



## The Right to Not Be Poor: The Growing Global Struggle for Economic Human Rights

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men [all human beings] are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men [human societies], deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.” -- Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, July 4, 1776

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate--we cannot consecrate--we can not hallow--this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work, which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” -- Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln, November 19, 1863

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

-- Article 25, United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948

“We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.”

-- Address to SCLC Staff Conference, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., May 1967

“We read one day, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.' But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists.”

--"Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," Dr. King, March 31, 1968

## I. THE NEW GLOBAL POOR AND THE CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

The United States today is rent with a profound leadership crisis caused by a profound economic crisis. This crisis has revealed the fundamental weakness in our global economic order: although we have the technical means to produce an unheard of abundance, we continue to witness a massive expansion of poverty and deepening economic inequality.

On the one hand, the depth and comprehensiveness of technological changes in production, circulation and communications have made it possible to advance the pursuit of human achievement and happiness for all. This technological revolution is of an intensity and magnitude that, even in its initial stages, has made the major industrial revolutions of the past two centuries seem like storms in a coffee cup. Consequently, neither our economy nor our consciousness need be constrained by scarcity any longer – this revolution has made poverty completely unnecessary. On the other hand, the current social and economic order continues to produce a mounting toll of human misery. Whole communities, countries and continents are having their populations rendered superfluous and stripped of the ability to purchase the basic necessities of life. As the momentous increase in the world’s production capacity is overwhelming global purchasing capacity, it is portending a collapse of the world market and resulting in huge social dislocations. Already, growing numbers of the world’s poor and dispossessed<sup>1</sup> are being thrown into life and death situations. Their ranks are being increased daily with the accelerating destruction of the so-called “middle-income strata.” This is all taking place alongside an intense concentration and centralization of wealth arising out of the most recent and ongoing technological revolution. Thus, poverty today exists in the midst of plenty with millions and billions abandoned in the midst of abundance.

In a globalized era, this is resulting in an inhumane and insane “race to the bottom” that is equalizing poverty everywhere. Poverty today knows no color, ethnicity, gender nor border.<sup>2</sup> It exists in every country, rich and poor, developed and undeveloped. Further, the global poor today are not like the old slave poor, the old feudal poor, nor the poor of an industrial society. It is a new social group arising out of a globalized capitalism and forming out of all sections of society that are being cast out from the ranks of the exploited to those of the excluded.

As the ongoing and emerging struggles of the new global poor reveal the injustices of a poverty-producing system, they are at the same time presenting a vision of economic justice and human rights: there should be no poverty when there is plenty; there should be no abandonment amidst abundance. One major way this is finding expression is the struggle to deepen, update and implement the founding creed of this country – the Declaration of Independence – and find fuller meaning in our rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Indeed, at its birth the U.S. declared loudly a demand for these “unalienable” human rights, articulating a revolution that moved the social consciousness of the

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent use of the word “poor” is to be considered shorthand for the classes of people who have been made “poor and dispossessed” by global capital.

<sup>2</sup> Although aggravated by such social ills as the oppression of women, racism, ethnic/national oppression, assaults on immigrants, the drug epidemic, criminalization, pollution, and militarization, poverty is not caused by these social ills and inequalities. Rather, they are the effects or symptoms caused by the present economic system in which an expanding poverty is produced by the historically unheard of concentration, consolidation and accumulation of wealth in few hands.

American colonies from recognizing the “Divine Rights of Kings” to the God-given rights for all. While these rights were once reserved for white, property-holding men, successive social movements for abolition, women’s enfranchisement, industrial union rights and civil rights for African-Americans, and others, have called for a broader and deeper redefining of the human rights declared in this founding creed. This historic cry of the Declaration of Independence has also echoed worldwide through important documents like the United Nations’ Universal Declarations of Human Rights (UDHR), and in poor people’s struggles like that of the shack-dwellers in South Africa and the landless workers in Brazil.

