

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Living the Dream



LABOR HONORS AN AMERICAN HERO



The accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a civil rights leader are now an accepted part of American history. He is rightly given credit for changing the broad course of that history.

This brochure has been prepared to highlight just one facet of Dr. King's legacy, his unswerving support throughout his life for the trade union movement.

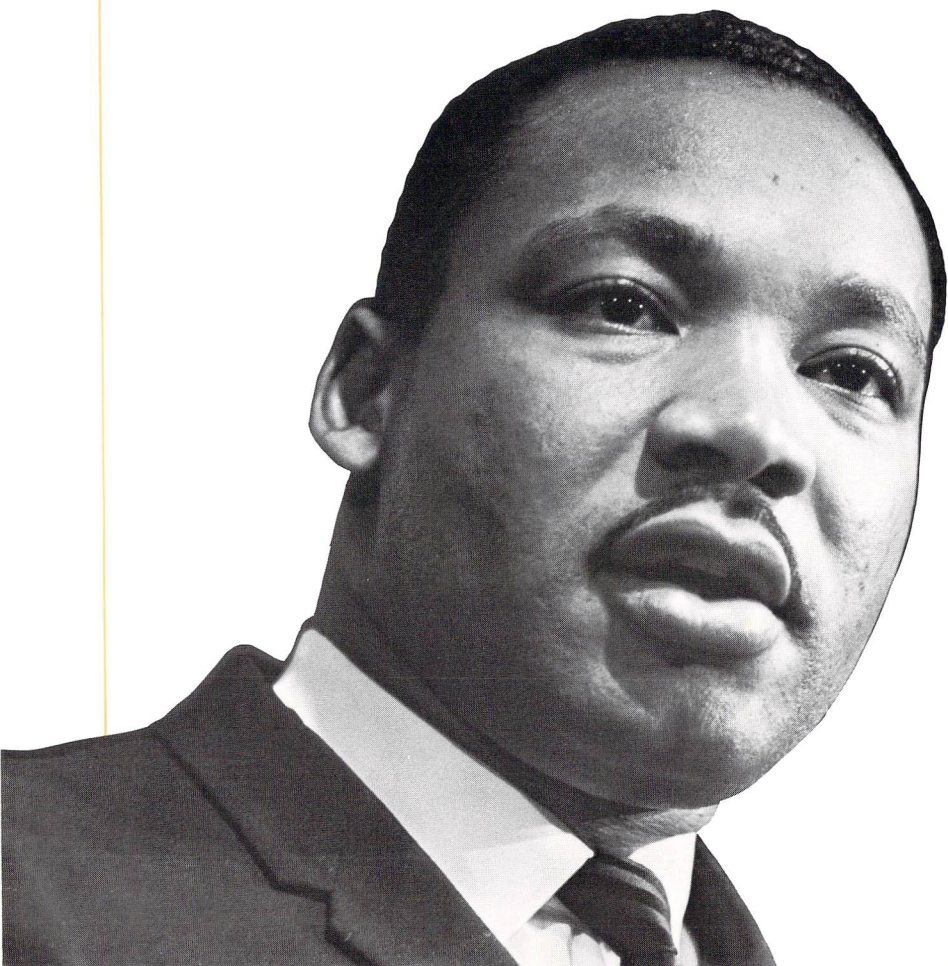
In his teaching, writing and speaking, Dr. King profoundly articulated the frustrations and aspirations of working men and women of all races and nationalities. His prescient analysis of the problems facing organized labor in the 1960's provided a blueprint for labor's agenda in the 1980's. And his persistent entreaties to the union movement planted seeds of cooperation between labor and civil rights that continue to grow nearly 20 years after his death.

