

50 years after April 4th

By Bill Fletcher Jr.

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I

The legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King is that of labor and racial justice leader. This point may need clarification since King is generally and almost exclusively associated with the Civil Rights components of the Black Freedom Movement. Yet such an association is very limiting in terms of King's contributions.

King was a self-conscious, non-violent, social revolutionary. He sought, from early in his life, the social transformation of the USA. Although he did not use the term, one could probably have best described King as a Black *social democrat*, that is, an individual who sought to fuse racial justice and social democratic reforms of the US system. Such a fusion would, in a US context, be quite revolutionary.

Beginning in the 1950s King raised the critical importance of unity between the Black Freedom Movement and organized labor (the trade union movement). He became a featured speaker at many conventions of labor bodies and conveyed important messages, including but not limited to the need for organized labor to understand the strategic importance of the Black Freedom Movement generally and the specific need for the trade union movement to organize the Black worker. He also stressed, for African

American audiences, the importance of their aligning with the advanced elements within organized labor as a means of both gaining essential allies but to also address issues of workplace justice so critical to the mass of African Americans.

Yet this is not what made King both a racial justice and labor leader, though these were important contributing factors. King recognized that racial justice in the USA could not be won in the field of civil rights alone. Many commentators act as if this was a late recognition on the part of King, but such a view is mistaken. King was a movement-builder and the movement that he sought to build was broader than the Civil Rights Movement.

By 1966, in the aftermath of significant victories with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights component of the Black Freedom Movement faced a major quandary. The strategic demands of the movement had been won yet Black Freedom had not been won. King recognized that there were two significant components of the struggle that needed to be undertaken; indeed, needed to be fused with the movement for racial justice. These were the struggles for economic justice and the international struggle for human rights.

King, much to the almost horror of some of his key allies in the Civil Rights Movement, advanced two propositions. The first was the necessity for a *poor people's movement*. The second was to add his voice to those who *opposed the US aggression in Vietnam*.

II

The expansion of King's work into the realm of the poor people's campaign and opposition to US aggression in Vietnam was not a reflection of what has come to be called "mission creep." It was not as if King thought that the work of the Civil Rights Movement had ended. Rather it was both a strategic and moral decision.

King understood that the Black Freedom Movement has always engaged both political and economic challenges. White supremacist oppression was not restricted to the political realm, e.g., voting, nor access, e.g., Jim Crow segregation. It was and is an all-round system of oppression that is linked with the construction of capitalism. It is a system for the total suppression of peoples of color and an instrument for social control over peoples of color *and* white working people.

Fulfillment of the tasks of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Freedom necessitated fusing racial justice and economic justice. Supposedly racially-blind or non-racial economic justice efforts were part of the history of US movements and they almost invariably failed in that the elite has been able to manipulate the oppressed on racial grounds. But they also failed because such racially blind efforts avoid the basic democratic question, i.e., how can one have incomplete and inconsistent justice and, nevertheless, consider that a victory? This was very evident in the Populist movement of the 1890s, but it was also true in countless trade union struggles.

Racial justice struggles absent a broader economic orientation confronted three problems. First, it was relatively easy for the ruling elites and their mass base to marginalize the struggles as, allegedly, only the concern of people of color. Second, racial

justice struggles that ignored the dimension of economic injustice, could also run the risk of ignoring the mass of the working populations of peoples of color. Third, the actual construction of “race” was directly linked to the construction of capitalism, i.e., “race” and racism are not add-ons to a somehow pure capitalist economic system. Racism cannot be ultimately destroyed while capitalism lives. Capitalism can never be defeated to the extent that there is any attempt to ignore or avoid the battle against racist oppression.

King sought to build what we could call a *new majority movement*. He focused on reaching out to those who have been victims of economic injustice, thereby crossing racial and ethnic boundaries. But in so doing, he sought not to ignore matters of race but to link them directly to the larger justice struggle. He aimed to show how racial boundaries were being used to block the cohesion and self-awareness of the new majority that he aimed to construct.

The demands of the new majority that he envisioned were, in effect, social democratic and aimed to transform the structures and values of the USA while always appealing to a moral compass that King believed existed in the heart of the mass of people of the USA.

It is important to add here that the poor people’s movement was one part of the larger economic justice movement that King engaged. The other was the trade union movement which, as noted earlier, he had consistently supported. It is in that sense that King’s appearance and involvement in the 1968 sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee was no accident nor was it a tangential piece of his work. It was part of what was becoming quite central.

King's entry into the anti-Vietnam War movement was not as sudden as is frequently described. He had begun making statements against the Vietnam War two years prior to his famous April 1967 speech at Riverside Church in New York City. He found it morally and politically reprehensible to restrict his criticisms of human rights abuses to what was underway in the USA. It was, however, in April 1967 that he went fully public.

