

Why we made this discussion guide

On December 5th, 1967 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference announced plans for a Poor People's Campaign. The Campaign aimed to bring poor people together from all across the country and from all racial and ethnic backgrounds in order to build up a force that could lead the fight against racism, militarism, and economic exploitation.

Today, dozens of groups in the United States and around the world are calling for a New Poor People's Campaign (poorpeoplescampaign.org), to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the original campaign. All throughout this year, we're working to revive Rev. Dr. King's vision for the PPC and bring these groups closer together.

MLK Day is a time when the whole country is talking about Rev. Dr. King, and different ideas about his message and his legacy come into conflict with one another. We intend to lift up the words and work of Rev. Dr. King the visionary, the revolutionary, who fought for the Poor People's Campaign to unite the poor in action together, as a "new and unsettling force."

To help spread that message among the many people who more and more see the necessity for unity among the poor, we've created this discussion guide for MLK Weekend. It includes videos and excerpts from Rev. Dr. King's speeches about the original PPC, as well as other resources to help start discussions about what it'll mean to take up Rev. Dr. King's unfinished work of the Poor People's Campaign.

How to use this discussion guide

Below are excerpts from Rev. Dr. King's speeches and writings (some accompanied by links to audio of the speech excerpts), links to videos about the New Poor People's Campaign, and some sample discussion questions. The idea is to provide a jumping off point for discussing how we can take up the vision and unfinished work of Rev. Dr. King today: you should adapt and use this guide in the way that'll best work for you and your group.

You can discuss all of the different excerpts and videos, or just one of them, or something in between. You can use the whole excerpt that we've pulled out here or just take a paragraph or a sentence or two. You can even go to the original text (many of these speeches are freely available online) and pull out a different passage. The discussion questions are just meant as examples - feel free to use them or to create your own. You know best what kinds of questions and prompts are going to encourage a meaningful discussion with your group.

If you want a set of shorter quotes to talk about, you can check out this collection from the Kairos Center: <https://kairoscenter.org/quotes-from-rev-dr-kings-last-years>

Introducing the Call for a New Poor People's Campaign

The Poor People's Campaign Midwest Tour

This video follows a 10-day Poor People's Campaign organizing and exchange tour in the Midwest, visiting Chicago, Elkhart (IN), Detroit, Flint, and Cleveland. 40 people from 10 states representing over 20 organizations participated in the tour delegation, connecting with hundreds of people in the region. These leaders held People's Tribunals and community hearings to bear witness to the crimes of racism, militarism, poverty, and ecological devastation and took our delegation on poverty tours to see local conditions. You can read more about the tour [here](#).

This video about the tour, produced for the teleSUR TV program "Ñ Don't Stop", is a great introduction to the call for a New Poor People's Campaign and the struggles that are at its leading edge.

Watch it here: <https://vimeo.com/172450002>

The Poor People's Campaign Is...

This short promotional video shows leaders from organizations around the country talking about what the New Poor People's Campaign means to them and why they think we need it. It can be a great way to start a conversation about the NPPC.

Watch it on the homepage of the PPC website: <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/>

Discussion questions

1. [list of conditions we raise in relation to the PPC.] How are these issues impacting your community? How do you see these issues overlapping?
2. What could it look like for your group to participate in the Poor People's Campaign? How could connecting to other people struggling in other communities through the campaign strengthen your work?

Speeches from Rev. Dr. King

Beyond Vietnam

This speech was given on April 4, 1967 - Exactly one year before Rev. Dr. King's assassination. It was MLK's major public announcement of his opposition to the Vietnam War. After the speech, Rev. Dr. King lost many friends and "allies" who thought that the Civil Rights movement didn't have anything to do with the war. Rev. Dr. King saw the two as deeply connected: Both showed how wrong the nation's priorities and values were, and the need for a "revolution of values" to set them right.

You can listen to this excerpt here:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-693509548/beyond-vietnam-excerpt>

You can find the whole speech, including audio, here:

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/

I am convinced that if we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see than an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just.

A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and

love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

Discussion questions

1. Do we still need a “radical revolution of values” today? What does that mean to you? What are the values that should be at the center of our society?
 2. What will it take to make the shift from a society that values “machines and computers, profit motives and property rights” to one that values people?
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Speech to the SCLC Staff, 1967

This speech comes from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Staff Retreat in May of 1967. In it, Rev. Dr. King lays out his ideas about where the movement has been and must go, and goes into detail about his opposition to the war in Vietnam. These excerpts highlight MLK's understanding of the move from civil rights to human rights, and from a reform movement to a revolutionary one.

I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights. You see when we think of civil rights we are referring to those rights that are clearly defined by the Constitution...But when you deal with human rights, you are not dealing with something clearly defined in the Constitution. They are rights that are clearly defined by the mandates of a humanitarian concern...We are talking about a good, solid, well-paying job. We are talking about a good, sound, sanitary house. We are talking not merely about desegregated education, but we are talking about quality education...

You see the trouble now is that the movement is making demands that say in substance that we must have genuine equality. And I am convinced that a lot of the people that supported us when we were in those glowing epic-making days in Alabama and in Mississippi, when we were in Birmingham and Selma, many of the people who supported us, supported us because they were against Jim Clark. Because they were against Bull Connor. but they were not for genuine equality for Negroes...

