

4-5-2018

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Radical New Leaders Are Reviving Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign

The movement looks to rebuild the cross-racial civil rights alliance that disintegrated during a half-century of counter-revolution. Their radical vision is more necessary than ever.

Lewis M. Steel | Apr 05, 2018 Common Dreams

The critical question long-time veterans of the civil rights movement and new activists alike ask is this: Are the times ripe for a newly energized movement to break the stagnation which has shut down most racial progress for the last 50 years?

If so, the follow-up is: What will it take to propel the activists forward who are demanding meaningful racial progress now?

As a white lawyer working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's general counsel, Robert L. Carter, I was there in 1964 when the breakthrough Civil Rights Act of that year became law. It was the result of efforts by thousands of Americans of all stripes taking to the streets and the courts to confront violent mobs, the Klan, racist law enforcement officers, and politicians to enforce their rights.

During those years, black and white activists worked together, went to prison together, and sometimes died together to pressure the federal government and the courts to bring down the racist Jim Crow legal system that demanded total segregation in every aspect of life.

That black-white alliance, with whites also risking life and limb to support a more integrated, freer America, was a thing of beauty I hoped would never come apart. However, it would soon split up -- with far reaching consequences.

What Became Possible

It's worth taking a look at what that alliance accomplished.

What's been called the Second Reconstruction followed on the heels of the return of hundreds of thousands of African American World War II veterans. They had endured segregation during

their military service fighting Nazi Germany and Japan only to return to a particularly brutal form of apartheid back home in the South.

The struggle to tear down the all-encompassing reach of Jim Crow laws and the terrorism of the Klan brought together new forces, who accomplished tremendous things together.

At the NAACP, Charles Houston, through his base at Howard Law School, trained brave and committed lawyers, black and white alike, headed by Thurgood Marshall. James Farmer created a new multi-racial organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). This legal front scored landmark victories: In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that legally compelled school segregation was unconstitutional in a 9 to 0 decision which undermined the Jim Crow laws.

On the social front, the NAACP's Rosa Parks precipitated the successful 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott, leading to the rise of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. The lunch counter sit-ins began in 1960, followed by the student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized by Ella Baker.

Young black and white Freedom Riders, following the non-violent precepts of Mahatma Gandhi, exposed for all the nation the viciousness of southern mobs aided and abetted by local law enforcement. Clergymen, rabbis, lawyers, students, and entertainers -- as well as fundraisers in the North -- propelled these groups forward.

The NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and SNCC and men and women of all races and religions joined together for the iconic 1963 march in Washington. The following year, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed. Church burnings, killings, and Klan violence continued, but the writing was on the wall: In the South, Jim Crow was dying as a formalized institution.

Still, just like the First Reconstruction that followed the Civil War, this Second Reconstruction focused almost entirely on the South. It barely touched the North, which had its own forms of deeply ingrained violence and racism. Amid the unrest of 1968, it drew to a close before it even had a chance.

Today, all these years later, the possibility once again exists that young blacks and whites -- joined by others whose human and civil rights are under fierce attack, including immigrants, Dreamers, Muslims, and LGBTQ advocates -- will again become a vibrant part of a new coalition to advance civil rights, this time all over the country, North and South, East and West.

To achieve that goal, it's necessary to go back in time to reconstruct what broke that old coalition apart.

A Half-Century of Counter-revolution

Even during my years at the NAACP, a counter-revolution had set in.

The Supreme Court majority turned against civil rights enforcement except in the most egregious cases. In the North, literally no progress was made to desegregate the public schools despite a major campaign led by the NAACP and its legal staff. African Americans remained locked into overcrowded housing in terribly underserved urban ghettos, with extremely limited employment opportunities. They were policed by virtually all-white forces who took their primary duty as protecting the whites who lived separate lives in separate worlds.

By 1965, King realized that the civil rights movement had to head North if it was truly going to free African Americans from segregation. To open a northern campaign, he took the SCLC to Chicago in 1966. Working with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and a local umbrella group, King focused on attempting to open up Chicago's totally white neighborhoods to African Americans. The effort met violent resistance. King was hit by a rock during a march and commented that he had never seen such hostility. After what turned out to be a sham agreement negotiated with the city, King and the SCLC retreated, and what had been called the Chicago Freedom Movement was dead.

By 1968 when King was assassinated, the civil rights coalition had fragmented. Frustrated by the resilience of white supremacy, many black activists gravitated toward the Black Power ideologies articulated by leaders like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther party. At the same time, the attention of many young white activists had shifted from civil rights to stopping the Vietnam War.

King wasn't blind to these fissures. Prior to his death, King and the SCLC had planned a Poor People's Campaign which would include whites as well as blacks and the poor of all national origins. The goal was to reignite the civil rights movement by linking the fights against poverty, racism, and militarism to inspire the millions of Americans of all races living in abject poverty.

