

← Back to Original Article

PERSPECTIVES ON MARTIN LUTHER KING : Today He'd Champion a Wider Cause: Social Justice : In L.A., King would be at the forefront of the drive to put minorities on a more fair footing in housing, jobs, bus service and voting.

January 15, 1996 | PETER DREIER | Peter Dreier teaches politics and directs the public policy program at Occidental College

What would the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. do if he were alive today and living in Los Angeles?

While we view King as something of a saint, in his day, the establishment considered King a dangerous troublemaker. While he began as a crusader against the nation's racial caste system, the struggle for civil rights radicalized him into a fighter for broader economic justice. He recognized the limits of breaking down legal segregation: What good was winning the right to eat at a dime-store lunch counter if you couldn't afford a hamburger and a Coke? He knew that if the poor organized effectively, they could wield their limited resources--their consumer dollars, labor and ultimately their votes--to challenge public opinion, confront public officials and change public policy. Using militant, often unconventional tactics such as boycotts, civil disobedience and strikes, he succeeded in putting social justice on the national agenda.

But there is still much unfinished business in order to achieve King's vision. Action on five local issues would help fulfill King's dream.

* Support the Bus Riders Union. King's first organizing campaign was to end the racially segregated bus system in Montgomery, Ala. Los Angeles' transit system is segregated by race and income, with the poor dependent on buses.

The Bus Riders Union is suing the transit authority to reduce fares, expand service and add 2,000 new buses over seven years to reduce overcrowding and air pollution. No doubt King would be in federal court for the trial, scheduled for Jan. 23, to show his solidarity with the bus riders.

* Register voters. One of the civil rights movement's most important victories was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminated obstacles to voting such as the poll tax and literacy tests. Today, King would be concerned that so many Americans, especially the poor, minorities and young people, fail to exercise this right. He'd push the churches, community organizations and unions to mount a massive voter registration drive in time for the 1996 elections. And he'd probably be leaning hard on Gov. Pete Wilson to fully implement the federal "motor voter" law, not only at DMV sites but also at libraries, public housing and unemployment offices.

* Support a living wage. During King's last few years, he focused much of his energy helping low-wage workers fight for rights and respect. Today, King would be working with the Living Wage Coalition, a consortium of church, community and union organizations, to get the L.A. City Council to require firms that do business with the city to provide decent wages, benefits and job security. He would also undoubtedly be crisscrossing California drumming up support for the ballot initiative to raise the state's minimum wage from \$4.25 to \$5.75 by 1998. And he'd be a big booster of current organizing drives among the city's low-wage work force--disproportionately immigrants and women--such as janitors and hotel workers.

* Fight housing discrimination. Appalled by the slums and blatant residential segregation in our major cities, King lobbied hard for antidiscrimination laws, including the landmark Fair Housing Act of 1968. Unfortunately, banks continue to exacerbate racial isolation by discriminating in their lending practices, denying eligible blacks and Latinos loans to buy homes and start small businesses.

King also would be working with consumer and community groups, like the California Reinvestment Committee, to oppose the banking industry's efforts to kill the Community Reinvestment Act, the federal law against redlining. He'd be testifying at a Federal Reserve Board hearing Jan. 23 to oppose Wells Fargo's plan to buy First Interstate Bank, a merger that would result in large-scale layoffs, fewer bank branches and less lending in poor neighborhoods. And he'd be helping tenant groups like the Coalition for Economic Survival and nonprofit developers like Esperanza Community Housing in South-Central L.A. and Nehemiah West Housing in Compton to rebuild their neighborhoods.

* End legalized bribery in politics. In King's day, the Southern business power structure kept wages low by supporting politicians who passed laws to keep unions out and the races divided. Today, corporate America--including the tobacco lobby that preys on our children, the insurance and drug companies that undermine health reform, and the clothing manufacturers that rely on sweatshops--wins favor in Sacramento and Washington through massive campaign contributions that distort our democracy.

King knew that to achieve economic justice, ordinary citizens need to have an equal voice in government. That's why he'd be helping groups like Common Cause and the League of Women Voters gather signatures to reform California's campaign finance laws through a ballot initiative this year.

King delivered his last speech at a mass rally for Memphis' striking garbage workers the night before he was shot. He told the crowd about a bomb threat on his plane from Atlanta that morning, saying he knew that his life was constantly in danger because of his political activism.

"I would like to live a long life," he said. "Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. 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."

We haven't gotten there yet. But Dr. King is still with us in spirit. The best way to honor his memory is to continue the struggle for justice.