Now, if we are to recognize that we are in this new era where the struggle is for genuine equality, we must recognize that we can't solve our problems until there is a radical re-distribution of economic and political power...

When we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement. We were seeking to reform certain conditions in the house of our nation because the nation wasn't living up to the

very rules of the house that it has prescribed in the Constitution. That after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution...

Now this means a revolution of values and other things. And it also leads me to the next point. That we must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together. And you really can't get rid of one without getting rid of the other...

Somebody must say to America, America if you have a contempt for life, if you exploit human beings by seeing them as less than human, if you will treat human beings as a means to an end, you thingify those human beings. And if you will thingify persons, you will exploit them economically. And if you will exploit persons economically, you will abuse your military power to protect your economic investments and your economic exploitations. So what America must be told today is that she must be born again. The whole structure of American life must be changed.

Where do we go from here?

This speech, delivered at the 11th Annual SCLC Convention in Atlanta, Georgia (August 16th, 1967), covers many of the same themes as the Staff Retreat speech. We include this excerpt here as a way to help clarify Rev. Dr. King's thinking on the idea of "restructuring the whole of American society."

You can listen to this excerpt here:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-693509548/where-do-we-go-from-here-excerpt>

You can read the whole speech here:

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/

I want to say to you as I move to my conclusion, as we talk about "Where do we go from here?" that we must honestly face the fact that the movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here, and one day we must ask the question, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?" And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I'm simply saying that more and more, we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society.

Discussion questions

1. Is there anything surprising in these quotes? Anything that goes against the usual ways that people talk about and honor Rev. Dr. King?
2. Where was Rev. Dr. King trying to take the Civil Rights movement? What does his vision have in common with where you think we need to go today?

Nonviolence and Social Change (The Massey Lectures)

In November and December of 1967, Rev. Dr. King gave a 5-part lecture series for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's Massey Lectures. He focused mainly on the violent summer of 1967 as it related to the deep problems facing society and the power of nonviolence to shape a way forward. This passage is taken from the fourth lecture, "Nonviolence and Social Change," and comes after Rev. Dr. King gives a brief summary of the Civil Rights campaigns and victories of the 1960s.

You can listen to the audio of these excerpts here:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-693509548/nonviolence-and-social-change-massey-lecture-4-excerpts>

You can listen to the full audio of this and the other Massey Lectures here:

<https://www.prx.org/series/31037-martin-luther-king-jr-massey-lectures>

Of course by now it's obvious that new laws are not enough. The emergency we now face is economic, and it is a desperate and worsening situation. For the 35 million poor people in America, not even to mention just yet the poor in the other nations, there is a kind of strangulation in the air. In our society it's murder, psychologically, to deprive a man of a job or an income. You are in substance saying to that man that he has no right to exist. You are in a real way depriving him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; denying in his case the very creed of his society. Now millions of people are being strangled that way. The problem is at least national, in fact, it's international in scope. And it is getting worse as the gap between the poor and the affluent society increases...

I intend to show that nonviolence will be effective. But not until it has achieved the massive dimensions, the disciplined planning and the intense commitment of a sustained direct action movement of civil disobedience on the national scale.

The dispossessed of this nation, the poor both white and Negro, live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice. not against the life of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty.

The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man who has nothing to lose. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.

Beginning with the new year we will be recruiting 3,000 of the poorest citizens from 10 different urban and rural areas to initiate and lead a sustained massive direct action movement in Washington. Those who choose to join this initial 3,000 - this nonviolent army, this freedom church of the poor - will work with us for three months to develop nonviolent action skills. Then we will move on Washington, determined to stay there until the legislative and executive branches are taking action serious and adequate action on jobs and income...

If you are, let's say, from rural Mississippi and have never had medical attention, and your children are undernourished and unhealthy, you can take those little children into the Washington hospitals and stay with them there until the medical workers cope with their needs. And in showing your children, you will have shown this country a sight that will make it stop in its busy tracks and think hard about what it has done.

Discussion questions

1. Here, Rev. Dr. King links some of the ideas that he put forward in speeches like "Beyond Vietnam" to the call for a Poor People's Campaign. Why did he see the PPC as the way to make those ideas a reality?
2. What would it mean for the poor to "take action together" today? What could it look like?

Preparing for the Poor People's Campaign (Video)

This is an excerpt from Rev. Dr. King's remarks at a multiracial meeting of the "Committee of 100", leaders from poor Black, white, Latino, and American Indian organizations. Given the short timeline between the SCLC's announcement of the campaign in December 1967 and the campaign's launch in April-May 1968, this was one of the few meetings that brought these kinds of leaders together beforehand.

Watch the video here: <https://vimeo.com/54324518>

We are assembled here together today with common problems. Bringing together ethnic groups that maybe have not been together in this type of meeting in the past. I know I haven't been in a meeting like this. And it has been one of my dreams that we would come together and realize our common problems...Power for poor people will really mean having the ability, the togetherness, the assertiveness, and the aggressiveness to make the power structure of this nation say yes when they may be desirous of saying no.

Discussion question

1. Rev. Dr. King says that: "Power for poor people will really mean having the ability, the togetherness, the assertiveness, and the aggressiveness" to win much-needed changes.

Do we have those things in our organizations and networks today? What do we need to do to encourage those qualities? What role could a New Poor People's Campaign play in that?