After his death, the SCLC, now headed by Ralph Abernathy, decided to continue the campaign, which centered on establishing a tent city on the National Mall to be called Resurrection City. After obtaining a permit, hundreds of people pitched their tents and opened the tent city in May. By June, however, after a month of heavy rain, the authorities drove the occupants out and destroyed the city. Like the early effort to expand the civil rights focus to the North, this effort also ended in failure.

Moreover, across the North, white-dominated establishment groups, funders, and unions that had supported civil rights now balked at calls for Black Power, as well as affirmative action. Even mainstay civil rights organizations like the NAACP, which relied heavily on white financial

support, joined the chorus, with its executive director, Roy Wilkins, opposing Black Power as well as black leaders who were coming out against the war in Vietnam.

To many African Americans, the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. was the last straw. Rebellions - - called riots by the press -- broke out across America. Whole sections of cities, including Washington, D.C., were torched. Troops were called out to quell the outpouring of anger.

As these events unfolded, virtually no major civil rights organizations joined Black Power advocates together with white activists to redirect the prevailing anger into a new, forward-looking civil rights agenda. The NAACP, which had played a leading role in the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968, seemed to have lost its ability to sustain a forward-looking agenda. Moreover, FBI infiltration of SNCC and the Panthers undermined major parts of the black protest movement.

Instead, it was the die-hard segregationists of the South who were on the march, with George Wallace of Alabama leading the charge into the North. There, many whites were fearful of blacks integrating their neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools, all of which made fertile ground for Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" and "law and order" campaigns, which rallied white fear and resentment behind a reactionary agenda on civil rights.

The mood of mainstream white America at the time was perhaps best expressed by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an academic and career politician who had received high level appointments under both Republican and Democratic presidents. As an adviser to Nixon in March of 1970, Moynihan wrote a memorandum advocating a policy of "benign neglect" toward blacks.

On the right, Moynihan was viewed as the voice of reason. To the remnants of the civil rights community, he was a traitor. Yet Moynihan's star kept rising. He became the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, a Harvard University professor, and eventually a U.S. senator. President Bill Clinton later awarded him the country's highest civilian award, the Medal of Freedom.

Throughout Moynihan's post-1971 career, whether he thought of it that way or not, the barely concealed racism of "benign neglect" remained central to American policy makers' retreat. In fact, under President Clinton -- and over Moynihan's own objections -- Congress passed so-called "welfare reform," which only hardened the extreme difficulty under which African Americans (as well as millions of whites) living in poverty existed.

Towards a New Militancy

Now, 50 years after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, the same racial injustices still confront the nation.

Many black urban areas look like war zones, thanks to white flight, globalization, de-industrialization, and automation -- as well as both "benign neglect" and more overt racism. Many barely functional public schools are still segregated, often serving as little more than a pipeline to overcrowded prisons. Black unemployment levels are still double those of whites, black wealth remains a small fraction of white wealth, and the housing costs in many cities are so high that African Americans find themselves forced to live in even worse housing further away from available jobs.

Yes, some African Americans have climbed the ladders of corporate, political, artistic, and athletic success to the highest levels. But on the ground, the reality remains bleak.

Perhaps as a result, a new generation of African American thinkers -- including Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *We Were Eight Years in Power*, and Michelle Alexander, who wrote *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* -- have injected into the public consciousness the idea that racism is the extraordinary powerful glue which has resisted all efforts to dismantle it.

Nor are these writers alone in expressing their anger and frustration.

Across the nation, many African Americans are in revolt against repressive police practices, including the killing of unarmed African Americans and a criminal justice system which almost always refuses to press charges against cops, yet imprisons millions of people of color in far greater numbers than they were imprisoned 50 years ago.

Putting the legal system further out of reach by making black political representation less likely, the Supreme Court has stripped the 1965 Voting Rights Act of its key enforcement provision. Donald Trump has appointed a racist attorney general, built a political career on claiming that Barack Obama was born in Kenya, and treated neo-Nazi marchers like "very fine people."

Supporting him, Trump has a solid base of Tea Party members, working class whites who have seen well-paying industrial jobs evaporate, white evangelicals, and millions of racist whites nostalgic for the old days.

After five decades of stagnation, are the times ripe now for a new movement which can win the allegiance of growing numbers of Americans against entrenched interests in order to achieve a more egalitarian nation?

Struggles of this nature are extremely difficult and require sacrifices, just as civil rights advocates made during the Second Reconstruction. In addition, back then, targets were overtly racist laws and customs like Jim Crow. Now, in the eyes of many -- or perhaps most -- white Americans, the issues appear more clouded. Conservative whites have grown increasingly comfortable being

overtly hostile to civil rights, while liberal elites fail to grasp the pervasiveness of the institution of racism.

Writing in *The Atlantic* shortly before Donald Trump won, Julian E. Zelizer noted that Hillary Clinton did not have "an extensive record of dealing with institutional racism." Like Hubert Humphrey back in the 1960s, he wrote, Clinton "has shown a willingness to allow the political fears of the right push her towards a more conservative stance." As for Trump, Zelizer opined, if elected, he would continue "to play to the worst sentiment in the electorate." What an understatement that was.

