"The Negro Is Part of That Huge Community Who Seek New Freedom in Every Area of Life"

1 February 1959
New York, N.Y.

In this interview from Challenge, a publication of the Young People's Socialist League, King responds to questions regarding the broader implications of the civil rights struggle. He argues that "complete political, economic and social equality" requires "a whole series of measures which go beyond the specific issue of segregation" and explains that the success of this struggle will depend on the realization of a "gigantic and integrated alliance of the progressive social forces in the United States."

Martin Luther King, the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott is probably the best known leader of the historic struggle for Civil Rights in the United States today. He achieved this position through providing dynamic leadership to a movement which made a unique contribution to this American battle for human decency: the use of non-violent direct action against the power of Jim Crow.

Recently Dr. King published his first book, Stride Toward Freedom (Harper & Brothers, $2.95). It provides an excellent occasion for exploring the larger significance of the Montgomery victory. At least one reviewer, Conrad Lynn, writing in the American Socialist, raised a series of critical points with regard to King's point of view, implying that the Montgomery leader had refused the radical implications of his action, that non-violence will not work because American Negroes, unlike the Indians who followed Gandhi, are a minority of the population and so on.2

In this context, the editors of Challenge addressed three questions to Dr. King:3

How does the struggle for Civil Rights relate to the broader social issues of our time?
Is non-violent direct action inadequate because Negroes are a minority of the American population?
Does the Montgomery experience indicate that Negroes are being won to a principled pacifist point of view?

Following is Dr. King’s reply.

1. See also King, Draft, The Negro Is Part of That Huge Community Who Seek New Freedom in Every Area of Life, 1 February 1959.
2. Lynn, a civil rights lawyer, cautioned King against repeating the mistakes of other black leaders who attempted "to keep the upsurge of his people within 'respectable' limits." Lynn predicted that, despite King's "martyr image" following his September 1958 stabbing, he faced an uphill battle because few whites in the South were "suffering any twinges of conscience yet over the new technique of pacifist action" (Lynn, "Negro Leadership," American Socialist 6 [January 1959]: 21-22).
3. Tom Marcel was the editor of Challenge, which had a six-member editorial board.
I am delighted to have the opportunity to answer your questions and thus to deepen the discussion of the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States. For I agree—and even with my critics—that we must carefully explore the potentialities and the limits of the kind of direct action which was successful in Montgomery.

In answer to your first question, I strongly believe that the fight for Civil Rights is an integral part of the over-all battle for social justice in United States. By its very nature, this movement for the human dignity of eighteen million Negroes raises problems and demands solutions which involve every American who is concerned with freedom and decency. And then, the very success of our cause depends upon our ability to fashion a gigantic and integrated alliance of the progressive social forces in the United States. Indeed, the very fact that we stand for “integration,” for a society in which the Negro will have complete political, economic and social equality, commits us to fight for a whole series of measures which go beyond the specific issue of segregation.

For example, it is no accident that the forces of race hatred in the South are also the partisans of reaction on every other issue. The American labor movement has discovered this when it tries to organize workers or when it faces the fact that “Right-to-Work” laws are a favorite instrument of the leaders of the White Citizen Councils and the Klan. In the South itself, then, the broader implications of our struggle for Civil Rights are there for everyone to see—and are made most obvious by the supporters of discrimination themselves. As integration develops, the Negro will more and more face the social and political dimensions of the race issue. As a Southern citizen, he will discover an identity of interest with all those who champion decent conditions for all workers, adequate housing and medicine for the entire population, and so on.

Then, there is the political aspect of our fight. It is obvious to us that a political majority for Civil Rights will also be a majority in favor of many other social reforms. Those who already support our cause—the unions, the liberals, the more progressive farmers—represent a cross section of the great American majority. When this coalition becomes politically effective in its battle against minority rule and reaction, it will act on Civil Rights and on the many other problems confronting the American people, Negro and white.