Given present economic and social conditions, the fight of the poor today is for economic human rights – the rights to food, housing, education, health care, etc. This essentially is a global fight for the Right to Not be Poor. Compelled by these conditions to come together, and with their life threatening problems being publicized en masse, the new global poor are convening a legitimate world forum that can unite the struggles of the global poor majority across color, religion, gender, and geography. They are opening the way for what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called a “revolution of values,” or a major shift in social consciousness.

Historically, every social movement to change an unjust status quo begins with this battle for political and moral legitimacy. To abolish poverty domestically and globally, the bulk of the 300 million people in the United States will need to have their hearts and minds changed about the necessity and possibility of ending poverty today. Today’s crisis of leadership is, therefore, the challenge of uniting the poor into a force capable of awakening the American and global public around this defining issue of our time.

## II. HUMAN RIGHTS AS CONTESTED TERRAIN HISTORICALLY AND TODAY

Human rights have been historically contested on the mental terrain of the American people in a war of ideas and values. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, “endowed by their Creator,” was the American colonies’ rallying battle cry against the British Empire. Less than one century later, in the epic struggle to abolish slavery in the United States, President Lincoln affirmed in his famous Gettysburg Address this basic principle of the Declaration of Independence – that God had created and endowed all human beings with equal rights. This statement directly challenged the 1857 Taney Decision and the 1861 Cornerstone Speech made by the Vice-President of the Southern Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, which both stated that black slaves, being property and less than human, had no rights that whites were bound to respect. Lincoln also affirmed that the United States was conceived as a government of, for, and by the people. In this way, the Gettysburg Address directly opposed the Confederacy’s call for “State’s Rights” and its objective of curtailing human rights, while also opposing in principle the related current debates arguing for “small government” against the evil “big government.”

The contest over rights continued in American and world history. As expressed in the UDHR, human rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights: civil and political human rights were born out of the Enlightenment era struggles against the aristocracy in the 18th century; economic

and social human rights were born out of the struggles against the exploitation resulting from the industrial revolution in the 19th century. More recently, the 20th century experience of the Great Depression and the horror and destruction of two world wars raised serious concerns about global economic stability; the drafters of the UDHR -- signed in 1949 -- concluded that insuring basic rights and a minimum standard of living were the most important ways to maintain and secure stability and peace. As Paul Gordon Lauren writes in his book, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*,

“They came to regard the economic and social hardship suffered during the course of the Depression as contributing greatly to the rise of fascist regimes, the emergence of severe global competition, and ultimately to the outbreak of war itself...They believed that poverty, misery, unemployment, and depressed standards of living anywhere in an age of a global economy and a technological shrinking of the world bred instability elsewhere and thereby threatened peace.”<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, World War II's devastation of Europe left the direct colonial imperialist powers weakened. This allowed for the unleashing of an era of national liberation movements worldwide. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement drew inspiration from these liberation movements of oppressed peoples and became an expression of them inside the country. At the same time, the American ruling class subversively discouraged the call for human rights at home by offering judicial and legislative “support” of the Civil Rights Movement and projecting a pro-people of color world image, while launching what Malcolm X called the “U.S. Dollar and Philanthropic ‘neo-colonial’ imperialist” takeover of former direct colonies. From the very beginning, the drafters of the UDHR, including Eleanor Roosevelt and other prominent U.S. leaders, never intended for human rights, especially economic human rights, to be applied at home.

This found support in the language of civil and political rights, which had evolved into a prevailing influence in the United States. Since the founding of this country, the ideas of constitutional rights and due process have been deeply ingrained in our culture and mental terrain. While the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the similar struggles for women rights, union rights, and immigrant rights utilized this framework, this tactical approach limited the full meaning and effect of human rights.

