The Civil Rights Movement that we typically think of beginning in the 1960s actually began long before that. Every time an African-American attempted to make the country live up to the promise of “liberty and justice for all” it was an act that formed the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement.

Long before Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech stirred the hearts of millions, black people in this country dreamed of better days. As far back as the 1830s, seeds of the civil rights movement were planted in American history. Fifty-three people aboard the ship Amistad took over the vessel and killed two crewmen in the process. The ship was captured by the United States, the people were charged with crimes. A federal trial judge believed the accused were justified because they had been enslaved and slavery was contrary to American law. The ship owners appealed to the United States Supreme Court which upheld the trial judge and ruled that since the international slave trade was illegal, persons escaping should be recognized as free under American law. This story would inspire the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and was later retold on stage and in film.

Similarly, Frederick Douglass physically beat his former master to demonstrate that inhuman treatment would not be tolerated by our nation. These overt acts, and many other covert acts, became seeds that would blossom after long years and eventually emerge in what we call the Civil Rights Movement. Most of the acts were committed by unnamed people upholding right over wrong.
Rosa Parks helped the movement by triggering a boycott. By refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Ala., bus, Rosa Parks demonstrated the means to a just end. By using nonviolence to promote societal change, King and his colleague Ralph Abernathy took up the tool of nonviolent civil disobedience and organized the boycott of Montgomery's buses in response to the arrest and punishment of Parks.

The demands they made were simple: Black passengers should be treated with courtesy and allowed to sit on a first-come-first-served basis. On December 5, 1955 the boycott went into effect and the Montgomery bus system was brought to its financial knees. Blacks stopped riding the buses and the loss of revenue changed the attitude of the owners. Business owners began to lose money because blacks were no longer patronizing or purchasing. The boycott was an effective catalyst for change and spread to shops that would not allow blacks to try clothes before purchase.

The success of these early efforts allowed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to change the plight of blacks in the United States by pursuing equal access to accommodation and transportation and desegregating them. Efforts were also made to protect the right to vote. When local and state governments tried to prevent citizens from participating in government by creating poll taxes and literacy requirements, activists fought those efforts. The use of non-violent tactics, such as boycotting, demonstrating, marching, and sit-ins, was often successful.

Equal access to all levels of public education was a right to be enforced as well. By desegregating colleges and universities, African-Americans would be able to acquire the credentials that should qualify them for higher level jobs in all sectors of the national economy. *Brown vs. Board of Education* in Topeka, Kansas, overturned state-sponsored segregation. But, it became clear that having the landmark decision as the law of the land and enforcing it were two different things. The Civil Rights Movement led marches and demonstrations that brought worldwide attention to the reality that schools throughout the nation were still segregated. The embarrassment of the country, as it was viewed by those in the world as a hypocritical place, preaching liberty abroad and practicing something else within its own borders, also contributed to the changes that were to occur throughout.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 sought to ensure the protection of the rights of black voters. Voter registration activities made it possible for many blacks to safely register and vote.
for the first time. As a result, barriers to voting, such poll taxes, literacy tests, threats and intimidation, lessened.

The Civil Rights Movement has brought many positive changes to the country. Many groups have benefitted from legislation enacted or enforced because of the movement. Women of all races have been the primary beneficiaries of legislation that prohibits discrimination based on gender. People with physical disabilities have benefitted from legislation that prohibits discrimination against them in every aspect of life—business, government, education, public accommodation. People who have faith traditions or no traditions have benefitted from legislation that prohibits discrimination against someone’s religion or creed. The body of laws and decisions that came from the Civil Rights Movement fundamentally changed the United States. What began as attempts to correct or prevent discrimination against African-Americans benefited all groups of people. The broadening of the legislation to prevent discrimination based on color, creed, national origin, race, religion, gender, etc. was a direct result of all the marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts. Those who benefit from civil rights laws may be completely unaware of the history of the struggle.

Many will never know that places of public accommodation once bore COLORED and WHITE signs throughout many sections of this country. Gone are the overt housing discrimination practices that prevented qualified blacks from purchasing homes where they wanted to live. Gone are the governors standing in the doorways of college and university buildings preventing blacks from enrolling in schools. There have been many accomplishments wrought by the tears and struggles of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Voting Rights Act increased numbers of blacks who chose politics as a career and made the election of more than 600 black mayors possible in the United States. There are 44 black members of the House of Representatives. There are 3 black senators. There are two black governors. And, there is, of course, a black president of the United States. Indeed, the increase in the number of women and other minorities in government across the country is a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement.

The 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington raised questions about progress and position. Clearly much progress has been made. The election of the first black president of the United States is an example of that progress.
In business we have also seen great examples of progress. Xerox, one of the largest companies in the United States, has a black woman chief executive officer—Ursula Burns. We have seen other blacks head leading corporations over the years. More blacks own businesses, with revenues of more than 2 billion dollars, than could have been imagined in 1963.

In education we have seen more blacks become high level administrators in cities across the nation. There have been black presidents of predominantly white colleges and universities. We have excelled in the education arena on many fronts.

King gave a speech at the March on Washington in 1963 that used the analogy of a dream to explain some of his points. He dreamed of an America that would live up to its promise of being a place where liberty and justice could be experienced by all. He dreamed that Negroes could experience the full American dream without restrictions based on their race. He wanted his children to experience the best that America could offer them. He wanted them to have the best education that could be had. And, he wanted them to be free to enjoy those things that all children should enjoy—the right to play and be entertained safely and securely in parks, playgrounds, and amusement centers. Has his dream been realized? Some would say, resoundingly, “Yes.” Others might disagree.

Was the election of the first African-American president of the United States a dream come true? That is certainly true for the value of the symbolism it represents. Becoming the President of the United States is now a very real possibility for black children to dream about and see come to fruition. The nightmare reality—the nationwide number of black males who actually graduate from high school with a diploma is fewer than 50 percent.

Millions of Americans with felony convictions are prevented from voting. And, confusion about and the misapplication of these laws causes the de facto disenfranchisement of countless other Americans.

Blacks make up 37.2 percent of the total population of federal prisoners. Yet, they count for only 13 percent of the total U.S. population. The number of blacks incarcerated in some municipalities is more than 50 percent of all arrests. Many opportunities, such as jobs, disappear following incarceration.

The question raised is what place does a Civil Rights Movement have today? We find ourselves marching in protest to the murder of our children in neighborhoods where police protection is nearly non-existent. We protest the stopping and frisking of innocent people of
color. We march, we demonstrate, we protest in response to new acts of disrespect, degradation and humiliation. So, yes, there is a need for a Civil Rights Movement today. Police protection is a civil right, as is the expectation of proper treatment by police and government.

We find ourselves getting riled up and then cooled down in a short number of weeks in response to violence and degradation.

We certainly need a movement to improve our circumstances. CWA has a long history of movement building. History teaches that organized labor was a fundamental part of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. So, to be successful we all need to join together with community groups, churches, and interest groups to preserve and protect our civil rights. While we have come so far, we still have a long way to go.