

Dr. Martin Luther King and AFL-CIO President George Meany: Creating a Common Agenda for Economic and Social Justice

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Martin Luther King and George Meany (*looking over King's shoulder*) with President Lyndon B. Johnson at the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech at the August 28, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, he and George Meany, the president of the AFL-CIO, developed a relationship that resulted in a partnership between Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement.¹ In 1960, Dr. King and President Meany began a years long mission to align the goals of America’s two most powerful progressive groups. The AFL-CIO and the Civil Rights Movement joined forces in a great crusade for social and economic justice.

¹ The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was led on August 28, 1963, by the Big Ten: A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Martin Luther King, Jr., President of the Southern Christian Leadership Council; John Lewis, Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; Floyd McKissick, National Chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality, standing in for CORE President James Farmer, who had been jailed in the South; Roy Wilkins, Executive Director of the NAACP; Whitney Young, Executive Director of the National Urban League; Mathew Ahmann, Executive Director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice; Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A; Rabbi Joachim Prinz, President of the American Jewish Congress; and Walter Reuther, President of the United Auto Workers.

The cooperation between President Meany and Dr. King culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It was also the impetus for the creation of the Mortgage Investment Trust, which evolved into the AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust (HIT).

Formation of the AFL-CIO

In 1955, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) joined to form the AFL-CIO, uniting the two fronts of the labor movement. The AFL, led



George Meany (left) and Walter Reuther mark the merging of the AFL and CIO at the first AFL-CIO convention in 1955.

by President Meany, was historically organized along craft lines. It had grown since its founding by Samuel Gompers in 1886 to become the most influential labor organization in the U.S. The CIO was organized along industry lines and was led by Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers (UAW). The CIO had come into being in 1935 when a number of unions left the AFL in a dispute over whether and how to organize workers in the growing industrial economy.²

A major impetus for the merger between the two Labor groups came from the increasingly anti-union labor policies in the U.S. following World War II, in particular the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which severely hampered the ability of the labor movement to organize workers. At its creation, the newly formed AFL-CIO represented approximately one-third of all nonagricultural workers in the U.S. For 24 years President Meany served as the country's most prominent and powerful Labor spokesperson. Reuther headed the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department while continuing to serve as the President of the UAW.

The Civil Rights Movement

In 1955, the Civil Rights Movement in the South was going through a transformation of its own. Bolstered by the Supreme Court's order in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* to integrate public schools, the movement implemented a strategy of direct action through civil

² The CIO was one of the first national organizations to admit African Americans, in earnest.

disobedience.³ The leaders modeled this strategy on the strikes and protests of Organized Labor and the non-violence of the Gandhi-led Indian Independence Movement. The leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were seeking out allies in the upcoming political and social struggles and they turned to what was then the strongest force for social and economic change in America, the newly formed AFL-CIO.

Kennedy's Election - 1960

During the 1960 presidential election, candidate John F. Kennedy decisively won the African-American vote. The Kennedy family's efforts that October to get Dr. King out of jail in Reidsville, GA, after three days of incarceration, played a prominent role in gaining that support. President Kennedy's election brought the Civil Rights Movement together under the same political umbrella as Organized Labor for the first time since President Franklin Roosevelt. In the aftermath of President Kennedy's election, Labor and the Civil Rights Movement saw each other as allies and fellow progressive organizations. The two groups recognized their common goals and united under the banner of social and economic justice. President Meany and Dr. King began forging a working relationship that proved to be critical to the success of both movements.

Strengthening the Partnership

In the 1960's, the Civil Rights Movement advanced with vital financial and legal support from Labor. President Meany was an outspoken defender of individual freedom, as reflected in his remarks at a large AFL-CIO gathering in March 1960, when he emphasized the crucial link between Labor and the Civil Rights Movement, proclaiming, "What we [Labor] want for ourselves, we want for all humanity."⁴ That year, President Meany and Dr. King began to privately discuss the ways in which Labor's vast resources and funds could be used to develop the agendas of both Labor and the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King proposed that the AFL-CIO invest pension assets in housing at the grassroots level as a way to ease the economic inequality in the American economy.⁵ In response to Dr. King's proposal, President Meany and the AFL-

³ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U. S. 483 (1954).

⁴ Report of the AFL-CIO's 1960 Executive Council Meeting.

⁵ The AFL-CIO and its member unions were actively involved in the creation of housing since their inception in the nineteenth century. In fact, Sidney Hillman, the leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, was among those who proposed the creation of the Federal Housing Agency. His union had been active in financing workforce housing for decades.

CIO established the Investment Department within the organization in August 1960.⁶ The department's mission was to guide individual union pension funds to invest in socially responsible projects. This department was the first step on the path to the future envisioned by President Meany and Dr. King and the eventual creation of the Housing Investment Trust.



