Poor People's Campaign engages in 40 days of demonstrations

William Barber II and Liz Theoharis are leading the re-launched national movement, started in 1968.

by Stuart Miller

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William Barber (left) and Liz Theoharis. Photo by Desmon Yancy.

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) For all its aspirations toward justice for all, the encampment known as Resurrection City became more a symbol of lost hope than empowerment.

The sprawling camp on the National Mall, the emblem of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968, lost its chief architect, Martin Luther King Jr., when he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4. After a police crackdown on the remaining campers in June of that year, the camp and its populist struggle against economic inequality faded into the whir of Woodstock and war.

Bernard Lafayette, of Tampa, Florida, was a national coordinator of the Poor People's Campaign. He mourned his friend, Dr. King. And he watched the movement falter, and fade. But he didn't give up the dream.

On Monday, Lafayette, now 77, returned to train a new generation. In another era of upheaval, Lafayette and the Poor People's Campaign are again reminding Americans that, as one 1968 brochure read, "Poor people are kept in poverty because they are kept from power." Thousands of Americans began a 40-day campaign of protest and civil disobedience.

Lafayette says despite new challenges and what he calls a positioning of poverty as a personal moral failing, rather than a social ill, the project ultimately has the same objective as the original campaign.

"Politicians usually just looked at statistics about poverty, and we wanted them to see people," Lafayette said.

The challenge is substantial: the U.S., after all, has since its founding shown a tendency to downplay the depth of poverty as more the price of personal irresponsibility than the result of national prerogatives. No matter the campaign's impact, poverty experts say, its existence is already a powerful signal of how the moral ground has shifted.

"People concerned with poverty programs, with economic justice, are today being accused of aiding and abetting poor people—that this sort of governmental concern with poverty is somehow immoral itself," said Gene Nichol, a University of North Carolina law professor whose UNC Poverty Center was shut down in 2015 by a state legislature unwilling to spend money to study the effects of policy on the poor. "The moral high ground is now tough love for poor people."

Changing that narrative is both a moral and economic imperative, said one of the chief organizers, William Barber II of North Carolina, founder of North Carolina's Moral Monday movement. "Morality is not merely inspirational, it is pragmatic."

The new campaign lacks several hallmarks of the original, including the camp and a mule cart procession to Washington from the poorest town in the poorest county of the poorest state: Marks, Mississippi. Today's movement is patterned in part on the experience of the Moral Monday protest movement in North Carolina, where hundreds of people have been arrested in protest of what they see as Robin-Hood-

in-reverse policymaking by mainly Republican lawmakers.

[In more than 30 states on May 14, hundreds more were arrested as part of the Poor People's Campaign, many while blocking traffic near state houses and capitols.]

Even as America has grown wealthier since 1968, inequalities remain stark. Median white household wealth is $171,000 today, ten times the median for black households. That intransigence underscores a hard-to-swallow irony: the wealthiest Western nation has the highest poverty rate. In turn, that creates a domino effect of tragedies, including alarmingly high infant mortality rates, especially among the poor—and especially among African Americans.

The wealth gap has remained virtually unchanged since 1968, and may get worse, some economists worry, given the recent tax cuts aimed at businesses and the wealthy. The national push to reverse illegal immigration and reignite a drug war that disproportionately impacts poor people also may exacerbate poverty rates. Organizers say that national leaders have found success in sowing the discord of a zero sum game, which Barber and other faith leaders say leaves many poorer Americans so busy fighting for scraps that they forget to look up.

The campaign's new study, *The Souls of Poor Folk*, highlights a wide range of problems: more than 40 percent of Americans are either poor or low-income. There were 187,914 state and federal inmates in 1968 but 1.45 million in 2016, and people of color account for 66 percent of inmates but only 39 percent of the total population. The number of citizens denied their right to vote because of felony convictions has tripled, from 2 million in 1968 to 6.1 million in 2016.

