

Fulfill the Legacies of King and Chavez

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On March 31 we celebrated the 81st birthday of the late Cesar Chavez, the revered co-founder of the United Farm Workers union. On April 4 we marked the anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Today, in the titanic struggle to end the right-wing grip on our nation's government, it is timely to reflect on the legacies of these giants of American history.

Chavez led a struggle of millions of workers, mostly immigrant, many Spanish-speaking, based on the notion that all workers, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender or status have a human right to organize and demand dignity. He insisted that this cause is not confined to the workplace - it is a social issue.

Chavez helped inject into the imagination of the labor-led people's movement the notion of "Sí se puede" - "Yes, we can."

It's worth recalling Chavez' words in a 1984 speech:

"Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore."

Sixteen years earlier, Dr. Martin Luther King was struck down in Memphis, Tenn., as he rallied the nation to the cause of striking sanitation workers there. King came to Memphis because of his deep understanding of the commonality of the needs, hopes and dreams of labor and of African Americans. King also saw that ending the bloody U.S. war in Vietnam was intertwined with the interests of African Americans and all American working people. He condemned the U.S. government "as the greatest purveyor of violence in the world," and courageously spoke out for ending the war, at a time when it was not fashionable to do so.

King had a profound understanding of the power of mass struggle by ordinary people and the importance of broad and unifying tactics that can bring millions into action.

King's focus in the last years of his life on the economic underpinnings of racism and oppression provide a beacon

for today's struggles against this enduring problem.

Indeed, in today's deepening financial crisis, African Americans and Latinos, widely touted as having made substantial economic gains during the 1990s, have found those gains now almost completely disappearing.

It is a disgrace that in one of the world's wealthiest countries, nearly half of all Black and Latino children still grow up in poverty, our schools remain largely segregated and unemployment for African Americans and Latinos is almost twice that of their fellow Americans. The disparity makes itself felt in almost every aspect of living - health care, criminal justice, the environment, and housing. Institutionalized racism and today's whipped up anti-immigrant hatred play a toxic role in our society.

Yet today, the possibilities for real change are greater than ever. In a dramatic and beautiful way, Sen. Obama's surging candidacy demonstrates an emerging anti-racist majority in our country, and a widening recognition that racism and anti-immigrant hysteria hurts all.

King's legacy looms large in this election year - his linking of labor and civil rights, his advocacy for peace and justice, his championing of human brotherhood and sisterhood, his courageous renouncing of "mindless anti-communism" and his ceaseless fight for what he called the "beloved community."

Likewise, the labor-Latino alliance championed by Chavez and his vision of labor rights as a national social cause inspire the movements of today.

Today the path to the "beloved community" lies in achieving a landslide victory against the Republicans in November.

When King was assassinated in 1968, the country was also preparing to vote in a landmark election that had the potential of turning the country away from war, racism and reaction. It didn't happen then, and the consequences were terrible. But it can happen now.

Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King will be smiling.



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