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Witness for Justice #516

February 21, 2011

Of Cairo, *Kairos* and Economic Freedom

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Watching the Egyptian people take their first bold steps toward freedom this month as their autocratic former president finally ceded the reigns of power, it was difficult not to weep with delight. A mostly peaceful revolution bringing an oppressive government to its knees is not something most will see in a lifetime. Yet, during this Black History Month, the revolution in Egypt, spurred in part by the demand for good jobs for all, brings to mind for me another struggle from another time. A call for freedom, not from the crowded streets of Cairo, but culled from an equally compelling *kairos* moment.

The civil rights march of August 1963 is so iconic that it is commonly referred to only by the first three words of its name. Remembered most for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream Speech" given there, the full name of the march, which was hundreds of thousands strong before the days of Facebook or Twitter, was the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." The event's brainchild was not King, but labor movement activist A. Philip Randolph, who saw it as an opportunity to speak truth to President Kennedy and the American people, not just about the sin of segregation, but also about the unacceptably high rates of black unemployment. "Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens," Randolph reminded the marchers, "but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them."

Some 48 years later, as our nation is in the throes of a painful recession, it is still the case that, as Randolph stated, African-Americans are the "first victims of unemployment," even as the economic hardship transcends race. Randolph's words pierce through time as he declares that "our white allies know that they cannot be free while [African Americans] are not; and [African Americans] know we have no future in a society in which six million black and white people are unemployed and millions more live in poverty." In the U.S. today, over 13.9 million people are unemployed, and more than 37 million live in poverty.

Whether in Alexandria, Egypt or Alexandria, Louisiana, one's ability to secure gainful, stable employment is fundamental to their sense of well-being and freedom. The technological age has opened many doors of opportunity; yet, it has also caused jobs once guaranteed to our compatriots to be exported around the world. Rather than allowing this reality to fill us with dread, we should think creatively about how to ensure that the freedom to be employed remains a reality for all in America. Taking steps like shoring up our transportation infrastructure and investing in clean energy would create jobs right here at home.

We should fight together to keep the issue of investing in America for the sake of creating jobs for all out of the political tug-of-war, remembering as Randolph knew that all our freedom is at stake if we fail to do so. Whether ultimately we take to the streets or to our social networking hubs in peaceful, persistent protest, the time is ripe *now* to persuade our legislators to see the issue likewise, and to act accordingly. We dare not miss our moment.

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