

Address by A. Philip Randolph

on

Civil Rights Resolution

Before Sixth Constitutional Convention, AFL-CIO

December 13, 1965

It has been two years since I last stood before this convention. These have been eventful and dramatic years for the Civil Rights Revolution. Indeed, the social and political landscape of the entire country has been changed.

We have won the passage of two historic pieces of legislation -- the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Thus, after centuries of slavery, segregation and discrimination, the American people have spoken out unequivocally -- not merely on behalf of the Negro but in the name of democracy itself. For when men are denied, on grounds of race, the elementary rights of due process and the right to vote, the moral foundations of that society are in doubt.

These victories are, first and foremost, the fruits of the struggle of the Negro people themselves. History will record that our gains, like those of labor, were not handed down from above but were wrested from reluctant hands through courage and sacrifice, often of limb and life.

Medgar Evers, William Moore, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, Lemuel Penn, Jimmy Lee Jackson, Mrs. Liuzzo, Reverend James Reeb, Jonathan Daniels, the four young girls of Birmingham -- these are but some of those -- black and white, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish -- who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom. President Meany, I request that this convention rise for a moment of silent tribute to the memory of these freedom fighters...

Brothers and sisters, we know that more than courage and determination were required to secure the civil rights legislation. Mass action had to be mobilized. The great Selma-to-Montgomery March, which captured the conscience of the nation and the attention of the world, generated the dynamism behind the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I am proud to tell you, brothers and sisters, that perhaps no single group was so distinctively and honorably present on that occasion as the representatives of the labor movement. President Meany sent Don Slaiman, Director of our Civil Rights Department, with a delegation that included, among others, Dave Sullivan, Robert Powell and Charles Zimmerman.

And so, on the very steps of the capitol of Alabama, labor's voice was raised high and clear in the name of freedom. President Meany, I participated in that historic event, and I can tell you that nothing so inspired the embattled Negroes of Alabama with courage and confidence as the visible and dramatic support of the labor movement in those glorious days.

Not only in Alabama but in Washington, the political power and skill of the Negro's allies were indispensable. The fact of the matter is, brothers and sisters, that the AFL-CIO -- under the able and forthright leadership of President Meany, Brother Reuther and the Executive Council -- did the yeoman's job of lining up Congressional support for the civil rights legislation of the past two years.

Special recognition is due to Andrew Biemiller who, working side by side with Clarence Mitchell, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Joseph Rauh, of the Industrial Union Department, coordinated labor's lobbyists on Capitol Hill. Without their tireless efforts, we might not have won the battle. Let these hard facts be properly noted by the hostile critics of the labor movement who profess sympathy for the cause of racial equality.

Brothers and sisters, the Resolution on Civil Rights which is before you is a commendable document which reaffirms labor's commitment to racial justice.

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commitment to racial justice and equality. It emphasizes what labor knows from experience -- that the passage of good laws is not sufficient, that the laws must be vigorously and effectively enforced. The agencies responsible for administering the laws must be given the resources to discharge their responsibilities firmly. Where necessary, the laws must be strengthened through amendment.

But we also know that the work of the civil rights movement has just begun. We rightly demand of the government that every barrier to the Negro's full participation in the nation's political life be struck down. Once those barriers have fallen, however, it is our task to mobilize the masses of Negroes at the ballot box.

This is labor's task as well. For when the full political potential of the Southern Negro is realized, the face of Congress will be radically changed. The Dixiecrat politicians who have joined with conservative Republicans in opposition to labor's legislative demands will have to sing a different tune -- or find other jobs. Moreover, brothers and sisters, I submit to you that in the continuation and expansion of the Negro voter registration campaign in the South lays the foundation for labor's drive to organize the unorganized in the South.

The last two years have plainly demonstrated that the Negro-labor alliance is not a one-way street. Virtually the entire national Negro leadership has put its weight heavily behind the Congressional campaign for repeal of 14b, for a 2-dollar minimum wage, for extension of the Fair Labor Standards Act, and for other labor demands. They have testified before Congressional committees and their testimonies have been published and widely distributed by the Randolph Institute.