However, leaders like W.E.B Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Dr. King refused to submit in this struggle, even though they were targeted, isolated and attacked for doing so.<sup>4</sup> In his last years, Dr. King began to articulate a strategy for human rights based on the unity across color lines of those most exploited and excluded by the economic system. In his 1966 essay, “Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom,” he highlighted the need to move beyond the limitation of constitutional rights and to take up the moral responsibility of ensuring human rights.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gordon Lauren. *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen*. University of Pennsylvania Press; 2nd edition (July 22, 2003). p. ---.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this point, see Paul Gordon Lauren on Dubois' petition to the United Nations in *The Evolution of International Human Rights: a Vision Seen*; Carol Anderson's *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955*; and Malcolm X's speech *The Ballot or the Bullet*.

“So far, we have had a Constitution backing most of the demands for change, and this has made our work easier, since we could be sure that the federal courts would usually back up our demonstrations legally. Now we are approaching areas where the voice of the Constitution is not clear. We have left the realm of constitutional rights and we are entering the area of human rights. The Constitution assured the right to vote, but there is no such assurance of the right to adequate housing, or the right to an adequate income. And yet, in a nation which has a gross national product of 750 billion dollars a year, it is morally right to insist that every person has a decent house, an adequate education and enough money to provide basic necessities for one’s family. Achievement of these goals will be a lot more difficult and require much more discipline, understanding, organization and sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup>

Two years later, when he launched the Poor People’s Campaign in 1967-68, Dr. King made an epochal shift from a period that emphasized problems of color and national liberation to one that emphasized economic oppression across color and national borders.

#### Changing Times, Changing Tactics

Today human rights, and especially economic rights, remain a deeply contested terrain in the American economic and political landscape. Although the language of human rights – including the use of the “human rights framework” – is being adopted and adapted by all corners of society, these actors do not always operate from the same definition or objective. Indeed, as current conditions are exposing weaknesses in both the economy and the prevailing mega-narratives that support it, those who benefit from the status quo are fighting with all their might to maintain it. Through new strategies, new theories, and new theologies, new responses are being developed and propagated by the powers that be to address the renewed demands for rights to basic economic necessities that are bubbling up in the United States and the world over. Given the history of this terrain in the United States, what they ascribe to “human rights” emphasizes civil rights and restricts economic rights.

Their responses may be categorized into three broad types:

*(1) Acknowledge economic human rights, but claim that they are merely ‘aspirations’ that can never be met, because they are impractical and unenforceable.*

This is a widely held objection from liberals to conservatives in the U.S. and worldwide. The objection is based on a false distinction between so-called “positive” and “negative” rights. According to this view, negative rights limit the power of the government, while positive rights expand it. Freedom from torture is said to be a negative right because it limits what the government can do (it can’t torture), while the right to housing is a positive right because it makes a demand on government to do more (it must provide houses). Additionally, negative rights do not cost anything and are therefore the proper role of government (they are ‘immunities’), while positive rights have considerable costs so they are not the proper role of government (they are ‘entitlements’).

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<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Non-violence: The Only Road to Freedom,” May 4, 1966.

The argument is completely one-sided. For instance, the protection of corporate investments and corporate contracts are considered negative rights, even though they amass enormous costs in enforcement.<sup>6</sup>

*(2) Champion “economic human rights,” but reduce them to the “cheap” and “feasible” “Millennium Development Goals” officially agreed to by most governments.*

In 2000, the United Nations established the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as part of its Millennium Summit in New York City. All 193 members of the United Nations have since agreed to achieve these eight goals<sup>7</sup> by 2015. The goal on poverty – eradicating extreme poverty and hunger – appears to be far-reaching in its vision; however, it is not in fact about ending poverty. Instead, it is about ending “extreme poverty,” narrowly defined as making little more than one dollar a day. And, because this goal is satisfied by merely cutting in half the numbers of people living on less than \$1 a day and the numbers of people who suffer from hunger, even “ending” extreme poverty will leave millions of the world’s poor both poor and hungry. Under the guise of declaring economic rights for the poor, these goals *at best* relegate at least half of the world’s poor – and threaten many millions more – to continuing and worsening conditions. Limiting the struggle for economic justice to the MDGs has the effect, therefore, of keeping in tact a poverty-producing system, the very edifice that undermines all human rights and human dignity.

