Michael K. Honey at the ALA MLK breakfast, 1/10/11

I grew up as a follower of Martin Luther King. When I was in high school, I followed his campaign for desegregation in the South; on tv, I saw the vicious dogs attacking young men who refused to react as the fire hoses turned on children in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. I became aware of racial injustice and oppression through the campaign for voting rights in Selma, where police on horses rode people down and smashed their heads in 1965. Growing up in Michigan, I saw the horrific riots and the repression against racial rebellion in nearby Detroit in 1967, and supported King’s efforts to address the poverty of the inner cities. When he launched his struggle against racial-economic inequality and was then killed while supporting a strike of sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968, I went to Washington to support his Poor People’s Campaign. I also did what King urged us all to do: at eighteen, I registered with my draft board as a conscientious objector against the Vietnam War and against all wars. In 1970, I went down South to do alternative service to the military. I worked to defend the victims of President Richard M. Nixon’s efforts to repress movements for peace and social justice as he drastically escalated the Vietnam War in the name of ending it. Fortunately, the Nixon administration’s illegal wiretapping, breaking and entering, dirty tricks, and even police murders coordinated by the FBI against the Black Panther Party, came to light during the Watergate scandal and finally undid him.

During all that time and still today I kept King’s teachings in my mind: an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere; the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice; an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves everybody toothless and blind; the best thing to make out of an enemy is a friend; justice and peace are indivisible; follow what’s right even if it means sacrificing yourself in order to save others, as the Good Samaritan did going down Jericho Road. But only when I went to graduate school (at Howard University and then Northern Illinois University) and began to research African-American and labor history did I really learn the full scope of King’s teachings. For
twenty years I researched the historic efforts of black and white workers to overcome the racial barriers put in place to separate them into hostile and antagonistic camps, first by slavery and segregation, then the poll tax and literacy tests, by war and poverty and anti-union crusades. In my first two books I showed how white and black joined together despite racism to overcome these barriers and form industrial unions. These unions raised their wages and made it possible for workers to send their children to college, have pensions for their old age, and join together politically to elect moderates in the South and liberals in the North.

This research led me back to Memphis, Tennessee, where I had worked for six years as a civil liberties and community organizer. It led me to write Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, King’s Last Campaign (W.W. Norton). That story opened my eyes to one of the most important facets of Dr. King’s work for human rights, his support for the labor movement. Dr. Benjamin Mays said at Dr. King’s funeral that he could have died anywhere on his Jericho Road to support human rights, but we should never forget that Dr. King died leading a strike of the working poor for the right to form a public employee union. Or, as Coretta King put it, her husband “gave his life for the poor of the world, the garbage workers of Memphis and the peasants of Vietnam. The day that Negro people and others in bondage are truly free, on the day want is abolished, on the day wars are no more, on that day I know my husband will rest in a long-deserved peace.”

Finally, the King family and its Legacy Series at Beacon Press asked me to edit this collection just out in the bookstores today, titled All Labor Has Dignity. In it, we have chapter and verse of Dr. King speaking to union members all across this country about labor rights and economic justice, from 1957 to 1968. These speeches should help us to remember that Dr. King’s sacrifice in Memphis helped to make possible the revolution in public worker organizing that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and that made public employee unions the strongest element of organized labor today. That includes the unions to
which many of you probably belong. King tells a mass of striking garbage workers in Memphis on March 18 (a speech that you can hear on a cd at the back of the book) that “all labor has dignity.” He said strikers “are reminding not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages.” Working people are poor not only because they are unemployed or underemployed, but many of them are working but “making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation.” It sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

Let me finish by saying to you today that if you support the human rights campaigns of Dr. King you should support his belief that labor rights are human rights. As he warned the AFL-CIO in 1961, the reactionary right in coalition with many businesses will stop at nothing to turn back the clock on both the labor movement and the civil rights movement. Through outsourcing and downsizing and automation and globalization they have whittled down the great industrial unions of this country to a shadow of their former selves and driven down the wages of most Americans. You can trace the decline of government that puts people before profits to the decline of industrial unions in every decade since the 1980s. And now, a right-wing business climate has created a full-scale economic crisis. The very banks, the giant corporations, the extremely wealthy and the extremely right wing that created that crisis now want to destroy public employee unions and do away with the last vestige of union consciousness. “These menaces now threaten everything decent and fair in American life,” Dr. King told the AFL-CIO, and they would like to create a political climate “made to order for those who would seek to drive labor into impotency” and undermine our civil rights gains.

Dr. King’s warning has now come to pass. Without unions, black and white and workers of all ethnicities and nationalities will be back at each other’s throats, as throughout so much of our history. And we can go back to a time when people who should be retired are “too old to work and too young to
“We can go back to an era when working people could not afford to send their kids to college, to own a decent home and to have health care. But King’s greatest message was and is hope. The power of organizing, King said, is that it can make the owners of capital and the right wing forces in politics say yes to workers and poor people when they want to say no. If Dr. King were alive today, he would be telling us to stand up for your rights, stand up for dignity, stand up for peace, stand up for the poor and the working class, stand up for your unions. Don’t give in or give up.

King told people at the Highlander Center in 1957, near the start of his amazing career as a movement leader, that the road ahead would be hard and long, but things will change if people change, and if they organize. “I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence.”

Remember King’s warning, and he encouragement to us, as he said at Highlander: “I call upon you to be maladjusted. Well, you see, it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.”