When the Negro leadership speaks out for labor's demands, they are not merely making a gesture in return for labor's support of civil rights. Rather we are bound together in a coalition of mutual interest.

Negro workers need and demand the repeal of 14b now! And they know why they want it. They know that repeal of 14b helps clear the way for unionization of the South. They know that repeal of 14b is a step toward economic security and better living standards. They know that repeal of 14b means greater dignity on the job - freedom from exploitation and intimidation.

And they know full well where the die-hard resistance to repeal of 14b is coming from. It is coming from the greedy profiteers and the reactionary politicians who have tried to block the Negro's advance every step of the way. That is why, in Oklahoma and other states, the Negro vote was decisive in defeating so-called right to work laws. And I can promise you, brothers and sisters, that throughout this land, the Negro revolution will join hands with labor in saying to the next Congress: Repeal 14b now!

And we say, too, that if there is any single step that will raise Negroes out of poverty, it is labor's demand for a national \$2 minimum wage. In this land of affluence, in the year 1965, two out of every three Negro families live in poverty and deprivation. In part, this fact reflects the astronomically

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high unemployment rates in the Negro community. But in most cases, the head of the Negro family is working -- forty hard hours a week. He does not need to be lectured about self-help. Give him a decent wage, and he will be able to help himself. He will be able to keep his family together, to educate his children, to contribute to the well-being of the community. And he will be in a stronger position to struggle effectively for the dignity and the rights which he has been denied.

A national \$2 dollar minimum wage, extended to millions now uncovered, would redress a shame of the nation. It would mean a revolution in Southern racial and economic relations. It would weaken the position of runaway plants that locate in the South in order to escape unionism and exploit a cheap labor market. In many Southern towns and cities, such companies become entrenched in the local power structures and fiercely resist civil rights efforts to change the status quo. The impact of a \$2 dollar minimum wage on the ghetto-entrapped Negroes of the North would be no less revolutionary.

In short: if the civil rights revolution is to have meaning outside of the South -- in the teeming slums of the cities, in the industrial centers of the nation -- the needs of the dispossessed Negro masses must be hitched to the economic demands of labor.

More and more, the Negro leadership recognizes that of all the mass institutions in the nation, the labor movement holds out the greatest hope for progress in the daily conditions of life in the Negro community. Yet they do not forget for one moment that labor's own house is not yet entirely in order, that segregated locals and discriminatory practices still exist in some unions. The eradication of these conditions, noted in the Resolution before you, must be high on your priority list in the coming year. We must not permit the existence of any barriers to expanded cooperation between labor and the civil rights movement; and we must not give any ammunition to labor's enemies.

The Civil Rights Department is to be congratulated for the vigor and effectiveness with which it has labored to eliminate the remaining discrimination in our ranks. Even before Title VII, the fair employment section of the Civil Rights Act, went into effect, the Department was hard at work preparing international unions to cooperate in obtaining compliance with the law. At the same time, the AFL-CIO has called for a strengthening of the enforcement machinery of Title VII.

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But more than your congratulations, Don Slaiman and the Civil Rights Department need your active support. Union locals must be encouraged to utilize the valuable technical assistance the Department can provide.

Brothers and sisters, two years ago when I stood before you, I spoke of the impact of the technological revolution and its economic dislocations on the Negro community. I said then that large sections of the community, unskilled and uneducated, were being rendered economically obsolete and deprived of social dignity. I spoke of a growing underclass, lacking hope and leadership, bereft of any sense of a stake in the total society. And I said then that, if we listened carefully, we could hear the rumblings of that underclass.

I do not need to tell you that in these two years those rumblings are exploded into thunderous and wildly destructive violence, from the tenements of Harlem to the slums of Watts. That violence cannot be excused or defended, for it took a larger toll in life and limb than has the nonviolent movement in the South -- and with less to show for it. But it serves no purpose simply to denounce the riots without trying to understand their causes. For, of this much we can be certain: if those causes are not identified and uprooted, radically and finally, we will be courting disaster.

