

Remarks by Lynne Dodson, Secretary Treasurer  
Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO

Tuesday, August 28, 2018

“Reflecting Back... Marching Forward” commemorating the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of the March on Washington

Fifty five years ago today, 250,000 people gathered to demand Jobs and Freedom – they knew that the fight for civil rights and the fight for economic justice are inseparable. I’m proud that the AFL-CIO played an important role in the march – A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and AFL-CIO vice President came up with the idea for the march, the UAW and Ladies Garment Workers contributed thousands of dollars, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters provided transportation from across the country, and trade unionists came from far and wide to participate.

Today, over half a century later, we are still fighting for Jobs and Freedom. True civil rights requires economic justice. As the Rev Dr. King said – “What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t have enough money to buy a hamburger?”

At the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, we represent over 450,000 union members across the state. We...we women, men, trans, non-conforming, Muslim, Christian, Jewish; Buddhist; atheist, immigrant, indigenous, white, black, brown, documented, undocumented, straight queer and bi, workers, and retirees. We build the cities, roads, and bridges, we make and fly the airplanes, we are teachers, social workers, engineers, nurses, plumbers, elevator constructors. We pour the concrete, bring food from the farm to your table, work in hotels, drive the buses, deliver the mail, work in call centers and in city hall, fight fires and keep the power on. We are on the ferries, football fields and docks. We are in the grocery stores, state and federal buildings and K through college classrooms. We fight for economic justice, civil and human rights. We fight for jobs and freedom!

In 1963, Bayard Rustin ended the march with 10 demands. We’ve made some progress, but it is also clear that the current president and administration are working to roll back even what small steps forward we’ve made. While racism has, to our detriment, been a cultural norm in this country for centuries, the rise in white supremacist groups and the acceptance of new levels of violence against people of color sound a clear alarm about how fragile our democracy remains. Mass incarceration, the school to prison pipeline, an unjust immigration system (now with kidnapping of children and torture of parents national policy), climate change that impacts poor communities the most – these issues impact working people and in the Labor Movement, we know we must work with our community partners to address them. We cannot stop fighting for justice – we must continue to recognize and address the impact of racism on the lives of workers. We must continue to fight – in the streets, in the Halls of our state and federal legislatures, in our workplaces – for true freedom for all.

As in 1963, we are still fighting for meaningful and dignified jobs with decent wages – today, income inequality is worse than it was 55 years ago. Then, top CEO’s earned 20 times the average worker. Last year, they made 312 times the average worker. Tax breaks, a rigged system – these have kept worker wages down while the very top rose over the past decades. Unemployment is down, but wages are stagnant.

In 1963, the people demanded that the minimum wage provide a decent standard of living. Now, because we passed Initiative 1433, the minimum wage in Washington state is \$11.50, in Seattle it ranges from 11.50-\$15.45. Yet, this year – the cost of living in this state would require a wage of \$24 an hour to provide a decent standard of living – much more if you live in Seattle. Women and people of color are most likely to be trapped in minimum wage jobs. Those jobs, ALL jobs should pay enough so that you can work 40 hours a week and survive.

During the March for Jobs and Freedom, A. Philip Randolph said, “we know that we have no future in a society in which 6 million black and white people are unemployed and millions more live in poverty. Nor is the goal of our civil rights revolution merely the passage of civil rights legislation. Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens, but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them. Yes, we want a Fair Employment Practice Act, but what good will it do if profit-g geared automation destroys the jobs of millions of workers black and white?”

Today, we see the ravages of economic policies that are designed more for profit than human dignity. Workers are shunted into part-time employment, called independent contractors so their employers can avoid workers compensation, unemployment, health care and retirement benefits. The rise of the gig economy, automation, and artificial intelligence designed to secure higher profits for a few while displacing workers threatens the very fabric of our society. We must address these issues as working people, in unions, and not yet in unions – to determine the kind of world, the kind of workforce, we want to have. In 1963 – they called for a jobs program so that every worker can have meaningful and dignified work at a living wage. We cannot give up on that demand.

There are those who try to convince us that freedom means making as much money as possible, no matter who gets hurt, or that freedom means not paying union dues. But we know what real freedom is. Freedom is not having to worry about going bankrupt to pay your medical bills. Freedom is being able to make a living with one job. Freedom is being able to breathe the air and drink water from the tap without getting sick. Freedom is being able to take time off work with your sick child. Freedom is being able to afford to live near where you work. Freedom is having time for your family and your community. Freedom is being able to join with co-workers to negotiate for our fair share. Freedom is being able to love whom you choose, and live free from discrimination and harassment. We will fight for freedom for everyone – because if any one of us is not free, none of us are free.

And we are fighting back. A few weeks ago, Missourians went to the ballot and defeated right to work. While Janus undermined public employee unions, workers have stuck with their unions and continued to fight for the public services we all need and deserve. Across the state and the nation, workers are demanding their fair share of the wealth they create, and decent funding for our public services. Teachers and operating engineers are on strike now in our state – because their wages have stagnated while great wealth accumulates for a small few. The incarcerated across the nation are striking to end the practice of prison slavery. The Trump administration uses racism, xenophobia, misogyny – to attack and divide us, to distract us while they give huge tax breaks to the wealthy, dismantle our public services, destroy the climate – but thousands are marching, protesting, filing lawsuits, running for office, standing up and speaking out to stop this descent into darkness. At the WSLC, we are hosting a Race and Labor Summit on September 14 and 15 to plan ways to address structural and institutional racism in our workplaces and our union halls. We are looking at all of our practices and the policies we fight for with a racial

equity lens – we cannot fight for economic justice without addressing social justice. We fight for Jobs and Freedom.

We do not have time to sit back and wait. This is election season – and we will not stand down. We see great candidates across the state and nation who are ready to fight for justice and we will elect them. We will continue to be in the streets and in the halls of power because we know we cannot stand down until every person in this country can truly live free. And we know, this fight is not just about jobs – it's about good jobs with decent wages. It's about freedom from poverty and exploitation. It's about raising living standards for all workers – so all have good housing, good schools, health care, retirement, time for our families and our communities. We will fight hate with love. We will fight for jobs. We will fight for freedom. What A Philip Randolph said on August 28, 1963 must guide us today as well – “We shall settle for nothing less, and may God grant that we may have the courage, the strength, and faith in this hour of trial by fire never to falter.”