

From Stanley D. Levison

[March 1960]

Levison reports on the progress of the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King and the Struggle for Freedom in the South, a legal defense group formed in response to King's Alabama perjury indictment.¹ He also decries the recent statement of Thurgood

380

1. A 3 March press release announced the formation of the committee and its plans to launch a "national fund-raising campaign" aimed at raising \$200,000 to defend King and support SCLC's voter registration drives in the South (Committee to Defend Martin Luther King and the Struggle for Freedom in the South, Press release, Committee to undertake fundraising campaign, 3 March 1960). In addition to Levison, the press release listed over forty other members including Bayard Rustin, A. Philip

Marshall, head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, that "the first stage of demonstrations should be ended" in favor of courtroom challenges.

Mar
1960

Dear Martin,

Enclosed is a suggested draft for a fund appeal.² It is somewhat long but I think the vital character of the moment will hold the attention of readers. Furthermore it is important that the meaning of the events be clearly spelled out. I have not made separate drafts for the churches, directors and individuals because I think the one message is suitable for all. If you feel a specific point needs to be made for the different groups it can be added as a sentence which you or Ralph [Abernathy] would better be able to compose than I.

We are inundated with tasks. To organize a new committee is a complex job, but simultaneously we are thrown into a series of fund raising projects each of which is complicated. However, the response is heartwarming. Harry Belafonte has stirred the cultural forces as never before and they should become a new and increasing source of strength.³ For the first time we have gotten the official leadership of the N.Y. Central Labor Council to come into the work with more than mere token endorsements of paper resolutions. Last week they had delivered to their meeting a full report of our Defense Committee with its objective of defending you, backing the students, and the S.C.L.C.⁴ The entire delegated body endorsed the report voted to stage a huge demonstration on May 17th in the garment center, and to raise funds through the unions.⁵ They are setting up a committee of their own to carry through these purposes. We are particularly encouraged because they appear willing to back up the method of going to the shops for

Randolph, Gardner C. Taylor, Mordecai Johnson, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Lorraine Hansberry, Jackie Robinson, and Ruth H. Bunche (Committee to Defend Martin Luther King and the Struggle for Freedom in the South, Press release, "Statement on the indictment of Martin Luther King, Jr.," 3 March 1960).

2. Levison likely enclosed an appeal for King's legal defense that eventually appeared in the *New York Times*. The statement was endorsed by supporters of King, including SCLC ministers, black entertainers, and prominent liberals (see "Heed Their Rising Voices," *New York Times*, 29 March 1960; see also Wofford to King, 1 April 1960, pp. 403-405 in this volume).

3. The committee was founded in late February in the New York apartment of Belafonte, who chaired the group's cultural committee.

4. The Labor Council's actions were reported in the 28 March minutes of the committee to defend Martin Luther King.

5. Among the speakers at the union-sponsored rally marking the sixth anniversary of the *Brown* decision were Morris Iushewitz, secretary of the New York Central Labor Council; Cleveland Robinson, secretary-treasurer of District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU); and David Livingston, president of District 65 ("15,000 Attend Garment Center Civil Rights Rally," *New York Times*, 18 May 1960). Following the rally the committee sponsored a benefit at New York City's 369th Armory. Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge emceed the event, which included performances by Belafonte, folk singer Odetta, and jazz vocalist Sarah Vaughn ("New Negro Is Key in Struggle," *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 May 1960). The committee later reported that the benefit netted over \$10,000 (A. Philip Randolph and Gardner C. Taylor, Press release, and Committee to Defend Martin Luther King and the Struggle for Freedom in the South, "Statement of income and expenditure for period ending 7/31/1960," both dated 7 October 1960).

Heed Their Rising Voices

"The growing movement of peaceful mass demonstrations by Negroes is something new in the South, something understandable. . . . Let Congress heed their rising voices, for they will be heard."

—New York Times editorial
Saturday, March 19, 1960

AS the whole world knows by now, thousands of Southern Negro students are engaged in widespread non-violent demonstrations in positive affirmation of the right to live in human dignity as guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In their efforts to uphold these guarantees, they are being met by an unprecedented wave of terror by those who would deny and negate that document which the whole world looks upon as setting the pattern for modern freedom. . . .

In Orangeburg, South Carolina, when 400 students peacefully sought to buy doughnuts and coffee at lunch counters in the business district, they were harshly ejected, tear-gassed, soaked to the skin in freezing weather with fire hoses, arrested en masse and hauled into an open barbed-wire stockade to stand for hours in the bitter cold. . . .

