

the task of the present. So much that we have already done together proves that in going further and strengthening our ties we will inevitably enrich the lives of all of us, bringing democratic dynamism into the political bloodstream of the nation. Lest we forget, the men who established our country were in the main ordinary people—but they had an extraordinary dream that all problems could be solved by united action; by participation of all upon an equal basis.

They called their dream democracy. Nearly two hundred years later, if we now faithfully develop and practice democracy, transforming it into living reality for all of our citizens, it will fashion a new era of abundance in material and moral riches.

[In King's remarks at the UPWA convention, King concluded with extemporaneous refrains he frequently used: the importance of being maladjusted, his faith in the future, a quote from James Russell Lowell about the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, and he finished with "free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last."]

## VI

*"There are three major social evils . . .  
the evil of war, the evil of economic  
injustice, and the evil of racial injustice."*

**W**hen King came to speak at this gathering, District 65's convention, in 1962, he knew he was among friends. Secretary-Treasurer Cleveland Robinson said District 65 scarcely held a major event that King did not attend (he had spoken to the union in 1959 and several times in 1961), and the union and its members closely followed his 1962 civil rights campaign in Albany, Georgia. African Americans and Puerto Ricans working in the lowest stations in department stores and other phases of retail and wholesale work comprised 90 percent of the union's membership. Instead of his measured, sober, and formal manner so evident at some of his other union speeches, King preached to members of District 65, bringing the exuberance of southern church meetings to union members in the North. And while he had avoided this topic at the AFL-CIO, at District 65, King spoke freely about the devastating connections between racism, militarism, and war. He saw in its members and leaders the kind of movement that could reform society from the bottom up.

Like the packinghouse workers union, District 65 had long provided solid support to King. Robinson worked closely with A. Philip Randolph and was vice president of

*the Negro American Labor Council (NALC). More than any other of King's labor advisors, he kept prodding King to move toward union and economic justice issues within King's SCLC. District 65 mounted picket lines and protests in New York in support of King's campaigns in the South. The union affiliated to the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), a New York-based grouping of unions that began under Communist leadership but later continued under a militant anti-communist president; District 65 later joined the UAW. Whatever their political stance, most union leaders prioritized a pragmatic concern for union autonomy and the ability to deliver for their membership, and District 65 was no different.*

*King gave this speech on the opening day of the union's convention outside New York City, fresh from a jail cell in Albany, Georgia. For demanding the right to access public facilities, decent schools, and to vote, King and thousands of others had been herded into trucks and arrested. Although producing no visible victories, the Albany movement unearthed a tremendous youthful spirit of singing, marching, and praying. In a similar spirit, King's audience at the District 65 convention cheered, shouted, laughed, sang, and raised a fuss. After King's death, the union made King's birthday a day off in its contracts, and workers donated the proceeds of that day's missed labor to a fund supporting human rights activity. The District 65 newspaper reproduced some of this speech in its October 1962 edition, supplemented here by excerpts from a recorded album issued by the union in appreciation of King's cause. The union estimated that in the 1960s it had raised more than \$100,000 from its members to support the southern freedom movement, and it would play a key role in the 1963 March on Washington.*



## Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) District 65

MONTICELLO, NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 8, 1962

My good friend, President [David] Livingston, and to all of the members, all of the officers and friends of District 65, ladies and gentlemen. I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to have the opportunity of coming back to this beautiful setting, to be with you on the occasion of your convention. I never feel like a stranger or a visitor when I come among 65ers. I always feel at home and I always feel like one of you. For I can think of no labor union in the United States today that has given us the type of moral and financial support that you have given across these last few turbulent years. And this support has given us renewed courage and vigor to carry on in the struggle. I know we could not make it without this type of support.

