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Remembering MLK: Honor the Dignity of Workers

Posted: 04/ 4/11 10:17 AM ET

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The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. walked the picket line the day before an assassin's bullet ended his life. A Nobel Prize-winner courted by presidents, King spent his final hours with Memphis garbage collectors fighting for the right to unionize. As we remember King's legacy on the anniversary of his death, the struggle for economic justice continues amid new assaults on workers' collective bargaining rights, the worst income inequality since the Great Depression and irresponsible budget cuts that will hurt the most vulnerable.

Governors in several states are using budget shortfalls to gut bedrock labor rights and social safety nets that give workers a fair shake and families economic security. Conservative lawmakers are targeting teachers, nurses and first responders even as they dole out generous tax breaks to corporations. More than 20 states are chipping away at the Earned Income Tax Credit, which primarily helps poor working families. Some Republican leaders and business associations are even eyeing minimum-wage laws.

In my home state of Louisiana, Gov. Bobby Jindal's plan to close the state's budget gap relies on cuts to vital state programs that serve the common good. A new report by the nonpartisan Louisiana Budget Project proposes a sensible alternative: raising rates for the highest-income households so our state can make smart investments in education, health care and public safety. Potential sources of new revenue, according to the report, include the estimated \$7.1 billion the state loses from hundreds of tax exemptions. Along with tax policies that favor corporate interests and millionaires, Louisiana has a shameful record when it comes to protecting workers on the job. New Orleans has the highest incidence of wage theft in the region, according to a survey from the Southern Poverty Law Center. Immigrant laborers in construction, agriculture and restaurant services are particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous employers who refuse to pay workers the wages they have rightfully earned.

Tough times call for shared sacrifice and prudent use of resources. But the working poor and public servants who teach our children and keep our communities safe did not create the budget crisis, and hurting them with drastic cuts won't solve our fiscal problems. Wall Street recklessness, irresponsible tax cuts for the rich and a culture that celebrates excessive materialism all contribute to a crisis that will require more than political grandstanding to solve.

In response to this urgent challenge, religious and civil rights leaders are once again standing up for workers, just as Martin Luther King did. Interfaith Worker Justice and the NAACP will host rallies, vigils and teach-ins this week in Ohio, Alabama, New Jersey, Florida, Washington, D.C. and other cities to mark the anniversary of King's assassination and renew his tireless call for economic justice. It's no surprise that religious leaders are again at the forefront of the struggle for economic fairness. For centuries, diverse faith traditions have emphasized the vital role of unions and the dignity of work. Along with King, Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, Cesar Chavez and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel were all inspired by their faith to stand with workers for just wages, safe working conditions and a seat at the bargaining table. Today, Pope Benedict XVI, Protestant clergy and prominent Jewish leaders consistently remind us that unions and collective bargaining are vital to ensuring that our economy serves the common good, not simply the privileged few.

4/4/2011

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What's at stake now in Louisiana and other states transcends the debate over balancing budgets. This is about preserving the American dream for those who work hard and play by the rules. Unions are not without flaws, but they are one of the few institutions that protect working families at a time when powerful business interests dominate politics and pursue an ideological agenda that benefit the privileged few. Many corporate leaders and conservative politicians -- especially in the South -- have effectively demonized unions for decades, even as studies show that all workers benefit from better wages and stronger workplace protections that collective bargaining helps secure.

Calls to honor Dr. King's legacy are never in short supply. His dedication to racial equality is frequently lauded. We should also carry on his commitment to economic justice by making fair budget choices, protecting labor rights and defending the dignity of workers.

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

MSN Video

Barack Obama in Fort Wayne, IN

YouTube

Ramiles feat Martin Luther King 'Free at Last' Remix

YouTube

40th Anniversary of MLK assassination-2/5

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