

# Resisting War and Racism, Fighting for Peace and Justice

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Over the spring and summer of 1967, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly stepped forward to condemn the US war on Vietnam. In so doing, he risked his reputation, the support of most liberal allies, and, ultimately, his life to “Break the Silence” on the costs of war at home and abroad—the systematic violence carried out by the US military in the name of defending democracy. (<http://icujp.org/king.html>)

Dr. King urged the intensifying mass movement for black empowerment and the growing anti-war movement to recognize their common struggle against the “triple evils” of war, racism and economic exploitation. For King, the triplets were “intricably linked,” mutually-reinforcing and historically-constituted systems of oppression and violence that shaped the life outcomes of all poor people—and poor people of color in particular. He believed called for a mass, multi-racial social movement for peace and justice driven by “a divine dissatisfaction” with injustice and sustained by “an audacious faith in the future.”

***“When a people are mired in oppression, they realize deliverance when they have accumulated the power to enforce change...so that government cannot elude our demands.”***

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967)

Today, some 40 years later, our nation is again mired in what appears to be a forever-war—this time against an amorphous enemy called “terrorism.” The Bush administration proposes paying for this war with deep cuts to education, health care and veteran’s benefits—all the while assuring supporters among the wealthy that their tax breaks will remain untouched. US history tells of many “racial projects,” designed to stir the blood, mask the contradictions of class society, and mobilize support for war abroad and oppression at home. Meanwhile, the “essential nature of democracy” is once

again buried beneath a deluge of cynical appeals to patriotism, paranoia and race prejudice.

With so little to show for all the time, energy, money and hope invested in electing “anybody-but-Bush,” it’s small wonder that so many people committed to peace and justice are asking each other: Where do we go from here? Indeed, where *can* we go from here?

## Where do we go from here?

King posed this very question to delegates attending the SCLC’s annual meeting in August 1967. Believing that the civil rights movement had reached a crossroads, King observed that though Jim Crow was in retreat in the South—the color bar lifted from many areas of public life—and voting rights for southern blacks were secured by federal statute and defended by federal marshals, he recognized that the hard-fought *right* to sit at an integrated lunch counter was ultimately meaningless to someone lacking the price of a meal. The Movement had clearly reached what King called the “second phase” of the struggle for equality: the a massive effort to achieve the actual “realization of equality” by dismantling longstanding institutions erected by whites to maintain traditional arrangements of wealth, power and privilege.

However, King had also noted that many of the movement’s liberal white allies had “quietly faded away”—only to reemerge in the guise of the Bush-loving *neo-conservatives* who allegedly “marched with King” but now condemn the “excessive” and “divisive” demands of civil rights advocates.

In the early months of 1968, King launched a nation-wide Poor People’s Campaign to apply the principles of nonviolent direct-action to the conditions of persistent economic disparity. The campaign involved mounting a permanent encampment of some 1500 people in the nation’s capital to bring the reality of the “war on the poor” to the front door of the White House. Out of this campaign, King hoped for a unified, multiracial, popular movement for peace and social justice that would link increased US military spending for war

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abroad to the reality of poverty, racist violence and discrimination at home.

Sadly, the vision didn't survive the murder of the visionary. The campaign's momentum stalled, alliances fragmented into separate, sometimes competitive, single-issue causes remaining largely divided on goals and priorities, segregated by race and social status; and mired in confusion and distrust at the political margins of society. Consequently, most initiatives attempting to cross the color line to build a mass social movement have faltered, failed and then faded away—sometimes quietly, sometimes bitterly.

Still, the pursuit of peace and social justice remains the unfinished business of the nation—and as the direct heirs to King's vision, we must ask ourselves where are we now, and where *must* we go from here?

### **It's time to Fund the Dream**

In Boston, the burden of the war in Iraq falls most heavily on poor and brown folks: taking the form of deep cuts to social services, education, job training and similar needs; it is implicit in the blatant racial profiling and intimidation of immigrants and practitioners of the Muslim faith; expressed in the diversion of funds from community needs to Homeland Security; and manifested in the “poverty draft” and the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Likewise, the steady exodus of manufacturing jobs and the growth of a low paying service and contingent employment (temp-work) have created a seemingly permanent class of unemployed and under-employed workers of color—many of whom are barred from gainful employment due to a prior criminal record.

And, despite claims that the dream of “color-blind” society has arrived, an individual's worth is still judged primarily on the basis of prejudiced assumptions about their proper “place” along the color line.

Fund the Dream (FTD) embraces King's vision, placing the “triple evils” concept at the heart of the initiative's action agenda. FTD has proposed a set of broad political demands speaking to the immediate concerns of this society's most vulnerable members, specifically:

1. **Bring US troops home, now;** reinvest the war budget in our children, into improving the per-

formance and infrastructure of our public schools

2. **Significantly reduce the US military budget;** the Congress must deny discretionary spending that supports discretionary violence by limiting the core mission of the armed services to peace-keeping duties under UN authority and assisting in global disaster relief efforts
3. **Rescind corporate tax cuts and tax-breaks to the wealthy;** direct these recovered tax revenues toward the rehabilitation of public housing and to reweaving the social safety-net
4. **Dismantle institutional racism;** examine the history, institutions and social practices that support white privilege and black disadvantage; adopt race-conscious restorative policies redressing this longstanding source of national shame.

We are convinced that FTD can make a significant contribution toward bridging the differences between peace and social justice initiatives, as well as toward linking local efforts to a national movement against war, racism and global exploitation.

### **We have unfinished business**

Confronted by a war-without-end over who stands where in the global pecking order, rising costs and falling wages at home, and the persistence of racial profiling, discrimination and violence against people of color, it is clear that we have some unfinished business. Indeed, we must rededicate ourselves to building the movement that Dr. King envisioned so long ago: a movement possessing the political clarity of purpose, the organizational capacity and the inspired determination to sustain itself in a protracted struggle for deep and enduring social change.

Of course, realizing this vision will require our questioning and rejecting the notion that demands for full employment, at a living wage with good benefits, are unrealistic in this competitive, globalizing economy. It will also mean consistently and fearlessly challenging institutionalized racist practices wherever and whenever they arise.

Lastly, and most importantly, this vision will involve firmly rejecting the wrong-headed belief that government financing for war and violence abroad is a greater or nobler endeavor than funding The Dream at home.