Unfortunately, all labor unions affiliated with AFL-CIO are not as sensitive to the needs and not as concerned about the problems as District 65. It is refreshing indeed and encouraging to know that somebody still has the vision, the concern, the insight, and the moral commitment to realize that we are together, and that if the minority groups that are exploited and trampled over by the iron feet of oppression go up, labor will go up; and if we go down, labor will go down because the forces that are anti-Negro are anti-labor and vice versa. And therefore we must see that we are together in a struggle to make democracy a reality, and to make the American dream a reality in this day and this age.

But I want to talk with you about some of the problems we are facing in the world today and problems that we are facing in our own nation. And if I had to use a subject for

the things that I would like to say to you I would use the subject "creative dissatisfaction."

There are three major social evils that are alive in our world today. And I would like to talk with you about these evils and urge each of you to maintain a keen sensitivity to these social evils that pervade our nation and our world. These three evils are the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice.

And so that means that I start out saying that we must find some alternative to war. And God grant that we will come to see now that we can never again adjust to war and all of the evil consequences that result from war, for there is something at bottom evil about war. War stacks our nations with national debts higher than mountains of gold. War fills our nations with orphans and widows. War sends men home psychologically deranged and physically handicapped. And we've got to come to see now that there is something basically and fundamentally wrong with a world that seeks to solve its problems on the battlefield. . . .

In a day with Sputniks and Explorers dashing through outer space, and guided ballistic missiles 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 either nonviolence or nonexistence, and the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world, may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation. War is evil, and there must be people all over this nation and all over this world, who will be a part of a creative minority, and who will develop a creative dissatisfaction where the whole question of war is concerned.

The other problem is one that you are very much familiar with; we all are. The problem is economic injustice. . . . We know that there is still in our world a great gulf

between superfluous, inordinate wealth, and abject, deadening poverty. We see it in our nation and we see it in other nations. And we must always maintain a keen sensitivity to these conditions, for there is something wrong with a situation that will take the necessities from the masses and give luxuries to the classes.

Somehow, we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny and we must see this over and over again. I think about the fact that right here in America, one-tenth of 1 percent of the population controls almost 50 percent of the wealth. Some changes must take place here, and I don't think the answer is in Communism, certainly not. Communism is based in ethical relativism, a metaphysical materialism, a denial of human freedom, and a totalitarianism that I can never accept. I believe that we can work within the framework of our democracy to make for a better distribution of wealth, and I believe that God has left enough and to spare in this world for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life. I will never be satisfied, and I will never be content, until all men and all women can have the basic necessities of life.

In the last two years I have done a little traveling in some of the other continents of our world, been in Africa, Asia, and South America, and in all of these countries and continents, I've noticed extreme poverty.

I said to myself, can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned? And something within cried out oh, no, because the destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India. And somehow I had to think about the fact that right here in America, we spend more than a million dollars a day to store surplus food. I say to you this afternoon, that I know where we can store that food free of charge, in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of people of Asia and Africa and South America.

Maybe we spend far too much of our national budget establishing military bases around the world rather than bases of genuine concern and understanding. All I'm saying is simply this: that all life is interrelated, and whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. John Donne was right in his poem, when he said, "No man is an island entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main," and he goes on toward the end to say, "Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

The third evil is the evil of racial injustice. And again, we are all familiar with this. We have seen it in all of its ugly dimensions. We've seen it in the South. Legislative halls ring loud over such words as interposition and nullification. We've seen it in muddy Mississippi, crying out in the voice of little Emmett C. Till. We've seen it down in Leesburg, Georgia, where the church of God could be burned simply because people assembling in that church wanted to register and vote. We've seen it in Albany, Georgia. More than a thousand people have gone to jail, merely because they want to be free, and engage in peaceful protest, in order to make that freedom possible.

Yes, we've seen racial injustice, but not only have we seen it in the South. No section of our country can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood, and so we even see it in New York, in housing and employment discrimination. But I believe all of us are aware segregation must die. For segregation is a cancer in the body politic, which must be removed before our democratic and moral health can be realized.

