

FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM

An Introduction to the Unfinished March

By Thomas J. Sugrue

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The March on Washington may be the most commemorated event in the history of the civil rights struggle in the United States. On August 28, 1963, in front of 250,000 demonstrators who packed the Mall between the Lincoln and Washington monuments, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the speech with his famous refrain, “I have a dream.” Those four words—known to nearly every American schoolchild—capture a popular, romantic image of King using soaring language to unify America in pursuit of a common goal, to create a society where everyone would be “judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin” (King 1963).

But the message of the march cannot be encapsulated so easily. King and his fellow marchers presented a far-reaching agenda for change, highlighting the intertwined problems of racial and economic inequality in the United States. This agenda was encapsulated in the full title of the event, “The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” In one of the seldom-quoted parts of his speech, King vehemently hailed “the marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community.” Speaking of the “fierce urgency of Now,” he encouraged Americans to take more aggressive action to address the twin problems of discrimination and joblessness: “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism” (King 1963). At a moment when conservatives (and many liberals) were denouncing the civil rights movement for going “too far, too fast,” King offered a powerful rejoinder: Go further, faster.

Today, many activists and intellectuals draw a sharp distinction between policies to alleviate racial discrimination and those that challenge economic injustice. Does race trump class? Is there a zero sum game between antidiscrimination strategies and efforts to challenge financial, employment, and trade policies that disadvantage workers regardless of their race? Do racial politics divide the American working class, fostering a bitter politics of resentment rather than the solidarity necessary for labor organization? While subsequent papers in the **Unfinished March** series will explore current views on these issues, it is important to recall that 50 years ago, King and the organizers of the March on Washington answered a resounding “no” to all of these questions.

The March on Washington grew out of a long, sometimes complicated, but often close relationship between the civil rights and labor movements that persists to this day. One of King’s closest associates—and the guiding hand behind the March—was A. Philip Randolph, the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union of black men who worked on America’s railways, carrying luggage, waiting on passengers, and serving food. The 1963 march was the culmination of Randolph’s lifetime fighting for racial equality and unionism. In 1941, Randolph had threatened a 100,000-person march on the nation’s capital to protest the exclusion of black workers from lucrative defense-industry jobs on the brink of U.S. military intervention in World War II. Just days before the march was scheduled, President Franklin D.

This is part of a series of reports from the Economic Policy Institute outlining the steps we need to take as a nation to fully achieve each of the goals of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Visit www.unfinishedmarch.com for updates and to join the **Unfinished March**.

Roosevelt capitulated to Randolph's demands and created the first federal antidiscrimination agency, the Fair Employment Practices Committee (Anderson 1986).

During the war—and for two decades afterward—civil rights activists put pressure on federal, state, and local governments to enact antidiscrimination laws. They worked closely with key unions, particularly in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), to expand workers' rights, improve wages and benefits, and extend opportunities to workers regardless of their race and ethnicity (Chen 2009). In the 1950s and early 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. collaborated with some of the most racially diverse and militant industrial unions, among them the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), and the United Automobile Workers (UAW). Each provided financial funding for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (Jackson 2007).

Black and white workers marched side by side on August 28, 1963, the result of Randolph's tireless organizing efforts. A few weeks before the march, Randolph pulled together more than 800 union and civil leaders and gained the support of dozens of interracial unions, among them the Drug and Hospital Workers Union-Local 1199, the International Fur and Leather Workers Union (IFLWU), the Seafarers International Union, and several unions representing public employees. For its part, the United Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Workers of America (RWDSU) successfully pressed employers to give its members a paid holiday to attend the march. The Negro American Labor Council ordered a special 16-car "Freedom Train" to carry its members to Washington. Activists made special efforts to include the jobless, to make the point that civil rights and economic justice were fundamentally intertwined. Labor and grassroots groups provided subsidies for the unemployed to join the march, adding urgent voices to the chorus for full employment (Sugrue 2008).

The economic climate of the decade leading up to the march gave marchers' demands particular urgency. Many of the unions whose members marched on Washington had seen their memberships plummet as manufacturers introduced automated technology and relocated production to low-wage regions. And the recessions of 1953–1954, 1958, and 1960–1961 hit blue-collar workers especially hard. The Packinghouse Workers union, for example, lost nearly one-fourth of its members between 1954 and 1960 (Horowitz 1997). Detroit, the stronghold of the autoworkers, lost 140,000 car manufacturing jobs between 1947 and 1963 (Sugrue 2005). At the same time, mass suburbanization gutted downtown retail and business districts, just as urban African Americans began to find opportunities in clerical and sales work. Economists wrote of the emerging "spatial mismatch" between where blacks lived and where jobs were being created (Kain 1968).

