

March on Washington should again focus on jobs

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
Thursday, 15 August 2013 14:28



WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Civil rights leaders will march on Washington, D.C. on Saturday, August 24 to observe the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Now economists, labor groups and community stakeholders want to make sure that the Black jobs crisis gets top billing on the agenda.

Some researchers say that the economic agenda of the 1963 march was largely forgotten as Blacks won hard-fought victories for voting rights and anti-discrimination policies in public and the workplace.

"There has been an incomplete representation of the Civil Rights Movement. On one hand people struggled tremendously, people fought, people died and we did have tremendous success, because of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," said Algernon Austin, director of the Race, Ethnicity, and Economy Program at the Economic Policy Institute. "We did get the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act, in part, because of the pressure from the 1963 March on Washington. Unfortunately, some historians have focused just on the success and have ignored everything else."

Austin made his comments during a recent panel discussion on the forgotten history of the March on Jobs and Freedom during a symposium coordinated by the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank focused on the economic needs of low- and

March on Washington should again focus on jobs

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
Thursday, 15 August 2013 14:28

middle-income families.

"The Unfinished March," a report by the Economic Policy Institute, authored by Austin, detailed a number of goals outlined during the 1963 march that have been largely left behind. According to the report, organizers knew that the civil rights Blacks gained would be diminished without economic opportunities that had the power to lift millions of Blacks out of poverty.

According to the EPI report, "The organizers of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom also demanded decent housing, adequate and integrated education, a federal jobs program for full employment, and a national minimum wage of over \$13.00 an hour in today's dollars."

Today, many Blacks still live in poverty, attend poorly funded, mostly segregated schools, and suffer unemployment rates that are twice as high as Whites.

Austin said that many of the struggles that Blacks are facing today are connected to the economic inequality and the disempowerment of the American public and that the influence of money and lobbyists in politics is making a bad situation worse.

"Clearly the government is dysfunctional, by design, in some respects," said Clarence Lang, associate professor of African and African American studies at the University of Kansas at Lawrence. "I don't know that the federal government, at this point in history, is the vehicle for the kinds of changes that we might be envisioning."

Ultimately, it falls on everyday Americans to drive that change starting in their own communities.

"You have to fight where you're standing. Whether that's in Kansas or New York state or Michigan, we have to begin to build and dig where we stand," said Lang.

And like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., some economists believe that the fight for economic equality needs a strong labor movement.

"When workers had a voice, they had a way of making sure that the pie was going to be divided up a little more fairly," said William Spriggs, chief economist for AFL-CIO, an umbrella group for labor unions in the United States.

Spriggs said that, since the 1970s, more of the pie goes to profits and interest, and less goes to workers. As the pie shrinks, workers fight amongst themselves over a smaller and smaller pie.

"We're not creating a smaller pie. We have to point to the right people who are creating a smaller pie," said Spriggs. "We need the government to take the side of those of us who are earning our pay versus those of us who are speculating on Wall Street and betting on horses."

Pushing the labor movement as a change agent may be a tough sell for today's workers, who participate in unions with less frequency than generations past.

Even though 13.1 percent of Black workers are union members, the Labor Department reported

March on Washington should again focus on jobs

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
Thursday, 15 August 2013 14:28

that the union membership rate for all workers was just 11.3 percent in 2012. In 1983, the membership rate was 20.1 percent.

Spriggs also suggested that Wall Street titans pay for cleaning up the whole mess, not just the mess that let them get their jobs back and their bonuses back and then argue for tax cuts. Spriggs called for a "financial transaction tax" targeting the more perilous gambles made by Wall Street investors.

"We saved AIG that was bankrupt, we can save Detroit that's bankrupt," said Spriggs. "And if the AIG [employees] that caused the downturn in the first place can get a bonus, because it said in their contracts that they had to get a bonus, then Detroit city workers can get a pension, just like it said in their contracts."

Like other panelists, Spriggs suggested that some of employment disparities may be beyond current policy reform.

"While an outcome of the 1963 march was the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, it wasn't enough," said Spriggs. "What people need to think about with the Trayvon Martin case is understand what that jury was saying about young Black men."

Spriggs continued: "Once you really understand what that jury was saying about young Black men, do you really have to ask why do young Black men have a hard time getting a job?"

Roger A. Clay Jr., former president of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, said that the fear of Black men and Black boys goes back hundreds of years.

"The simple answer is people are afraid of us," said Clay. "Generally, the fear is not based on experience and it's not based on fact."

Clay continued: "On this topic I'm not that optimistic, because I think the fear is so deep-seated, it really is going to be hard to turn that around."

The fact is Labor Department reported that Blacks 16-19 years old faced a 41.6 percent unemployment rate and less than 30 percent were either employed or looking for work in July, compared to 20.3 percent jobless rate and a 37 percent labor force participation rate for Whites. Black men still suffer the worst unemployment rate among all adult worker groups.

"We're not going to get racial justice until we end disparities in the criminal justice system," said Kica Matos, director of Immigrant Rights & Racial Justice Center for Community Change. "The criminal justice system touches the lives of so many people of color and so many communities that we will never get racial justice until we do away with disparities in the criminal justice system."

Even though some of the panelists expressed doubts about the ability of lawmakers, civil rights leaders and everyday Americans to come together to solve the problems surrounding economic inequality some were more optimistic.

March on Washington should again focus on jobs

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
Thursday, 15 August 2013 14:28

"We are clearly moving beyond our evil past into a time where we will be very different," said Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and CEO of Policy Link, a research group that advocates for economic and social equity. "We will get there, it is inevitable, but the old guard is afraid of losing and the last gasp can be a dangerous time and that's exactly where we are right now."