

**AAG Tom Perez**

**AFL CIO MLK Day Commemoration**

**Theme is 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins**

**Greensboro, NC**

It's an honor to join you today to celebrate the legacy of one of our nation's true heroes. And I feel particularly fortunate to be commemorating Dr. King's contributions to our country and to the world with the AFL CIO – an organization that knows intimately the power of organizing, the power of standing up for individual rights, the power of making your voices heard.

The civil rights movement and the labor movement were forces that profoundly shaped my life. I was the son of immigrants who fled the Dominican Republic seeking refuge from a totalitarian regime that had no respect for the country's people, let alone their rights. My parents found in America the freedom that has long made this nation one of the world's greatest, and they taught me and my siblings it was always worth fighting for.

They settled in Buffalo, a community that perhaps knows as well as any other in America how the organized labor movement can improve peoples' lives. Coming of age there, I witnessed first-hand how a grassroots movement of people with common interests can change their world.

These two movements – the civil rights movement and the labor movement – are inextricably intertwined because their goals were, and continue to be, essentially the same.

Dr. King himself said "Our needs are identical with labor's needs. Decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community."

He said that African Americans "read the history of labor and find it mirrors their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience and protest are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table."

There are so many examples of how civil rights and labor interests converged to instigate real social change.

A. Philip Randolph, the man responsible for organizing the Pullman porters into the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, went on to be elected Vice President of the newly merged AFL CIO in 1955. He was also one of the co-founders of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights in 1950, and later helped organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Before co-founding the United Farm Workers to advocate for farm laborers' rights, Cesar Chavez was a trained community organizer who traveled throughout California urging Mexican Americans to register and vote.

In the 1930's, the unionization of workers in the Alaska canneries and the fields of western Washington state gave Filipinos a voice, and an important place in the battle for rights. Filipino activists created the Cannery Workers and Farm Laborers Union, and fought for civil rights and fair treatment.

African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, the Navajo Nation – all of these groups united in support of workplace rights and civil rights.

And on the night before Dr. King was gunned down in Memphis – he spoke of the struggle that had brought him there. He spoke of the deplorable conditions in which African American sanitation workers had been forced to work, and of the need for unity to help them overcome their burden.

He said “The question is not, ‘If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?’ ‘If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?’ That’s the question.”

If Dr. King were here today to celebrate with us today, he would no doubt feel a great sense of pride and accomplishment.

If he had been with us last January to witness the inauguration of our first African American President, he would have no doubt reflected upon the distance traveled on the long road that led to that momentous occasion.

If he was with us in 2010, celebrating 50 years since four brave students sat down and stood up for their rights, if he had lived this long to witness each of our landmark achievements, he would no doubt feel a great sense of joy at the steps we have taken

toward that ultimate goal of equal opportunity and equal justice, and a great sense of comfort that he had seen the fruits of his labor.

But he would not rest.

If he were here in 2010, he would take a moment to reflect on the advancements of the last half century, and then he would turn and set his sights on the challenges we still face.

He would recognize that we continue to see violence fueled by bigotry and hate in our nation, and he would continue to react to such violence with nonviolent protest in an effort to eradicate hate from people's hearts.

He would speak out against those more subtle brands of discrimination that still permeate so many of our institutions, insisting that ALL children, no matter the color of their skin, the language they speak, or the country from which they come, receive a quality education and the opportunities it brings.

He would continue his quest for economic justice, for all Americans to be able to access the great wealth and promise of our nation.

He would urge our nation's leaders to move forward on health care reform, repeating his painfully accurate observation that *"Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."*

He would join with you, and with your fellow workers nationwide, in calling for passage of the Employee Free Choice Act to ensure workers can stand up for their rights in the workplace.

He would ask the question: if women outnumber men in the workplace, then why are women still fighting for pay equity in the workplace?

He would stand shoulder to shoulder with our LGBT brothers and sisters, recognizing that for them, the promise of equal justice has not yet been fulfilled, and calling on our nation to again rise to the occasion.

He would recognize that each of our great milestones has been not a culmination, but rather a checkpoint along the path toward fulfillment of our nation's greatest promise.

He would remind us yet again, as he did on the eve of his death, that we must ask ourselves: what will happen to our brothers and sisters if we do not stop to help them?

This is a question we continue to ask ourselves today. We have come a long way from that day when four young men sat down at the Woolworth's lunch counter. But we still face great challenges.

