

Address by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. TWU's 11th Constitutional Convention, 1961

Thank you for your heart-warming applause. Mr. Quill, Officers and Delegates of this Constitutional Convention of the Transport Workers Union of America, Ladies and Gentlemen: I do want to pause to say how very delighted I am to be here today and to be some little part of this most significant convention. I want to express my personal appreciation to your distinguished President for extending the invitation and I am very happy that my schedule made it possible for me to be here.

I bring greetings to you from the South, a section of our nation in transition. Mr. Quill has mentioned to you the struggle which took place in Montgomery, Alabama, and I can hardly speak on any platform in America without bringing greetings from the citizens of Montgomery, particularly the 50,000 Negro citizens of that city, who, a few years ago, came to see that it is ultimately more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. And as a result of their willingness to suffer and sacrifice for some 381 days, I am happy to report that the buses of Montgomery, Alabama are now thoroughly integrated and Negro passengers can sit anywhere on the bus in that city.

I am happy to report that the buses of Montgomery, Alabama are now thoroughly integrated and Negro passengers can sit anywhere on the bus in that city.

I also bring greetings to you from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of which I am President—an organization working tirelessly and assiduously to make the American dream a reality. And I want to express once more my personal appreciation to Mr. Quill, and to this great union, for the support that you have given us in our struggle in the South. Many of the leaders of our organization, many of the officers of our organization, have had to suffer as a result of their standing up for the cause of freedom and human dignity. They have had to suffer libel suits. They have had to suffer having their property and their automobiles taken away from them, all because of trumped-up charges on the part of the State of Alabama. I remember some months ago when this problem was presented to Mr. Quill. He immediately responded by giving us support to face these cases. And I want to thank him and I want to thank you, once more, for that support.

I also bring greetings from the student movement. These students in the South have taken our deep groans and passionate yearning and filtered them in their own tender souls, and fashioned them into a creative protest which is an epic known all over our nation. In a real sense, for all these months, they have moved in a uniquely meaningful orbit, imparting light and heat to distant satellites. And, as a result of their non-violent discipline, yet courageous action, they have been able to bring about integration at lunch counters in more than 100 cities of the South.

I am convinced that when the history books are written in future generations, historians will have to call this student movement one of the growing epics of our heritage.

Freedom Rides Get Results

I should also mention to you the Freedom Rides, for you have supported the Freedom Rides in a most positive and concrete way. This Freedom Ride movement came into being to reveal the indignities and the injustices which Negro people still face as they attempt to do the simple thing of traveling through the South as interstate passengers. More than anything else, this movement revealed that segregation is still the Negro's burden and America's shame. As a result of this movement, concrete and meaningful things have happened and many achievements have come into being, the



most recent being the ruling from the Interstate Commerce Commission, which says in substance that segregation must go in all interstate travel, and all bus terminals must now be thoroughly integrated, or else they will face sanctions by the Federal Government.

When your union was born in strife during the turbulent thirties, it grew and developed in the pioneering, democratic tradition of a CIO Union with respect to racial equality. Your crusading spirit which broke through the open shop stronghold, also broke through the double walled citadels of race prejudice. It is pathetic that our nation did not begin decades ago, as did you, to deal with the evil of discrimination. Had it done so, in 1961 its American ambassadors in every nation on the globe would not be embarrassed and apologetic because our democratic garments exhibit some gaping moth holes. I want to say a word about your President, Mike Quill, and some of your other leaders whom I have met. There is a special quality in them which is found in the spirit of this Union itself. It is a quality of independence.

Your views may not at every moment be the popular one, but they are always respected, and frequently, the passage of time has proven your position to be the soundest.

You may not always be right, but you are never going to be intimidated into silence or conformity. Your views may not at every moment be the popular one, but they are always respected, and frequently, the passage of time has proven your position to be the soundest. The great Scottish poet, Robert Burns, seeking a phrase to describe a real man, finally expressed the ideal: "A man of independent mind." Your leadership and your Union and you, its delegates, are just that, to me. Now, I wish all America had that spirit of freedom in its heart. I know that some day it must, to be America.

