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Our history

MLK: To the Promised Land

- Features -

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Michael K. Honey is the author of the new study, *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice*, to be published on the 50th anniversary of King's April 4, 1968 assassination. He was interviewed by Charles Williams of the *Against the Current* editorial board. Their discussion of Michael Honey's earlier book *Going Down Jericho Road* is [here](#).

Against the Current: What is the significance of calling this book *To the Promised Land*?

Michael Honey: I wanted to present a different view of Martin Luther King, Jr. that focuses on his lifelong quest for economic justice for working and poor people.

He said that the civil rights movement and the voting rights struggle were just part one of the freedom movement, to get rights that should have been ours to begin with, namely the post-Civil War 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution and the civil rights laws of Reconstruction. But civil and voting rights by themselves do not produce equality.

In his formative years as an undergraduate student at Morehouse in the '40s and a graduate student at Boston University in the '50s, King saw a big problem with capitalism and the way capitalism is organized in the United States. He wrote to Coretta Scott in 1952 that he sought "a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color." He got more radical from there.

The title *To the Promised Land* comes from his last speech on April 3, 1968, the night before he was killed in Memphis, in which he concluded, "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

It's a pretty well-known speech, and of course his church audience in Memphis knew that it is about Moses looking out from a mountain, seeing freedom in the future, and then dying the next day. That would be April 4, when King was killed.

King's speech had a huge impact on the people who were there. But what is the larger meaning? The Promised Land is not equal opportunity capitalism. The Promised Land is social and economic justice and a better life for all.

The book fills in how economic transformation was part of King's message all along. He saw that there is no way we can affect this larger problem of American capitalism and racism without disturbing and remaking the economic order.

ATC: So your aim was to combine the larger political analysis with King's own personal experience?

MH: To me, it's very significant that King's framework from the beginning is very strongly based in his own family's struggle to get free of slavery and the consequences of slavery. In the first chapter, I situated his perspective in his family's history in slavery.

We remember King as a man in a suit and tie, being very eloquent at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, but you have to

remember that he's only one generation removed from sharecroppers, and only two generations removed from slavery.

This is his family. The struggle against racial capitalism in the North and Jim Crow capitalism in the South was not some abstraction. King's family lived that struggle.

King also read W.E.B. Du Bois, Marx, Gandhi, Howard Thurman, and others who saw the racial problem as a world problem of imperialism and racial domination by European nations of African and Latin American and Asian nations.

King's framework wasn't so different from Malcolm X in terms of how he saw the world, except that they differed completely on how to bring about change. King said that means and ends had to be consistent: If you want peace, follow nonviolence. Malcolm said you could never have a revolution with nonviolence. King said you could never truly change the human condition without it.

Clayborne Carson and the Martin Luther King Papers Project at Stanford University have documented that King was saying these things early on. There are a lot of things you could criticize about King, but it's important, 50 years since his death, to fully appreciate both the person and his political strategy in trying to move things onto the next level.

So the economic justice framework of this book is an attempt to get people to understand him that way, not only as a civil rights leader but as a human rights revolutionary.

Jericho and Memphis

ATC: I want to come back to that political strategy, but maybe you could first say a little more about how To the Promised Land fits with your previous work on King and especially with your book, Going Down Jericho Road?

MH: The title Going Down Jericho Road is also from his last speech. King used the story of the Good Samaritan repeatedly in many of his speeches and sermons.

It's the Bible story of a poor person from a different and despised race traveling down a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, finding somebody of the dominant race by the side of the road who had been beaten and robbed.

All the rich people and ministers passed this man by, afraid to stop and help him. And the Samaritan, who would maybe be similar to an African American in King's time, seen as lower caste and lower class, stops and saves this man's life.

On April 3, the night before his own death, King says this is the model we should follow. He calls it "dangerous unselfishness." It's a mode of operation about how we should conduct ourselves in the world, even at our own peril.

We might think that revolutionaries should die on the barricades, but King said we should be willing to die for the cause but also to save someone else. King said not "self preservation" but "other preservation" is the first law of life. This goes completely against the greed and selfishness of capitalism and the current occupant of the White House.

Going Down Jericho Road was primarily about the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike, but it goes back to all these same issues. King came to Memphis engaged in the Poor People's Campaign, calling for a redistribution of wealth away from war and the enrichment of a few to housing, health care, education, and decent jobs and income for all.

King said that the richest nation in world history has the means to end poverty and racial-economic inequality. It was true then and remains true today. The trillions spent on forever wars, tax breaks for the wealthy and Wall Street bailouts could have been used to end poverty once and for all.

Following his own prescription, when James Lawson asked King to come to Memphis to support a strike by impoverished Black sanitation workers, he readily agreed. His staff said we can't go to Memphis and get involved in the local struggle because it will involve you in a whole set of new circumstances.

That is how King ended up in jail in so many different communities. They'd bring him in and he'd be the speaker, the next thing you know he's leading a march, the next thing you know he's in jail. That's exactly what happened in Memphis.

In his first speech in Memphis on March 18, the one his staff didn't want him to make, he said "You know, you people are really well organized here." It was a fantastic meeting, it was a packed house at Mason Temple, and he said "You ought to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis."

The audience went crazy. Everybody knows in the Black community that if Black people stopped working the city would stop, because they're doing 80% of the laboring jobs. So when he called for a general strike he had to come back, because they want him to lead it. In effect, King became a labor leader in Memphis.

That is why he was there on April 3. In between was March 28, when he came back to lead a mass march and it turned into a police riot. It was a police riot and the wanton police murder of 16-year old Larry Payne, followed by National Guard occupation of the Black community.

Like the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, you have to know the whole story of what happened in Memphis to really understand the trajectory of King. So I give that story in *To the Promised Land*, but I also connect King to the labor movement and the working-class people that were always a part of his framework.

Yes, he was a highly regarded minister with perfect diction in a suit, but he was also a revolutionary for racial and economic justice who understood the plight of working-class and poor people. I'm trying to provide a different way of seeing King for people who think of him always as a civil rights leader.

Race and Class Politics

ATC: Along those lines, your discussion of King's early years highlights his ties to a vanguard of activists committed to what you describe as a combined race and class politics, for instance Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Stanley Levison and A. Philip Randolph. Is that one of the ways that you see the book challenging some common assumptions about King's trajectory?

MH: They were all really crucial to King's evolution as a movement leader, and most of them are totally unknown to most people. Others would be Ralph Helstein, the president of the United Packinghouse Workers, Cleveland

Robinson of District 65 in New York City, and numerous others in labor's left.

King developed close ties with union people who embraced what historian Bob Korstad calls "civil rights unionism." It tied civil rights advances in the 1940s South to organizing unions, particularly unions with a large percentage of Black workers.

The very first groups to come to the aid of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56 were the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, headed by A. Philip Randolph, and the United Packinghouse Workers.

In my earlier writings and research, I document how civil rights unions in the 1930s and 1940s, in Memphis and other southern places, built organization on the framework of "Black and white unite and fight." This was not a naïve dream.

Communists such as Herbert March, a white ethnic organizer, and various Black and white workers on the left rebuilt the Packinghouse union, which had been previously smashed by racial division, by placing equal rights at the forefront of their campaigns.

They fought for open housing for Black workers in Chicago in the late 1940s, and they had Black and ethnic women in leadership as well. And lo and behold, who provides the real funding for the beginning of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference after the Montgomery Bus Boycott? The United Packinghouse Workers of America.

The UAW too was not so much a left union, but it had a very strong civil rights framework "although as you well know from your own research on the auto industry, they didn't do a good job in racially integrating higher-paid jobs or the union leadership. Nonetheless, Walter Reuther was a powerful ally for King.

By the time of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, King had strong linkages to left-led unions, including the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), District 65 hotel and warehouse workers union, and 1199 that organized drugstore and hospital workers in New York City.

In *To the Promised Land*, I try to bring in these relationships so that people understand King's framework of a civil rights-labor alliance. It was the idea that if you could get the majority of working class people organized and have a civil rights framework that went with it, you would have a majority coalition in the United States for changing Congress, for changing the presidency.

It made a lot of sense then, because almost a third of American workers belonged to unions, and the civil rights movement was the powerful movement of the early '60s.

In the later '60s, some of the problems with that approach became much more evident. White backlash against the upheavals sparked by white police violence in the big cities, the campaigns of segregationists like George Wallace and right-winger Barry Goldwater, and the increasingly divisive effects of the escalating Vietnam War undermined the hopes for that labor-civil rights alliance. And soon American industries began to pack up and move to the non-union South or overseas or to Mexico.

These conditions undermined the unions and King's power base, as we so well know today. That is why King moved on to the Poor People's Campaign framework, which was to organize the unemployed poor and the working poor in a multi-racial coalition to demand the government spend money for jobs, health care, education and housing instead of spending for war and to benefit the wealthy and white.

ATC: Could you expand a little more on some of the successes and limitations of this civil-rights labor alliance? For instance, you talk about the Scripto strike in Atlanta as an interesting example.

MH: The Scripto strike began in December of 1964. King was just coming back from getting the Nobel Prize in Sweden. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, his organization, had been working with people in Atlanta at the Scripto factory, the biggest pen and pencil manufacturer in the United States, just down the street from where King grew up and from his church, Ebenezer Baptist.

There were a few white skilled workers and six Black skilled workers, none of whom supported a strike, but about 800 Black women, many of whom went to Ebenezer, asked King for support. They won the strike in large part because King and the civil rights movement came to their support.

It also came to light that while the AFL-CIO did support the strike, rank-and-file white workers were very dubious. All over the South and the North, white workers presented a problem for the labor-civil rights coalition. As one of the white workers told AFSCME organizer William Lucy in Memphis, "I'll support the strike, but if it becomes a NAACP thing, I'm out."

In Atlanta too, white workers didn't see the strike as civil rights unionism. As long as it was a pure and simple trade union battle, then you could get white workers to support it. But if it started getting into the areas of "let's desegregate the skilled trades" or "let's deal with inequality at the workplace," then many white workers would bail out.

Historian Bruce Nelson called this "Divided We Stand." This came up in Atlanta in the Scripto strike, but took a much worse form in the Birmingham, Alabama desegregation struggle in 1963. White workers led a lot of the really vicious, violent attacks against black workers.

Some white union members in the Steelworkers Union joined the Ku Klux Klan and even the John Birch Society. These totally anti-labor organizations had a lot of white working class members in the Deep South.

Anticommunism and the Vietnam War

ATC: You also touch on domestic anticommunism and then the war in Vietnam as obstacles to building this kind of political coalition. Can you comment on those developments?

MH: Coupled with white racial reaction, many whites, North and South, bought into the anticommunist fervor of the Cold War. As Black worker Leroy Boyd told me in Memphis, if a white man was called a Communist it meant that he was a civil rights supporter.

Anticommunism usually did not faze Black workers, but many white workers fell for it. For King it became just a huge problem of how to develop true labor-civil rights solidarity under those circumstances. King supported union people everywhere, including in predominantly white unions, but the way forward would always end up being very complicated.

In addition, racists and the FBI bitterly denounced King himself as a Communist. I wanted to make sure to get into this book the devastating nature of anticommunism in this period.

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It started out when he spoke at the Highlander Folk School in 1957. Somebody came in from the Georgia Education Commission secretly taking pictures, and they took a picture of King along with Rosa Parks and Abner Berry, who was a reporter for the Communist Party's Daily Worker.

Then the Georgia Education Commission published this as "King at a Communist training school," which Highlander was not. Highlander was called Communist because it allowed interracial meetings and it was one place in the South where Black and white people could get together.

They took this picture and reproduced it in pamphlets all over the country. The John Birch Society put it on billboards and eventually sent out postcards. So there was a whole movement on the ultra-right from early on to destroy King as a leader by using anticommunism. It went on throughout his whole life.

One of the little vignettes in the book is about King speaking in Detroit in March of 1968 and being confronted by this group called Breakthrough, led by Donald Lobsinger. They surrounded the meeting with pickets. Then they came inside and shouted him down, "King, you're a traitor."

In one earlier encounter in Birmingham, somebody from the American Nazi party walked up and slugged him in the face, and then hit him in the stomach. The same guy showed up in Chicago to attack him later on.

So he was subjected to these assaults. When he led an open housing campaign in 1966, a white mob in Chicago that included Nazis would have liked to have killed him.

James Lawson says that anticommunism was another form of racism. If you're Martin Luther King and stand up for all the things he stood up for, of course you're a "communist."

King was intimidated by this, especially early in his life, but he didn't do what a lot of liberals did, which was join in and make yourself acceptable by mouthing all these anticommunist absurdities. He stood up for the rights and civil liberties of people like Frank Wilkinson and Carl Braden, victimized and sent to prison by the House Un-American Activities Committee for refusing to name names.

Then, of course, somehow these peasants in Vietnam, 10,000 miles away, were seen as a threat to the United States. King knew about the history of Vietnam. He knew it was an anti-colonial struggle, and that the United States had taken the place of France and was suppressing the Vietnamese independence movement, so he never fell for this anticommunist framework.

He also philosophically stated repeatedly that he didn't agree with communism, or any form of dictatorial state socialism. He was a socialist, though. He believed in the social gospel, which is that the wealth should be distributed to end poverty. Like Jesus said.

He agreed with a lot of Marx's critique of capitalism. He also understood the nuances in coming up against a white supremacist society in places like Birmingham, Alabama or Memphis, Tennessee, where the anticommunist and racist drumbeat had penetrated deeply into white society "and it would be directed at him.

Every time he would get into a movement, it would become a life-threatening situation, and that's finally what happened in Memphis.

Isolation and Seeking Direction

ATC: There's also a sense in your book of King feeling isolated in the later 1960s, to some extent caught between Black nationalist politics and the New Left on one hand and the limitations of the AFL-CIO and his hoped for "civil rights unionism" on the other. Is that a fair reading of where King was by the late '60s, struggling to figure out where to go next?

MH: Yes. In '67 he published his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, dealing with that question. Black Power came to the fore during the March Against Fear in Mississippi in 1966, as he and Stokely Carmichael and others tried to walk in a civil rights march through Mississippi without getting killed.

James Meredith had led a one-person march and was shot in the back, so they picked up his campaign and thousands of people joined. Stokely decided to use this racially polarized situation to launch the Black Power slogan.

I say in the book that the media would have served us much better to talk about the structural economic critique that Black Power offered to American capitalism. It was the same critique that Dr. King offered. Instead, the mass media focused on Black Power versus nonviolence as a slogan or a philosophy or a way of life, and on racial polarization.

Stokely was trying to move things forward into a new phase of the movement, and King was doing the same thing. But the media posed Black Power and nonviolence as two opposed ideas, and of course they weren't.

King was not against Black Power. But he said that to have a mass movement succeed you have to have nonviolent discipline, because you're never going to beat the people with guns, which is the U.S. military and the police state. It's not that nonviolence is so morally superior, it's the only way to get anywhere politically in the United States.

A lot of us believed in armed self-defense against police violence in particular. King never said somebody shouldn't defend themselves if the police were attacking their home or their family. He was talking about when you're in a mass movement, you don't go out there with guns, because that's self-defeating.

But in the New Left movement these things kind of got obscured. It became sort of common among a lot of us to say "Well, nonviolence is over," and "King is old-fashioned and he's still talking about the social gospel," when we're talking about national liberation and socialism and the Cuban revolution and the Vietnamese revolution and Frantz Fanon, and so on.

In my opinion now, and somewhat then too, that was kind of a romantic revolutionary point of view. King was not a romantic revolutionary. He saw that this was not the way we were going to bring change.

So, he didn't pick fights with people in the New Left. He tried to win them over by saying "Look, let's get a strategy that we can all agree on that will move things forward."

ATC: And that's where the Poor People's Campaign came in?

