

Our Brother's & Sister's Keeper

Hello brothers and sisters! I am honored to join you here in Alabama on this leg of the Freedom Rides for Immigrant Workers.

I am honored to join so many courageous people who have come out today to show the Freedom Riders that they too care about social justice.

I am honored to be part of a truly important historic moment in the struggle for working people led by SEIU and HERE, the religious community, the civil rights community, black and brown people, and those who have been relegated to the margins of this society.

I am especially honored to be part of this leg of the Freedom Ride – moving across the great state of Alabama.

It is wonderful to be here in the cradle of the civil rights movement to declare yes, we are our brothers and sisters keepers.

I've been watching news clips of the Freedom Ride as it began on the West Coast, from Seattle, to San Francisco, to Las Vegas, to Portland. Everywhere we could hear that sweet melody 'We Shall Overcome.'

This is not by accident. It is a sure reminder of the connectedness of our movement and our struggle.

From the days when Dr. Joseph Lowery and Reverend Orange marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, singing 'We Shall Overcome,' to this time and place, we are reminded that the struggle is long and hard. And many of those crusaders are still with us today, joining us in this new phase of the struggle.

I applaud all of you for understanding the importance of unity and the power of the beautiful rainbow assembled here today. Through our activism and our embrace of immigrant rights, we are bridging the many divides that separate us based on gender, race and cultural background.

[Pause]

We are all connected to each other in some way, shape or form. Unity gives us strength. Truly, we are the changing face of America. We have seen how the rapidly changing demographics make it essential for all of us to guard against falling into that divide-and-rule trap.

[Pause.]

Since 9/11 we've endured a new kind of racial profiling.

We still have the traditional garden variety type, like the New Jersey turnpike highway patrol stops or the baseless police harassment of young African-American males in urban centers across the country. But now, under the guise of anti-terrorism, there's also open season on people who look foreign, especially people of color who may happen to be immigrants.

Let there be no mistake, immigration is a civil rights issue! And immigration is a Black issue, just as it is a Brown issue.

Eleven percent of the Black population in this country is immigrants.

The new workforces across this country are largely immigrants from Mexico, Russia, Poland, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But most importantly, we are a nation of immigrants.

Undocumented immigrants pay taxes and work hard. A recent study estimates that they contribute at least \$300 billion to the U.S. economy annually.

Over 50,000 immigrants are serving in the arm forces, protecting this country.

As we know, immigrants are being rounded up and held for months at a time without charges or access to lawyers.

Some may say it doesn't affect them or their family, because they're not Muslim or Arab or from a foreign country.

Rest assured that whenever they get through fighting their so-called war on terrorism, they won't stop there.

Who will be the next target?

History keeps the score card. We need look no further than the 30's, 40's, 50's and 60's to remember a time when our rights and civil liberties were under attack.

Brothers and sisters, please keep in mind that you don't have to be "foreign" to be stamped an enemy of the state.

The organizer of the Sleeping Car Porters, A. Phillip Randolph, was once labeled the most dangerous Negro in the country.

He was targeted, not only because he was organizing exploited sleeping car porters, but because he was uniting black men – isolated because of racism – into a larger movement with whites who also shared the common struggle as workers. Their struggle went beyond the color of their skin.

[Pause.]

While the demographics have changed, that reality is no different today. In the larger society, “they” determine who’s “colored” when it suits them.

For instance, at one time, Irish and Italian immigrants were not considered White until it became convenient for them to be pitted against the real colored folks.

In the land of the free and the home of the brave, we have seen Africans bought and sold; Native Americans stripped of their ancestral lands; special taxes paid by Chinese immigrants; Japanese Americans locked up in concentration camps; and Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe denied entry into neighborhoods and social organizations.

Aren’t all those immigrant issues?

[Pause]

Uniting people who are similar is easy. What's really hard is uniting people who are different and finding the common links that make us all the same.

No ethnic or racial group has a lock on any issue, especially not injustice.

Blacks, Asians and Latinos are all struggling for decent wages, adequate health care and quality schools for their children.

The incarceration rates of black and brown young people are both higher than the percentage of their kids in college. Both groups still experience racial discrimination in housing, employment and education.

There is no monopoly on racial exploitation. Nor should there be a monopoly on the fight for racial justice!

Yes we must be our brother and sisters keeper.

As single and separate groups, we cannot achieve victories. Together we are not a minority. We are the majority!

[Pause.]

Dr. King understood this. When he left Alabama and went to Chicago, he quickly realized that it was not only about racial justice but it was also about economic justice. That's why he started the Poor People's Campaign and died vowing to amass a new movement of people of all colors connected by the common struggle of economic justice.

That great organizer of farm workers Caesar Chavez also understood this. He united Filipino, Puerto Rican, Mexican and even Arabic-speaking workers into a great movement.

He always prided himself in seeking “minimum
dramatics” to win maximum results. For Caesar Chavez,
the struggle was about what he called “winning small
victories constantly.”

His was a movement that was built on its humility
and might. It amounted to giving the poorest people who
worked at producing food, food for themselves. Not just
bread to eat, but dignity that would allow them to believe in
their worth as workers and as human beings.

And Reverend Jesse Jackson understands this. He
always reminds us that the majority of poor people in this
country are not Black or Latino. They are White. And
they don't all live in Appalachia.

[Pause.]

In closing, to those who may be tired as we continue the long but winnable trudge uphill, I paraphrase the Reverend Joseph Lowery to urge you to not get tired. As we trudge up this very big hill, let's build on our collective strength because we've come too far, fought too hard, marched too long and died too young to go backwards.

Let freedom ring and justice ride till victory!