

# DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

## ADDRESS TO ILLINOIS AFL-CIO ON OCTOBER 7, 1965

Following is the address, in substance, delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Leader from Atlanta, Georgia, to the delegates in attendance at the 8th Annual Convention of the Illinois State AFL-CIO, held in Springfield, Illinois during the week of October 4-7, 1965

Mr. President, Distinguished Mayor of this great City, all of the delegates assembled for this significant Convention of the Illinois State AFL-CIO, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I need not pause to say how very delighted and honored I am to be here and to have the privilege of sharing with you this very significant occasion. It is always a rich and rewarding experience when I can take a brief break from the day-to-day demands of our struggle for freedom and human dignity and discuss the issues involved in that struggle with friends of good will and concerned individuals all over this nation.

I can assure you that I feel I am among friends in being with you today, and I come with great delight and great pleasure. There are many reasons why I am happy to be here. One is that I am aware of the fact that I am in the city of Abraham Lincoln, the man whose sacred memory will remain a part of our thoughts as long as there is any memory in this great Nation, and a man who, through his dedication and through his commitment to the great principles of our American democracy, has carved for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of our Nation's history. So I am deeply grateful to the distinguished Mayor of Springfield for presenting me with the keys to this great city, and I am deeply indebted to him for all his kind and gracious words. Now, there is another reason that I am happy to be here. For some reason, the flight that we got out of Atlanta to Chicago, and then on into Springfield, confronted a little turbulence in the air. We had a little bad weather in the South, and even getting into Chicago it was a little choppy. And whenever I have a choppy flight I am always happy to get on the ground.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that I don't have faith in God in the air; it is simply that I have had more experience with him on the ground. *(Laughter and applause)*

My Brothers and Sisters of the Labor Movement of this great State: I want to discuss with you this morning, honestly and frankly, some of the challenges facing the Labor Movement and some of the challenges facing the Civil Rights Movement, and the great opportunities that



*Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Springfield on October 7, 1965, to speak to the AFL-CIO convention at the Illinois State Armory. Terming civil rights a movement of the people, he said it was not a Negro or Caucasian or sectional problem, but an American problem. Photo source: www.sj-r.com*

we have in the days ahead. And I say, I want to discuss the problems with you frankly and honestly because I think if we are to be friends, we must be honest with each other; and if we are to meet the challenges in the days ahead we must speak frankly to the issues involved.

There have always been two groups who have suffered at the hands of the writers of American History – the Labor Movement and the Negro people. School children, from their distorted history books, even today, learn that our social pioneers and heroes were almost exclusively great presidents, generals and captains of industry. The contributions of the Labor Movement are so slighted that they appear as mere accidental phenomena, if they receive attention at all.

At the turn of the century, women earned approximately ten cents an hour, and men were fortunate to receive twenty cents an hour. The average work week was 60 to 70 hours. During the thirties, wages were a secondary issues; to have a job at all was the difference between the agony of starvation and a flicker of life. The Nation, now so vigorous, reeled and tottered then almost to total collapse.



“The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress.”

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The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation. They resisted it until they were overcome. When in the thirties the wave of Union organization crested over the Nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society.

Civilization began to grow in the economic life of man, and a decent life with a sense of security and dignity became a reality rather than a distant dream.

It is a mark of our intellectual backwardness that these monumental achievements of Labor are still only dimly seen, and in all too many circles the term “Union” is still synonymous with self-seeking, power hunger, racketeering, and cynical coercion. There have been and still are wrongs in the Trade Union Movement but its share of credit for triumphant accomplishments is substantially denied in the historical treatment of the Nation’s progress.

The other group denied credit for its achievements are Negroes. When our Nation was struggling to grow in the 18th and 19th centuries, our place in international commerce was finally secured when cotton became King and the mills of Europe turned on our abundant raw material. That white gold was the product of Negro labor. Even beyond that the very bodies of Negroes, then called black gold, built the economies of many nations through the nefarious but immensely profitable slave trade. The clearing of the wilderness, the productivity of the plantations, the building of roads and ports all emerged from the toil of the grossly oppressed Negro, and on these foundations a modern society was built. None of this, however, finds constructive expression in our history books.

It is not a coincidence that the Labor Movement and the Civil Rights Movement have the same essential origins. Each is a movement that grew out of burning needs of an oppressed poor for security and equality. Each was

denied justice by the dominant forces of society and had to win a place in the sun by its own intense struggle and indescribable self-sacrifice.

There were always people to tell Labor that it should wait and be patient. The railroad magnate, George Baer, invoked the divine in these words, “The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for, not by Labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God, in His infinite wisdom, has given control of the property interests of the Country.”

