

# OMNI NEWSLETTER #2 ON MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.'S BIRTHDAY Observed Jan. 16, 2012. Compiled by Dick Bennett for We, the People and a Culture of Peace and Justice.

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## OMNI'S NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DAYS PROJECT

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Monday, 29 August 2011 10 Things Martin Luther King, Jr. Taught Us About Today's Struggles by Richard (RJ) Eskow, Op-Ed, NationofChange: "A lot of people in the media are so afraid of offending anyone that they can't even tell the truth about the man whose memorial is being unveiled this weekend in Washington. Their coverage could give you the impression that the purpose of Martin Luther King, Jr's life was simply to make everybody in this country feel good about themselves. So once again we're presenting ten quotes that represent Dr. King as he truly was -- the kind of brave and visionary leader we so badly need today." READ | DISCUSS | SHARE  
<http://www.nationofchange.org/todays-visionary-10-things-martin-luther-king-jr-taught-us-about-todays-struggles-1314630006>

Maybe the best critical thinking in our local newspapers is found in the Comic section. "Non Sequitur" is particularly good, as is "Six Chix." Here's a recent "Six Chix": Two women conversing, first panel, first woman, as she holds out a restaurant take-out sack: "I'm celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day by exploring a culture different from my own." Second woman: "But you've had Tsao's chicken before!"

Diluting the messages of cultural critics happens all around us, to MLK Jr. frequently. How do we often commemorate King's birthday? Instead of remembering the three essential principles of his resistance to US culture—opposition to racism (institutional discrimination), militarism (empire-Pentagon-WH-Congress), and poverty (US capitalism)--, we generalize them into "service." A "March Honors King" by promoting his "Legacy of Equality, Service, and Brotherhood." But only his civil rights values are presented, along with a vague "brotherhood," while all of his impassioned opposition to economic inequality and poverty—to US capitalism--, and to the Vietnam War and US wars, is transformed into "service." Only one-third of King's great tri-partite critique of the USA, of his urgent call for real, structural change, is given any attention, and even that is trumped by the promotion of local "service." A speaker urges his audience to seek "greatness" in "bold action." How bold? To improve the schools efforts to "keep students from falling through the cracks." What often happens at the annual rededication to King's goals, life, and legacy, to his rejection of US materialism/capitalism, US militarism/empire/wars, and US racism, to his commitment to economic justice, to nonviolence, and to

equality? They are licked like a lollypop, and all go home happy.

Following are two essays that discuss the full, true challenge of Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Remembering the Real Martin Luther King

Monday 17 January 2011

Martin Luther King Jr.

Several years ago, at a forum honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., some participants wanted to take the opportunity to make a statement opposing the Iraq War. The organizers objected, saying they did not want to detract from the message honoring King's memory. Few who ever knew King and his work, however, could miss the irony of the organizers' objections, for there is no question that had King still been alive he would have spoken out forcefully **against the war, as he did all war.**

Most people who learn about Martin Luther King in school learn about Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, the march on Washington and his other great accomplishments in leading the movement to end legal racial segregation in the South. Yet King saw that Jim Crow laws were but one manifestation of injustice in American society. King also opposed the de facto segregation in housing and other manifestations of racism in the north; **he challenged the draining of our national resources for the military; he passionately opposed the Vietnam War and other aspects of US foreign policy. He also questioned the very economic system which allowed for such enormous poverty in the midst of such great wealth.** He died while planning the Poor People's March, where he was to lead thousands of poor Americans (black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Indian) to Washington, DC to demand not only racial justice, but also economic justice.

**Perhaps it was no accident that he was murdered not during his campaign to end segregation, but when he began to challenge the foundations of American capitalism, militarism and imperialism.**

In a sense, King's right-wing critics were more on target than many of his liberal supporters today: King was a radical. Contrary to what the late Senator Jesse Helms and others alleged, however, King was never a communist. His deep religious faith made any adherence to the materialist values of Marxist Leninism impossible. He was, however, a **democratic**

**socialist, a Christian socialist**, who firmly believed that meeting the basic needs of the poor was a higher priority than ensuring profit for the few. He could never accept the communist dictum that "the end justifies the means"; indeed, central to his beliefs was the recognition that the means and the ends are inseparable.

For, even as he moved to the left later in his life, he never wavered on his firm commitment to **nonviolence**. To King, nonviolence was actually more radical than violence, which simply perpetuated the oppression of one group against the other. He believed that nonviolence was not just a tactic nor was it just a personal ethos; it was both. This gave King, like Mohandas Gandhi, the stature of being both a great moral leader and a brilliant political strategist. He recognized that nonviolence was strategically the only realistic option for oppressed African-Americans to achieve justice, and that violence would simply polarize the races and make true justice and reconciliation impossible.