The April 1967 speech was a full and dramatic break with the Democratic Party establishment that supported then President Lyndon Johnson. It united the struggle for Black Freedom with the larger struggles underway across the planet for national liberation and human rights. And in speaking out, King was prepared to denounce the hypocrisy of the US ruling elite which condemned the violence of everyone other than themselves.

King's speech and subsequent position against the Vietnam War came at a tremendous cost. Many liberals—including Black liberals—distanced themselves, if not denounced King. The denunciations were quite severe, including suggestions that King had no business speaking out on anything other than race and civil rights.

King stood firm and expanded his critique beyond the specifics in connection with the Vietnam War to a reexamination of US foreign policy. He linked US foreign policy and its purveying of violence with its domestic policies, including lack of resources for the poor and marginalized and the atmosphere of violence that it permitted, if not encouraged at home.

III

What should a contemporary socialist say of King's legacy? Was King an interesting historical figure of little relevance to today's challenge?

King believed in the need for the ultimate transformation of the USA. That much is clear and documented. But, contrary to what many radicals believed at the time—including this writer (who was a young radical at the time of King's assassination)—it was not his appeals to non-violence that made King a reformer rather than an out and out anti-capitalist revolutionary. King was *morally* a social revolutionary who believed that there could be the gradual transformation of the USA into a humane society. He believed that this could happen as a result of a fusion of movements that could bring about the new majority.

To a great extent King was correct. The transformation of the USA will never happen based upon one social movement alone. He was correct that there is an integral linkage between the struggles in the domestic realm and those in the realm of international affairs. He was correct that there was something deeply unjust and demonic about the US system.

Yet King did not acknowledge the need for a revolutionary transformation of US society in the sense of a plan for a radical reorientation of priorities and institutions. Such an approach would necessitate both the structural reforms which King demanded, but also the elevation of oppressed to being the rulers of society. This goes far beyond pressuring one or another existing establishment political party to do the right thing. This means an end to capitalism.

There is an *implicit* anti-capitalism in the work of King and, as a result, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent he was being tactical in his pronouncements (and that which he did not say) as opposed to his actual beliefs. One must draw inferences. Just as militancy and direct action need not define a revolutionary, so too is the case that references to the need for revolution in values or living in revolutionary times need not necessarily imply one's support for a revolutionary transformation. To some extent we are left to speculate.

Coming to a definitive conclusion is not as important as drawing key lessons from the life and work of Dr. King, lessons that I would argue contain deep and continued relevance.

IV

What are some key lessons?

- (1) ***Mass movements bring forward change, but they are very messy:*** King was a true believer in mass movements. He believed that people must be the subjects of history rather than the reliance on the “great man” or “great person.” This may seem ironic since Dr. King has been elevated to the “great man” status in so-called mainstream circles. But as *one of the leaders* of a large movement, he realized that coalition building was essential. When he was first chosen to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott it was largely the result of his being new to town and not caught up in the factions. Leaders are essential in coalition building.
- (2) ***A movement must represent a “cause”:*** The movement of which he was a leader heralded a cause that included opposition and overthrow of Jim Crow segregation.

But the cause was larger and it was about Black Freedom and, ultimately, a movement for human rights. It was not only a movement for specific demands, though demands were critical.

- (3) ***Movements must outlive their leaders:*** This is a lesson to be learned from the murders of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. In neither case were their respective movement-organizations structured in such a way that one could reference a collective leadership. And, while it was the case that the Black Freedom Movement had an assemblage of leaders, there was a particular role that King played that appeared nearly irreplaceable. Movements must always remember the mortality of their leaders.
- (4) ***Tactical flexibility:*** King understood the necessity for tactical flexibility. Though non-violence was a principle for him, he was prepared to engage in multiple means of pressuring his opponents. It is also critical to recognize that while non-violence was a principle for King, it was not necessarily the case for much of the rest of his movement. In many cases it was viewed, itself, tactically.
- (5) ***A movement for justice cannot advance with implicit or explicit male supremacy:*** This is perhaps one of the most important *criticisms* of the work of Dr. King. He was a Christian minister and a great man, but his world was largely dominated by men. King, though he respected the work of women, was not a champion of women's leadership and the equality of women leaders. Though some might suggest that this is an unfair criticism given the times, it is important to acknowledge that there were struggles that had long been underway in various

social movements, including but not limited to the Black Freedom Movement, to advance women's leadership and break down barriers.

(6) ***International solidarity and context:*** King, along with Malcolm X and many other leaders, fought very hard to both internationalize the Black Freedom struggle but also to bring forward other global struggles for freedom to the Black Freedom Movement. The ruling circles in the USA have always attempted to isolate the Black Freedom struggle and to cut it off from international ties. King worked towards the recognition of a global struggle against injustice.
