OVERVIEW

KEY PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS THE BLACK JOBS CRISIS IN NEW ORLEANS

“Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know that it isn’t enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?”

– Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., March 18, 1968

In April 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated while supporting sanitation workers striking for decent wages, safe working conditions, a grievance procedure, and union recognition. Dr. King knew that it wasn’t enough simply to integrate the lunch counters or the schools—genuine equality means economic equality. When he was killed, Dr. King and other civil rights activists across the country were organizing the Poor People’s Campaign, demanding $30 billion annual investment in antipoverty measures, a government commitment to full employment, enactment of a guaranteed income, and the construction of 500,000 affordable homes. In order to realize America’s promise that all men were created equal, people need access to quality jobs, career ladders, and saving wages.

#BlackLivesMatter has served a rallying cry for those concerned with the chronic undervaluation of Black lives in America. #BlackLivesMatter is about ending police brutality and mass incarceration, but it’s also about what Dr. King called “genuine equality.” What does it mean to desegregate the lunch counters if you can’t afford a hamburger? And what does it mean to desegregate the schools if you can’t feed and clothe your kids? It is this goal of genuine equality and economic opportunity that we commit to by recognizing that #BlackWorkersMatter.

Public investment in City contracted construction projects presents an enormous opportunity to address the Black jobs crisis, encourage equitable economic development for workers and communities across the New Orleans area, invest in young people’s futures, and reduce rates of violent crime—but only if we unite to collectively hold the leading construction companies and our government responsible for committing to:

1. **Community Monitoring and Oversight** – the creation of a permanent Public Construction Oversight Commission
2. **Career Ladders** – the utilization of Certified Apprenticeship Programs in all trades;
3. **Saving Wages** – commitment to a $15 minimum wage for all workers working under city contracts; and
4. **Worker Health and Safety** – worker safety committees on city construction sites to ensure clear mechanisms to address basic health and safety standards.
Rather than building with a workforce treated as disposable, our public investments in the physical infrastructure of our city must be maximized to also invest in our local workforce infrastructure, to address the deep remaining inequities in New Orleans and to ensure that we do not leave whole sections of our community behind as the city grows. Today, New Orleans is second most unequal city in America, 52 percent of Black men are out of work, and our community is still fighting to realize the genuine equality for which Dr. King and other civil rights activists lost their lives.

In August 2014—recognizing the critical opportunity presented by the $546 million public investment to build a new terminal at the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport to invest in quality economic development—civil rights, faith, labor, educational, and community leaders from across New Orleans came together to form the Community Evaluation Commission. The Commission led the first-ever community process in New Orleans to evaluate the bidding contractors’ proposals on the basis of the four community priorities.

Community energy, organizing and involvement, and the support for the Community Evaluation Commission shifted the discussion across the city. Hunt-Gibbs-Boh-Metro, the construction team that won the pre-construction phase contract for Airport project, included a $2 million investment in workforce development in their budget. In early September 2014, Mayor Landrieu announced a broad new policy to connect Black men to jobs. Now, it is time to turn these promises into real commitment, and real commitment into community-wide solutions.

Today, as we remember Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we renew the call for genuine equality. We renew the call for America to make good on her promise that all her people are created equal. We renew the call to remember that #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackWorkersMatter. And we renew our commitment to fight for our freedom as we remember Dr. King’s words—as true today as they were in 1968:

“We can all get more together than we can apart. We can get more organized together than we can apart. This is the way to gain power—power is the ability to achieve purpose. Power is the ability to affect change, [but] nothing is gained without pressure. ... If we are going to get equality, if we are going to get adequate wages, we are going to have to struggle for it.”