



COMMUNIQUE

MARCHING IN MEMPHIS THE BELL TOLLED FOR MARTIN

By Dan Cunningham

New Year's Day 2015 finds me struggling to jump start this piece about the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Maybe I should kick myself for agreeing to try my hand at so daunting a task. Scholars and sages, historians, and pundits have written volumes on the life and times of this extraordinary man. My poor powers of prose won't measure up, I'm afraid. But I'll take some comfort in knowing that mere words, no matter how elegantly stated, cannot truly commemorate a life so devoted to justice, nor consecrate a sacrifice so noble. We truly honor the memory only by picking up the gauntlet and carrying on with the work he so gallantly advanced.

Under King's stewardship, and by strength of conviction, the Civil Rights movement gained traction. America moved light years closer to realizing the principles put forth in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence — freedom, equality, pursuit of happiness, and justice for people of all races, religions, and economic conditions. Between 1956 and 1965, King led and participated in a series of prolonged and successful campaigns aimed at a "plantation culture" that resembled more medieval serfdom than anything envisioned by our founding fathers. To the detriment of all Americans, the culture King targeted hadn't changed much since before the Civil War.

Patterns of racism, inequality, deprivation, and human degradation continued, most negatively impacting Southern blacks, but hurting people of all races, all over America, especially those below the poverty line. Those benefiting from the decadent status quo would use any means to protect their interests, including murder and terrorism. But King, the Civil rights movement, the labor movement, and all people of good will were on the march, "stomping through the vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored."

Below are synopses of some high-profile campaigns between 1956 and 1965 when the Civil Rights Movement reached a peak:

Montgomery Bus Boycott 1955-1956: The arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery city bus led to a boycott of the bus line that lasted for an entire year. The result was a Supreme Court ruling that the segregated bus practices were unconstitutional. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

(SCLC) gained notoriety due to the movement's success.

Albany Campaign: (1961 & 1962) King and the SCLC joined a movement of civil disobedience organized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. The movement heated up after 11 people were arrested for challenging segregation policies in Albany, Georgia. So many were arrested, including King, that the Albany jails couldn't accommodate their number. Although events included some friction between the student organizers and the SCLC, the outcome was further success in integration and voter registration.

Birmingham Protests (May 1963): The SCLC devised a plan for prolonged protests, marches, and civil disobedience. King was jailed during an initial march. After his release, thousands joined the march, especially the young people, and even children. Scenes of children standing their ground against police dogs and fire hoses drew the national spotlight. The protests forced an agreement for the integration of public facilities in Birmingham.

March on Washington (August 1963): King proposed a massive march on Washington to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The SCLC organized fleets of buses to get people to Washington. The march included the SNCC, Francis Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and union leaders such as Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. King delivered the famous "I Have a Dream" speech to more than 300,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial. March leaders met with President Kennedy after the meeting and asked him to ramp up efforts for the passage of the civil rights bill that Kennedy introduced in February 1963. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, three months after the march. The first Civil Rights Bill was passed in 1964 under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson.

March from Selma to Montgomery (March 1965): On January 2, 1965, King and the SCLC joined the SNCC, the Dallas County Voters League, and other local African American activists in Selma for a voting rights campaign. Only 2 percent of blacks were on the voting rolls at the time. The SCLC focused on Selma because they anticipated that the brutality of local police would draw national attention and force Congress to enact new national voting rights legislation. On March 7 (Bloody Sunday), state troopers attacked peaceful marchers using tear gas, clubs, and police dogs. Television coverage of "Bloody Sunday" spurred national outrage.

On March 15, President Johnson addressed Congress and identified himself with the demonstrators. On March 17, he submitted voting rights legislation to Congress. On August 6, 1965, in the presence of King and recalling the "outrage of Selma," Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law.

In the years between 1956 and 1968, under Dr. King's leadership, the Civil Rights Movement realized more racial equality than in all preceding years, from the time slave ships first landed on American shores. After 1965, the movement came to a crossroads. King's leadership was challenged from within by activists who said the movement lacked direction. Many favored a "by any means necessary" stance, including violence. King was not militant enough they said. King remained adamant that the path of non-violent resistance be followed. His non-violent principles were deeply rooted in his Christian faith and the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Time and again, during the struggle he had witnessed the truth of Gandhi's quote: "Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man." Using the weapons of boycott, civil disobedience and grass-roots organizing, King had achieved goals thought to be impossible. He understood the wisdom of Gandhi who said: "Non-violence is not a garment to be taken on and off...it must be an inseparable part of our being." King knew what got him "to the mountaintop."

Always the visionary, King also knew where to take the fight. He knew the next battle, the one for economic equality, would be the hardest and most contentious battle of all. He knew that entering the battle would put him in more peril than at any other time in his life. In his famous "mountaintop" speech delivered in Memphis on the night before he died, King uttered these prophetic words: "I've been to the mountaintop...I would like to live a long life...but I'm not concerned about that now...I've

seen the promised land...I may not get there... but I'm not worried...Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the lord..."

In his final days, King threatened more than the status quo of the Southern "plantation culture." Dr. King's "poor-people's campaign" envisioned a "multi-racial army of the poor" that would pressure Washington into adopting a poor-people's bill of rights. He denounced the huge income gaps between the rich and the poor. This new campaign battle is what led King to Memphis in 1968.

"We in the labor movement know that America has a history of dealing harshly with human rights' champions. From the infancy of the labor movement, union leaders and labor activists have been killed in the fight for decent wages, safe working conditions, and the right to organize. The roll call of those beaten, killed or imprisoned in the pursuit of justice for working people stretches back to before the American Revolution. We know the famous ones like Mother Jones and Joe Hill, Gompers, Reuther, Chavez and Quill; let us also honor the legion of lesser-known and nameless heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice so working men and women could earn a decent wage, raise themselves up, and walk with dignity.

Martin would not object to having his name added to that roll. He would have agreed that human rights and labor rights are synonymous. It is altogether fitting that King devoted his last days on earth to supporting the striking sanitation workers of Memphis. He died in a fight to give working men the right to be represented by a union. He died in a struggle to end starvation wages, and cruel and unusual working conditions.

The Reverend King got to the mountaintop; he saw the other side. It is for us, the living, to honor his sacrifice and continue the journey to the promised land. In solidarity, we will be delivered.