It also sets up a situation that divides the global poor into the “extreme poor” and the “relatively poor”: those who live without homes, food, jobs or health in South Africa are “extreme poor”, whereas those who live without homes, food, jobs or health in the United States are “relatively” poor. This false dichotomy obscures the fundamental nature and causes of global poverty and compromises the vital principles underlying the UDHR – universality, equality and indivisibility. This is especially misleading and alienating insofar as the psychology and consciousness of the American people are concerned. For them and their history, the origins and legitimacy of these principles are that rights are “God-given,” “endowed by the Creator,” and, therefore, equally endowed to all human beings, owing to what the American people deeply believe as the equal worthiness of all God’s children.

*(3) Champion economic rights, but redefine them as civil and political rights*

This is the most subtle of the responses to the challenge of economic rights. While human rights have become increasingly indispensable to the important work of poor people’s organizations, non-profits, foundations and others, the battle around what it is that rights are and can be is being waged in an increasingly narrowed space.

On the one hand, it seems that the debate over rights – and especially economic rights – plays out along predominantly partisan lines, with politically conservative actors claiming economic rights are

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this argument see *The Cost of Rights: Why Liberty Depends on Taxes* by Cass R. Sunstein and Steven Holmes.

<sup>7</sup> The eight MDGs are: (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieving universal primary education; (3) promoting gender equality and empowering women; (4) reducing child mortality rates; (5) improving maternal health; (6) combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development.

contrary to American values and liberal or progressive actors claiming they are central to them. On the other hand, this entire debate is itself contained within a particular narrative that limits even the most progressive grassroots work within a civil rights framework.<sup>8</sup> This narrative appeals to deeply embedded fears, ignorance and stereotypes and is rooted in the assertion that we must choose whose rights – and what rights of theirs – are realized. In the United States, therefore, instead of a right to housing, we have the right to due process in eviction proceedings; instead of a right to food, we have food stamps and assistance programs that provide limited access to food; instead of a right to health or social and economic security, we have a declining welfare system that relies on a shrinking tax base resulting from increasing unemployment and underemployment. Economic rights are not defined as protected guarantees, but rather as “opportunities” made available alongside limited advocacy for legal due process and anti-discriminatory practices.

This interpretation of rights does not allow for rights to be rights, i.e., inalienable, universal and inseparable in their application for everyone to meet our basic human needs, but rather divisible privileges for only some to enjoy. Once again, the strategic objective of this narrative is to both misinform the masses on the real causes of their growing economic insecurity and to maintain their disunity and disorganization, even though the causes of their poverty and misery are one and the same.<sup>9</sup> It also has the effect of limiting any potentially transformational economic rights work by conceding to certain demands of certain groups, thereby dividing and manipulating the poor and dispossessed. Thus, for instance, the Philadelphia-Delaware Valley Homeless Union/Kensington Welfare Rights Union’s militant takeovers in 1990s of vacant HUD housing in Philadelphia did not resolve the fact that someone was made homeless every 30 minutes; important advances made by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ “penny per pound” campaign, which brought the big businesses of the food industry to the negotiating table, have not fundamentally ended the poverty of farm workers; and United Workers’ historic victory for living wages for workers at Camden Yards did not realize the *right* to a living wage for all.

