needs. In doing, we could become a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood and dispelling the myths and stereotypes that uphold the mass complacency and leave the root causes of poverty intact. He described this force as a multi-racial “nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor.”

In his last Sunday sermon, he stated:

There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today. In a sense it is a triple revolution; that is a technological revolution, with the impact of automation and cybernation; then there is a revolution of weaponry, with the emergence of atomic and nuclear weapon of warfare. Then there is a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion that is taking place all over the world. Yes, we do live in a period where changes are taking place and there is still the voice crying the vista of time saying, “Behold, I make all things new, former things are passed away”... Now whenever anything new comes into history it brings with it new challenges ... and new opportunities ... We are coming to Washington in a poor people’s campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses ... We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But if a man doesn’t have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists ... We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that is signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic non-violent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible.

The triple revolution that Rev. Dr. King highlighted in this sermon emphasized: 1. a technological revolution, 2. a revolution of weaponry, and 3. a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion taking place all over

the world. He argued that social transformation was not inevitable, arising solely out of the historic conditions, but rather needed the commitment, consciousness, capacity and connectedness of the “new and unsettling force” to build a credible and powerful campaign.

The first gathering of over fifty multiracial organizations that came together with SCLC to join the Poor People’s Campaign, took place in Atlanta, Georgia in March 1968. Key leaders and organizations 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, and organized tenants. Rev. Dr. King addressed the session saying that it was the first meeting of that kind he had ever participated in. Indeed, meetings where leaders of different sections of the poor and dispossessed come together on the basis of their common needs and demands remain rare and politically taboo.

The Platform for the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968

As a first step in building the power needed to achieve the goal of a radical redistribution of political and economic power King, along with other leaders of the poor such as Johnnie Tillmon of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), helped work out the major elements of the platform for the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968. An important aspect of the Campaign was to petition the government to pass an Economic Bill of Rights as a step to lift the load of poverty.

- \$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

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 1,500 to 3,000 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, mass nonviolent civil disobedience, and mass arrests to protest the plight of poverty in this country. 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.

Although Rev. Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, on April 29, 1968, the Poor People's Campaign went forward. It began in Washington where key leaders of the campaign gathered for lobbying efforts and media events before dispersing around the country to formally launch the nine regional caravans bringing the thousands of participants 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."⁴

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 at Resurrection City to rally around the demands of the Poor People's Campaign on Solidarity Day. This was the first and only massive mobilization to take place during the Poor People's Campaign.

Bayard Rustin put forth a proposal for an "Economic Bill of Rights" for Solidarity Day that called for the federal government to:

1. Recommit 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 Legacy of MLK's Poor People's Campaign

Unfortunately, the unity and organization needed for the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 to complete all three of the planned stages and form the "new and unsettling force" capable of disrupting "complacent national life" and achieving an economic bill of rights was not easy to come by. The assassinations of Dr. King and Senator Robert Kennedy, a key proponent of the Campaign and Presidential candidate, only served to cripple the Campaign and greatly limit its impact. King emphasized the need for poor whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans to unite. He asserted that the Poor People's Campaign would only be successful if the poor could come together across all the obstacles and barriers set up to divide us and if they could overcome the attention and resources being diverted because of the US engagement in the Vietnam War. In August 1967, he preached:

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.'

And the night before his assassination, in his "Promised Land" speech, he reminded the people that being disunited only benefitted the rich and powerful:

You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to 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.

Shortly before the Poor People's Campaign was launched, King described the kairos moment they were in. His words still ring true today:

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee — the cry is always the same: "We want to be free."... Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity.

King and the other leaders of the Poor People's Campaign asked fundamental questions about the contradictions of their day. Today, many of the groups interested in re-igniting the Poor People's Campaign are asking similar questions about the problems of inequality, power and class:

We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life's marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. And you see, my friends, when you deal with this you begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the oil?' You begin to ask the question, 'Who owns the iron ore?' You begin to ask the question, 'Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?' These are words that must be said.

King exemplified the clarity, commitment, capability, and connectedness needed to build a movement to end poverty:

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.

This commitment is needed from all leaders interested in taking up King's mantle. He demonstrated the difficulty and necessity of uniting the poor and dispossessed across race, religion, geography and other lines that divide. In

our efforts to commemorate and build a Poor People's Campaign for our times, we will undertake an analysis of the 1967-68 Campaign. We aim to stand on the shoulders of those who came before and put effort into learning lessons and getting into step together.

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FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

1. We are rooted in a moral analysis based on our deepest religious and constitutional values that demand justice for all. Moral revival is necessary to save the heart and soul of our democracy.
2. We are committed to lifting up and deepening the leadership of those most affected by systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation and to building unity across lines of division.
3. We believe in the dismantling of unjust criminalization systems that exploit poor communities and communities of color and the transformation of the “War Economy” into a “Peace Economy” that values all humanity.
4. We believe that equal protection under the law is non-negotiable.
5. We believe that people should not live in or die from poverty in the richest nation ever to exist. Blaming the poor and claiming that the United States does not have an abundance of resources to overcome poverty are false narratives used to perpetuate economic exploitation, exclusion, and deep inequality.
6. We recognize the centrality of systemic racism in maintaining economic oppression must be named, detailed and exposed empirically, morally and spiritually. Poverty and economic inequality cannot be understood apart from a society built on white supremacy.
7. We aim to shift the distorted moral narrative often promoted by religious extremists in the nation from issues like prayer in school, abortion, and gun rights to one that is concerned with how our society treats the poor, those on the margins, the least of these, LGBTQIA folks, workers, immigrants, the

disabled and the sick; equality and representation under the law; and the desire for peace, love and harmony within and among nations.

8. We will build up the power of people and state-based movements to serve as a vehicle for a powerful moral movement in the country and to transform the political, economic and moral structures of our society.

9. We recognize the need to organize at the state and local level—many of the most regressive policies are being passed at the state level, and these policies will have long and lasting effect, past even executive orders. The movement is not from above but below.

10. We will do our work in a non-partisan way—no elected officials or candidates get the stage or serve on the State Organizing Committee of the Campaign. This is not about left and right, Democrat or Republican but about right and wrong.

11. We uphold the need to do a season of sustained moral direct action as a way to break through the tweets and shift the moral narrative. We are demonstrating the power of people coming together across issues and geography and putting our bodies on the line to the issues that are affecting us all.

12. The Campaign and all its Participants and Endorsers embrace nonviolence. Violent tactics or actions will not be tolerated.

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Watch the launch video at <https://youtu.be/bWyF94XfcZw>