

A new and unsettling force: the strategic relevance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign

Wille Baptist

Abstract

This essay moves from the fact, demonstrated in every major struggle, that all oppressed people, including the poor can think, speak and fight for themselves. It endorses David Harvey's critique of capitalism but suggests that effective resistance to capitalism will have to be led by the poor. This will require a new and unsettling force, a united struggle of the poor which will, in turn, require a massive program of training poor people as political leaders.

My name is Willie Baptist, like a Baptist Church. I am formerly homeless and still poor. I have been poor all my life and have been organizing among poor people in the United States for over 40 years. I participated as one of the organizers in the National Union of the Homeless nationwide organizing drive back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We developed chapters in 25 cities across the US with over 15,000 members and it was perhaps the first time that homeless people organized homeless people on this scale. I also served as the Education Director for the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, an organization of poor and homeless white, Black and Latino families based in Kensington, the poorest community in the entire state of Pennsylvania, for 10 years. I have worked to build networks of grassroots organizations fighting poverty and connect them with international struggles of the poor including the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) of Brazil and the Abahlali baseMjondolo Shackdwellers movement of South Africa. I currently serve as the Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence at Union Theological Seminary and the Coordinator of the Poverty Initiative's Poverty Scholars Program.

All of my life experiences and all my life studies and all of the experiences of this growing national and international network of which I am a part confirm at least one important and inescapable point. That is, that we the poor can think for ourselves, we can speak for ourselves, we can fight for ourselves, and we can lead not only for ourselves but that we can take part in world leadership.

The majority of the world's population are the poor of every age, gender, educational background, ethnic group and color. There is somewhere between 3.5 to 4 billion human beings who are eking out a meager and miserable life globally. This is compared to some 400 to 500 billionaires who own and control most of the world's wealth and means of subsistence. We the poor are unlike the poor in past. We live and die under new conditions shaped by the new information technology, which has given humankind an unheard of productive

capability to end all poverty now and forever. Of course the political will is not there; there is only the complicity of complacency.

Poverty with all of its complexity is the defining issue of our time, particularly within the wealthiest nation in the world. In today's Great Recession, realities of growing poverty are soaking into American consciousness. While recent periods of economic growth overshadowed the poor—rarely portraying poor people as agents of change—poor leaders and their organizations waged successful campaigns to demand access to living wage jobs, healthcare, immigrant rights, workers rights, education reform, and housing. Today, emerging and veteran organizers stand poised to offer leadership to a broader movement to end poverty as more Americans face increasingly insecure times. In order to resolve this growing and defining problem, we need a movement to unravel not only poverty's manifestations, but also its roots and causes. Segments of our population most affected by poverty must be central in shaping both strategic questions and resolutions to this complex problem at the local, state, national and international levels.

Historically, successful social movements have been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve. Slaves and ex-slaves led the anti-slavery movement; people of color led the Civil Rights Movement; women led the women's suffrage movement. In their own time, those very people struggled for recognition that the problem they were facing was immoral and their struggle was legitimate. They fought to be considered fit for leadership of such a movement themselves. Yet today, we recognize the moral evil of slavery, and the right – and necessity – of slave and ex-slaves to lead the struggle to end it.

The social position of the poor gives them the least stake in the economic *status quo*. And given the current economic and political direction of society this position of the poor anticipates the position of the mass of the population. Both these and other circumstances make the poor, whether they are yet aware of it or not, the leading social force for ending poverty and accordingly changing society and a system that creates poverty. Our mission to unite and organize the poor is essentially to raise their consciousness of their social position, shared across borders and lines of difference, thereby giving them greater mass influence and impact.

Based on my experience organizing amongst the poor for more than 40 years, I believe the crucial question today is: "what is the social force that has the potential if united to make fundamental social change?" I believe this question intersects with David Harvey's essay, "Organizing for the Anti-Capitalist Transition".

David Harvey's work is very important because he consistently goes deeper than the superficial discussions of policy that dominate much of left critique of the economy. His focus on the structure and dynamics of the economy is necessary if we are to understand the challenges of our times. It is Harvey's comprehensive survey of left social actors in this recent essay of his where I would like to make my intervention. While Harvey identifies the need to

coalesce five broad wings, tendencies and epicenters of anti-capitalist sentiment (including NGOs, anarchist GROs, traditional labor organizing and left political parties, those movements that resist displacement and dispossession, and emancipatory identity movements), I propose that a social movement to end poverty, and the system that creates it, led by the poor in the 'belly of the beast' - a core country of the capitalist world like the United States - represents our best hope for the future, especially if it is intimately linked to the struggle of the poor internationally.

