

# **Remarks of BCTGM International President David B. Durkee**

January 20, 2014

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Commemorative Service  
Cane Creek Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn.*

Few Americans have impacted the movements for social and economic justice the way Dr. King has. His passion and dedication to end the injustices brought upon so many American citizens, was an inspiration to an entire generation, and helped spawn new leaders in these movements, keeping them strong and alive.

There is a reason that Dr. King's memory is invoked whenever there is a struggle for justice; because he was on the front lines of some of the most historic struggles this country has ever witnessed. But he also fought the small fights, with as much enthusiasm as he did the big ones.

It was that passion and that fight that led him to Memphis to speak out against the injustices suffered by African-American sanitation workers.

That passion. That determination to end social and economic injustice resonates today just as it did almost 50 years ago.

## **Social and Economic Justice**

As I was listening to the speeches today, at the parade and here this afternoon, I am heartened by the fact that new generations have taken up the fight to end injustice and inequality in all its ugly forms.

It is genuinely recognized that we are living in a time of great injustice. Income inequality is rising. The middle class is shrinking. Voting rights are being tossed aside. Women's rights are under attack. The environment is being desecrated. The poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer.

Dr. King knew this was the road this country was going down.

## **Laws Written for the Rich**

There was something systemic that Dr. King understood: he who holds the power makes the rules. And the rules of the land are laid out in our laws.

Right now in America, it is the wealthy and the largest corporations that hold all the power. It is the wealthy that are writing the laws of this great country.

The laws are written for them. Not for us.

If we wrote the laws, would we allow companies to shut down plants in America and move them to low-wage countries? No.

Would we put laws in place that rewarded companies for firing full time workers while replacing them with part-timers? No.

If we wrote the laws, would we force voters in poor districts and African American districts to wait seven or eight hours to vote? No!

If we wrote the laws would we allow companies to pollute our lands and drinking water without any government oversight? No.

Would we allow bankruptcy laws that saddle working families with loads of debt, but let failing corporations off the hook? Of course not.

Would we permit laws that allow corporations to fire employees that want to join a union? That want to join the middle-class? No!

And if we were writing the laws of the land, would we allow children, the sick and the elderly, to go without the proper health care coverage? No we would not.

But we don't write the laws of the land. The rich do.

Which means we can either sit back and accept the corporate agenda of low wages, no regulations, and no rights. Or we can fight back.

Just as Dr. King did.

## **Memphis**

Now one of those fights is going on right here in Memphis. This fight embodies all that is wrong with today's America.

But it also illustrates the spirit, unity, and resilience of America's working families and the communities that they live in.

You are all well aware that three months ago Kellogg Company locked the doors to its Memphis plant, telling its hard working employees to go home, and not to bother returning until they would agree to a contract that would set back the next generation of Kellogg workers. Not just here in Memphis; but all over North America.

Kellogg is a \$14 billion dollar snack giant. It pays its CEO and top executives millions of dollars. It lavishes dividends and stock buybacks on its largest investors making them richer than we could ever imagine.

And yet despite all these riches, Kellogg turned on its workforce. And their families. And their communities.

The company told \_\_\_\_\_ who had just worked over 150 straight days without a day off; they told him to go home because he wouldn't sell out future Kellogg workers.

The company told Betty Guyton, Olympia Pritchard, and Jeanie Frasier, who have over 100 years of combined service to Kellogg, to go home and don't bother returning until they were willing to accept a contract that would turn Kellogg's full-time jobs into part-time ones.

They have forced families already trying to get by without a paycheck, to do without health insurance as well. Surgeries, procedures, appointments: cancelled or delayed. And if its life and death, as in the case of Roger Brown and his wife, then these families are being forced to pay thousands of dollars out of pocket to prevent a tragedy. And if they want coverage? It's \$2,400 a month, which many just can't afford.

And their callousness is not just reserved for the fine folks of Memphis. Believe it or not two weeks before Christmas Kellogg abruptly announced that plants in London, Ontario and Charmhaven, Australia, would be closing. Two weeks before Christmas. Merry Christmas indeed.

It goes without saying that these closings will devastate the local economies and hurt both communities. More middle-class jobs will disappear. And I'd be remiss if I didn't tell you that Kellogg just built another plant in Mexico.

Kellogg, it turns out, is just like every other large company beholden to Wall St. Profits before people. The downsizing of the middle-class. The destruction of the American dream.

## **Fighting Back**

But Kellogg, and their friends on Wall Street are in for a rude awakening. As Dr. King said almost fifty years ago : *"Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in this world"*.

And that something is a movement to take back our communities. To fight for justice. To fight for power.

Dr. King knew that if a movement was to be successful, people of all different types would have to come together.

And we are seeing that today!

Fast food workers fighting for a living wage. Students fighting for affordable education. Activists fighting against restrictive laws that suppress the vote. The elderly fighting to keep social security.

Workers, like the Kellogg folks here in Memphis, fighting against unfettered corporate greed.

And as we know, a lot of little fights equal a big fight.

One of Dr. King's lasting legacies was his firm belief that people would indeed stand up for themselves; that they would fight for equality and justice; and that they would band together with their fellow citizens and demand a better day.

Dr King said:

*“You know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. There comes a time.”*

That time is now.

Thank you. And God Bless.