In Montgomery, Alabama, after students sang "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" on the State Capitol steps, their leaders were expelled from school, and truckloads of police armed with shotguns and tear-gas ringed the Alabama State College Campus. When the entire student body protested to state authorities by refusing to re-register, their dining hall was padlocked in an attempt to starve them into submission. . . .

In Tallahassee, Atlanta, Nashville, Savannah, Greensboro, Memphis, Richmond, Charlotte, and a host of other cities in the South, young American teenagers, in face of the entire weight of official state apparatus and police power, have boldly stepped forth as

protagonists of democracy. Their courage and amazing restraint have inspired millions and given a new dignity to the cause of freedom. . . .

Small wonder that the Southern violators of the Constitution fear this new, non-violent brand of freedom fighter. . . . even as they fear the appalling right-to-vote movement. Small wonder that they are determined to destroy the one man who, more than any other, symbolizes the new spirit now sweeping the South—the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., world-famous leader of the Montgomery Bus Protest. For it is his doctrine of non-violence which has inspired and guided the students in their widening wave of sit-ins; and it is this same Dr. King who founded and is president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—the organization which is spearheading the urgent right-to-vote movement. Under Dr. King's direction the Leadership Conference conducts Student Workshops and Seminars in the philosophy and technique of non-violent resistance. . . .

Again and again the Southern violators have answered Dr. King's peaceful protests with intimidation and violence. They have bombed his home almost killing his wife and child. They have assaulted his person. They have arrested him seven times—for "speaking," "demonstrating" and similar "offenses." And now they have charged him with "perjury"—a felony under which they could imprison him for ten years. Obviously, their real purpose is to remove him physically as the leader to whom the students and millions

of others—look for guidance and support, and thereby to intimidate all leaders who may rise in the South. Their strategy is to belabor this affirmative movement, and thus to demoralize Negro Americans and weaken their will to struggle. The defense of Martin Luther King, spiritual leader of the student sit-in movement, clearly, therefore, is an integral part of the total struggle for freedom in the South. . . .

Decent-minded Americans cannot help but applaud the creative daring of the students and the quiet heroism of Dr. King. But this is one of those moments in the stormy history of Freedom when men and women of good will must do more than applaud the rising-to-glory of others. The America whose good name hangs in the balance before a watchful world, the America whose heritage of Liberty these Southern Upholders of the Constitution are defending, is our America as well as theirs. . . .

We must heed their rising voices—yes—but we must add our own. . . .

We must extend ourselves above and beyond moral support and render the material help so urgently needed by those who are taking the risks, facing jail, and even death in a glorious reaffirmation of our Constitution and its Bill of Rights. . . .

We urge you to join hands with our fellow Americans in the South by supporting, with your dollars, this Combined Appeal for all three needs—the defense of Martin Luther King—the support of the embattled students—and the struggle for the right-to-vote. . . .

Your Help Is Urgently Needed . . . NOW!!

Stella Adler
Raymond Fox Alvarez
Harry Van Arsdale
Harry Bealorke
John Bellotti
Dr. Agnes Black
Mary Blount
William Bush
Malin Bunde
Mrs. Kath Bunde
Daphne Canal

Dr. Alan Knight Chalmers
Richard Cox
Nat King Cole
Clara Crawford
Dorothy Davidson
Ovia Davis
Sanny Davis, Jr.
Ruby Dee
Dr. Philip Elliott
Dr. Henry Emerson
Frank

Anthony Francisco
Lorraine Hershberg
Rev. Donald Houston
Nat Hunsell
James Kela
Mary Hudson
Van Hulle
Langston Hughes
Mama Johnson
Mabel Johnson
Meredith Johnson

John Kilmer
Letha Kitz
Rabbi Edward Klein
Hazel Lange
John Lewis
Vivica Lindfus
Carl Mucely
Don Murray
John Murray
A. L. Mudd
Frederick O'Neal

L. Joseph Overton
Geneva Pickett
Shed Pickett
Johnny Pickett
A. Philip Randolph
John Ratt
Dora Rice
Jackie Robinson
Mr. Deane Rowlett
Rosalind Rubin
Robert Ryan

Waynes Stapleton
Frank Stone
Happ Stone
George Tabor
Rev. Gardner C. Taylor
Norman Thomas
Eugene Topp
Charles White
Shelley White
Har Youngkin

We in the south who are struggling daily for dignity and freedom warmly endorse this appeal

Rev. Ralph D. Abernethy
(Montgomery, Ala.)
Rev. Paul L. Dunbar
(Birmingham, Ala.)
Rev. Kelsey Miller Smith
(Nashville, Tenn.)
Rev. W. A. Davis
(Chattanooga, Tenn.)
Rev. C. K. Shortt
(Tallahassee, Fla.)