Dr. King reiterated their common goals when he spoke at a 1961 meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO. In his remarks, he compared what Labor had achieved successfully over the previous three decades to what the Civil Rights Movement hoped to achieve going forward. “We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the good will and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They resent our will to organize. They are shocked that active organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and protests are becoming every day tools just as strikes, demonstrations, and union organizations became yours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.”⁷

Cementing Shared Agendas

The AFL-CIO held its Fourth Constitutional Convention in December 1961 in Bal Harbor, Florida to continue constructing an agenda for action and set specific goals that the organization planned to achieve during President Kennedy's term. President Meany made the cause of civil rights a prominent item on the agenda. President Meany also invited Dr. King to the Convention as a guest speaker. His address before the hundreds of delegates made plain his skill as a bridge builder by bringing together the two groups, uniting them through a common agenda.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Report of the AFL-CIO's 1961 Executive Council Meeting.



Dr. King began by noting the bond between the rights of the ordinary laborer and the struggle of African Americans for civil rights. He emphasized to the Labor leaders in attendance that African Americans are “almost entirely a working people.”⁸ Dr. King’s presence at the convention energized the delegates and linked the AFL-CIO to the cause of civil rights. For Dr. King, addressing the AFL-CIO’s convention marked one of the high points of his public career to that point. For President Meany, it publicly aligned the labor movement with the nation’s most significant social cause, the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. King seized the moment to urge Labor to root out discrimination within its own ranks, especially in the trade unions. While conceding that the task “is not easy or popular,”⁹ Dr. King reminded his audience that their own efforts for child welfare, a minimum wage, shorter hours, and better conditions were likewise not achieved without strikes or controversy; that in the “struggle for democratic rights, yours won both economic gains and the respect of the country.”¹⁰ By uniting with the Civil Rights Movement, he argued that Labor would reclaim its historic role as a leader in the struggle for social justice and equality for all.

Dr. King underscored the impact that Organized Labor had on American society. He praised Labor for “raising the living standards of millions”¹¹ and emphasized how American industry and the nation overall benefited from labor unions. In his estimate, “the two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country”¹² were Labor and the Civil Rights Movement. Taking aim at the plight of African Americans in the South, King went on to articulate a hopeful vision of all that could be achieved by a coalition between Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement:

⁸ Martin Luther King, “MLK Address at the AFL-CIO Fourth Constitutional Convention,” *The King Center*, delivered December 11, 1961 in Miami, Florida, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/mlk-address-afl-cio-fourth-constitutional-convention>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Together we can be architects of democracy in a South now rapidly industrializing. Together, we can retool the political structure of the South, sending to Congress steadfast liberals who, joining with those from Northern industrial states, will extend the frontiers of democracy for the whole nation.¹³

Dr. King encouraged a meaningful relationship between Labor and the Civil Rights Movement. He noted that the differences between the two groups “have been contrived by outsiders who seek to bring disunity by dividing brothers because the color of their skin has a different shade. I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness.”¹⁴

On the Ground Collaboration

In response, in part, to Dr. King’s speech and the shared agendas of Labor and the Civil Rights Movement, several AFL-CIO member unions provided much needed capital to the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, AFL-CIO affiliates donated more than \$100,000 to Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The UAW was a particularly potent force, directly funding voter registration drives in predominantly black areas throughout the South and providing bail money to jailed “freedom riders.” In May 1963, when more than 800 civil rights demonstrators were arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, the UAW raised bail for the protestors’ release. The head of the UAW’s Fair Practices Department and President Reuther’s administrative assistant personally delivered the \$100,000 bail to the Birmingham jail.¹⁵

While the civil rights bill was being drafted by the Kennedy administration, the AFL-CIO used its considerable political influence to argue for the inclusion of a fair employment clause, Title VII, in the language of the bill. UAW’s Joe Rauh and Jack Conway, along with AFL-CIO legislative director Andrew Biemiller, participated in the draft negotiations with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.¹⁶ The representatives of the AFL-CIO, under direction from President Meany, discussed with Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, who was tasked with writing the bill, and Robert F. Kennedy the inclusion of Title VII in the final draft of the bill.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, "History." <http://www.uaw.org/page/uaw-history>.

¹⁶ Joseph Goulden, *Meany: the Unchallenged Strong Man of American Labor* (New York: Antheneum, 1972), 322.

George Meany understood that without a fair employment practices commission, which would be created under Title VII, the civil rights law would have no teeth.¹⁷



A little less than a year after the 1962 AFL-CIO convention, over 200,000 people gathered for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Under the direction of UAW President Reuther, the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO endorsed the march as did 11 international unions and several state and municipal labor councils.¹⁸ A. Philip Randolph, then the President of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters, a member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, and a principle organizer of the event, led the marchers to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where Dr. King gave the historic “I Have a Dream” speech. President Reuther also spoke at the march, deploring the fact that African American men and women were “treated as second-class economic citizens.”¹⁹ The March on Washington, one of the first major events where the Civil Rights Movement and Labor worked hand in hand, helped to shape public opinion in favor of legal protections for all Americans regardless of race.

¹⁷ Andrew Biemiller, interview by James R. Fuchs, for the Harry S. Truman Library" Oral History Interview with Andrew J. Biemiller," July 29, 1977, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/biemiller.htm>.