Victor Hugo answered the admonition to wait with a simple equation. He said, “There is always more misery in the lower class than there is humanity in the upper class.” Waiting submissively has always meant standing with an empty cup in one hand while the cup of misery overflows in the other hand.

Negroes today are deafened with advice to wait, but they have learned from the experience of Labor that to wait is to submit and surrender.

Despite the striking similarities in the origins of the Labor Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, there are features today that are markedly different. The Civil Rights Movement is organizationally weak, amateurish, and inexperienced. Yet, it has profound moral appeal; it is growing dynamically, and it is introducing basic democratic reforms in our society.

The Labor Movement, on the other hand, is organizationally powerful, but it is stagnating and receding as a social force. As the work force has grown substantially in the past twenty years, the ranks of organized Labor have remained stationary, and its moral appeal flickers instead of shining as it did in the thirties.

With all its power and experience, Labor has been on the defensive for years, beating back efforts to outlaw the closed shop, interference in its internal affairs, and restrictions on organizing activity.

Where once the anti-poverty fight was a product of Labor’s creativity, now the Federal government conducts it through agencies essentially apart from Labor. The administration determines the form, the tempo and the style the anti-poverty program will have and it receives all the credit for it. Unfortunately, Labor cannot stand still long or it will slip backward. Labor today faces a great crisis, perhaps the most calamitous since it began its march from the shadows of war and insecurity. Apart from its loss of influence and leadership the new technology is undermining its strength. The advance of automation is a destructive hurricane whose winds are sweeping away jobs and work standards.

The new awareness that America in its glittering prosperity still has nearly forty million poor reveals the dangers facing



Labor and the unfinished tasks it faces. Henry George once said, "Poverty is the open mouthed, relentless, hell which yawns beneath civilized society." Where there are millions of poor, organized Labor cannot really be secure.

One of the most publicized areas of poor, Appalachia, is the huge ghost town of

the mining industry overcome by automation and new products. In a few years, steel will have lost one-third of the jobs it had in 1950 as new methods and equipment blot out employment. Food packing, auto and electrical assembly, all industries of this State, are visibly scarred by the consuming flames of automation. The process does not abate because it has socially undesirable consequences, but accelerates because it is invariably profitable to industry to shrink jobs.

Where are the unemployed automation has created? Many, numbering millions, are walking the streets. A large proportion are Negroes who are half hidden in the ghettos. Some have found employment in service industries in low paid jobs largely unprotected by Unions in these unorganized trades. Other millions have retired, some on pensions, some on social security, others on relief.

The tragic and perilous feature common to all is that they have moved from a decent standard of living to an essentially impoverished condition. This process is dangerous for the Nation as it reduces purchasing power; it is dangerous for Labor as it undermines standards; and it is catastrophic for the Negro who does not even have a toe-hold on security.

The South is Labor's other deep menace. Lower wage rates and improved transportation have magnetically attracted industry. The widespread, deeply rooted Negro poverty in the South weakens the wage scale there for the white as well as the Negro. Beyond that, a low wage structure in the South becomes a heavy pressure on higher wages in the North.

And I might say at this point that it is imperative for the Civil Rights Movement to join with Labor in an unrelenting campaign to repeal the inequitous 14(b), notwithstanding the distinguished Senator from the great State of Illinois, Senator Dirksen. (*Applause*)

These conditions that I have mentioned exist at a time when national wealth and resources are enormous. They exist in a time when Labor is still strong, and the Civil Rights Movement is dynamic and expanding. This suggests that

the day of structural economic reform is not over but must begin with a new birth toward historic heights.

Are we not past the day when layoffs are not longer sufferable? No one any longer suggests that firemen should be paid only when they are putting out fires. They are paid while they are waiting in the firehouse for the call to work. What kind of security do we have when jobs can disappear for periods and families must abruptly sink to lower living standards? Why should older workers be put in competition with young workers? Why should Negro workers and white workers compete for jobs? The answer is a guaranteed annual wage, and adequate minimum wage for all who work without exclusions (*applause*), and guaranteed employment for all willing to work. These reforms are entirely within our reach – they are entirely practical in a society so rich and productivity so abundant. Why should the most affluent and the most powerful Nation on earth have unemployment today when most industrial nations of Europe have none at all?

