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United States: Legacy of “Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble”—John Lewis tells today’s activists

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“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

— A tweet from June 2019

John Robert Lewis died on July 17 in Atlanta, Georgia, at the age of 80. He was born on February 21, 1939, in the segregated town of Troy, Alabama. His parents were sharecroppers.

His death marked the last member of the civil rights leadership known as the “Big Six.” He was the youngest leader as the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), formed in 1960.

He led lunch counter sit-ins to desegregate diners in Nashville, Tennessee in 1960. The next year he was a founding leader of the “Freedom Rides” to desegregate public transportation across the South. His first arrests and beatings occurred then.

Living continuity of popular movements

Black lives uprising leaders stand on the shoulders of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Lewis’ life reflects the power of that revolutionary leadership and its inspiration to today’s new leaders.

Although Lewis became a part of the Democratic Party establishment as an elected member of Congress for three decades beginning in 1986, he lived for over 20 years as a community leader in the Jim Crow South where whites saw African Americans as less than human.

Lewis lived an extraordinary life to his death. He fought legal segregation in the South in his youth and joined the Black Lives protests this year in the Capital. He was a living continuity of the two popular struggles. He knew racism when he saw it.

He refused to attend the inauguration of Donald Trump and criticized Trump as the racist president and white nationalist.

Lewis believed in the nonviolent teachings of the Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi. He left Alabama as a teen to attend a seminary college in Nashville, Tennessee, and was trained in nonviolence philosophy and strategy.

He became chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1963, then affiliated to Martin Luther King Jr's Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). SNCC was seen by the leaders of the movement as the "shock troops of the revolution."

Lewis, age 23, spoke at the 1963 March on Washington. He gave a militant speech demanding the government act now for freedom.

Yet his speech was weakened by the leadership to appease President Kennedy.

The unedited 1963 speech

The night before the march, the speech was mistakenly leaked to the press, and as word of its contents began to spread, Lewis was summoned to a meeting with the march's leaders and urged to tone down certain elements. Lewis edited his harsh criticism of the Kennedy administration's civil rights bill, which he'd originally called "too little and too late," and changed his call for a march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did" to a march "with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today."

In his unedited speech, he said, "I want to know, which side is the federal government on?"

"The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery. The nonviolent revolution is saying, 'We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure, that could and would assure us a victory.'

"To those who have said, 'Be patient and wait,' we must say that 'patience' is a dirty and nasty word. We cannot be patient; we do not want to be free gradually. We want our freedom, and we want it now. We cannot depend on any political party, for both the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence."

He continued:

"All of us must get in the revolution. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete. In the Delta of Mississippi, in southwest Georgia, in Alabama, Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march!

"We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Bameett, Wallace and Thurmond [segregationist officials in the South] won't stop this revolution. The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own scorched earth policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently. We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy. We will make the action of the past few months look petty. And I say to you, WAKE UP AMERICA!"

Lewis met the great revolutionary nationalist Malcolm X the day before his speech, and again in a

trip to Africa in 1964. Lewis said he and other SNCC leaders had “great respect” for Malcolm. Malcolm was assassinated in 1965.

Lewis noted in an interview in 1988 about his meeting Malcolm that Blacks in the South were focused on the battle to overturn legal segregation and win basic rights. He said Northern Blacks suffered from a different racism—de facto discrimination.

Voting Rights Act

The Democratic Party at the time was an alliance of Northern liberals and Southern white supremacist racists in the Jim Crow South. That unholy alliance gave John F. Kennedy the 1960 presidential election. The Southern Democrats were okay so long as the Democratic Party did not demand it allow Blacks the right to vote and other freedoms.

The student youth rejected that alliance. The traditional leaders, however, were conscious of the support from white liberals.

SNCC leaders, including Lewis, represented the militant uncompromising wing of the movement and did not back down in its criticism of the Kennedy administration.

Lewis had been arrested 45 times in his life—some 40 times when battling Jim Crow segregation.