TWU – A Union of Minorities

No doubt the special depth that typifies your Union springs from the fact that you are virtually a Union of minorities, because I understand your membership is largely made up of Irish, Italians, Negroes and Jews. Each of these minorities had to pursue a struggle for equality as a people. This heritage you are able to understand more clearly, than others—the goals and methods of the Negro's present-day fight for freedom. Negroes who are now beginning their march from the dark and desolate midnight of discrimination can find from you inspiration and lessons for the hard-road still ahead. But though we have a multitude of problems, we cannot be unmindful of new problems confronting labor. Toward these problems we are not neutral, and certainly not indifferent, because they are our problems as well.

Automation Hits Negroes Hardest

New economic patterning through automation is dissolving the jobs of workers in some of the nation's basic industries. This is, to me, a catastrophe. We are neither technologically advanced nor socially enlightened, if we witness this disaster for tens of thousands, without finding a solution. And by "solution," I mean a real and genuine alternative, providing the same living standards and opportunities which were swept away by a force called "progress," but which for some, means destruction.

The society that performs miracles with machinery has a capacity to make some miracles for men, if it values men as highly as it values machines. This is really the crux of the problem. Are we as concerned for human values and human resources as we are for material and mechanical values? Industry is not alone a production complex of assembly lines and steel-forming equipment. It is made up of people who must live in decency, with security for children, for old age, for health, and a cultural life. And automation cannot be permitted to become a blind monster which grinds out more material resources and snuffs out the hopes and lives of people by whom the industry was built.

Industry is not alone a production complex of assembly lines and steel-forming equipment. It is made up of people who must live in decency, with security for children, for old age, for health, and a cultural life.

Perhaps few people can so well understand the problems of automation, as Negroes, because we built the cotton economy for 300 years, as slaves, on which the nation grew powerful, and still we lack the most elementary rights of citizens or workers. We, too, realize that when human values are subordinated to blind, economic forces, human beings can become human scrap. You can count on us to be reliable allies in every form of struggle you must undertake in the solution of your problem—legislative, social, and political.

There are more ties of kinship between labor and the Negro people, than the problem of automation. For example, labor has long needed a wage-hour bill which puts a firm floor under wage scales. Negroes need the same measures even more desperately, for so many of us earn less than \$1.25 per hour.

What Labor Needs, Negroes Need

Labor needs housing legislation and an adequate old-age medical care bill, and so do Negroes. The list might be extended ad infinitum, for it is axiomatic that what labor needs, Negroes need, and simple logic, therefore, puts us side by side in the struggle for all elements of a decent standard of living.

As we survey the problems of labor from the chilling threat of automation to the needs in housing and social welfare generally, we are confronted with the necessity of having a Congress responsive to liberal legislation. Here, again, the kinship of interests of labor and the Negro people expresses itself. Negroes need liberal Congressmen, if they are to realize equality of opportunity. And this fundamental objective of the Negro's freedom struggle, if attained, will bring into being a new political alignment in our nation. The campaign to grant the ballot to Negroes in the South has profound implications.

From all I have outlined, it is clear that the Negro vote will not be utilized in a vacuum. Negroes exercising a free suffrage would march to the polls to support those candidates who would be partial to social legislation. Negroes in the South, whether they elected white or Negro Congressmen, would be placing in office a liberal candidate—if you will, a labor candidate.

No other political leader would have a program possessing appeal to Negroes. In the circumstances, a campaign for Negro suffrage is both a fulfillment of Constitutional rights and a fulfillment of labor's needs in a fast-changing economy.

We, the Negro people, and labor, by extending the frontiers of democracy to the South, inevitably will sow the seeds of liberalism where reaction has flourished unchallenged for decades. The new day will dawn which will see militant, steadfast and reliable Congressmen from the South, joining those from Northern industrial states, to design and enact legislation for the people, rather than for the privileged.

No Rest Until Discrimination Ends

Just last week we had the annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Nashville, Tenn. In this meeting we went on record endorsing a plan to start a campaign to extend the ballot for the Negro, or, rather, the number of Negro registered voters to at least double where it stands at the present time. As you know, there are approximately 1,300,000 Negro registered voters in the South; but there are 5 million Negroes who are potential voters—that is, eligible to vote, in terms of age. And we feel that one of the most significant steps that the Negro can take at this hour is that short walk to the voting booth. For this, as I have said, would liberalize the total political structure of the South, and thereby liberalize the political structure of the nation. And we are going all out to achieve the ballot for the Negro. In order to do this, we ask for your continued support, for as you can realize, this is a big job, it will take a lot of time, it will take a lot of energy, it will take a lot of money, and we will need the backing and the support of all people good will in the United States.

