

# Martin Luther King Jr's Forgotten 1962 Speech on Civil Rights Unionism

BY

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

MLK regarded progressive unions as bulwarks of the civil rights movement. In this rousing 1962 speech to the National Maritime Union, he linked the democratic struggles of workers and black people and ended by quoting the "beautiful words" of Eugene Debs.

Industry knows only two types of workers who, in years past, were brought frequently to their job in chains — Negroes and shanghai'd seamen. In those days only these workers were physically bound to their place of employment — the Negro to his plantation by guards, and the seaman by the watery isolation of his ship. Yours was never as humiliating a condition as chattel slavery, but the abuse of your freedom, and dignity of personality, were corrosive and destructive.

The sailors wrote a luminous page of history when they used their mighty strength and unity to civilize their work conditions. Everyone benefitted — other labor groups as well as employers because the violence and instability of the sea life of old could not be a basis for a great commerce. Nor could maltreated, brutalized men be entrusted with the multimillion-dollar ships of the modern era; nor with the safety of millions of passengers who now make the seas a highway.

THE KING LEGACY

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# "All Labor Has Dignity"



Martin Luther King, Jr.

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY  
Michael K. Honey

*"All Labor Has Dignity"* (Beacon Press, 2012).

And so you and your industry have come a long way from great depths to great heights in your journey, achieving democratic practices which put you above many other segments of American life.

What do I mean by this? I believe there is more simple nobility in your work than in almost any other. First, in the progress toward integration you are matchless because an integrated ship is a flower of democracy. On the sea, workers not only toil side by side, but they eat, sleep, and relax on an integrated basis. You are not divided by color, religion, or other distinctions. The men of a department work and sleep and eat without artificially imposed barriers between them. Mastering nature's giant seas requires unity, brotherhood, and in moments of peril, the *color* of a man's skin is of no importance, but the *quality* of his courage and resourcefulness is all important.

Sailors are unique workers possessing noble qualities because in time of war they assume risks many soldiers never experience, even though they remain civilians.

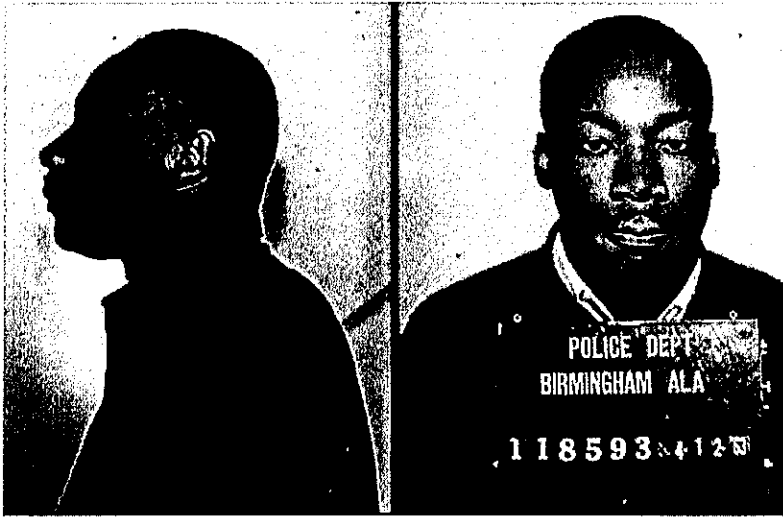
Lastly, every sailor is expected in the tradition of the sea to be willing to risk his life in order to save the life of another.

Some years ago I read a newspaper story of an American liner which altered its course and stood by in a storm because a single man had been sighted floating on a raft. Thousands of passengers, many of them leaders of industry and eminent statesmen, were compelled to wait — perhaps altering a thousand appointments and conferences. The delivery of cargo and mail were delayed until one man was rescued from death. For me this incident had overwhelming spiritual and moral meaning because the multitude of distinguished people, who were inconvenienced, and the fortune in wealth which waited upon one man, dramatized the importance of a single human being in an age when we too easily forget people. But this incident was multiplied in meaning because that one man, whose life hung in the balance, was discovered to be a Negro when the lifeboat brought him to safety.

It is not often that everything stops and holds its breath for an ordinary Negro. I am happy to say that a similar situation finally did occur on land only recently when the governor of Mississippi tried to reverse history and victimize one Negro, only to find hundreds of millions lining up with James Meredith and an army mobilized at his side, for the sole purpose of ensuring his rights as an American citizen.