**Negroes and Labor**

Perhaps a special word is in order here about the American labor movement. The unions in this country still have a considerable distance to travel before they root out racism in their own structure. The documentation of Herbert Hill, the labor secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, is impressive and conclusive on this count. And yet, with all of the changes which

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must be made within the labor movement, the American unions represent a major and natural ally of the Negroes in their striving for equal rights. The Negro, it must be emphasized again and again, is not set apart from other Americans. The fact of race hatred imposes a terrible deformation upon his life, but it is not the only fact of his life. The vast majority of Negroes in the United States face the problems of poverty, of slum housing and inadequate medicine as well as those of Jim Crow.

Today, the real issue is to make this "natural" alliance real and effective. In the 1958 election, Negroes worked along with the unions against "Right-to-Work" laws, and the candidates of labor and liberalism stood for Civil Rights. Yet it is clear that these forces have not yet really reached a level of effectiveness. Their majority mandate is subject to minority veto through the structure of our political parties and undemocratic rule in Congress, as the results of the recent Senate debate on Rule 22 points up. It may well be that political realignment is a pre-condition for a real development of majority rule in the United States. But whatever the course of the struggle, there is no question that the fight for Civil Rights is integral to the indivisible cause of social justice in America. The Negro cannot win alone, or in a vacuum. The Negro is part of that huge community of Americans who seek new freedoms in every area of life.

I would summarize my answer to your first question this way: we stand for brotherhood, not for "Negro justice" and not for "white justice." We reject black supremacy at the same moment as we reject white supremacy. And this fundamental value, this spiritual commitment, obliges us to take our rightful place in the campaign for the advancement of every single human right.

The second problem which you raise—the fact that American Negroes are a minority of the population—is intimately related to the first. For if Negroes were isolated, if we thought of our cause apart from that of the majority, then this would be a compelling objection. But we don’t think in these terms. As I see it, our problem is to make the majority of Americans who are willing to accept, and even to seek, integration aware of their responsibilities in this struggle.

Protest Minority Rule

Thus, the significance of actions like the Youth March for Integrated Schools or the Montgomery Bus Boycott, is not limited to a minority of Americans. On the contrary, these demonstrations are a means of making the majority conscious: they focus upon the moral principles involved. For it is an embattled minority

5. In 1958 King, National Baptist Convention president J. H. Jackson, and NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins issued statements opposing proposed right-to-work legislation in California and other states. King noted that such legislation was "backed by the same reactionary forces which flout the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation" and called such laws "inherently wrong in principle because they seek to circumvent the collective bargaining power of American workers, which is the fundamental keystone of free trade unionism" (National Council for Industrial Peace, Press release, 6 October 1958; see also NAACP, "Vote ‘No’ on Proposition 18," October–November 1958).

6. On 12 January 1959, the U.S. Senate amended Standing Rule 22, reducing the number of votes necessary to break a filibuster (Congressional Record 105 [12 January 1959]: 421–494). Segregationists had used the filibuster to stymie civil rights initiatives.
which seeks to thwart the fundamentals of human decency, the values of democracy, and the sentiment of the majority through a “century of litigation.”

The arduous campaign in the courts has, of course, achieved magnificent victories. But now, precisely because the minority is organizing politically, economically and socially against these gains, we must seek new forms of struggle. That, to me, is the larger dimension of the non-violent action in Montgomery. Here, in the very midst of the South, we proved that the court decisions could be made real and meaningful. Here, in the very midst of the South, we proved that the people were prepared to accept integration on the buses—in short, we did awaken the conscience of the majority.

Here, again, we see that the Civil Rights issue refuses to be strait-jacketed as the narrow interest of a minority. It is a majority concern, and this means that non-violent actions like Montgomery, demonstrations like the Youth March, are an absolute essential to our cause, for they are the means of reaching the conscience of millions, not simply with the issue of integration, but with the fundamental values of brotherhood itself.

