

CALL FOR A POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN FOR TODAY



On December 4, 1967, the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. announced plans for a Poor People's Campaign and called for the nation to take dramatic steps to end poverty. In the wake of his assassination the campaign went forward but fell short of his vision. The U.S. government, consumed by waging war in Vietnam, did not heed the call by King and the poor people who traveled to Washington. Today, nearly 50 years later, we are experiencing unprecedented poverty in the midst of plenty and unnecessary abandonment in spite of unheard abundance. According to official data, at least 46.5 million people, including 1 of every 5 children, are living in poverty, an increase of more than 9 million since 2008. An additional 97.3 million people are officially designated as low income. Taken together, this means that 48% of the U.S. population, nearly one in every two people, is poor or low income. At the same time, racial and gender inequality remains as deep as ever.

People fighting for their lives, rights and deepest values are organizing a growing resistance, fighting on the many fronts of this struggle, including for good affordable homes, water, nutritious food, health, education, racial, gender and LGBTQ equality, a humane immigration system, an end to mass incarceration, living wages, good jobs, and a sustainable environment. We experience the power and joy of these campaigns, celebrating and drawing inspiration from the gains of these struggles. Yet we all are painfully aware of the limits of our victories as overall conditions worsen and inequality and poverty continue to grow. There is a growing need and yearning to connect these separated battles and begin creating a broader and deeper social movement with the power and vision to take on not just the rotten fruits of poverty, inequality, and oppression but the national and global systems and structures that produce them.

The poor and dispossessed have come to embody all major injustices of our time. This gives them the capability of providing a rallying point for this broader and more powerful social movement. Far from putting aside these issues to focus on yet another one, such a movement would strengthen these different struggles by recognizing them as inter-connected, inseparable and central to the fight to end poverty and create a moral and just society. The leading role of the poor in these struggles is critical to building this movement, as history reminds us successful movements' essential first step is uniting those most affected by the problem.

History has also shown that powerful movements require the involvement and support of all sectors with an interest in a radically different society. This means nearly everyone. A recent study measuring "economic insecurity" found that 4 of 5 people living in the U.S. live in danger of poverty or unemployment at some point in their lifetime. A key objective of building the unity and power of the poor is to help those who feel they are still in the middle to realize their common interest in the fight to end poverty. This task is all the more crucial as the wealthy attempt to win the same battle by turning those who have little against the poor who have even less. But the scale, extent, and endurance of the economic crisis has made this long standing game harder for them to win. The permanent crisis has raised the most serious questions about the prevailing ideological orthodoxies which for too long have defined what is "realistically" possible in terms of social change. And even those who feel economically secure can see that mass poverty and economic hardship amidst such wealth and productive power obscenely violates our most sacred values. This is why King called for a revolution of values and put forward not just a new political vision but a moral one for a society in which people are not treated as commodities to be thrown away but as precious brothers and sisters.

The year 2017 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s saw as the first step towards the radical restructuring of U.S. society. The conditions of poverty, inequality and injustice we face today make necessary a genuine commemoration of King's unfinished revolution through the building of a new Poor People's Campaign for Today. We who are making this call know that it must be done thoughtfully, carefully, and inclusively. We are committing to talking with as many others as possible, to joining in strategic conversations about what is to be done, and to bringing our own work, our commitments, and our knowledge into the planning process. Because it is urgent, we have to start now. And because we are taking this up together, we can and will succeed.