Let me say that I have been greatly encouraged by President Johnson's speech at Howard University and by the Department of Labor's study on the Negro family. Both move in the right direction of pinpointing the social and economic roots of the Negro's discontent. To further explore these roots, the President has, as you know, scheduled a special White House Conference, of which I have the privilege of serving as honorary chairman.

This conference will give special attention to the problem of Negro family instability. This, brothers and sisters, is a major problem with deep historical roots. Under two centuries of slavery, the Negro family was systematically destroyed. The right of Negroes to marry is barely one hundred years old. Following slavery, a system of segregation was introduced which denied the Negro family, particularly the Negro male, even the rudiments of economic security. To this very day, many of our welfare laws encourage family desertion by Negro males.

I do not have to tell you how family breakups encourage delinquency, crime, school drop-outs, and many forms of destructive, anti-social behavior. But when all of this is said, the question remains: How do we strengthen the Negro family and the fabric of the Negro community?

Here again, I think the labor movement knows the answer at least as well as the sociologists and psychologists and other experts. The answer is jobs -- decent jobs at decent wages. We know that when the Negro unemployment rate dropped during World War II, so did the Negro rate of divorce, of illegitimacy, and other indications of family instability. And so, brothers and sisters, the answer to Negro family instability and to Watts is the enactment of labor's programs for full and fair employment.

The record of the last ten years will show that we cannot look to the private sector of the economy to achieve the goal of full employment. But we can meet that goal through expansion of the public sector -- through meeting the vast unmet social needs of the country. We can put the unemployed back to work by clearing our slums and rebuilding our cities, by building schools and hospitals, by modernizing and expanding mass transit facilities, by investing in flood control and by combatting air pollution. We can open new jobs for the poor by expanding our social services.

We can achieve full employment by tearing down the physical environment of poverty and building a great society in its place. It was with this concept in mind that I proposed, at the planning session of the White House Conference, a national Freedom Budget of 100 billion dollars. This is a feasible and realistic budget, which has the support of leading labor economists. We have the means; we lack only the social imagination and the political will.

This is, above all, an imperative budget if we are serious about building the Great Society. As President Meany has said, "We must not let money stand in the way." Either we decide upon massive social investments now, or we face the incalculably more costly alternative of social disintegration and violence. In the long run, it is the budget-balancers and the tight-money boys who will prove to be the most impractical. Let me say right here that the recent action of the Federal Reserve Board may do more to dry up job opportunities for Negroes -- not to mention whites -- than the most overtly racist discrimination.

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Brothers and sisters, I cannot close without commenting on a great danger that may lie ahead. In times of war or international crisis, as you know, there is a tendency to divert attention away from crying domestic needs and problems. Even now there are those who would exploit the perilous situation in Vietnam for their own narrow political purposes. Already we have heard the reactionary voices of Senators Stennis and Russell and other segregationists. They call for a cut-back in the war on poverty; they would push the struggle for racial equality off the stage of history; they feel strengthened in their opposition to labor's struggle for industrial democracy.

These tendencies must be vigorously fought. As President Meany has said, our efforts to resist Communist totalitarianism will require sacrifices and impose burdens. But those sacrifices and burdens must be evenly distributed. We must not place the heaviest loads on those least able to bear them -- the poor and dispossessed, black and white. We must not now dash their new hopes for a place in the sun. We must press forward the struggle for justice and democracy at home while we pursue it abroad.

In recent weeks, the Negro leadership has gathered together to discuss the objectives and directions of the civil rights movement during this difficult period of transition. They have concluded that we need to press forward on three major fronts. First is to achieve economic security for the Negro family through full and fair employment. Second is to see to it that the civil rights legislation is vigorously implemented. Third is to secure full protection of individuals in the exercise of the constitutionally-guaranteed rights. There must be an immediate end to the brutalization and murder of civil rights workers, and to a discriminatory jury system which makes a mockery of justice.

President Meany, the Resolution before us speaks forthrightly and directly to these concerns of the Negro leadership. Not coincidentally, but by indisputable social logic, the forces of labor and civil rights again find themselves on the same side of the struggle for justice.

Brothers and sisters, I urge the adoption of the Resolution on Civil Rights.

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