Yet for precisely these reasons, the time is ripe for the rise of a vital new movement. In recent years, the relentless police killings of unarmed blacks has unleashed the Black Lives Matter movement. That movement, which has been supported by many whites as well blacks, spread to city after city as new shootings occurred.

The use of social media ensured virtually no time lag between the triggering events and the reactions. Despite heavy police repression, the Black Lives Matter movement flourished into local, non-hierarchical chapters with their own leadership. They had no need for the older civil rights leaders who habitually appeared, bull horn in hand, then jetted out again to the next demonstration.

Nor did the new energy stop there. Women seeking to close the wage gap and stop sexual harassment, environmentalists reacting to global warming, the LGBTQ community demanding marriage equality and workplace protections, workers and unions seeking a \$15 minimum wage, and young people working to end gun violence have all taken to the streets with impressive mobilizations.

Even the defeat of Hillary Clinton augurs well for new militancy, as it signals the need for a new generation of leadership. In the political sphere, many more women are seeking election up and down the political ladder, and new and more militant women leaders are emerging on the national stage. Union leaders also understand that by supporting a \$15 minimum wage, they are supporting unorganized as well as organized workers.

Sharing the Burden

To move all this energy forward will be a herculean process. People must come to understand their common interests intersect much more than they divide. First and foremost, however, the Second Reconstruction teaches us that blacks and whites must work together as they did during the crucial years of the Second Reconstruction.

African Americans will always be out front in any sustained effort to undo the damage of slavery, Jim Crowism, and relentless segregation. But they cannot and should not bear the burden of confronting America's racism alone. If there is to be a Third Reconstruction, it must receive at least the same kind and level of support that helped move the Second Reconstruction forward. That means whites working with and aiding African American leadership at every level is essential.

Moreover, there are many millions of white Americans who live in desperate poverty. Both blacks and whites living in poverty need the same things: medical care, adequate and healthful food and housing, functioning public schools, access to decent jobs, clean water, clean air, a fairer criminal justice system, and a livable environment. Separately, neither African Americans nor whites will be able to achieve these goals.

A New Poor People's Campaign

Sensing that the time is ripe a Third Reconstruction, the Rev. Drs. William Barber, Jr. and Liz Theoharis have issued a "National Call for Moral Revival," in order to launch a new Poor People's Campaign.

They're melding together their long experiences as organizers and as pastors, each recognizing that the analysis that Martin Luther King, Jr. put forward in the years leading up to 1968 presented a path forward in the current economic, political, and social context.

As the architect of the Moral Mondays Movement in North Carolina, Barber and a coalition of churches, activists, and the North Carolina NAACP created a cross-race, multi-issue moral voice to oppose the repressive policies of lawmakers in that state. By 2014, between 60,000 and 80,000 people gathered in Raleigh for the Moral March, advocating voting rights, labor rights, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights, as well as for health care, education, and the environment.

Explaining his success, Barber told CNN, "We didn't build a white movement or a black movement. We built a moral movement." This momentum built towards a 2016 Moral Revival tour, during which Barber visited 22 states, holding trainings and public events for clergy and grassroots activists. That seeded the ground for Barber in 2017 to join with Theoharis, co-director of the Kairos Center and founder of the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary, to revive the 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

After a 15-state tour in 2017, the campaign was formally launched on December 4, 2017, 50 years after King announced the 1968 campaign. At a press conference in Washington, D.C., activists from 30 states declared their commitment to participate. On February 5, 2018, local leaders from those 30 states participated in the campaign's first coordinated action, delivering

statements to their state capitols announcing their intention to return and organize towards 40 days of nonviolent direct action starting on May 13, 2018 -- Mothers Day -- to raise the moral demands of the campaign.

Mary Kay Henry, the president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), also announced her support of the campaign. And the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), a Washington D.C., think tank with a long history of providing support to progressive groups, is releasing an audit of civil rights progress over the past 50 years for the campaign.

The clock won't run out after 40 days -- this will be only the first chapter in a multi-year campaign, just as the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina was a multi-year campaign which was built and grew over several years.

As this campaign rises up in states across the North and South, Barber and Theoharis are committed to ensuring the nurturing and development of local leadership, including strong representation of the millions of poor people -- black, brown, and white -- who struggle to be heard. Their aim is to create a multi-racial, multi-gendered, intergenerational campaign which will work to heal the racial and economic divides which presently tear America apart.

To achieve this objective, however, white participation will be a critical ingredient. In the heyday of the Second Reconstruction, white youths joined young black people to put their bodies on the line as Freedom Riders and demonstrators, and white religious leaders, lawyers, and financial supporters stood with their black counterparts. They made clear that the fight against Jim Crow was a national fight.

So too today, the fight for equality must be seen as a national struggle in which the object is to create a more perfect union which will benefit all Americans.

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American Friends Service Committee

Barack Obama

Black Lives Matter

George Wallace

Liz Theoharis

Martin Luther King Jr

Moral Monday

Poor Peoples Campaign

Poverty

Rosa Parks

William Barber