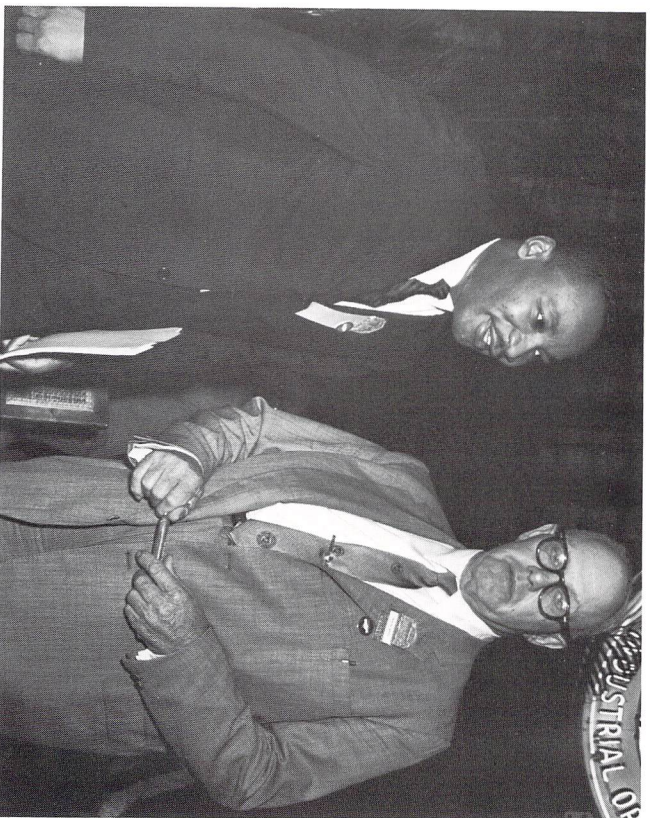
Martin Luther King, however, was more than a writer and a teacher and a speaker. He was an activist in the proudest tradition of trade unionism, putting his reputation as well as his life in jeopardy by personally participating in dozens of organizing drives and strikes over nearly two decades.

Today, the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions are dedicated to continuing the struggle for equality and economic justice that was led for so brief a period by Dr. King. Trade unionists everywhere are dedicated to extending the benefits of a bountiful society to all Americans and to "living the dream" he so eloquently championed.

“**N**egroes are almost entirely a working people. There are pitifully few Negro millionaires and few Negro employers. Our needs are identical with labor’s needs—decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor’s demands and fight laws which curb labor. That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.”

AFL-CIO Convention, December, 1961





New economic patterning through automation is dissolving the jobs of workers in some of the nation's basic industries. This is to me a catastrophe. We are neither technologically advanced nor socially enlightened if we witness this disaster for tens of thousands without finding a solution. And by a solution, I mean a real and genuine alternative, providing the same living standards which were swept away by a force called progress, but which for some is destruction. The society that performs miracles with machinery has the capacity to make some miracles for men—if it values men as highly as it values machines. //

UAW Convention, May, 1961

As I have said many times, and believe with all my heart, the coalition that can have the greatest impact in the struggle for human dignity here in America is that of the Negro and the forces of labor, because their fortunes are so closely intertwined."

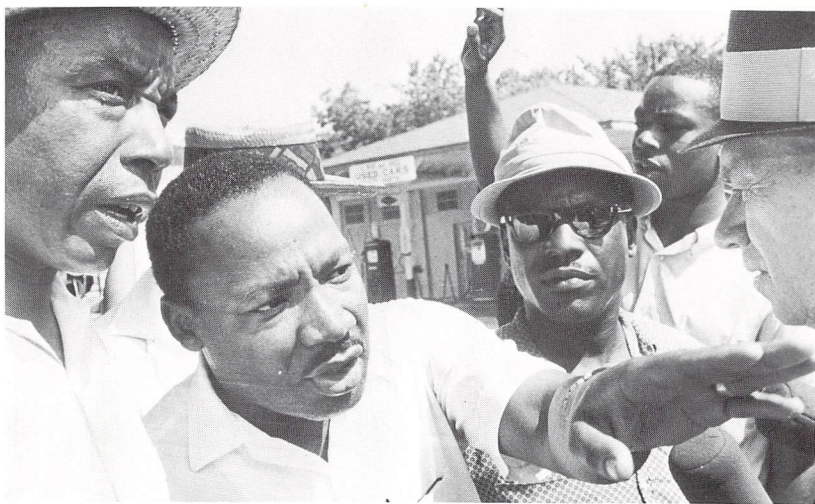
Letter to Amalgamated Laundry Workers

January, 1962





“It is in this area (politics) of American life that labor and the Negro have identical interests. Labor has grave problems today of employment, shorter hours, old age security, housing and retraining against the impact of automation. The Congress and the Administration are almost as indifferent to labor’s program as they are toward that of the Negro. Toward both they offer vastly less than adequate remedies for the problems which are a torment to us day after day.”



