

Labor History: The March on Washington

By Ed Leavy

As everyone certainly knows, August 28th marked the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington. Today, the march is remembered primarily as the backdrop for Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The eloquent, Utopian vision of racial harmony presented by Reverend King, however, was in contrast to the specific economic and political demands that lied behind the march and were expressed by the other speakers that day. The power of his words, and the tragedy of his assassination five years later, has obscured the economic demands presented and the role labor unions played in the march itself.

The march was neither called nor organized by Reverend King, but by A. Philip Randolph. Randolph was the founder and leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and had been a leading and radical voice in both the civil rights and labor movements for decades. Randolph had originally called for a march on Washington in 1941 to protest discriminatory practices in the defense industry. Randolph called off the march when President Franklin Roosevelt created – and later largely ignored – the Fair Employment Practices Commission. The idea of a mass demonstration stayed with him, and in 1963 the confluence of the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, the delays in passing the Civil Rights Act, and rising unemployment led him to call for the march.



The idea that civil rights and labor rights were inextricably linked is made clear in the published goals of the march. While passage of the civil rights bill, "protection of the right to vote," and "desegregation of all public schools in 1963" were all identified as goals, so too were a federal work program "to train and place unemployed workers," a "Federal Fair Employment Practices Act... for all employees," and a rise in the minimum wage to what would be \$13.00 an hour in today's money. Speaker after speaker spoke about specific political and economic actions that must be taken. In a brilliant speech, A. Philip Randolph stated, "We have no future in a society in which 6 million black and white people are unemployed and millions more live in poverty. Nor is the goal of our civil rights revolution merely the passage of civil rights legislation. Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens, but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them. Yes, we want a Fair Employment Practice Act, but what good will it do if profit-g geared automation destroys the jobs of millions of workers black and white?"

The emphasis on economic justice was underscored by the role unions played in the event. Many of the organizers came from the labor movement, and unions provided buses and private trains to get people from throughout the country to the event. AFT demonstrated its long-term commitment to civil rights by being a key sponsor of the event. Not every union behaved admirably, of course; AFL President George Meaney continued his checkered history with civil rights by refusing to officially endorse the march and sending mixed signals (depending on the audience) about his support. He was not alone. President John Kennedy begged Randolph to call off the march, fearing it would be seen as overly provocative; only that evening, when the event had ended without any violence or disruption, did he agree to be photographed with the leaders of the event. Though there were no reports of any violence in Washington, many

attendees, especially in the South, were greeted with violence upon their return. Yet coverage of the event at the time focused on the peaceful demeanor of the enormous crowd and the positive feelings of the event.

The assassination of Reverend King and the subsequent move to make his birthday a national holiday telescoped the importance of the march to his closing speech. The calls for justice have been forgotten, subsumed in his call for racial harmony. Though incidents such as the Trayvon Martin shooting and verdict remind us how far we still have to go to achieve that vision, the wide-spread and accepted violence in the South is far more muted than ever before. The economic goals, however, are even farther away than ever. The battle for a far-lower minimum wage than the one set as a goal for the march continues. More tellingly, A. Philip Randolph's claim that African-Americans cannot truly be free if 10.9% of African-Americans are unemployed should resound with us today; latest unemployment figures have African-American unemployment at 13.7%. While it is right to celebrate the anniversary of the march and the integral role organized labor played in it, we must also reflect on how much farther both the civil rights and labor movement have to go.