

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Rally in Detroit: The Struggle to Defeat Racism, War and Poverty

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This year's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Rally & March was organized under the demands for "Jobs, Peace and Justice" commemorating the 50th anniversary of the intersection between the Civil Rights, Black Power and Antiwar Movements in the United States.

Dr. King during the early months of 1967 rapidly developed his theoretical views in opposition to the U.S. imperialist war against the people of Vietnam and Southeast Asia and its interconnectedness to the unfulfilled quest for full equality and economic justice.

The event was held again at the Central United Methodist Church (CUMC) on Woodward Avenue and East Adams downtown where Dr. King delivered several sermons during the Lent season from the 1950s right through 1968. The leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) spoke at Central on March 14 just three weeks prior to his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968.

Contributions from Broad Array of Activist Leaders

A host of speakers representing the foremost struggles involving water services, housing rights, election integrity, youth organizing, indigenous solidarity surrounding the Standing Rock resistance, educational democracy, among other issues spoke during the rally held in the sanctuary of CUMC. Music was provided by the Deep River Choir directed by Bobbi Thompson.

These speakers included: Sylvia Morgan and Malcolm Jones, participants in the 2016 Freedom Tour sponsored by the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR), where students are taken on a journey through the southern U.S. to study the historical legacy of the Civil Rights Movement; Jennine Spencer of the Charlevoix Village Association discussed the campaign to end property tax foreclosures in Detroit and Wayne County where every year tens of thousands face eviction from their homes; the question of the integrity of electoral politics was examined by Anita Belle who is the President of the Reparations Labor Union and a Green Party organizer; Cynthia Thornton, Chief Steward for UAW Local 6000 representing state employees and Pride at Work as well, talked about the need for a united movement against discrimination on the job; speaking for Water You Fighting For, Melissa Mays of Flint, emphasized that the water crisis in the city is by no means resolved; and Joan and Joe Jacobs of the American Indian Movement (AIM) stressed the importance of the resistance at Standing Rock where the campaigns for water rights among the Indigenous people along with Detroit and Flint merge.

Other speakers addressing the rally were Rev. Sandra Simmons of Hush House whose topic

was “Building Community in the Age of Trumpism.” Simmons described the ascendancy of President-elect Donald Trump as a “coup.” She called for people fighting in the movements in Detroit to unify through their community efforts.

Elena Herrada of the Detroit Board of Education in-exile continued to illustrate the apartheid conditions under which students are subjected to in the city. The Detroit public school system has been restructured once again by the state government which has controlled the district for most of the last eighteen years to its detriment. Hundreds of schools have been closed and thousands of educational employees laid-off by the emergency managers and their functionaries working on behalf of successive administrations.

The question of war in the Middle East was taken up by Workers World Party youth organizer Joe Mshahwar of Detroit who expressed solidarity with the people of Syria. He noted that the people in the U.S. should not be manipulated into a war with Russia or China over imperialist ambitions emanating from Washington and Wall Street.

Evoking Dr. King’s Antiwar Legacy and the Lessons of the Detroit Rebellion

In 2004, the Michigan Emergency Committee Against War & Injustice (MECAWI) founded the Annual MLK March in Detroit. This decision occurred less than a year after the Pentagon-led bombing, invasion and occupation of Iraq. The principal slogan of the event was “Money for Our Cities, Not for War.” Since 2004, the event has been expanded to encompass other organizations and coalitions under the banner of the Detroit MLK Committee.

Corporate media narratives surrounding the legacy of Dr. King often deliberately disregard his intervention into the antiwar movement which coincided with the escalating militancy among the African American people. In 1967, rebellions erupted across the U.S. in over 160 cities. James Forman, the-then International Affairs Director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) described the period in an essay as the “High Tide of Black Resistance.”

The city of Detroit experienced the largest of these rebellions which had been assessed at the time as the most widespread civil disorder in the history of the U.S. Battles raged in the streets for five days leaving 43 dead, hundreds injured and 7,200 arrested. Property damage estimates ranged into the hundreds of millions of dollars. President Lyndon Johnson, who was bogged down in the Vietnam War deployed thousands of federal troops into Detroit after Governor George Romney requested assistance saying the situation was beyond the capacity of the local police and National Guard to contain.

On July 25, 1967 at the height of the Detroit Rebellion, three African American youth, Aubrey Pollard (19), Carl Cooper (17) and Fred Temple (19), were executed by police officers in the annex to the Algiers Motel which was located on Woodward Avenue and Virginia Park. The massacre prompted outrage throughout the African American community. Three white police officers indicted in the case were all acquitted of their crimes in several legal proceedings that were held both inside and outside the city of Detroit.

One month after the massacre of the youth, leading activists organized a People’s Tribunal to investigate the massacre and level charges against the police involved. Thousands attended the Tribunal held at Central United Church of Christ (later renamed The Shrine of the Black Madonna and the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church) on Linwood and Hogarth on the west side, several blocks away from where the Rebellion erupted.

Rev. Dan Aldridge was a key convener of the People’s Tribunal. He wrote an insertion for the Detroit MLK program brochure explaining the significance of the event held on August 30, 1967.

Aldridge said that: “Among the twelve members of the jury were national icon Rosa Parks, novelist John O. Killens, book store proprietor Ed Vaughn, Michigan State Senator Jackie Vaughn, and two members of People Against Racism (PAR) Frank Joyce and Valerie Shook. Following standard legal procedure, the judge of the People’s Tribunal was Justin Ravitz and prosecuting and defense attorney roles were performed by attorneys Milton Henry, Kenneth V. Cockerel, Sr., Andrew Perdue, and Sol Plofkin. The stenographer was later Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick.”

A leading activist in the city at the time, Aldridge continued by noting: “While total access to the People’s Tribunal was given to the Detroit Free Press, The Detroit News, and The Michigan Chronicle, only the Chronicle’s Aretha Watkins covered the story in full. The Detroit News did not report the event and Detroit Free Press reporter, and later Editor William Serrin, told the organizing committee that editors directed him to publish no photographs and only a very small story without interviews. The three officers were convicted by the People’s Tribunal for murder.”

A Coalition Effort

This event is a broad coalition effort. Over forty organizations and individuals sponsored and endorsed the 14th Annual MLK Day Rally and March for 2017.

These groups included in part: Moratorium NOW! Coalition, MECAWI, People’s Water Board, Linda Szysko, UAW Local 140 Civil and Human Rights Committee, UAW Local 160, We the People of Detroit, the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, Detroit People’s Platform, Avalon Bakery, ACLU of Michigan, St. John’s Episcopal Church, Detroit Coalition Against Tar Sands, IWW Detroit GMB, Pan-African News Wire, Sugar Law Center for Economic and Social Justice, Veterans for Peace Chapter 74, Workers World Party, Pride at Work Michigan, Retirees for Single Payer Health Care, Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, Pointes for Peace, among many others.

Note: The author of this report Abayomi Azikiwe chaired the rally held at CUMC.

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