The poor and dispossessed today differ from the poor and dispossessed of the past. They are compelled to fight under qualitatively new conditions and to creatively wield new weapons of struggle. In other words, the socio-economic position of the low waged, laid off, and locked out is not that of the industrial poor, the slave poor, or of the colonial poor of yesterday. The new poor embody all the major issues and problems that affect the majority of other strata of the country's population. Our growing ranks are filled with people economically "downsized" and socially dislocated from every walk of life. Therefore the massive uniting and organizing of the poor across color and all other lines has "a freedom and a power" to inspire and galvanize the critical mass of the American people needed to move this country toward the abolition of all poverty. The late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called this leading social force the "non-violent Army or 'freedom church' of the poor," about which more will be said shortly.

Any discussion of poverty and the poor that tends towards a very narrow definition of these terms falls into the stereotypes and images that are projected by the forces that are arrayed against us. To not have an accurate estimate of who are the poor and why they are poor would have us all descend into subjective and divisive personal judgments of who's poor and who's not. To leave out people who are in fact poor is to fall into the trap of the Powers That Be and their representatives that say that we should only be concerned with 'extreme poverty' and not all poverty. If you can't get the basic necessities of life, you're poor. A narrow definition of poverty further isolates and divides the poor. When you have a narrow definition of poverty, it leads to separating the homeless poor from the day laborer poor from poor artists, obscuring what people have in common, when the task before us is to unite all the poor. The division of the growing ranks of the poor upholds the powerful stereotypes, which blind the main mass of the people from understanding the cause and cure of all poverty.

Presently, we are experiencing the wholesale economic destruction of the so-called "middle class" in the United States. This is huge in terms of U.S. domestic political power relations and strategy and tactics. This "middle class" is beginning to question the economic status quo. And this has major economic and political implications for the middle strata and poor globally. The point here is that the economic and social position of the poor is not one to be pitied and guilt-tripped about, but rather that it indicates the direction this country is

heading if nothing is done to change it. Poverty is devastating me today. It can hit you tomorrow.

If poverty is to be ended the minds of the bulk of the 300 million people that make up the U.S. need to be changed. The united actions of the poor across color lines break down stereotypes and unsettle the thinking of the mass of the people. We are building a big movement to solve a big problem, and we need a lot of leaders, coming from different social strata bringing different social skills and resources to carry this out. Central to the uniting and organizing of the poor as a social force is the identifying and training of massive numbers of leaders from the ranks of the poor. This has to be our point of concentration at this initial stage of building a movement broad enough to end poverty. However, for this very reason we must challenge every person, including those coming from other important social ranks, to commit themselves as leaders and to be trained as leaders as well. Only leaders can ensure the development of leaders. This is no easy task.

Here we must understand the strategic difference between the leadership of the poor as a social group and the leadership of individuals from the ranks of the poor as well as from other ranks. History and our hard won experiences have taught us a lot in this regard. Leadership of the poor as a social group is secured primarily through united actions and organization. The development of individual leaders is secured primarily through political education and training. The content of the development of individual leaders is the acquiring of the clarity, competence, and commitment necessary for the development of the leadership of the poor as a social group united around their immediate and basic human needs. For example, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who initiated the organizing of the historic Poor People's Campaign, was himself not poor. However he was a highly insightful and trained leader committed to organizing the poor across color lines and giving his life to the struggle to end all poverty everywhere. His words and work contributed greatly to the development of both kinds of leadership, social and individual. A very important lesson for us today from his life, especially his last years, is that we can and must develop "many Martins" especially from the ranks of the poor.

The problems of poverty today are not those of scarcity and limited productivity. They are the problems of increasing abandonment in the midst of increasing abundance. Today no one in the world has to be hungry. Today no one has to be homeless. No one should have to die from curable diseases. The tremendous economic and social wealth and tremendous production capacity we have today makes poverty and death from poverty immoral, unjust and insane. Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane FEMA (the U.S. government's disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina that continues to this day throughout the U.S. Gulf Coast) revealed the social fact that this poverty, immorality, injustice, and insanity exist here in the land of the free and the home of brave, here in the United States of America.

There are many people today who are beginning to awaken and to take up honestly with a strong sense of not simply charity but justice, the expanding

problem of poverty in the midst of plenty. However, there are those who either out of ignorance or out of a real lack of true compassion despite their crocodile tears and rhetoric to the contrary are moving quickly and loudly to “save the poor before the poor save themselves”. They are presenting, or what we call “pimping” the plight of the poor, in such a way as to prevent or preempt the fight of the poor.