The loss of jobs arising from automation, urban disinvestment, capital flight, and changing population patterns was especially devastating for black workers—and the speakers at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom emphasized the point. For example, Randolph denounced "profits geared to automation" that "destroy the jobs of millions of workers," and called for measures to address unemployment, raise the minimum wage, and increase federal aid to education. The UAW's Walter Reuther also rallied the crowd with a call for jobs and freedom. "The job question is crucial," he argued, "because we will not solve education, or housing, or public accommodations as long as millions of Americans, Negroes, are treated as second-class citizens." For Reuther, as for Randolph, the key was "fair employment within the framework of full employment" (Boyle 1995). In their view, antidiscrimination laws were necessary but far from sufficient to overcome workplace inequality, particularly in those urban areas where jobs were disappearing and where wages scarcely lifted workers above the poverty line.

The March on Washington focused attention on jobs, but also on “freedom”—which the diverse body of march organizers defined broadly. Some echoed Franklin D. Roosevelt’s famous “Second Bill of Rights,” calling for the right to a decent home, the right to security in old age, and the right to a remunerative job. Veteran civil rights activists echoed the demands of the sit-in protests, the Freedom Rides, and other demonstrations against segregation in public accommodations. James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), unable to attend the march because he was languishing in a Louisiana jail after being arrested in a civil rights demonstration (his speech was read by one of his CORE associates), assailed second-class education: “We will not stop our marching feet until our kids have enough to eat and their minds can study a wide range without being cramped in Jim Crow schools.” The Urban League’s Whitney Young highlighted “rat-infested, overcrowded ghettos” and “congested, ill-equipped schools.” One of the march’s major goals was to persuade President John F. Kennedy to strengthen the civil rights legislation that he had proposed earlier that summer. Some, like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s John Lewis (later a congressman from Georgia), worried that Kennedy’s civil rights bill was “too little, and too late,” but most of the organizers saw the march as leverage to force the administration and Congress to bring the civil rights bill to fruition (Jones 2013).

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was, by nearly all reckonings, a great success. After the march, Randolph and King met with the president and left feeling that he was sympathetic. Media coverage of the march was overwhelmingly positive, even if most mainstream accounts downplayed the radical economic messages that animated most of the speeches. Above all, the march—in combination with the hundreds of large protests, some of them violent, across the United States in 1963 (a year that many coined the “Negro Revolt”)—put pressure on lawmakers to act

quickly on civil rights legislation before the lid blew (Sugrue 2008).

Many of the demands of the March on Washington were met in the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, pushed through a reluctant Congress by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Civil Rights Act of 1964—the result of a delicately crafted compromise to win wavering Republican lawmakers—banned segregation in public accommodations, encouraged the desegregation of public schools, and, most importantly in Title VII, forbade employment discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin. But the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would not be self-enforcing—it would take years of litigation, protest, and administrative innovation to fight discrimination effectively. The act also left untouched several key demands of those who marched on Washington, most notably ending racial segregation in housing, which was partially addressed in 1968 legislation, but with only weak enforcement mechanisms (Graham 1990; MacLean 2006).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 promised to lower discriminatory barriers to employment, but it did not address one of the major demands of the March on Washington: job creation. However, building on the marchers’ call for full employment, Randolph and his longtime aide, civil rights and labor organizer Bayard Rustin, convened a group of prominent economists, labor unionists, and civil rights leaders who drafted a Freedom Budget, released in October 1966. The budget called for job creation programs to eliminate unemployment; a guaranteed annual income for poor families; and increased federal spending to eradicate slums, improve schools, and build public works. The Freedom Budget won support from a broad band of civil rights and black power groups, mainstream religious organizations, many trade unions, and a bipartisan group of legislators. Despite wide support, the Freedom Budget lost in the “guns versus butter”

struggle of the Vietnam War, and met with indifference at best from Congress, especially after the rightward turn in the 1966 midterms and the 1968 general election (Randolph and Rustin 1967; Sugrue 2008).

Martin Luther King Jr. vocally supported calls for economic justice. He demanded a “Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged,” arguing that “while Negroes form the vast majority of America’s disadvantaged, there are millions of white poor who would also benefit from such a bill.” King called for an interracial coalition of the poor and working class and, to that end, he formed the Poor People’s Movement in 1968 and spent his last days joining Memphis sanitation workers striking for better working conditions, pay, and benefits (Honey 2007).

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom raised important questions, pushed for sweeping policy changes, and offered a vision of the United States free of both racial and economic inequality. But a half century later, the marchers’ demands for jobs and freedom are still far from universally accepted. Workplace discrimination is less persistent today than in 1963, although interviews with employers show that many still use race as a “signal” of desirable worker characteristics (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991); they often restrict employment to those without criminal records, thus excluding many black men, who are disproportionately represented among the formerly incarcerated (Pager 2007); and they regularly choose employees with “white”-sounding names over those with “black” names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Full and remunerative employment—especially for minorities, who have borne the brunt of the current economic crisis—is still a remote dream. In the last quarter of 2012, 6.3 percent of whites, 9.8 percent of Hispanics, and 14.0 percent of blacks were unemployed (Austin 2013). At a moment when union membership is at a historic low, when the fastest-growing sector of the economy consists of part-time, contin-

gent, and insecure work, and when the number of unemployed workers and frustrated job seekers is high (especially among African American men), the march’s call for jobs and freedom resonates as much today as it did in late August 1963.

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