In 2010, we have an African American President. And yet discrimination persists – both blatant discrimination and the dangerously subtle kind – in so many of our institutions, showing up in our schools, in our workplaces, in our health care system, in our financial system.

In 2010, a Latina sits on the Supreme Court bench. And yet newcomers to our country, trying like so many generations past to carve out a life in the land of the free, face bigotry and hate because of the language they speak, the clothes they wear, the color of their skin or the accent in their voice.

In 2010, openly gay lawmakers have been elected to legislatures at every level of government. And yet there is no federal law that protects them from discrimination in the workplace.

Our children today are growing up to accept families of all different kinds, but a Justice of the Peace in Louisiana recently took it upon himself to refuse to marry an interracial couple. A woman is the Speaker of the House of Representatives, yet women in so many places across the country must still fight for equal pay.

Crosses are still burned in yards across the nation's heartland. Acts of violence are still committed because of an individual's skin color, or because of who they love, or because of where they come from. Individuals with disabilities are still too often denied access to those basic services that the rest of us take for granted.

These are the challenges that face us each day in the Civil Rights Division. And this is why, under the leadership of President Obama and Attorney General Holder, the Division has embarked upon a period of restoration and transformation.

I am reminded as I enter those hallowed halls at the Robert F. Kennedy Justice Building each day that I have one of the greatest jobs in America. The Civil Rights Division is the conscience of the nation. We are responsible for delivering on the promise of equal justice. We enforce those laws for which Martin Luther King fought. For us in the Civil Rights

Division, every day is Martin Luther King day every day we put his legacy into action by enforcing civil rights laws.

We are addressing the vast injustice done by the explosion in subprime lending and the subsequent foreclosure crisis, which had devastated families and ravaged communities. Unscrupulous lenders all too frequently have used the corrosive power of fine print to trick hardworking people and tear apart communities. I have hired a Special Counsel for Fair Lending, and we are creating a dedicated Fair Lending unit in our Housing Section to root out discrimination in lending.

We are working to ensure that services, programs and public facilities are accessible to individuals with disabilities, who have a vast contribution to make to our society and our communities that can only be maximized if they have equal access. We are working to end the illegal but all too common practice of unnecessarily segregating people with disabilities in institutions.

We know that the landmark civil rights laws already on the books have holes yet to be filled, and we are working to pursue policies that protect the rights of all individuals. The recent enactment of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Protection Act was a good start in that direction. The Obama Administration has also expressed strong support for passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act to protect LGBT individuals from workplace discrimination, and we feel confident that it will happen in 2010.

We are restoring and transforming the Civil Rights Division – not in an effort to re-create the Civil Rights Division of an earlier era, but rather to prepare ourselves to tackle the challenges before us today, and to ensure we are nimble enough to address the challenges on the horizon.

There are those who would prefer we stick to the status quo. Critical civil rights protections gathered dust during the 8 years of the previous administration, as those entrusted with the keys to the Civil Rights Division worked on the belief that we've closed the book on civil rights in our nation. We saw a fifty percent decrease in cases brought by the Housing Section from the Clinton Administration to the Bush Administration. We saw disability rights cases cut in half. We saw a dramatic decline in cases brought to combat voting discrimination. We saw an unfathomable drop in hate crimes prosecutions, from 51 in 1996 to just 12 in 2006.

There are those who doubt the continued need for civil rights laws, those who will paint their enforcement as controversial. But we will not let them stagnate so that we can avoid such criticism. We are not afraid that we will offend some by protecting and defending the rights of others.

From his narrow cell in Birmingham Jail, Dr. King wrote "I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension...Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension on society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood."

President Obama and Attorney General Holder have made clear that civil rights are a top priority, and we are committed to the enforcement of some of our most cherished laws.

I feel fortunate that in my life I have worked to advance civil rights, and that I have worked closely with labor organizations. Over the last century those two movements have learned from each other, have helped each other and have changed our nation into one where more people have access to the promise equal opportunity.

My parents could have never imagined the progress we see today. My children, however, will know nothing different. Those four young men who carried out their meticulously planned and executed protest in 1960, and the thousands of others who over the course of the last half century had the courage to stand up for what was right when it certainly wasn't popular, changed the hearts and minds of a nation.

Together, we can continue our great progress. We must continue to work collaboratively for our common goals. As Dr. King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Together, we can continue to move toward justice.