Finally, a few words about the tactical value of the non-violent approach. It is in the local community that Southern Negroes are under the most acute pressures and daily suffer the cumulative humiliations and, frequently, violence, which deprives them of dignity. Hence, it is in the local community that non-violent direct action is rooted and finds its most effective expression. For, in many Southern communities, the Negro is not in the minority, but in the majority, and is capable of exerting immovable force.

**Inspired by Gandhi**

Your third question is also quite important, for it is often a source of confusion. Non-violence can be approached on two levels, that of principle and that of action. Both are extremely important, yet they are distinct. I personally have been deeply moved and motivated by the inspiration of a teacher like Gandhi. To me, the non-violence we practiced in Montgomery is an application of my most profoundly held beliefs and Christian faith. I feel that we cannot organize ourselves on the basis of [hatred?], because if we do we will imitate the worst aspects of those who oppress us. Once again, for it cannot be repeated too often, we do not seek to counter white supremacy with black supremacy: we seek brotherhood.

In saying this, I am relating non-violence to my own most deeply-held values. But this does not mean that a principled commitment to non-violence, or even religious faith, is necessary before one can participate in a movement like the bus boycott. Far from it. It is quite possible, and even probable, that American Negroes will adopt non-violence as a means, an instrument, for the achievement of specific and limited ends. This was certainly true in the case of Gandhi himself, for many who followed him, like Nehru himself, did so on this kind of basis. Certainly, it would be wrong, and even disastrous, to demand principled agreement on non-violence as a pre-condition to non-violent action. What is required is the spiritual determination of the people to be true to the principle as it works in this specific action. This was the case in Montgomery, and it will continue to be the rule in further developments of our struggle.

At the same time, this emphasis upon the practical and tactical aspect of non-
violence in action should not be interpreted as a denigration of the spiritual values which must be present if non-violence is to work at all. Let me cite just one case in point: In Montgomery, crime among Negroes declined markedly during the course of the boycott. There was no organized campaign in this direction. What happened was that the very presence of a sense of social mission and human brotherhood worked tremendous changes in the personal lives of those involved. Thus, even when non-violence is accepted as a practical means, an instrument, it has profound spiritual consequences, it leads toward the consideration of non-violence as a principle.

A Visionary Struggle

But there is an even larger dimension to non-violence and it is with this point that I wish to close. When Negroes involve themselves in such a struggle, they take a radical step. Their rejection of hatred and oppression in the specific situation cannot be confined to a single issue. For it raises the question of hatred and oppression in the society as a whole, it moves toward an even deeper commitment to a pervasive social change. For out of this one problem, the sense of brotherhood springs as a practical necessity, and once this happens, there is revealed the vision of a society of brotherhood. We seek new ways of human beings living together, free from the spiritual deformation of race hatred—and free also from the deformations of war and economic injustice. And this vision does not belong to Negroes alone. It is the yearning of mankind.

PD. Challenge, 1 February 1959, p. 3; copy in NNU-T.

Address at the Thirty-sixth Annual Dinner of the War Resisters League

[2 February 1959]
[New York, N.Y.]

In this typed draft, King embellishes some of his standard remarks on nonviolence with a call for an end to war and an affirmation of the link between social justice at home and peace abroad: “No sane person can afford to work for social justice within the nation unless he simultaneously resists war and clearly declares himself for non-violence in international relations.” He concludes with the hope that, through adherence to non-violence, “the colored peoples” would so “challenge the nations of the world that they will seriously seek an alternative to war and destruction.” The War Resisters League’s newsletter reported that this event, held in honor of pacifist A. J. Muste, was the “most widely attended WRL dinner in recent years.” The following day, King departed for India.

1. “Martin Luther King Addresses WRL Dinner,” WRL News, March–April 1959; see also War Resisters League, Program, “Thirty-sixth annual dinner,” 2 February 1959. The War Resisters League, founded in 1923, emerged out of opposition to World War I. In 1956 Bayard Rustin, executive secretary of the WRL, arrived in Montgomery to offer assistance in the early days of the bus boycott.