

Poor People's Campaign confronts society's injustices

A need for disruption

By Mark Mishler

Civic leaders, upset by a series of disruptive demonstrations for justice, said, "We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized," adding that the protests by "outsiders" were "unwise and untimely." They noted that, "these days of new hope are (not) days when extreme measures are justified." The leaders said the tactics were "not really very considerate of working-class people who are just trying to get around," and that the demonstrations were led by "protesters who bus and drive into our city to disrupt it." They advised the protesters that there were "better ways to deliver the message" and proposed to meet with the activists to try to persuade them to change their tactics.

The first two of those sentences come from a 1963 letter by white clergy in Alabama, who were angry at Martin Luther King Jr., and other activists regarding a series of disruptive and confrontational demonstrations in Birmingham. The second two depict the response of Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan and her chief of staff, Brian Shea, in 2018, responding to the Poor People's Campaign.

It is impossible to tell the difference between those expressions of hostility. It's been said that when historical events repeat themselves, the first time is tragedy, the second time farce.

In 2018, a crisis affects every aspect of the lives of poor and working people. Around the country, thousands have joined the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Poor people, clergy, labor activists, fighters for racial justice, women's equality, LG-BTQ rights, and the environment, along with their comrades, have committed to six weeks of confrontational yet peaceful, nonviolent actions in Washington, D.C., and in close to 40 state capitals. These actions call attention to the connected and solvable evils of racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation, and demand the implementation of comprehensive solutions. Building on King's 1968 Poor People's Campaign,

the 2018 campaign is modeled on King's principles of creative and confrontational nonviolent civil disobedience.

In Albany and other state capitals, these actions have seen hundreds of caring, dedicated and loving people block intersections and otherwise demonstrate that "business as usual" is no longer acceptable.

Positive change in times of crisis requires disruption.

Without disruption, workers would not have the right to organize, African-Americans would not have won victories in the civil rights era. Women would not have won the constitutional right to vote, control their own bodies or recognition of their right to equality at work. We would not have ended the terrible U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. LGBTQ people would not have had their human rights recognized.

"There is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. The purpose of direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."

— Martin Luther King Jr.

Strikes are disruptive. The protests of the 1960s civil rights movement interfered with business as usual in Birmingham and cities across the South. Students made college campuses ungovernable. Stonewall was labeled a "riot." And so on.

And, whenever people have joined together to demand justice, those in power have angrily declared that their tactics were too confrontational.

In 1963, in Birmingham, it was a tragedy when white clergy implored King and thousands of brave activists to be more patient. The protesters were labeled as outsiders. King was locked up in the Birmingham jail when white clergy published an "open" letter, chastising him for the demonstrations in the streets of Birmingham. King wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in response. He showed how their criticisms were baseless and served no purpose other than the perpetuation of the evil of violently enforced segregation.

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In 2018, in Albany, history repeated itself as Sheehan and Shea went out of their way to publicly chastise the Poor People's Campaign for having caused some inconvenience.

Nonviolent direct action, in the tradition of King, causes tension, disruption, inconvenience and crisis. It does in 2018 as it did in 1963. "There is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth," King said. "(T)he purpose of direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."

In 1963, King responded to the argument that he and others were "outsiders" by clarifying that there were residents of Birmingham engaged in the struggle for justice, that he and his staff were invited to Birmingham by activists in the city, and, finally, by noting that there is an "interrelatedness of all communities" and that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The same holds true for Albany in 2018. Albany is the seat of power in New York. What happens here resonates throughout the state. There is nothing wrong with people joining us in Albany to fight for justice. Also, far from being "outsiders," many of the people involved in the Poor People's Campaign live in Albany.

Similarly, the demand that people suffering injustice ought to be more patient is as unjustified in 2018 as it was in 1963 when King observed that there has never been a "direct-action movement that was 'well-timed' according to those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation."

Rather than holding news conferences or launching tweets to attack conscientious fighters for justice, Sheehan and her staff could have better used that time to read King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail." The opportunity still exists. Take a few minutes. Read how King responded to criticisms that sound terribly close to the words you have spoken. Then, join with your constituents and their allies in standing up for what is right.

► Mark Mishler is an Albany attorney and longtime civil rights activist. King's letter can be read at <http://tinyurl.com/47u7qm>

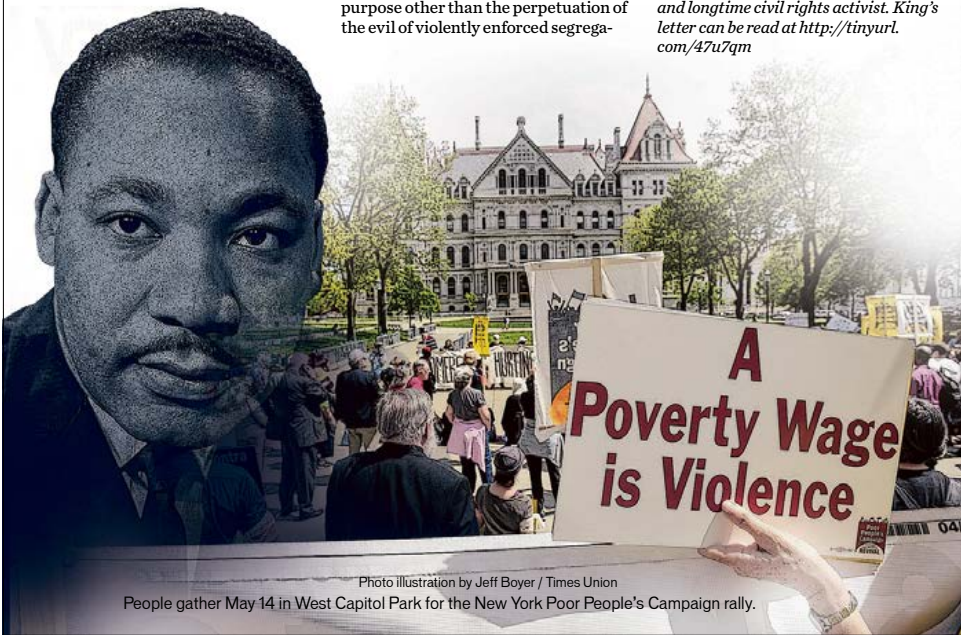


Photo illustration by Jeff Boyer / Times Union

People gather May 14 in West Capitol Park for the New York Poor People's Campaign rally.