

Poverty Violates Human Economic Rights

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We celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King as a civil rights leader. But in the years before he was assassinated, he realized that civil rights meant little without economic rights. The right to sit at a lunch counter, he wrote, meant little without the right to an income that would purchase food. He wanted a massive multiracial march of poor people to set up a tent encampment on Washington's Mall, and remain there until the nation's leaders passed an Economic Bill of Rights. His assassin killed the dreamer, but not the dream.

Today the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC) is reviving his dream. On August 2, marchers left Marks, Mississippi, where poverty is worse today than it was when Dr. King's march left Marks 35 years ago. When we reach Washington, D.C., we will set up Resurrection City II and teach how poverty is an economic human rights violation, and protest how poverty in the U.S. violates that human right.

Why now? Because we are in the worst economy for working people since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Even as our leaders say this recession is temporary, we see that good jobs are not coming back. Health care for workers is in terrible shape and getting worse. Homelessness is on the rise. The money needed to rebuild America is going to rebuild Iraq. And yet, President Bush and the Congress have passed the largest tax cut for the rich in the history of our country. Where is our "homeland security"?

Our marchers are poor and working class people and people of conscience from throughout the United States. No matter what color, ability, gender, sexuality, or background, people all over the United States see it is time to take sides in the moral crisis of growing poverty in a world of plenty.

We are the voices of the poor and of the workers, dot-com busters who can't find work, laid-off government and manufacturing employees, the 11 million Californians without health insurance, students who can't afford higher tuitions, elderly and disabled denied medical care, addicts in recovery denied rehabilitation, homeless denied shelter beds, working mothers denied childcare, consumers denied affordable energy. We are uniting to raise our voices for the human dignity promised when the United Nations adopted its Declaration of Human Rights way back in 1948.

It has been 40 years since Dr. King proclaimed, "I Have a Dream, today." Too many people have suffered and died because our nation deferred that dream. But we can realize it. The goal of the PPEHRC is to build a movement to end poverty, because poverty is a human rights violation as defined by the U.N., and because this richest country the world has ever known has the means to end poverty.

We march to Washington to demand all of our economic human rights—healthcare, education, housing, food and a living wage. The PPEHRC was launched in 1998 and the Women’s Economic Agenda Project has been the California host of the PPEHRC since 1999. As Dr. King said in 1967, “There is a fire raging now...for the poor of this society. Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds.” We will reach Washington, D.C. on August 23rd, the 40th anniversary of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream...” speech.. We call on the American people to make now the time to demand all of our economic human rights.

This article was submitted by Ethel Long-Scott of the Women’s Economic Agenda Project. For more information, see these websites: www.weap.org, www.kwru.org and www.justhealthcare.org.