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<sup>8</sup> One example comes from the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. In an article in *Human Rights Quarterly* titled “Defending Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Practical Issues Faced by an International Human Rights Organization”, Kenneth Roth writes:

“When international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch take on ESC [economic, social, and cultural] rights, we should look for situations in which there is relative clarity about violation, violator, and remedy. Broadly speaking, I would suggest that the nature of the violation, violator, and remedy is clearest when it is possible to identify arbitrary or discriminatory governmental conduct that causes or substantially contributes to an ESC rights violation....To illustrate, let us assume we could demonstrate that a government was building medical clinics only in areas populated by ethnic groups that tended to vote for it, leaving other ethnic groups with substandard medical care. In such a case, an international human rights organization would be in a good position to argue that the disfavored ethnic groups’ right to health care is being denied. This argument does not necessarily increase the resources being made available for health care, but it at least ensures a more equitable distribution. Since defenders of ESC rights should be concerned foremost with the worst-off segments of society, that redistribution would be an advance. Moreover, given that the government’s supporters are not likely to be happy about a cutback in medical care, enforcement of a nondiscriminatory approach stands a reasonable chance of increasing health-related resources overall.” (For full article, see Kenneth Roth, “Defending Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Practical Issues Faced by an International Human Rights Organization,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 26 (2004) p. 63-73.)

In other words, in the view of the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, the “right to health” does not actually mean that everyone has the right to health care. Rather, it means that everyone has the right not to be discriminated against when they are denied health care. The economic human right to health care has been transformed into the civil right to be free from discrimination. The enforcement of this perverse “right to health” has the virtue of “not necessarily increasing the resources being made available for health care”.

<sup>9</sup> The escalating and persistent deprivation of rights that is emerging in foreclosures, homelessness, joblessness, hunger and malnutrition cannot be contained within particular identities of race, gender, nationality or culture.

These three responses are, therefore, an attempt to shift the discussion away from the economic reality that the poor are becoming poorer *because* the rich are getting richer, a reality that is becoming harder to ride as the ranks of the poor and dispossessed are growing. Current economic and social conditions are forcing people to question the way our core values have been defined and how we might redefine our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness today.

### III. ECONOMIC HUMAN RIGHTS AND BUILDING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT TO END POVERTY

Over 40 years ago, Dr. King understood that the deep crises of his time – racism, war, social and economic inequality – were, and still are, rooted in an economic system that deprives millions of people the right to a decent life. After the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 he realized that,

We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole of society – this means a revolution of values...We now see that the evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are all tied together – you can't really get rid of one without getting rid of the others.<sup>10</sup>

Anticipating the necessary strategic response, he launched the Poor People's Campaign in 1967-68, which took deliberate steps to unite the struggles of the poor across color lines. In this regard, he stated:

The dispossessed of this nation -- the poor, both white and Negro -- live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize... against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of organizing this campaign for economic justice, Dr. King raised the battle cry of "moving from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights."<sup>12</sup> Today more than ever, we are confronted with the urgent need to finish the unfinished business of the Poor People's Campaign. In the past 40 years, through the 2008 economic crisis and its continuing aftershocks, we have seen an unprecedented polarization of wealth and poverty. In the U.S., more and more Americans are finding themselves in the ranks of the downsized, outsourced and outcast, while welfare, food stamps, Medicare and Medicaid, and Social Security are under attack. Following in Dr. King's footsteps, the

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<sup>10</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Address to the SCLC Staff Meeting, May 1967.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Massey Lecture Series for the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), December 1967. *See also, Trumpet of Conscience.*

<sup>12</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Riverside Church, New York City, May 4, 1967.



Right to Not be Poor provides a way to unite these poor and dispossessed millions against the system that is immiserating them.