“**E**very sailor is expected in the tradition of the sea to be willing to risk his life in order to save the life of another. Some years ago, I read a newspaper story of an American liner which altered its course and stood by in a storm because a single man had been sighted on a raft. Thousands of passengers, many of them leaders of industry and eminent statesmen, were compelled to wait—perhaps altering a thousand appointments and conferences. The delivery of cargo and mail were delayed until one man was rescued from death. For me, this incident had overwhelming spiritual and moral meaning because the multitude of distinguished people who were inconvenienced and the fortune in wealth that waited on one man dramatized the importance of a single human being in an age when we too easily forget people. But this incident was multiplied in meaning because that one man, whose life hung in the balance, was discovered to be a Negro when the lifeboat brought him to safety.”

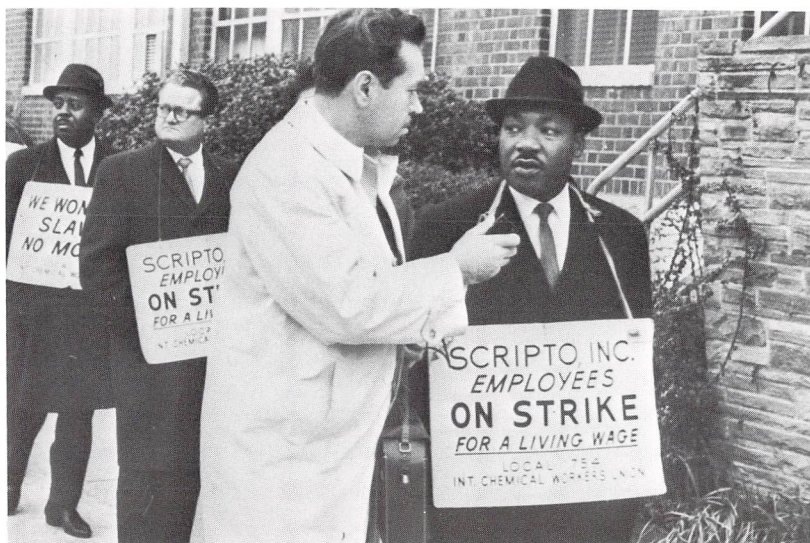
National Maritime Union

25th Anniversary, October, 1962

“**M**ankind through the ages has been in a ceaseless struggle to give dignity and meaning to human life. It is that quest which separates it from the animal, whose biological functions resemble aspects of the human specie. If our nation had done nothing more in its whole history than to create just two documents, its contribution to civilization would be imperishable. The first of these documents is the Declaration of Independence and the other the Emancipation Proclamation. All tyrants, past, present and future, are powerless to bury the truths in these declarations, no matter how extensive their legions, how vast their power and how malignant their evil.”

District 65 30th Anniversary, October, 1963





“**A**t 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 sixty to seventy hours. During the thirties, wages were a secondary issue; 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 almost to total collapse. 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 our nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society.”