Reaching far back into the past, it is interesting that the brutal practice of flogging on ships was fought and abolished by a member of another minority group in the eighteenth century when Commodore Uriah Levy, a Jew, ended this barbaric practice in the US Navy.

All of your progress in humanism spread to other sectors of American life, making you pioneers of the human spirit.



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Martin Luther King Jr was arrested in 1963 for protesting the treatment of blacks in Birmingham, Alabama. (Wikimedia Commons)

So it is a natural extension of your tradition, it is consistent with your sense of brotherhood, that in celebrating your twenty-fifth anniversary, that with your deserved enjoyment and delight in the event, you also use it to make financial aid available to a people still fighting to realize their elementary rights and still seeking the long-promised pursuit of happiness. [The National Maritime Union, like other progressive unions, was a strong financial supporter of the civil rights movement.] Your twenty-fifth anniversary arranged in this constructive fashion honors you even beyond the achievement of twenty-five years of organized life. You sum up thousands of years of man's struggle to be human, decent, and honorable.

Our nation is facing severe trials in these turbulent days because one region of our country still holds itself above law, as if it were cut adrift from constitutional obligations, and insurrection and mutiny against the government is still possible. They not only abuse persons, but they debase the democratic traditions of the nation in their defiant resort to anarchy and storm troop rule.

Against this force, which has the power of states at its command, Negroes have searched for effective weapons. We believe we have found them. Emulating the labor movement, we in the South have embraced mass actions — boycotts, sit-ins and, more recently, a widespread utilization of the ballot.

Emulating Biblical teachers and Mahatma Gandhi, we have seized the unique weapon of nonviolent resistance. It is a pleasure to tell you that our weapons work. They do not draw the blood of our

adversary, but they do defeat the unjust system.

A remarkably effective method has evolved and become a source of splendid strength in recent months. The secret ballot is our secret weapon.

In the state of Georgia a quiet revolution is taking place. My organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, has been persistently carrying on a voting and registration drive in concert with other groups. First in Atlanta, the Negro vote joined with white allies casting our ballots in secret, and together we crushed a rabid segregationist and put into the mayoralty seat a white moderate, who has already with us broken more walls of segregation in a year than were destroyed in decades. . . .

[King went on to cite political victories in his home state of Georgia based on registering black voters, leading to the election of more moderate candidates for governor and Congress.]



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Student sit-in at Woolworth in Durham, North Carolina, on February 10, 1960.  
(Wikimedia Commons)

It is heartwarming to share your successes, and gratifying to tell you of ours. We still have a long way to go and if we forget how great the sacrifices will be, there are always arsonists, lunatics, and rampaging bigots to remind us that death lurks nearby. But if physical death is the price that we must pay to free our children and our white children from a permanent death of the spirit, we'll accept it with quiet courage . . .

Our lives are an endless concert of tensions, struggle, and pain. Many who would speak are silent. I have often looked at the imposing, segregated churches, which the religious South has in profusion, and asked the troubling question, "What kind of people worship there? Who is their God?"

I don't know what kind of church you worship in. Perhaps many of you worship in none. Yet I know what kind of people you are and I know what God you worship.

In your long struggle for humanity and justice, you are religious in the deepest sense, whether you have realized it or not.

With all our problems we are optimistic. We are presiding over a dying order, one which has long deserved to die. We operate in stormy seas, but I often remember some beautiful words of Eugene Debs to the court which imprisoned him for his pacifism:

I can see the dawn of a better humanity. The people are awakening. In due course of time they will come to their own.

When the mariner, sailing over tropic seas, looks for relief from his weary watch, he turns his eye toward the Southern Cross, burning luridly above the tempest-vexed ocean. As the midnight approaches, the southern cross begins to bend, and the whirling-worlds change their places, and with starry finger-points the Almighty marks the passage of time upon the dial of the universe, and though no bell may bear the glad tidings, the lookout knows that the midnight is passing — that relief and rest are close at hand.

Let the people take heart and hope everywhere, for the cross is bending, the midnight is passing, and joy cometh with the morning.

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Excerpted from *All Labor Has Dignity* by Martin Luther King Jr. Edited and introduced by Michael K. Honey. Copyright 2012. Excerpted with permission by Beacon Press.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) was a legendary civil rights leader.

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