It is a bitter and ironic truth that in today's prosperity, millions of Negroes live in conditions identical or worse than the depression thirties. For hundreds of thousands there is no unemployment insurance, no social security, no Medicare, no minimum wage. The laws do not cover their form of employment. For millions of others, there is no employment or under-employment. In some ghettos the present rate of unemployment is higher than that of the thirties. Education for our children is second class and in the higher levels so limited it has no significance as a lever for uplift. The tenements we inhabited thirty years ago, which were old then, and three decades more dilapidated. Discrimination still smothers initiative and humiliates the daily life of young and old. The progress of the Nation has not carried the Negro with it. It has favored a few and bypassed the millions.

I have attempted in this discussion to point up the common interests of Labor and the Negro and to sincerely express the respect Labor deserves for its creative role in history. Yet, I would be lacking in honesty if I did not point out that the Labor Movement thirty years ago did more in that period for Civil Rights than Labor is doing today. Thirty years ago Labor pioneered in the mass production industries in introducing new equal employment opportunities. It was bold when general support for equality was timid. ...

I come to you this morning with an appeal to join us in this crusade. At present, the staff of my organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, is already at work in the City of Chicago. They are busily training the people of the West Side to engage in nonviolent action to deliver the rights, dignity and opportunities to which all people are entitled.



Chicago is our Nation's second largest city, and as such it has embodied within it all of the economic and social problems which are inherent in our national metropolitan life. These are the problems which produced the Watts riot; these are the problems which threaten to destroy our entire Nation; these are the problems which breed violence and hatred in our midst.

I am convinced that there are nonviolent solutions to these problems, but our experience in government and throughout this Nation has been that nothing will be done until the issues are raised so dramatically that our Nation will act. This was the lesson of both Selma and Birmingham where inhuman conditions had been allowed to exist for hundreds of years. Negroes in the North are not so patient. If a coalition of conscience between the forces of Labor, the church, the academic community and the Civil Rights Movement does not emerge to make these issues inescapably clear and demand their solution, then I am afraid that hostility and violence will breed a crisis of nationwide proportion. Anyone who remembers how quickly the nonviolent movement spread across the South, first in the bus boycotts and then within a year to almost 200 cities in the sit-ins, will shudder in horror at the thought of violence spreading with similar speed.

It is not a constitutional right that men have jobs, but it is a basic human and moral right.

The two most dynamic movements that reshaped the Nation during the past three decades are the Labor and Civil Rights Movements. Our combined strength is potentially enormous. We have not used a fraction of it for our own good or for the needs of society as a whole. If we make the war on poverty a total war, if we seek higher standards for all workers for an enriched life we have the ability to accomplish it, and our Nation has the ability to provide it. If our two movements unite their social pioneering initiative, thirty years from now people will look back on this day and honor those who had the vision to see the full possibilities of modern society and the courage to fight for their realization.

But I must honestly say to you today that there are some things in our Nation and in the world of which I am proud to be maladjusted, and to which I call upon all men of good will to be maladjusted until the good society is realized. I must honestly say to you that I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination.

I must honestly say that I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry.

I must say to you that I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. *(Applause)*



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I must honestly say that however much I am criticized that I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence, for in a day when man-made vehicles are dashing throughout outer space and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or non-existence; and the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat may be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not envision.

And may I say to you, my Brothers and Sisters, that I still have faith in the future. However difficult our problems may be now, however dark the day and dismal the night, I still have faith in America and in the democratic process. *(Applause)* I still believe that by working together and through a mighty coalition of conscience we will be able to solve the problems ahead.

Now, and before the victory is won, I must be honest enough to say to you that we must be willing to suffer for righteousness' sake; before the victory for justice is won, some will get scarred up a bit; before the victory for freedom is won, some more will be thrown into crowded and frustrated jail cells. But if this is the case, we must go into those jails and transform them from dungeons of shame to havens of freedom of human dignity.

Before the victory is won, maybe somebody else like Evers, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, or Reverend Reed, or Selma Jackson, or Reverend Jonathan Daniels may have to face physical death. But if physical death is the price some must pay to free their children and their white Brothers from a death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redeeming. *(Applause)*

So, today, I can sing more than ever before, "We shall overcome," and we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it is bent toward justice. We shall overcome in the struggle for social and economic justice because Carlisle is right, "No lie can live forever." We shall overcome in the struggle because William Conant Bryant is right, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right, "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne; yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind them unknown standards guard within the shadow, keeping watch within His own."

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our Nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. Yes, with this faith we will be able to speed up the day when men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and nation will not rise up against nation; neither will they study war any more.

With this faith all over America of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

"Free at last; free at last,  
Thank God above, yes, we are free at last."

Thank you.

*... The entire delegation arose and applauded.*

## Remembering Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**WE  
ARE  
ONE**



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ARE  
ONE**

**Illinois AFL-CIO Moment in History**