



**Looking Back on the March on Washington
Civil Rights and Equity Committee Report 2014
By Kendall Bell**

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom sprung from the Labor Movement and was spearheaded by A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. The goals of the march included a comprehensive civil rights bill, protection of the right to vote, mechanisms for seeking redress of violations of constitutional rights, desegregation of all public schools in 1963, a massive federal works program to train and place unemployed workers, and a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act, barring discrimination in all employment. This all was condensed to “jobs and freedom.” As early as 1941, there were various permutations of what eventually became the March on Washington. But, political maneuvering succeeded in delaying the March from being carried out until the 1963 action. Despite being universally embraced, some, such as Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, condemned the March, calling it “the Farce on Washington,” believing that the March was not a forceful enough action to instigate change.

In 1963, despite overwhelming support, there was fear that a disorganized event would undermine rather than boost the effort. To this end, progressive unions like the UAW made sure the event would succeed. In New York and several other cities, mobilizers worked out of union halls. Dozens of labor groups chartered buses, trains, and even airplanes to get members to the capital city. The UAW paid for a first-class sound system, so that every speech would ring out along the Mall, and produced thousands of signs with the slogan, “Equal Rights and Jobs NOW” printed in big, block letters. In the spirit of preserving organization and supporting all the March stands for, unions were again at the forefront for the 50th Anniversary of the March on

Washington, organizing attendance and chartering buses, like the 50 buses organized by CWA's Human Rights Department.

As we commemorate the Anniversary of the March on Washington, it only stands to reason that we evaluate the progress of our Nation and the strength of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which is the tangible outcome of the fight waged so tirelessly by the activists who came before us. Yes, we have seen the election and inauguration of the first Black President of the United States of America, "because of the honor and courage of those who lost their lives in the civil rights struggle", as he remarked during his commemorative address on August 28, 2014. Still, "...the men and women who gathered 50 years ago were not there in search of some abstract ideal," he said. "They were there seeking jobs as well as justice. Not just the absence of oppression but the presence of economic opportunity." In the last half-century, black unemployment has remained almost twice as high as white employment with "Latino unemployment close behind," Obama told the crowd. "The gap in wealth between races has not lessened, it's grown."

This year has seen many fluctuations in the civil rights arena. Among the notable actions that span the spectrum are the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court and the legalization of gay marriage. The Supreme Court essentially made it legal for states to erect barriers and institute conditions that make voting difficult at best and inaccessible at worst. Redistricting can be done on a whim, polling places and hours can be changed with no notice, and identification requirements imposed that are impossible for some voters, especially elderly and poorly documented citizens, to comply with. A case in point is 92 year old North Carolina resident Rosanelle Eaton. Because she was born at home, the name on her birth certificate is not the same as what is on her driver's license. Because of this, she is unable to register to vote, despite having registered over 4,000 citizens in the state.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Supreme Court has ruled that same-sex married couples have the same right to collect federal benefits as heterosexual married couples. Also, by declining to decide a case from California, they deemed same-sex marriage legal, which will have a domino effect across the country.

So, where do we go from here? As I see it, much has been achieved, but there is still so much work to do. Fifty years ago, there was no arguing that change was needed and that we all had to take part in making that change happen. Today so much is taken for granted. The

successes enjoyed by many are accepted with no thought of how or why they are able to be enjoyed. Reverend Al Sharpton reminded young people that they sit at their middle class status not on their own efforts, but because "...some unlettered grandmas who never saw the inside of a college campus put their bodies on the line in Alabama and Mississippi and sponsored you up here." He also recollected a conversation with a young professional who questioned why he should feel the civil rights movement was important. To paraphrase, the young professional said that his achievements were his own, the civil rights movement did not write his resume, to which Rev. Sharpton replied, "...but the civil rights movement made someone read your resume." We all have to remember and appreciate those who fought for the rights we enjoy daily, remember that victories won can turn to defeat if we are not vigilant, and commit to attaining future civil rights victories for those who will come after us.