

As King Day approaches, Minnesotans should remember why King went to Memphis

By Jeff Kolnick / Saturday, Jan. 15, 2011

As Martin Luther King Day approaches, it is helpful to remember where the Rev. King was and what he was doing when he was shot down in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968.

King was called to Memphis by his good friend the Rev. James Lawson to help sanitation workers (garbage men) form a local union. The sanitation workers sought to join AFSCME Local 1733 in an effort to improve their lives and gain full citizenship. They wanted to become public-sector workers represented by a union.

On Feb. 1, 1968, two Memphis sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed in their garbage truck due to a mechanical malfunction and the fact that safe places for workers riding in the trucks were not made available to the all-black workforce. The sanitation workers labored under extreme conditions and for wages so low they could not support themselves or their families. This was the condition of many public sector workers before they were represented by unions. King took time from his Poor People's Campaign, his last major project, to visit Memphis to help public employees form a union. This was his mission on the day he died.

King's embrace of the labor movement preceded his trip to Memphis. In 1962, he wrote of organized labor, "History is a great teacher. Now everyone knows that the labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them."

On October 7, 1965 he wrote, "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."

A march for jobs and freedom

We often forget that the March on Washington in 1963 was called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and that UAW President Walter Reuther also spoke that day. For King, there was no separation between the struggle for human rights and the struggle for labor rights.

Library of Congress Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Now, as we prepare to remember King, public employees are the No. 1 target of the conservative movement. The attacks were rolled out with great efficiency and always the same: higher wages than the private sector; super benefits that are crippling local, state, and federal governments; opposition to efficiency and reform; massive pension liabilities, etc., etc. The conservative think tank the Cato Institute published a longish piece by Chris Edwards called "**Public Sector Unions and the Rising Costs of Employee Compensation**" [PDF] on Feb. 10, 2010, that set the tone for the assault. Borrowing heavily from the CATO report, commentator Michael Barone made an early assault in an April 2010 commentary in the **Washington Examiner** and billionaire **Mortimer Zuckerman took a swipe** at union workers in the Sept. 10 edition of U.S. News. More recently, the attacks have been frequent with **The Wall Street Journal** on Jan. 4, and **The Economist** on Jan. 6. On TV, Fox News got on the bandwagon with reports on April 2, 2010, and Jan. 5, 2011. And now the anti-government agenda is coming home to Minnesota, where the goal of new Republican majority is to drag all workers down to the level of those without the protection of a union contract rather than lift working Americans up to the standards demanded by King.

According to **a recent MPR story** by reporter Tim Pugmire, the new Republican majority in the state Senate rolled out its new tax cutting "jobs bill" this week. If signed into law, "the bill would phase in a 50 percent reduction of the business income tax rate. The rate would gradually drop from 9.8 percent to 4.9 percent over the next six years. Business property taxes would be rolled back to 2009 levels. The estimated cost for both tax breaks is \$200 million in the next two-year-budget." According to a report in the **Star Tribune**, the bill's author, Sen. Geoff Michel, refused to speculate as to how many jobs would be created by the massive tax cut to businesses.

A 'jobs bill' that would kill jobs

At the end of his thoughtful report, Pugmire noted a different kind of "jobs bill" being worked on by the Republican majority. This bill would kill jobs. Pugmire writes: "As Republican

lawmakers were showcasing their plan to grow private-sector jobs, they were also quietly proposing to put some public employees out of work. The early batch of House bills included a measure to reduce the state workforce by 15 percent over the next four years through early retirement, furloughs and layoffs."

So watch out, Minnesotans, when the new Republican majorities pay homage to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. No doubt they will quote his content-of-the-character idea to prove their fidelity to "the dream." But do not let this out-of-context and limited understanding of King's dream fool you. King died helping public sector workers form a union, and no doubt he would condemn any attempt by lawmakers give tax breaks to bosses even as they made plans to fire public sector workers.

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