He was beaten bloody numerous times by cops, state troopers and white supremacists including at the infamous March 7, 1965 “Bloody Sunday” march in Selma, Alabama. Some 600 demonstrators peacefully walked across Edmund Pettus Bridge, named after a Confederate general and former head of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. Lewis was 25.

“I gave a little blood on that bridge,” he said years later. “I thought I was going to die. I thought I saw death.”

The Democrats in Washington decided to act after broad public and international outrage. President Johnson pushed through the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Its significance was revolutionary.

Although on paper Blacks had the right to vote after the 13th Amendment was adopted in 1865 that ended slavery, it was up to the states to implement the new constitutional rights.

What happened instead was these rights for former slaves lasted 12 years when the Union army left the South. White nationalists organized a counter revolution. Using extralegal terror and legal institutions they controlled, Blacks lost every positive change during the period of Radical Reconstruction.

Lewis and the civil rights leaders knew this history. His demand in the 1963 speech for nonviolent revolution NOW was widely supported by the movement.

In 1966 Lewis lost his chairmanship of SNCC to Stokely Carmichael who represented the left-wing of the organization. Carmichael demanded “Black Power.” Soon afterwards, Lewis resigned from the organization. Groups like the Black Panther Party were later formed connecting the fight for equality to the struggle of Black workers against their super exploitation by the employing class.

It took the civil rights revolution to win the main legal demands of the movement. Three historic laws—1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act and 1968 Housing Act—opened society to a new reality where African Americans could finally live anywhere in the country and even vote.

Those three laws ended the bond between southern Dixiecrats and the Democratic Party. President Nixon and the Republican Party embraced the white segregationists in the 1970s. Overnight a majority of southern whites switched their allegiance from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. The Party of Lincoln that crushed the Confederacy became the party of racism.

Legal equality not enough

Yet the debate continued in the broader Black movement over would legal equality lead to Freedom Now.

Lewis and others who fought for legal equality in a nonviolent revolution shifted their focus to joining the institutions like the two-party system that Blacks had been excluded from.

King, on the other hand, decided to keep the movement for change in the streets arguing that formal legality meant little without economic power. He began organizing a Poor People's Campaign and against the advice of allies began opposing the US war in Vietnam.

King was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a strike of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee.

Afterwards the divisions between the more moderate wing of the movement and militant nationalists hardened, It led eventually to further shift from the streets by the civil rights establishment. Blacks over the next decade won hundreds of elected positions to city, state and even Congress.

The Black Nationalist and Black Power wing rejected that objective of integration into the capitalist system. They had been influenced by the ideas of Malcolm X and African independence leaders, and some the leaders of the Cuban revolution, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

It is not unusual that leading activists in a democratic revolutionary struggle to become more moderate when the main legal demands are won even though the fundamental change to the economic system has not occurred.

The BLM movement today is at the head of the democratic struggle to end policing and systemic racism. There is more understanding that to end policing (abolish and defund) requires mass struggle. It cannot wait for a new president in November.

The young revolutionary Lewis believed in 1963 that Freedom Now could not wait for whites and others who said take it slow. Today's youth recognize that same belief, which is why the mass uprising has not slowed down.

The uprising is being led by Blacks but has been joined by other oppressed national minorities and whites at levels rarely seen since the 1960s.

Too often progress is made then derailed, reversed, or overwhelmed by powerful reactionary forces. Bloody Sunday led directly to the passage of the Voting Rights Act--and yet suppressing the Black vote is a pillar of today's Republican Party strategy. The election of the first African American President was followed by a bigot running for election, and now reelection, on a platform of racism and resentment.

The continuity of Lewis life from 1960 to 2020 is he understood that Freedom had not been won as the pandemic of coronavirus is showing, African Americans, Latinos and indigenous people were being hit the hardest because of structural inequalities.

John Lewis understood that gains won in the past had been eroded and could only be defended by more agitation and popular struggle.

It is why the democratic revolutionaries of today can salute his life and vision that being a good troublemaker and breaking immoral laws is the first steps toward full equality.

And, an end to systemic racism will require an anti-capitalist revolution.

Malik Miah