¹⁸ William P. Jones, "How Black Unionists Organized the 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom," *Labor Notes* (blog), August 23, 2013, <http://www.labornotes.org/2013/08/how-black-unionists-organized-1963-march-jobs-and-freedom>.

¹⁹ Walter Reuther, "Walter Reuther Remarks at the March on Washington," *The King Center*, at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/walter-reuther-remarks-march-washington>.

The day of the march, President Kennedy met with Dr. King and representatives of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights along with Presidents Reuther and Randolph to discuss the civil rights legislation pending in congress. At the meeting, they lobbied President Kennedy to support the inclusion of a fair employment clause, Title VII, in the proposed Civil Rights legislation.²⁰

Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965



A year later in 1964, President Meany and Dr. King sat side by side in the East Room of the White House as President Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although Dr. King's role in the passage of the monumental law is well-known, President Meany played a pivotal role in gaining congressional acceptance of Title VII. The signing of the law was a dramatic testament to the productive partnership that existed between the Civil Rights Movement and Organized Labor. The historic measure would thenceforth seek:

To enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States of America to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in

²⁰ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 383-87.

federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes.²¹

A year later, the Civil Rights and Labor Movement's combined efforts once again achieved an important milestone with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Dr. King's Assassination and the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike



It is poignant that on the eve of his assassination, Dr. King's final act of social and economic justice was performed in support of labor organizing in Memphis, Tennessee. He went to Memphis to help organize support for sanitation workers striking for the right to collectively bargain, throwing his considerable influence behind the workers. In his remarks, delivered

without notes, he cast off threats against his own life.

We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter now. I have been to the mountain top. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will and he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I have looked over and I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I am not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.²²

Immediately after Dr. King's death, President Johnson sent the Undersecretary of Labor to settle the strike. After a 65-day strike, the City of Memphis acceded to the demands of the sanitation workers Dr. King had supported. As a result, Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees was established and continues to represent the sanitation workers of Memphis to this day. At his funeral, Dr. King's successor at the Southern Christian Leadership Council, Dr. Ralph Abernathy, began the service by praying, "Lord, we want to

²¹ Civil Rights Act of 1964 enacted July 2, 1964

²² Martin Luther King, "I've Been to the Moutaintop," *The King Center*, delivered April 3, 1968 in support of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/ive-been-moutaintop>.

thank you most of all that he died on the field for poor garbage workers; men who pick up slop and waste.”²³

Out of respect for Dr. King’s support and sacrifice, the president of the International Longshoremen’s Association, Thomas Gleason, announced the closing of all Atlantic, Gulf Coast, and Great Lakes ports. He said that, “it is fitting and proper, then, that we devote this time to pray that the principles which guided this great man continue to guide others in the movement for brotherhood to which he devoted his energy.” This marked one of only two times in American history that ports were shut down in memorial; the other time was after the death of President Kennedy.²⁴

Dr. King’s Legacy and Labor Pension Capital

In a series of meetings with President Meany in 1962 and 1963, Dr. King pressed him to use more effective tactics in the fight for economic justice. President Meany took to heart Dr. King’s suggestion that Labor was not doing enough, and prepared in 1964 what is now called the “Meany Letter.” In the letter to all AFL-CIO affiliates, President Meany outlined his vision for a new Labor endeavor that would directly support housing creation and homeownership. Dr. King and President Meany’s sweeping vision for the potential of Labor’s capital is alive and well today. They sought to increase employment and the supply of affordable housing, built by union members, while providing a safe vehicle to grow pension capital. With the assistance of an “auxiliary corporation” the AFL-CIO would assist local non-profits in developing low-income housing in underserved areas.²⁵

In 1965, the AFL-CIO’s Investment Department helped establish the Mortgage Investment Trust, the first embodiment of its socially responsible investment mission. The purpose of the fund as expressed by President Meany was to help unions invest their funds at a reasonable rate of return with a high degree of security while emphasizing the construction of badly needed affordable housing. The implementation of the pension investment program was, in part, one of Labor’s

²³ Hunter, Bob. "America Pays Homage to A Black Man." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*, April 8, 1968.

²⁴ Arnold, Martin. "Port Work Suspended as Tribute." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 06, 1968.

²⁵ Today this function is performed by, Building America CDE, Inc, a subsidiary of the HIT.

responses to the Civil Rights Movement's March on Washington, Dr. King's powerful call for economic justice, and his long dialogue with George Meany.

The AFL-CIO continues to strive to achieve President Meany and Dr. King's ambitious and far-reaching vision. The AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust, founded in 1984 as the successor to the Mortgage Investment Trust, was one of the first socially responsible investment funds in the nation and takes very seriously the special history and founding principles at the core of its creation. Today the HIT has grown to some \$4.5 billion in net assets and helped finance more than 100,000 housing units affordable to working families and low and moderate income people and in the process, created tens of thousands of union jobs. The great crusade continues and the vision lives on.

This is the first in a series of article on the origins and evolution of the AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust.

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