While many liberal pacifists tend to overlook structural violence and many Marxists tend to overlook problems associated with behavioral violence, King saw that it was important to address both pathologies. Indeed, King recognized that structural violence could truly be overcome only through the bold and creative application of nonviolent action. He recognized that it would be naive to put too much faith in the electoral process or the judiciary to bring justice; he knew that real change must come from below. At the same time, he recognized it would also be naive to believe that violence could ever bring real justice. For, in his words, it was no longer a question of violence versus nonviolence, but nonviolence versus non-existence.

- <http://www.truth-out.org/print/66903>
- <http://www.truth-out.org/>

Which Side Would Martin Luther King Be On?

<http://act.commondreams.org/go/4018?akid=343.126591.VbLGoT&t=4>

Published on Monday, January 17, 2011 by *In These Times*

## Which Side Would Martin Luther King Be On?

*When it comes to newly maligned public workers, the answer is easy*

by **Roger Bybee**

If Martin Luther King, Jr. were to be resurrected today, just in time for the national holiday commemorating his memory, many of the anti-public sector politicians praising his legacy would be choking on their words.

After all, King was a persistent, unwavering champion of the most despised and disparaged members of society, like the public employees now being systematically demonized for state and local fiscal crises (Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich decimates the myths behind the campaign against government workers [here](#)).

Recent portraits of Martin Luther King, like Michael Eric Dyson's *I May Not Get There With You* and the brand-new *All Work Has Dignity* by Michael Honey, stress his unwavering commitment to labor unions and economic rights as well as full racial justice.

President Lyndon B. Johnson and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. meet at the White House, 1966

King's exhausting pace of organizing and mobilizing helped to force the passage of landmark civil rights legislation in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But he never considered resting on his laurels. He remained utterly unconcerned with retaining elite approval, as he had a larger vision of economic and social justice he sought to pursue.

Dr. King maintained a disciplined method of non-violence, but increasingly went "too far" in challenging America's economic inequality and the inequality its corporations established across the globe, backed up by U.S. military might. In a little-known speech at the Highlander Institute for activists in 1957, King proudly proclaimed:

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.

King fought not just against "Jim Crow" laws, but against the underlying structure of America's economy which condemned all working people--black, white, and Latino--to a fundamental lack of power, dignity, and economic security. The condition of black people in America was a distinct product of American racism, but it was also intertwined with the economic powerlessness facing all poor and working people, King argued.

The Northern media—which largely applauded his efforts to bring down the irrational system of Southern segregation which kept the entire region backward for a century and impeded economic development—were far less sympathetic to his forceful denunciation of economic injustice and the Vietnam War.

As Norman Solomon and Jeff Cohen noted,

But after passage of civil rights acts in 1964 and 1965, King began challenging the nation's fundamental priorities. He maintained that civil rights laws were empty without "human rights" — including [economic rights](#). For people too poor to eat at a restaurant or afford a decent home, King said, anti-discrimination laws were hollow.

Noting that a majority of Americans below the poverty line were white, King developed a class perspective. He decried the huge income gaps between rich and poor, and called for "radical changes in the structure of our society" to redistribute wealth and power."

Thus, at the time of his death on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was deeply immersed in the struggle of 1,300 black sanitation workers in Memphis who had organized themselves into an AFSCME local.. At the same time, he was also building a coalition for a "Poor People's Campaign" that would assemble in Washington, D.C., to demand "economic rights" for people of all colors. It was aimed at building a mighty coalition that would span autoworkers in Detroit, discarded coalminers in Appalachia, Latino farmworkers, and oppressed blacks in both the South and North.

In his new book *All Work Has Dignity*, Honey pulls together 11 of King's speeches on labor and explains the lasting significance of King's emphasis on the need for "economic rights" for all.

People forget that Dr. King was every bit as committed to economic justice as he was to ending racial segregation. As we struggle with massive unemployment, a staggering racial wealth gap and near collapse of our financial system, King's prophetic writings and speeches underscore his relevance for today.

King saw domestic inequality as inextricably linked with the foreign policy of U.S. corporations and the government. He spoke out against the Vietnam War not as a "tragic well-intentioned mistake," as so many liberals described it, but the inevitable result of the U.S. empire of corporate power expanding under a growing military umbrella.

In an audacious statement that would get him branded a dangerous "extremist" today, King declared on April 4, 1967, that the United States was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." King was an early critic of corporate globalization, which exploited the misery of the world's poorest nations:

capitalists of the West [are] investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries.

### **GLOBALIZATION: SOUTHERN MODEL EXPANDED ACROSS GLOBE**

The current version of globalization would seem familiar to Dr. King, as the the Southern economic model of all-powerful management, docile low-wage labor, and publicly subsidized operations, is now hugely expanded and ported around the globe.

Were he with us today, Dr. King would stand against the opportunistic politicians overlooking the untaxed wealth of billionaires to target public workers. In choosing which side to take in this growing battle, King would have little trouble making a decision, states Honey:

Efforts to shred public employee unions would have deadly effects on the wages, jobs and living standards of the rest of us—especially African Americans, who constitute the most highly unionized group of workers in the country. King fought for the right of all workers to belong to unions, and died supporting that right in Memphis.

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