On August 11, 1965 some 60,000 to 100,000 people took to the streets of Watts, California in violent protest against inhuman conditions of poverty and police injustice. I was 17 years old then and I was one of the so called “looters” and “rioters” in that uprising. The 1965 Watts Rebellion of poor blacks unleashed the most violent social upheaval in this country since the Civil War, engulfing in flames over 300 major cities during the last half of the 1960s. These events shook everyone, including Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King. One summary he gave of these events was that these “riots were the voice of the unheard.” Indeed through the “riots” this desperate voice of the poor black masses was heard around the world. However, Martin Luther King was concerned that this voice and the anger behind it needed to be more constructively and nonviolently channeled and that its message about the injustice of poverty in the midst of plenty needed to be made more clear and effective. This is what his 1968 Poor People’s Campaign was all about. And this is what got him killed.

As opposed to the representatives of the Powers That Be, Martin Luther King did not see poor people as a threat. He saw them as “the least of these”, “Gods Children”. He saw them as a potentially powerful and positive force. He stated in December of 1967,

“There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life...”

The Powers That Be have done a great disservice with regards to curriculum and the philosophy of education in the US. They’ve left out whole periods of history and obscured certain periods of history that have direct bearing on what we are trying to do today. The experience of Martin Luther King in the last period of his life is obscured. It is something that is pushed under the rug. Clearly up until a certain point in his development, he was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement that was focused on *de jure* racial apartheid in this country. But at a certain point towards the end of his life, he began to recognize that – even though they were able to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Right Act of 1965 passed - the black masses who were succumbing to economic exploitation couldn’t benefit from the results of the Civil Rights Movement. He pointed out: What good is it to be able to go into a restaurant now since they’ve taken down the “whites only” sign if you can’t afford a hamburger? Today you don’t have the “whites only” sign in the front window of restaurants. You have another sign. It’s the menu, and the menu has the different items and their costs. And if you can’t afford what’s on that menu, I don’t care what color you are; there’s no need for you to go in there.

King's recognition was a very significant development because it offers us the opportunity to move American thinking in a way that focuses on power shifts and social change. But we've got to grapple with this reality. Martin Luther King said "It didn't take a penny to integrate lunch counters in this country" (that is, to defeat *de jure* segregation). But when we talk about ending poverty, to paraphrase him, you're talking about a whole reconstruction of "economic and political power" relationships. He recognized that. And the Powers That Be saw that not only did he recognize that, but that he had begun to utilize his great international prestige to take actions that were a real political threat to them and their domestic and foreign policies. That's why he was killed; that was proven by the 1999 MLK assassination trial in Memphis, Tennessee – an event for which there was a virtual media black-out.

King recognized that for the load of poverty to be lifted, the thinking and behavior of a critical mass of the American people would have to be changed. To accomplish this change a "new and unsettling force" had to be formed. In late 1967, he described this force as a multi-racial "nonviolent army of the poor, a freedom church of the poor." In other words, the poor would have to be organized to take action together around their immediate and basic needs, thereby becoming a powerful social and political force capable of changing the terms of how poverty is understood, dispelling the myths and stereotypes upholding the mass complacency that leaves the root causes of poverty intact.

King proceeded to translate this analysis into activity. He got from behind the pulpit and hit the pavement, launching the organizing drive of the Poor People's Campaign. He brought people together, across racial and regional lines to plan for a new march to Washington. He aligned with the struggle of the poor and black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Their struggle for dignity, King suggested, was a dramatization of the issues taken up by the Poor People's Campaign—a fight by capable, hard workers against dehumanization, discrimination and poverty wages in the richest country in the world.

In a number of respects the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 anticipated the challenges of our times. We are in a time of acute economic crisis, both in the United States and globally. The acuteness of the crisis has revealed its unique chronic aspects as expressed in the impoverishment of increasing segments of the middle income strata, the so-called "middle class." Alongside rising hunger, homelessness and economic inequality we find hints of a growing protest movement at the grassroots level. At the same time, the current economic crisis has seriously questioned the prevailing ideological and theological orthodoxies, which have defined the limits of the "realistically" possible for at least the last forty years.

I agree with David Harvey's assessment that the global financial collapse has shown that economic arrangements are contingent and fallible, and that we can and must legitimately imagine new and different ways to structure economic institutions. I would add however that without a movement issuing specifically from the bottom demanding a more just set of arrangements, it is unlikely that the current crisis will be resolved in a direction qualitatively different than that

of the past two decades, which saw a historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth upward. An accounting of the lessons of King's Poor People's Campaign and a study of their application to the contemporary struggles of the dislocated and dispossessed is thus both timely and necessary.

