

Civil Rights Struggles in the US - The Evolution of Dr. King

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By the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr was an avowed socialist.

Virtually every Democratic Party politician, black or white, claims the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

Conveniently forgotten is the fact that in the final years of his life, before his assassination in 1968, King broke with Democratic President Lyndon Johnson over the Vietnam War and the administration's failure to enforce civil rights legislation in the South. That's something no Democrats of national stature have been willing to do today.

While the reforms advocated by King for most of his life were mild compared to the demands of the more radical black nationalists, they were nevertheless condemned by the same Democrats who have since tried to turn King into a heroic icon and a symbol of black accommodation to the system.

In order to understand King's eventual shift to the left, it's necessary to look at the class struggles that underpinned the civil rights movement and the nature of King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

When King emerged as a leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950s [\[1\]](#), he was at the forefront of a local movement whose example was followed in dozens of other Southern cities in subsequent years. The organization he helped found, SCLC, established several field offices, but it was essentially a group of professional organizers who typically moved from city to city to be involved in struggles initiated by local black students, workers, and farmers.

SCLC's aim was not to help these activists develop independently, but rather to lead them into nonviolent confrontation with segregationists and the brutal cops and state police who backed up Jim Crow law. According to SCLC leaders such as Hosea Williams and Wyatt T. Walker [\[2\]](#), the federal government would then be forced to intervene to support civil rights activists in order to stop the mayhem.

At first, the strategy seemed to work. A Supreme Court decision supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott. President Kennedy introduced civil rights legislation after Birmingham, AL cops repeatedly attacked SCLC-organized marches in 1963, and the bill became law a year later. Bloody confrontations in St Augustine, FL [\[3\]](#) and Selma, AL prodded Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, to push the Voting Rights Act of 1965 through Congress.

Kennedy and Johnson supported civil rights only when they believed it was necessary to stave off more militant black rebellion. They had no wish to alienate the powerful Southern Dixiecrat wing of their party. King and the SCLC's protests could be tolerated as long as they remained "nonviolent," were limited to fighting segregation in the South, and did not challenge racist economic

discrimination rooted in US capitalism.

But by 1965, King's credibility among Southern activists was waning. The SCLC's habit of arriving in town in the midst of a struggle, grabbing the media spotlight, and negotiating a settlement irritated both local blacks and the increasingly radical members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who were trying to help Southern blacks develop their own leadership.

Meanwhile, black nationalist Malcolm X rightly argued that the nonviolence advocated by King and the SCLC exposed blacks to attack by police and racist thugs.

Criticism of King reached a new peak in Selma in 1965, where police tear-gassed and clubbed activists who were attempting to march to the state capital in Montgomery. When a second march was organized, police didn't block it. But King led marchers back into Selma rather than defy a court injunction. This retreat, along with King's acceptance of token concessions from Selma politicians, was denounced as a sellout by radicals.

Differences spilled into the open a year later after James Meredith [\[4\]](#), the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi, was gunned down during his solo protest march across the state. King and SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael [\[5\]](#) (later known as Kwame Ture) were among the civil rights leaders who joined several hundred activists to complete Meredith's march in the summer of 1966.

Hounded by racist thugs and brutal cops every step of the way, angry marchers eagerly joined Carmichael's impromptu chant of "Black Power" and listened intently to his nationalist ideas. While King refused to join more conservative black civil rights leaders in attacking the Black Power slogan as racist, he refused to support it on the grounds that it implied violence and would alienate potential white support.

"We've got to transform our movement into a positive and creative power," he said when asked his opinion of Carmichael. To black militants, King was viewed as a sellout. But to Democratic liberals, worried by the influence of black nationalist ideas and widespread black rebellions in Northern cities, King's position seemed a virtual endorsement of Black Power.

King recognized that he was trying to bridge an ever-widening gap. "The government has got to give me some victories if I'm going to keep people nonviolent," he said. In fact, King would soon confront the Northern Democrats as an open enemy. Since the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had formally abolished the last of the Southern Jim Crow segregation laws, King and SCLC turned their attention to the increasingly militant Northern blacks.

King's final break with Johnson came in April 1967 when King called for the US to pull out of its "colonial" war in Vietnam.

While a number of important Democratic senators had already turned against the war, most top civil rights leaders continued to support the administration. Liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which had usually been sympathetic to King during the civil rights struggles in the South, attacked him for his antiwar stand.

A vengeful Johnson allowed the FBI to step up its long-term harassment of King and other SCLC leaders. The president was outraged when he learned of King's plans to lead a Poor People's March on Washington to close down the US Capitol [\[6\]](#).

Johnson and the Democrats had come to rely on King's nonviolent tactics and his support for their party as an important counterweight to the growing numbers of radicals in the rising Black Power

revolt. When King denounced the war in 1967, the Democrats regarded him as a traitor.

Yet King's break with the Democrats did not earn him the support of blacks in the North, where street rebellions swept every major city in the country. The politics of the more radical black nationalists — particularly their advocacy of self-defense in the face of racist violence — seemed to speak more to the struggle in these circumstances.

Attacked from both left and right, King was forced to rethink his career and the organization he led, the SCLC. "We must admit there was a limitation of our achievement in the South," he told a meeting of the SCLC board in 1967. SCLC would have to call for a "radical redistribution of wealth and power." On several occasions, King told his aides that the US needed a democratic socialism that would guarantee jobs and income for all.

Other SCLC leaders, such as Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, and Ralph Abernathy, were hostile to plans for the Poor People's March. The SCLC's Southern field offices had been neglected during an ill-fated attempt to organize against housing segregation in Chicago, and the group's Northern offices were even weaker.

Moreover, the plan clashed with the black capitalist orientation of SCLC's Operation Breadbasket [7], directed by Jackson. "If you are so interested in doing your own thing that you can't do what the organization is structured to do, go ahead," King said in response to Jackson's criticism of the march. "If you want to carve out your own niche in society, go ahead, but for God's sake, don't bother me!"

Still, the Democrats saw betrayal in King's Poor People's Campaign — while the right wing declared it proved their longtime claim that King was a Communist. These elements, encouraged by the presidential campaign of segregationist Alabama Gov. George Wallace, publicly threatened King's life.

Faced with hostility from the Johnson administration, criticism from both black nationalists and the black establishment, and a divided staff, King was politically isolated as never before when he was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968 — less than three weeks before the Poor People's Campaign was to begin. King had travelled to Memphis to support a strike by black sanitation workers — he was the only national civil rights leader to do so.

Yet it wasn't long after his death that the media hacks of the ruling class began to convert King into a harmless saint.

To do this, however, they had to bury the real legacy of Martin Luther King — both the leader of the critical early struggles of the civil rights movement who refused to accept pleas for patience and moderation from his liberal Democratic allies, and the more radical black leader of the late 1960s whose vision of what needed to be changed in society had widened enormously.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 01.18.2016:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/01/martin-luther-king-socialist/>

* Lee Sustar is the labor editor for Socialist Worker, where this first appeared.

Footnotes

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montgomery_bus_boycott

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hosea_Williams

[3] <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96516146/>

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Meredith

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stokely_Carmichael

[6] <http://www.upi.com/Archives/Audio/Events-of-1968/Poor-Peoples-March/>

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Breadbasket