The great civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer once recalled the moment she decided to fight for her right to vote: "When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine. What was the point of being scared? The only thing they could do to me was kill me and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember."

Forty-three years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and 40 years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, we're on the brink of an election that promises to be historic on a multitude of levels. Not only is there an African American candidate as the nominee of a major political party, but millions of young people and people of color have been aroused and are registered for the first time. Fannie Lou Hamer's fearlessness paved the way, along with the work of countless other civil rights activists. Now we need to make sure the promise becomes a reality.

Many of these new voters understand that America desperately needs a new direction. African Americans are consistently poorer and enjoy fewer advantages than other groups. In 2006, for example, African American median household incomes were $16,000 lower than the national average. African Americans earned 78 cents on the dollar of their white counterparts. While overall unemployment in August reached a five-year high of 6.1 percent, the rate for African Americans hit 10.6 percent, the first time in three years it has been in double digits. While 13% of white Americans do not have health insurance 22% of African Americans lack health coverage.

At every turn, the current Administration and the Republican Party have left all working families behind. Since 2001, the year that President Bush took office, unemployment has soared, and our nation has lost three million good, family-supporting manufacturing jobs. Median household income has fallen. The number of people living in poverty has increased 15.4 percent nationally since 2001. Over two million Americans are facing home foreclosures.

It's time to turn around America, and we will start by voting and making sure that every single vote is counted. It won't be easy. The last few election cycles have been plagued with problems that disenfranchised would-be voters, including many African Americans.

In urban areas, many right-wing groups have attempted to purge voters from the rolls. One such increasingly used tactic is called "caging," in which right-wing groups send out certified letters to new voters. If the letter is returned because the mail carrier couldn't hand it to the new voter at the address listed, the group moves to have these voters expunged from the rolls. In fact, there could be a host of reasons why a certified letter was returned, including the fact that the voter

could have two or three jobs, and simply isn't home very often.

Other Election Day tricks we must look out for are fake, confusing ballots handed out at polling sites, phony notifications about moved polling sites and official-looking letters saying that people registered through Democratic-leaning groups aren't eligible to vote.

Despite these tricks, a truly historic election day is going to come down to individual voters who, like Hamer, should do everything we can to protect our own right to vote – and those of our friends and neighbors.

The AFL-CIO has been working with union activists and constituency groups, civil rights organizations, faith-based organizations, students, lawyers, and other community allies in neighborhoods to help ensure that everybody who wants to vote is able to. There are six simple steps you should take to make sure your ballot is counted on November 4:

1) Call your local elections office to verify the location of your polling place. It is possible that the polling station has moved since the last time you voted, and a vote cast in the wrong station may not be counted.

2) Bring some form of identification to the polls. Although identification isn't required everywhere, the rules are sometimes unclear and it is best to be safe. The best option is to bring a government-issued photo id.

3) If you are confused about anything at the polling place, ask for help from the polling workers and read the posted information signs.

4) Make sure that you cast a vote. If you are in line at the polling place when the polls close, you are still entitled to vote. Do not leave.

5) If you are offered a provisional ballot, ask if you can cast a regular ballot by providing additional ID or by going to another polling place. If there are no other options available, then cast a provisional ballot.

6) If you have a voting rights problem, ask to speak to an election official or to a voting rights volunteer at the polls. Or, call the toll-free nationwide voting rights hotline 1-866-OUR-VOTE. The hotline is operated by a nonpartisan coalition of groups, including the AFL-CIO, that have committed themselves to promoting voting rights.

This year, 2008, is one when we can all make history. We've struggled long enough with politicians who have ignored the needs of our communities. This year, we must ensure that all Americans can vote in the most vital election in generations, and that each and every vote is counted.

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