We are challenged to work passionately and unrelentingly to get rid of this evil and unjust system. Now, of course, we need many agencies to work. We need the federal government to do something about it. The fed-

eral government has a great responsibility in this tense period of transition. This is why I've tried to get over to the president in the form of a document that there is a need now for the president of the United States to sign an executive order making it palpably clear that segregation is unconstitutional on the basis of the Fourteenth Amendment. This would be something of a second Emancipation Proclamation.

You will remember that almost one hundred years ago Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the Negro from the bondage of physical slavery. A hundred years later we still have slavery because segregation is nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. The time has come.

This is very important. Along with all that we do to get the federal government to act, we realize that if we are to be free, we must do something about it ourselves. For we have in our hands the creative, moral, nonviolent instruments to change the social situation. This is what we tried to emphasize in our struggle in the South. This is the meaning of the struggle taking place today in Albany, Georgia. This is what the people of Albany, Georgia, are saying: "We are determined to be free. And we have discovered a creative method, we have decided to stand up for that freedom, we have decided to suffer and sacrifice for that freedom."

We see in Albany, Georgia, the most vigorous determination to break down segregation to date, for all of the nonviolent methods are being used in Albany, for the first time and at the same time. Here you see sit-ins, stand-ins, wade-ins, kneel-ins, boycotts, working through the courts, and also working through the political area, by seeking to double the number of Negro registered voters. All of these are working together . . .

Three simple words explain the social revolution tak-

ing place in Albany and the South today. They aren't big words. One does not need to have a philosophical bent to understand them. They are three simple words: the word *all*, the word *here*, and the word *now*. [King's voice rises to a fevered pitch.] We don't want some of our rights. We don't want a few token handouts here and there. We want all of our rights, but we don't want to have to run anywhere else to get them, and so we will not join a back-to-Africa movement (Applause), nor will we take a one-way "freedom ride" ticket north sponsored by the White Citizens' Council movement. (Applause) What we are saying is that we want all of our rights and we want them here in the red hills of Georgia, here behind the cotton curtains of Alabama, here on the soils of Mississippi. We want all of our rights, and want them here! (Applause and cheering)

We aren't willing to wait two hundred years for our rights. No, we are not willing to wait one hundred and fifty years for our rights. We have lived with gradualism. And we know that gradualism is little more than a do-nothingism and an escapism which ends up in stand-stillism. And we are simply saying we want all of our rights, we want them here, and we want freedom now! This is what we want. (Applause and cheering)

In short, my friends, our goal is freedom. And I believe we will reach the goal because the goal of America is freedom. This is our destiny, and we are determined, and nothing can stop us.

But our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. We worked right here two centuries without wages. We made cotton king. And we built our homes, and the homes of our masters, in the midst of injustice and humiliation. And yet, out of a bottomless vitality, we continue to grow and develop. And if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, certainly the opposition that we now face will not be able to stop us. And we will continue this

struggle because we know that somehow the heritage of our nation and the will of God are somehow tied up in our echoing demands. And so we go on with this faith, and God grant that we together, all of the liberal forces, will move on toward that great day when the brotherhood of man will be a reality, when all of God's children will be able to join together, realizing that all men are significant and God's children, realizing that the basic thing about every man is his dignity and worth.

And if we will go on with that spirit we will be able to speed up that day when we will be able to sing with new meaning "My Country, 'Tis of Thee": "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where our fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring." And that must become literally true all over this nation, and if we will make it true, we will be a great people, and we will be a great nation.

This is the challenge for people everywhere. This is the challenge for men of goodwill at this hour. This is the challenge of this moment. And may we do it with zeal and determination, not waiting until next year, not waiting until tomorrow morning, not waiting even an hour from now. Somewhere I read a little poem, which said, "A tiny little minute, just sixty seconds in it, I didn't choose it, I can't refuse it. It's up to me to use it. A tiny little minute, just sixty seconds in it, but eternity is in it." And if we will use the moment creatively and bring into being this new society, something will happen.

That will be the moment, figuratively speaking, when the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy. Thank you. (Applause)