Such facts underscore why "it is more important to reach out today than it was in 1968," said Carlos Santacruz, a Detroit-based activist who is coordinating for seven states in the new campaign. Santacruz felt it was important to reach poor whites and connect them to the same cause as blacks and Latinos. "We've become a highly segregated, highly racialized country where the common narrative is that if you're suffering then someone else is benefiting."

How much that remains true will determine the arc of a campaign that is expected to last 40 days and is intended as a first step. The campaign hopes to draw 25,000 to 30,000 participants, with each week featuring a different theme, from institutionalized racism to ecological devastation. There will then be a mobilization in Washington, D.C., on June 23. After gathering input from the national network, the

group will release a set of policy goals in June.

“We are not calling that the culmination,” said Liz Theoharis, one of the chief organizers. “We see this not as a moment but as a movement.”

The reawakening of King’s most radical project comes as the issues surrounding some of the civil rights movement’s greatest achievements—the triumph of the March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act—are back in the spotlight. Columbia University historian Jelani Cobb calls this moment “the signal phase of the civil rights struggle.”

A1968 Poor People’s Campaign brochure sought wages high enough to support a “decent life.” Wages continue to be the top concern for America's poor, according to UNC’s Nichol, whose new organization, the North Carolina Poverty Research Fund, found that persistently low wages in particular means many Americans “don't have a chance to carve out a life that is not at the edge of destitution.”

North Carolina, for example, made it illegal for municipalities to raise the minimum wage, narrowed child-care subsidies, cut Medicaid, and pushed people off food stamps, Nichol said.

“We have many problems in the U.S., but it is not inaccurate to say that poverty amidst great wealth is the largest one,” he said. The vast gap is “impossible to square with our self-declarations and our commitments.”

Nevertheless, in an age when panhandlers can afford iPhones but not rent in America’s largest cities, the meaning of a “decent life” can sometimes blur. Soaring housing prices that have pushed poor families further toward the margins—exacerbating segregation by income—make it easier for many to dismiss the struggles of America’s working poor.

Another challenge in sustaining a national movement that Santacruz thinks could last a decade is more practical: people on the ground have competing priorities closer to home. Take activist Callie Greer, who is deeply involved in several social justice organizations in Selma, Alabama. One she founded, Mothers Against Violence, needs immediate attention after a killing and retaliatory violence put the group in crisis mode.

Greer knows the danger of “getting caught up in your own bubble and not seeing the bigger picture of the campaign,” so she plans to participate in the 40 days “as much as possible” without neglecting the crisis in her own community.

Intended to be an exercise of independent groups from Native American activists to the NAACP, the campaign intends to leverage the organizing prowess of Theoharis and national stature of Barber.

To be sure, the campaign is in part a pushback on state and national policies and a corrosive political atmosphere that has contributed to U.S. polarization. Yet Barber said that it is “very clear that this is not about Donald Trump.” Instead, a “deep commitment to empirical evidence” and a higher moral calling is the key to help empower poorer Americans and sway opinions of wealthier Americans.

The mission “is intrinsically political but it is not partisan and we reserve the right to challenge all parties,” Barber said. “We need to shift our moral narrative because the lack of one has disabled our ability to see living wages and guaranteed incomes and health care as moral issues.”

FOLLOWING UP (Updated August 7): The Poor People’s Campaign on June 23 concluded 40 days of demonstrations and civil disobedience at more than 30 state capitals around the country and in Washington, D.C. William Barber II and Liz Theoharis were cochairs of the “national call for moral revival,” which involved dozens of faith-based, labor, and community groups.

After a final rally that drew several thousand people to the National Mall, the campaign shifted its focus to “organizing, mobilizing voters, and building power among the 140 million Americans living in poverty, particularly in the often-ignored South,” leaders wrote in an email. “What makes this different from the typical voter registration and mobilization drive is we’re not a single issue effort gearing up for a particular election. We’re building deep infrastructure in the states to fight for long-term change.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition.