Norman Thomas, leader of the American Socialist Party and six times its presidential candidate, had long advocated social and racial justice. After the bus boycott began he cautioned colleagues that the presence of northern activists in Montgomery, white or black, would tend to discredit the local movement and further alienate the white community. As this letter indicates, he believed their proper role was to build support and raise funds in the North. King responded with a brief note on 27 April, apologizing for his “long delay in answering” and expressing gratitude “for your wonderful spirit in the situation we are presently facing.”

Rev. Martin L. King
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church
Montgomery, Alabama

Dear Mr. King:

I am not surprised to read that you were convicted in that court. It seems to me that your lawyers are pursuing all the way the proper tactics and I want you to know my very deep admiration for the great service the Negroes in Montgomery are rendering to liberty in America and the world, not only by standing for the rights of human beings but by the method which you have adopted.

I am of the opinion that the intrusion of Northerners in Montgomery will do more harm than good but if there is any help that I can give in the country, I should like to know it. What is the financial situation of the movement? I assume the NAACP has funds in hand for the strictly legal work. I speak for a great many whom you do not know in telling you how earnestly we hope for the triumph of your cause which is the cause of justice and fraternity.

Sincerely yours,
[signed] Norman Thomas

NT:S

TLS. MLKP-MBU: Box 66.

1. Norman Mattoon Thomas (1884–1968), a native of Marion, Ohio, received his B.A. (1905) from Princeton University and his B.D. (1911) from Union Theological Seminary. A former Presbyterian minister (1911–1918), he joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1917, founding and editing the organization’s magazine, The World Tomorrow, from 1918 to 1921. In 1917 he helped establish the organization that became known as the American Civil Liberties Union. After joining the Socialist Party in 1918, Thomas headed its national ticket in every presidential election from 1928 to 1948. He also co-directed the League for Industrial Democracy (1922–1937). In 1957 he was a founder of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy.

2. Thomas, for example, disagreed with Homer Jack’s call for northerners to visit Montgomery: “I do not think it good from all I have heard to send Northerners into that Montgomery situation especially as on your own showing the Southern Negroes are handling it so well” (Thomas to Jack, 12 March 1956).