The demand for the rights to basic economic necessities for all means:

- **Building a broad social movement to end poverty, led by the poor and dispossessed as a social force united and organized across color lines and other lines of division.** Economic human rights can only be secured through this type of movement. The demand for the rights to these basic economic necessities necessarily challenges the existing economic and power relationships. As Frederick Douglass once stated, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will.”<sup>13</sup> Power grows from unity and organization.
- **Uniting the poor and dispossessed as a “new and unsettling force.”** Economic human rights offer a framework to unite the poor on the basis of their common needs and demands. This unity brings together millions of small and separated voices into one powerful voice that must be heard, awakening the world masses to the urgent necessity and moral imperative to end poverty in the midst of plenty.
- **Uniting struggles arising out of different immediate issues into one powerful social movement.** Economic human rights offer a framework to unite the poor and dispossessed as a social force across individual issues of struggle. In this way, the unity of actions of the poor can target the forces arrayed against them at their weakest point - morally, politically, strategically and tactically - that is, around the fact of poverty existing in the midst of plenty.
- **Giving legitimacy to locally emerging struggles.** Using the demand for economic human rights as a battle cry can give historic and global legitimacy to today’s struggles of the poor. This is because the growing mass struggles worldwide are becoming an undeniable source of moral and political importance. In addition, these growing mass struggles evoke the core religious and spiritual values or justice and dignity embodied in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and its current global expression in the UDHR.
- **Framing the issues in a proactive way.** The demand for economic human rights offers a comprehensive vision of a world free from want. It begins to suggest a world vision of a society where the meeting of our basic needs is guaranteed and non-negotiable. This view allows for the increasing struggles for life and livelihood to go beyond immediate defensive efforts to an all out offensive to end the conditions causing our poverty.
- **Encouraging global solidarity of the poor.** Framing our local struggles around economic human rights embraces the values of this vision and also appreciates the new globalized character of the polarization between wealth and poverty. It thereby facilitates global solidarity of the developing struggles of the poor to abolish that polarity.

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<sup>13</sup> Frederick Douglass, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress,” August 3, 1857.

- **Orienting the fight for the proper role of government.** The demand for the Right to Not be Poor is essentially a demand for the right to basic economic necessities. It begins to indicate how government can function to secure human rights for all as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. It therefore insists on what President Abraham Lincoln once called the “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

History has shown that struggles for rights have always been struggles for power. During the Abolitionist movement and leading up to the Civil War, when a class of big slave-owners held economic and political power, slavery was legal. It was protected and enforced through the state apparatus as well as by every societal institution and constituency that had any interest in maintaining the status quo, including through the prevailing and entrenched mental and moral terrain of the American people. Consequently, slaves had no rights that society was bound to respect.<sup>14</sup> In many aspects, poverty today is the political and moral equivalent of slavery then. Poverty, too, is legal in all its manifestations – lack of healthcare and adequate housing, underemployment and structural unemployment, hunger, poor education, etc. It is, in other words, the law of the land. Consequently, the poor have no rights that society is bound to respect.

Because slavery was legal at the time, the social and political movement to abolish slavery was essentially a movement to secure the right to not be a slave. Similarly today, when poverty exists in the midst of plenty, a movement to abolish poverty must aim to secure the human right to not be poor. These movements are necessarily about power, not pity or limited legal concessions; therefore, the right to basic economic, social, and cultural necessities such as healthcare, housing, education, and jobs that ensure a quality life is necessarily the product of nothing short of a broad and powerful movement led by the poor and dispossessed united as a social force.

In his last speech, Dr. King said,

You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery.<sup>15</sup>

The unity of the poor is, in the same way, the beginning of the ending of poverty. The Right to Not be Poor provides leaders committed to the challenge of uniting the poor with strategically important guiding principles, especially as millions of people are being placed in a position where they are compelled to kill the status quo before the status quo kills them. With little or no stake in the economic and political edifice that produces beggars and billionaires, and united as the poor and dispossessed, they will emerge as the “new and unsettling force” that can awaken the American and global masses and end poverty for all.

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<sup>14</sup> In the landmark case *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (60 U.S. 393 (1857)), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that people of African descent who were brought into the United States and held as slaves, or their descendants, whether or not they were slaves, were not protected by the U.S. Constitution and were not U.S. citizens. As part of the majority opinion, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney wrote that blacks had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

<sup>15</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land (I’ve been to the Mountaintop),” April 3, 1968.