MH: For a time he thought the anti-Vietnam War movement would fulfill that mass coalition strategy. He threw himself into leadership of the movement against the war, but then he found a lot of allies falling away, particularly in the civil rights movement.

He didn't change his position on the war, but he started rethinking the strategy. He concluded, based on some comments from Robert Kennedy, that trying to bring forward a movement of the poor to end poverty would unite almost everybody into a majority coalition.

There were about 40 million poor people in United States at that time, in the so-called prosperous '60s. He thought that the economic basis existed to either create jobs or provide income. Beginning in 1965 he campaigned around an economic Bill of Rights. It would consist of health, housing, education and jobs, to sustain people's welfare.

Money for war would be redirected into money for the social good, and if you did that you could end poverty. That is what he was hoping for with the Poor People's Campaign: Let's move the New Left, let's move the students, let's move the labor movement, and the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and talk about radically reforming this capitalist society.

You could say King was a revolutionary, but not in the way we normally think of a revolutionary. He wanted a revolution in morality and a revolution in values, and he thought if you could do that, then the other things would start to fall into place.

At the time, I thought of this as a somewhat anemic approach when we needed drastic structural reforms. But now I think his values argument puts us in a larger framework. If you adopt a nonviolence framework, and that of the Good Samaritan, then you would govern accordingly. You would leave nobody out.

He also felt that to get anywhere we have to elect people to office that are willing to move in that direction. What made that difficult was not only the Vietnam War, polarization in the New Left, and schisms with labor, but in 1966 there was a midterm congressional election where Congress shifted decidedly toward the Republicans.

King had thought what he called "Goldwaterism" was defeated with the election of Lyndon Johnson as President in 1964, but the radical right was just getting started. It was also the time of George Wallace running around the country with very divisive racial rhetoric, running for president in '64 and '68 and '72 and getting a lot of white working-class votes — sort of Trump before there was Trump.

So by the time King was organizing the Poor People's Campaign in early '68, he faced a very entrenched Congress with a powerful Republican and right-wing tilt. If he had lived, I don't how this would have turned out. It's not likely that he would have won any big victories.

ATC: Another topic you take up in discussing the Poor People's Campaign is the National Welfare Rights Organization. That highlights another thread in the book, which is the importance of women to the Black liberation movement.

MH: A lot of people on the left, including myself, feel uncomfortable about the King story because it's so male-centric. He comes out of a ministerial tradition where the men seemingly run everything, but where actually the women do a lot of the work and make up more than half of the audience in church. Yet they don't get to run things at the top.

King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference worked well in a lot of ways because the church was so powerful in the Black community. But what about the fact that, for instance, women make up the majority of the bus riders in the Montgomery Bus Boycott? These are the people who ride the bus to the homes of white people.

In the Memphis sanitation strike, the wives of the strikers have to keep their families together while the strike is going

on. The women are the ones who lead the boycott of the downtown businesses. That's true in Birmingham too.

By contrast to SCLC, in SNCC women like Fanny Lou Hamer played an out front role. So in our historiography of the freedom movement, we've tried in many different ways to highlight the role of women, because it should be highlighted.

Myles Horton of Highlander said that one of King's problems was that he was kind of a one-man institution, charismatic and traveling around, with people looking to him as a savior. Ella Baker sharply criticized this model of leadership.

Yet Myles said on the other hand that King was always learning and changing. One moment in that was in February '68, when King met with the Welfare Rights Organization in Chicago, and they talked to him about what he wasn't saying about welfare rights and about women. They did not like his male model of leadership and they challenged him.

He actually had been talking about the plight of women on welfare, but when Johnnie Tillman, the president of the National Welfare Rights Organization, told him he needed to know the details of welfare legislation going on in Congress, King said, "You're right, we don't know about welfare. Please tell us about it, we're here to learn."

Subsequently, the National Welfare Rights Organization led the first big demonstration during the Poor People's Campaign on Mother's Day, May 12. And women became the majority of the activists coming out of the Deep South going to Washington D.C.

It would have been interesting if that poor people's campaign had continued on. Women would of course be at the forefront of any poor people's movement. Priscilla Nadasen and other movement scholars have documented the powerful role of welfare rights activists in the 1970s and beyond.