Illinois AFL-CIO Convention, October, 1965

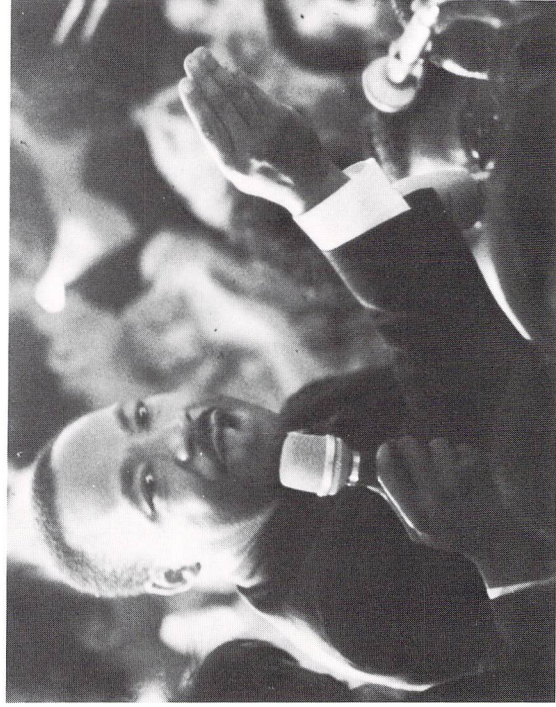
“**T**he South is labor’s other deep menace. Lower wage rates and improved transportation have magnetically attracted industry. The wide-spread, deeply-rooted Negro poverty in the South weakens the wage scale there for the white as well as the Negro. Beyond that, a low wage structure in the South becomes a heavy pressure on higher wages in the North.”

Illinois AFL-CIO Convention, October, 1965

“**I**n the days to come, organized labor will increase its importance in the destinies of Negroes. Automation is imperceptibly but inexorably producing dislocations, skimming off unskilled labor from the industrial force. The displaced are flowing into proliferating service occupations. These enterprises are traditionally unorganized and provide low wage scales with longer hours. The Negroes pressed into these services need union protection, and the union movement needs their membership to maintain its relative strength in the whole society.”

**Where Do We Go From Here:
Chaos or Community?** 1967





“Today Negroes want above all else to abolish poverty in their lives, and in the lives of the white poor. This is the heart of their program. To end humiliation was a start, but to end poverty is a bigger task. It is natural for Negroes to turn to the labor movement because it was the first and pioneer anti-poverty program. It will not be easy to accomplish this program because white America has had cheap victories up to this point. The limited reforms we have won have been at bargain rates for the power structure. There are no expenses involved, no taxes are required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels and other facilities. Even the more substantial reforms such as voting rights require neither monetary or psychological sacrifice. The real cost lies ahead. To enable the Negro to catch up, to repair the damage of centuries of denial and oppression means appropriations to create jobs and job training; it means the outlay of billions for decent housing and equal education.”

Teamsters and Allied Trade Councils

NYC, May, 1967

“When there is massive unemployment in the black community, it is called a social problem. But when there is massive unemployment in the white community, it is called a Depression.

We look around every day and we see thousands and millions of people making inadequate wages. Not only do they work in our hospitals, they work in our hotels, they work in our laundries, they work in domestic service, they find themselves underemployed. You see, no labor is really menial unless you're not getting adequate wages. People are always talking about menial labor. But if you're getting a good (wage) as I know that through some unions they've brought it up . . . that isn't menial labor. What makes it menial is the income, the wages.”

Local 1199 Salute to Freedom, March, 1968

“You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth.”

AFSCME Memphis Sanitation Strike April 3, 1968





On February 12, 1968, 1,200 predominantly black sanitation workers, members of AFSCME Local 1173, went out on strike when the City of Memphis refused to recognize their union or to grant payroll dues deduction.

Dr. King came to Memphis in support of the strikers and led 5,000 marchers through the streets in an attempt to bring the city to terms. For the first time in his career, a King-led march broke into violence, leaving the civil rights leader more despondent than he had ever been.

A week later, a follow-up march was cancelled because of snow and a strike of weeks turned into a showdown of months.

In early April, King returned to Memphis determined to finally lead a successful march in the proudest non-violent tradition.

Our nation's most successful practitioner of non-violence and peace never got the chance: he was slain by an assassin's lone bullet as he stood in the twilight on the balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968.

“I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality.
That is the dream. . . .”

AFL-CIO Convention, December, 1961



American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

815 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006

Publication No. 169

November 1986

