

To George Meany

12 Jan
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New York, N.Y.

King, labor leader A. Philip Randolph, and Catholic priest John LaFarge invite AFL-CIO president George Meany to join them as chairmen of the Youth March for Integrated Schools and to endorse a petition to Congress and the White House demanding an end to school segregation.¹ In his 16 January reply, Meany agreed to sign the petition but declined to co-chair the march, explaining that he would "be unable to take an active part in the committee's work."

Mr. George Meany, President
American Federation of Labor-
Congress of Industrial Organizations
815 16th Street, N.W.
Washington 6, D.C.

Dear Mr. Meany,

At the now famous Youth March for Integrated Schools last October, you will recall that ten thousand young people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, and there voted to return this spring to Washington "to press for the laws which will guide and sanction our advancement to a fuller, more just interracial democracy."²

The 1958 Youth Maarch for Integrated Schools was organized by an ad hoc committee of distinguished church, labor, school and community leaders who supported the young people in their epochal action.³ We are now in the process of re-constituting and enlarging the committee to achieve the objectives of the Lincoln Memorial meeting through a Petition Campaign for hundreds of thousands of signatures and a Youth March carrying the Petitions to the Congress and the White House on April 18th, 1959. (Text of the petition is enclosed.)⁴

1. King sent similar invitations to other individuals, including Eleanor Roosevelt (King, A. Philip Randolph, and Ruth H. Bunche to Roosevelt, 12 January 1959). For King's remarks at the Youth March, see Address at the Youth March for Integrated Schools on 18 April 1959, pp. 186-188 in this volume. George Meany (1894-1980), born in New York City, became an apprentice plumber at age sixteen and served as business agent for Plumbers Union Local 463 from 1922 until 1934, when he became president of the New York State Federation of Labor. Meany was secretary-treasurer (1940-1952) and president (1952-1955) of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1955 he became the president of the merged AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a position he held until his retirement in 1979. The AFL-CIO, under Meany's leadership, provided critical support for the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 and other civil rights initiatives although it did little to end racial discrimination in many of its member unions and refused to endorse the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

2. King quotes the 25 October Youth March press release announcing the "Youth Pledge."

3. At the march Coretta Scott King delivered remarks on behalf of her husband, who was recuperating from his September 1958 stabbing (see King, Address at Youth March for Integrated Schools in Washington, D.C., Delivered by Coretta Scott King, 25 October 1958, in *Papers* 4:514-515).

4. Youth March for Integrated Schools, "A petition for integrated schools to the President and the Congress of the U.S.," January 1959.

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Young people, who are those primarily affected by school integration, have thus found a way to express their convictions, and participate actively in the struggle for equal educational opportunities for all. Negro leaders in the South have let us know that the morale of those working with them under the most trying circumstances was measurably uplifted by the outpouring of young people to Washington last October. They look forward hopefully to the Petition Campaign and the Youth March of 1959 as an event which will dramatize before the nation and the world, the support of young people for their heroic and often lonely struggle. The widespread newspaper coverage and the sympathetic treatment in editorials of the objectives and conduct of the 1958 March gives assurance that both the supporters and opponents of integration will regard our campaign in 1959 as one of the major events in the civil rights struggle this year.⁵

The enthusiasm with which thousands of young people responded to the 1958 March, and the eagerness with which they are working on the preparations for the Petition Campaign and Youth March of 1959 leads us to have high hopes for a really historic success. on this fifth anniversary year of the Supreme Court integration decision. Furthermore, we now have behind us the experience and demonstration of the Committee's ability to organize and conduct this kind of campaign in the responsible and dignified manner which our cause requires. (After the last March, we received a letter from Robert McLaughlin, president of the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia, in which he wrote in part: "I'd like to commend the group, also, on its decorum while in the D.C.")

The combination of a vast petition campaign and Youth March is indeed a prodigious task. We need the help of important Americans for whom the youth of the nation have respect. You are such an American. We would be honored if you would join us as a sponsor of the Petition, and as a co-chairman of our committee. An early reply will make it possible for us to complete our list of co-chairmen and get the petition campaign rolling.

Very truly yours,
[*signed*] Martin L. King Jr
REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

[*signed*] John LaFarge S.J.
FATHER JOHN LAFARGE, S.J.⁶

[*signed*]
A. PHILIP RANDOLPH

THLS. GMF-DAFL: Box 41.

5. See for example "Integration March Staged in Washington," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 October 1958, and "'March' in Capital Asks Integration," *New York Times*, 26 October 1958.

6. Jesuit priest John LaFARGE was one of the Catholic Church's foremost proponents of racial justice. In April 1957 he was co-recipient, with King, of the Social Justice Award from the Religion and Labor Foundation.