



Dignified Jobs and Decent Wages

The Next 50 Years of Civil Rights and Economic Justice

By Maryam Adamu July 2014

Introduction and summary

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Years of organizing and civil disobedience culminated in a seminal piece of legislation prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, and sex.

A few years after the Civil Rights Act was passed, Martin Luther King Jr. asked, “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?”¹ It is important to realize what King always understood: The civil rights movement was about both social and economic justice. It was about ensuring that everyone has the right—as well as the means—to be successful in this country.

Fifty years later, as the nation reflects upon the profound impact of this fundamental legislation, it is clear the country has made considerable progress in key areas. Still, barriers to progress persist and must be identified and addressed. This report begins with an overview of the nation’s progress. It then goes on to describe how conditions have fundamentally changed over the past few decades, especially since the Great Recession.

Finally, taking these changes into account, this report offers policy recommendations for establishing economic security as a civil right. These recommendations include:

- Raise the minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour to increase the collective income of people of color by \$16.1 billion.
- Increase federal investment in job-creation programs that prioritize generating job opportunities for youth and low-income and long-term unemployed adults.
- Invest in workforce development to prepare people for higher-skill, higher-wage jobs.

- Strengthen the social safety net to ensure that people can meet basic needs as they get back on their feet.
- Expand access to crucial benefits, including paid family leave and paid sick days.
- Eliminate employment discrimination for people with criminal records to expand the possibilities for those who were formerly incarcerated.
- Reinvest in neighborhoods by expanding the Promise Zones initiative and offer planning grants and tax incentives for neighborhoods.

As the country's economic climate changes and people of color grow to represent a majority of Americans, it is a moral and economic imperative that the United States pursue policies now to ensure that everyone has a chance at prosperity. This report lays out a pathway forward as the nation seeks to make good on the promises of the civil rights era and to advance them for future generations.

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