

MetroTimes: King's legacy: If you don't keep marching, you start losing

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Keep on pushing

King's legacy: If you don't keep marching, you start losing

By Larry Gabriel

Last Saturday, there were three big political rallies related to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Aug. 28, 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered the famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Most of the media attention went to the "Restoring Honor" right-wing rave-up led by Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin on the National Mall, in which the Tea Party crowd attempted to co-opt King's dream.

A counter demonstration to Beck's, the Rev. Al Sharpton's more liberal "Reclaim the Dream" march, from northwest Washington, D.C., to the site of a planned MLK memorial on the Mall, received less coverage.

And the "Rebuild America: Jobs, Justice and Peace" march organized by the Rev. Jesse Jackson and UAW President Bob King went virtually unnoticed beyond Detroit. Yet it was the truest to the memory and the goals of the late civil rights leader.

MLK's Walk to Freedom march in Detroit on June 23, 1963, when he delivered an early version of the "I Have a Dream" oratory, was a warm-up for the Washington march. In the months leading up to the Detroit march, MLK and the UAW collaborated, with MLK working from an office in the UAW Solidarity House on Jefferson Avenue.

MLK's Detroit march — down Woodward to Jefferson and over to what was then called Cobo Hall — had been the biggest civil rights march to date, with an estimated 125,000 participants. Saturday's Jobs Justice and Peace group, about 5,000 strong and mostly sporting UAW, SEIU and AFSCME T-shirts, started at today's Cobo Center and went to Grand Circus Park for a rally. The disparity in numbers notwithstanding, it was a good start for what Jackson and Bob King envision — a series of marches in various locations across the country culminating in a massive march in Washington on Oct. 2. In addition, it is a next step in Bob King's drive to align the UAW and the labor movement with allied social forces such as civil rights, peace and economic justice activists.

"We are sisters and brothers, all God's children," King said. "We're not here to tear anybody down. We are here because we care about each other."

"Detroit and Michigan are ground zero of the urban crisis," Jackson said. "It's time to enact real change for working families and all America." Jackson went on to discuss religion as part of the movement, pointing out that the "spirit and the body is life" and a body without a spirit is, well, dead. "It's time to come alive," he said.

With a slew of ministers (Bishops Marvin Winans and Charles Ellis, the Rev. Wendell Anthony and others) and an imam onstage, not to mention a couple of gospel choirs, there were plenty of references to God. And the Rev. Ed Rowe of the Central United Methodist Church reminded the crowd that MLK had preached from the pulpit at Rowe's Woodward Avenue church overlooking Grand Circus Park.

But politics ruled the day, with Sen. Debbie Stabenow, Reps. John Conyers, Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) and Marcie Kaptur (D-Ohio), Democratic gubernatorial candidate Virg Bernero and running mate Brenda Lawrence (the state Democratic convention was at Cobo Center on Saturday), and Detroit City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson. (Of note, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing was nowhere to be seen.)

"I'm marching for the Marshall Plan," Watson told me before she took the stage. She was referring to a UAW plan to rebuild the United States in the same way that Europe was rebuilt after World War II, an idea she has long supported. She rattled off a list of things Detroit needs such as rapid transit and renewable energy technology, and pointed out that the federal government bailed out General Motors and Chrysler, but they are not the city.

"It's imperative that we organize," she says. "That's why I'm here. We need a sustained organizing effort."

We all know why Bernero was there. He's running for governor. Bernero sounded the same theme at the rally that he presented later at the convention, saying that two mayors — he and Lawrence — were going to set Michigan straight. "Wall Street's had their day," he said. "They got paid. I'm concerned with Main Street."

This mix of messages — including a call for a moratorium on home foreclosures and an antiwar plea — represents the progressive coalition that Bob King has worked to pull together since becoming president of the UAW in June. It's similar to the coalition between civil rights, labor and the anti-war movement that MLK was building when he was assassinated. In fact, King Jr. was in Memphis fighting for local sanitation workers when he was killed. His enduring legacy is in civil rights, but he saw the power that was possible in coalitions with like-minded associates.

"It's the power that comes when you wed the civil rights movement with the labor movement, churches and the workers," said Waters (who is facing an ethics investigation in Congress).

That's what they are trying to concentrate on this fall. Bob King called on activists to focus on three things in the coming months: the Labor Day Parade in Detroit on Monday, Sept. 6; the Oct. 2 march in Washington, and registering voters for the Nov. 2 elections.

That's a good start for the goals Bob King has articulated. Saturday he talked about the Obama presidency and initiatives that have become bogged down in the political swamp. "After we elected Obama, we did not keep marching," he said. "If you don't keep marching you start losing. We will march until we win."

That same spirit of perseverance was articulated by Baldemar Velasquez, president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. "They got all the money, all we got is time," he said. "They're going to run out of money before we run out of time. Viva la causa."

In the end, we heard a lot of speeches from all over the spectrum, but nothing approaching the legendary oratory of MLK. Still, Stabenow condensed it all by saying, "Without jobs there is no justice, without justice there is no peace."

Between that and a seriously funky version of the old hymn "Jesus on the Mainline" I was ready to get on the good foot and do some more marching. It's an uphill climb, but when the spirit moves you, it levels the terrain.