Assassination and Aftermath

ATC: Can you say a little more about how events played out in Memphis with the strike and King's death?

MH: This April 4 will be 50 years since King was killed in the Memphis sanitation strike. There will be a week of activity in Memphis and in Atlanta, not because we're hero-worshipping King but because the events at that time are an epochal part of our movement history.

As we know, 1968 was an incredible year with attempted revolutions all over the globe. And in the South, the Memphis strike brought forward something that the civil rights movement hadn't brought forward in quite the same way.

Some 1300 workers walked off the job, led not by the union but led by themselves, over the combined devastating effects of poverty and racism and their lack of any rights at all on the job. All these workers were Black and all the supervisors were white, and treated them with disrespect in the Jim Crow tradition.

People classified as casual workers could be fired at any time. They could come into work one day and the employer would say sorry, go home. Their wages were below poverty. They were subject to constant injury and no

compensation. A lot of the workers' families were on welfare, so they were working full time but still on welfare.

The needless deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker due to unsafe equipment on February 1 touched off the strike that began on February 12. The slogan and picket sign "I Am a Man" came out of a series of police attacks against them. Mace had never been used on civilians. It was developed for war, and on February 23 the police sprayed marchers in the face with it and beat up a lot of people. The police, almost all white at that time, were taking revenge against the civil rights movement.

King had been saying the Black community needed more than civil rights, it also needed union justice. In Memphis Black people never lost the vote, although it was manipulated and controlled, but what they didn't have was any way of exercising their human rights on the job.

King understood this situation immediately when he came to Memphis to support them on March 18. Remarkably, he called for a general strike of Black workers against the city of Memphis. These workers wanted union recognition, and recognition to them meant to recognize their human rights.

That '68 strike was a new thing for the civil rights movement. In Memphis you see an uprising of the working poor, with poor people taking charge. King had the good sense to see the importance of that and he declared the Poor People's Campaign would start in Memphis.

As I already noted, when King returned to lead a general strike on March 28, police attacked marchers again, killed Larry Payne, and set off a wave of violence in the streets.

When King came back to lead a mass nonviolent march, he was assassinated on April 4. Riots broke out in over 100 cities and the United States experienced the largest mobilization of military force to suppress domestic rebellion since the Civil War.

Fifty years later, workers all over the country will remember the importance of these events. Today, sanitation workers are in difficult straits because all public sector workers are. The ruling business interests, led by Scott Walker in Wisconsin and the Koch brothers and many others, are trying to use the misnamed "right to work" laws to wipe out unions by wiping out union dues.

The industrial unions that Memphis had in '68 are mostly gone now. Memphis remains one of the poorest cities of its size in the country. That poverty partly comes down to the fact that most workers still need a union.

That is true all over the country. We need unions more than ever to counter the racial and economic inequality, poverty, and mistreatment suffered by working-class people.

ATC: Along with those April events, is another important development the present effort to relaunch a Poor People's Campaign?

MH: Reverend William Barber and others are reviving this, and it's a great idea. Fifty years since King we still have 40 million poor people in America, and a lot more who are almost poor. The Poor People's Campaign, like a lot of King's ideas, deserves to be revisited. We need to rebuild his campaign to spend money for jobs, not for war; to attack the evil triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism.

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We need to go back to his vision of a promised land, in which every person is respected, educated, housed, and provided adequate and affordable health care. “All labor has dignity,” King said in Memphis. We need to make that idea a reality in the USA. It is the richest and most unequal country in the world today, and that is a shame.

“It is a crime for people to live in this rich country and receive starvation wages,” King said in Memphis. We need to see the connection between labor and civil rights issues that King talked about all of his adult life.

We need to bring the threads together to see labor and the freedom movement, civil rights, equal rights for all people, all up and down the line, as things that should all work together toward radical reform of American capitalism. Or call it a moral revolution as Dr. King did.

I don't believe in hero worship, but I think we still have a lot to learn from Martin Luther King, Jr.

[Against the Current](#)