Rev. Matthew D. McMan
(Orangeburg, S. C.)
Rev. William Holmes Borders
(Atlanta, Ga.)
Rev. Douglas Moore
(Durham, N. C.)
Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker
(Orangeburg, S. C.)

Rev. Walter L. Hamilton
(Norfolk, Va.)
I. S. Levy
(Columbia, S. C.)
Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr.
(Atlanta, Ga.)
Rev. Henry C. Burton
(Memphis, Tenn.)
Rev. S. S. Spear, Sr.
(Montgomery, Ala.)
Rev. Samuel W. Williams
(Atlanta, Ga.)

Rev. A. L. Davis
(New Orleans, La.)
Mrs. Kate E. Whitman
(New Orleans, La.)
Rev. W. H. Hall
(Natchitoches, Miss.)
Rev. J. E. Lowery
(Mobile, Ala.)
A. L. Mudd
(Baton Rouge, La.)

Please mail this coupon TODAY!

COMMITTEE TO DEFEND MARTIN LUTHER KING AND THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN THE SOUTH

312 West 125th Street, New York 27, N. Y. UNiversity 6-1700

Chairmen: A. Philip Randolph, Dr. Gardner C. Taylor; Chairmen of Cultural Divisions: Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier; Treasurer: Nat King Cole; Executive Director: Bayard Rustin; Chairmen of Church Divisions: Father George B. Ford, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rev. Thomas Kilgore, Jr., Rabbi Edward E. Klein; Chairmen of Labor Divisions: Morris Lurie

Committee To Defend Martin Luther King
and
The Struggle For Freedom In The South
312 West 125th Street, New York 27, N. Y.
UNiversity 6-1700

I am enclosing my contribution of \$ _____
for the work of the Committee.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____

I want to help Please send further information

Please make checks payable to:
Committee To Defend Martin Luther King

This advertisement, endorsed by supporters of King, including SCLC ministers, black entertainers, and prominent liberals, appeared in the *New York Times* on 29 March 1960. The ad states that the funds would be distributed three ways: King's defense for his Alabama perjury trial, support for student protesters, and the voting rights struggle.

Mar
1960

individual collections. This means larger sums than we normally get from the union treasuries. I don't think we will accomplish this easily but up to now we have never been able to get the officials to think this way. Too often they considered a fifty or one hundred dollar contribution as meeting the responsibility. With this new thinking we are starting down the right road.

All of this illustrates the point Bayard [*Rustin*] and I were attempting to make last week. This is a new stage in the struggle. It begins at the higher point where Montgomery left off. The students are taking on the strongest state power and demonstrating real will and determination. By their actions they are making the shadow boxing in Congress clear as a farce. They are by contrast exposing the lack of real fight that exists among allegedly friendly Congressmen and Presidential aspirants. And by example they are demonstrating the bankruptcy of the policy of relying upon the courts and legislation to achieve real results. The country is stirred by them and sickened by the feebleness of the foolishness in Congress.⁶ It is interesting and very significant that this weekend Thurgood Marshall has called a conference of lawyers in Washington and has been quoted as saying that the first stage of demonstrations should be ended and a new one in the courts now [is] to be developed.⁷ Characteristically, they want to give a tranquilizer or pacifier to the whole movement and send the people back to their ordinary preoccupations. More and more they are revealing themselves as gradualists in reality while they pretend to be uncompromising and firm. But they are not taking into account that people cannot and will not accept this policy. They are using up the good will past victories in the courts brought them, and increasingly criticism and cynicism about their motives is being expressed. It is not yet on a broad public scale because there is fear of appearance of disunity. But the clouds of distrust and opposition are gathering. Sooner or later their policy will have to change or their influence will sharply diminish and the true forces of struggle will move into effective leadership.

Please forgive this sloppy typing. I am doing this late at night at home and both the hour and my abilities are fighting me. Please be careful in copying my draft to see that it is checked for spelling. I learned how to write but neglected to learn how to spell. Love to Coretta and your family,

Fondly

[*signed*] Stanley

TALS. MLKP-MBU: Box 2.

6. Levison refers to the filibuster of the 1960 civil rights legislation. For more on the filibuster, see Jacob K. Javits to King, 21 April 1960, pp. 439-440 in this volume.

7. The meeting was held 18-20 March at Howard University in order to discuss legal questions related to the arrests of student demonstrators. At the end of the three-day meeting, a news report quoted Marshall: "The right of protest is traditional, going back to dumping tea in Boston Harbor because we didn't like certain things. These kids have a right to have their say. The right to carry a picket sign is the most precious right we have" ("NAACP Sits Down with the 'Sit-Inners,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 March 1960).