But our struggle will continue in other areas, also. Suffice it to say we will not rest until segregation and discrimination have been removed from every area of American life. We are convinced that segregation is a cancer in the body politic, which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized, and it is nothing but a new form of slavery, covered up with certain niceties of complexity.

So in order to make the American dream a reality, we will continue to work in areas of non-violent direct action to break down all of the barriers of segregation. We will continue to sit in, to stand in, to ride in, to wade in, and to kneel in, in order to get America out of the dilemma in which she finds herself, as a result of the continued existence of segregation and discrimination.

Segregation is a National Problem

May I say to you, as I come to my conclusion, that this problem in the United States will not be solved until enough people North and South, come to see that it is wrong, and are willing to work passionately and unrelentingly to get

ride of this cancerous disease. And I say to you that as you well know, this is not merely a Southern problem, it is a national problem. Segregation still exists in the South, in its glaring and conspicuous form but we still find it in Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, yes, and in New York, in its hidden and subtle forms.

But if democracy is to live, segregation must die. So that there is need for a real commitment and a genuine liberalism. The person of genuine good will may rise up with righteous indignation when a Negro is lynched in Mississippi, or when a bus is burned in Anniston, Alabama, but that same person must rise up with righteous indignation when a Negro cannot live in his neighborhood, or when a Negro cannot get a particular job in his firm or in his organization, or in his particular industry, or when a Negro cannot join his professional society, simply because of the color of his skin.

In the final analysis, this problem will be solved when men develop the type of discontent which says, within, "We will take it no longer!"

An Appeal for 'Maladjustment'

There are certain words in every academic discipline which soon becomes stereotypes and cliches. Every act of democratic discipline has its technical nomenclature. Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word in modern environment. It is the word, "maladjustment." Certainly, we all want to live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. As I come to my conclusion, I say to you, today, that there are some things in our social order toward which I am glad to be "maladjusted," and I call upon you to be "maladjusted."

I never intend to adjust myself to slavery and segregation.

I never intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry.

I never intend to become adjusted to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.

I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism, for in a day when sputniks and explorers are dashing through outer space, and guided ballistic missiles are carving highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can win a war. It is no longer a choice between violence and non-violence. It is now either non-violence or non-existence.

And I never intend to adjust to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.

"Let Justice Run Down Like Waters..."

And so I call upon you to be "maladjusted" and continue in the maladjustment that you have already demonstrated, for it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the "maladjusted." And so, let us be maladjusted.

If you will allow the preacher in me to come out now, let us be as "maladjusted" as the Prophet Amos, who, in the midst of the injustices of his day, cried out in words that echo across the centuries: "Let justice run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free.

As maladjusted as Thomas Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, could cry out in words lifted to cosmic proportions, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As maladjusted as Mahatma K. Gandhi, who could say to his people, "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."

As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who could say to the men and women of his generation, "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you."

Daybreak of Freedom and Justice

And I believe through such maladjustment we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man, and to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

And may I remind you that those of us who struggle for the good life to realize the American dream and to make

a better place in which to live, do not struggle in vain, and we do not struggle alone, for somehow in this struggle we have cosmic companionship. The hours are dark, sometimes, and the nights are dreary, and there are moments when we feel, even in the struggle for racial justice, that we are going backwards instead of forward—there are always those frustrating moments in any move toward a great goal. But, somehow, there is something that reminds us that the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice, and there is something in this universe that justifies Carlyle in saying, “No lie can live forever.”

The Faith That Keeps Us Going

There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant saying, “Truth crushed to earth, will rise again.” There is something in this universe which justifies James Russel Lowell in saying, “Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne; yet that scaffold sways the futures.” And it is faith that keeps us going, and with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism, and then, on that new day, when that day comes, the fears of insecurity, the torments of frustration, and the doubts clouding our future, will be transformed into confidence, into excitement to reach new goals, and in which the brotherhood of man will be undergirded by secure and expanding prosperity available to all.

This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to join hands, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”