Concerned about the lack of careful and systematic study of the Poor People's Campaign—both its goals and the reasons for its demise—the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary decided to concentrate much of its energies on study and historical analysis of King's last years. This project brought together leaders from different poor communities across the U.S. who agreed to join this effort mostly because they felt that networking with other community and religious leaders would greatly strengthen their struggles and organizations. This joint exploration led to the Poverty Initiative's decision to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign with the development of a Poverty Scholars Program. With these leaders, the Poverty Initiative began by identifying and connecting with local organizing work in impoverished communities and holding strategic dialogues. Learning from the crippling effects of King's assassination, it becomes clear that there is a need to develop many "Martin Luther Kings." Such leaders do not develop naturally—they must be systematically educated and trained.

The Poverty Scholars Program is the cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative, reflecting its mission to raise up "generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a movement, led by the poor, to end poverty," —a mission inspired by the historical and strategic conclusions King arrived at about the poor united across color lines being "a new and unsettling force."

One thing that's very crucial in this period is the role of education and consciousness raising. What I've learned in my experiences in organizing is that building socio-political movement is about more than simply mobilizing bodies. It's essentially about moving minds and hearts. And education is central, especially in an information age. The technological revolution I alluded to earlier has created the ability to impact people's worldviews and ultimately influence people's political wills, which is what we're trying to get at. Today, unlike any other period, these influences work like a 24/7 netwar against the poor as the first line of attack against all of us.

In looking at the way you fight today as opposed to how we fought yesterday, the question of the relationship of education to organizing is more intimate and integral. You've got to talk as you walk. You've got to teach as you fight. You've got to learn as you lead. These things are inseparable to the problem of movement organizing, and I think the Saul Alinsky community organizing influence and some of the trade union organizing influences have separated those questions for social movements in the U.S. These approaches tend to de-emphasize the importance of education and thus miss out on the opportunity of using the daily struggles as a school to elevate consciousness particularly in terms of leadership development for a broad social movement.

I can give you an example of this need for education and analysis as well as the creativity and ingenuity of the poor from 1993 during the homeless organizing. We had formed a Homeless Union in Houston, Texas, so we had some notoriety because we had done the kinds of things that we needed to do in terms of organizing from service programs like job programs, to protests that brought attention to the issues. We were known for moving families in the dead of winter into empty HUD housing that was deteriorating. It was civil disobedience basically, bringing attention to the conditions and trying to get some kind of response in terms of negotiations. So groups from time to time would ask us to come in to help them organize.

A group in Austin, Texas asked us to come in to deal with a situation where there were no programs to deal with people who had been laid off and then were evicted because they couldn't pay their rent. Austin had massive numbers of homeless families living in the downtown area in vacant lots, in alleyways, and in structures no bigger than doghouses. We saw it when we walked the streets. They were trying to figure out what to do, so we exchanged experiences, sharing what we had done in other cities to bring attention to the issue and break our isolation. Then we divided up into research groups. Homeless people became researchers, looking at different areas of the city to find out the extent of the problem, the cities priorities, how that found expression, and so on.

One of the research groups went to the city council and got a hold of the budget. They looked at every item on the budget and found that there was nothing being allocated to assist people who were being evicted--no housing programs. What they did find though was a curious item on the budget--monies allocated for the purchase of Canadian Geese to the tune of \$800 per goose. The geese that you see downtown that the yuppies and buppies do lunch with and throw bread at, they pay for those bad boys. I didn't know that. That was one of the reports on Austin's budget priorities.

Based on that analysis and research we came up with an action plan. Every city has a historic district where someone important did something important--some famous personality came down and used the bathroom or something and they now have a historical marker. We identified this historic district in downtown Austin with these mansions where important people resided, and they have tours where you can come and visit these mansions. Based on our research, we decided to move into one of the mansions. The idea was to bring attention to the issue, so we called the police and the media to tell them about it. The news vans and the police cars race to the scene. With the news cameras rolling the police jump out of the cars with their guns out, come knock on the door, and yell "come out, we know you're in there, open the door, come out of there". For a moment there's complete silence. Finally the door slowly opens and you see a brother and sister holding one of the geese at knifepoint, and they say "if you come one step closer this goose is cooked". You know they held the media attention for two weeks discussing what kind of priorities we have when we don't put human lives and human beings first. Out of that struggle they were able to build connections with the trade union leaders, religious leaders and

students. They were able to solve the problem of their isolation and expand their network based on their research, analysis and leadership.

About the author

Willie Baptist is a formerly homeless father who came out of the Watts uprisings, the Black Student Movement, and working as a lead organizer with the United Steelworkers. He has 40 years of experience organizing amongst the poor including with the National Union of the Homeless, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, the National Welfare Rights Union, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, and many other networks. Willie currently serves as the Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence and is the Coordinator of the Poverty Scholars Program.