



**UPLIFTING AND LINKING MOTHER'S DAY AND MAY DAY:
LIVING THE LEGACY OF LABOR STRUGGLES FOR INCLUSIVE GOOD**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

AS I THINK LOVINGLY AND APPRECIATIVELY of my mother on this coming Mother's Day and reflect on this past May Day, I remember that it was my mother and father who taught me the dignity and duty of work and worker, and the role of work and workers in serving our community and humanity, and in making and remaking the world. And they taught me also the equally important meaning of work as a self-defining, self-developing and self-affirming activity. I speak here, then, not of toil, the exhausting and demeaning drudgery engaged in to eke out a living and provide for the bare necessities of life. Rather, I speak of work, an activity essential not only to our making a living but also to our conceiving and making a life, an activity vital to our self-understanding and the way we engage and build our world and thus, certainly *worthy of respect and demanding of justice*.

Nana Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mother and father, of the same spiritual faith and a similar generation as my mother and father, taught him the dignity and worth of work in its service to humanity, as my mother and father taught us, drawing from a long and honorable tradition of work. In his classic speech on this topic in Memphis, supporting the strike and demands for decent wages and working conditions of the sanitation workers, Dr. King reaffirms this position, saying to the striking workers and their supporters,

that they are rightfully "demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor". And he noted that "So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But...whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth". Thus, in the best of our ethical sensibilities, thought and practice, all workers deserve respect, just pay, appropriate conditions of work, and the right to organize and assert their interests.

We stood and stand in active solidarity with the millions in this country and around the world who participated in marking May Day (International Workers' Day) in demonstrations, deliberations and resolute commitment to continue the struggle against war, ICE, genocide, injustice, fascism and all forms of oppression. For at the heart of all these labor and other struggles must be, and is for us, the collective and collaborative commitment to achieving a shared and inclusive good for everyone, everywhere and the sustained well-being of the world and all in it.

What I want to do here, then, in uplifting and linking Mother's Day and May Day is to center the legacy of labor struggles in our history, especially those led by Black women that form a core of our larger struggle for freedom, justice and a shared and inclusive good and those that are caringly attentive to the over-

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looked, undervalued and vulnerable, as my mother and father taught. Let us first pay rightful homage to our ancient ancestors, the original world builders, working their will on the world to extract and share good from the earth - the early gatherers, farmers and fishermen and fisherwomen, herbalists and healthcare workers, the builders of houses and temples and all other workers who worked to bring a shared good in the world. We pay homage also to the workers who launched the first strike in recorded history at a worksite in ancient Egypt called *Set Ma'at*, the Place of Justice c. 1170 BCE. Indeed, artisans and ordinary workers stopped work, sat in, marched, petitioned and disrupted the regular order of things. They told the officials that they were not only striking because of the late wages and the hunger that this caused for them and their families, but also because "There is injustice in this place". Their concern was beyond the essential need for wages and centered the issue of the dignity of the worker and the respect and just compensation due to them.

We pay rightful homage also to the women and men free of mind and heart who did not accept their status in enslavement and resisted being objects of labor, sex and entertainment by striking, breaking tools, destroying crops, escaping and returning to free others, and exercising the right and responsibility to revolt and be free. And we pay homage to the Black washerwomen or launderers who built a labor union, the Washing Society, and organized a strike in Atlanta, Georgia in 1881 to win higher and uniform wages;

and to Nana Nannie Helen Burroughs, an educator and organizer, who founded the National Association of Wage Earners in 1921; and to Nana Rosina Corrothers Tucker, labor organizer, civil rights activist, and educator who worked as a union organizer for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and served as the first president of its International Ladies Auxiliary, 1938. Also, we pay homage to Nana Dorothy Bolden, founder of the National Domestic Workers Union of America in 1968; to Nana Clara Day who co-founded the Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974; and to all other labor and life way-makers and bridges who carried us over and led us forward.

Finally, we pay homage to the labor leader and activist Nana Fahari Jeffers who with her husband, Ken Seaton-Msemaji, co-founded the United Domestic Workers of America in 1977. They were grounded in Kawaida philosophy and its organizing thought and practice and linked their work to the United Farm Workers movement given that both were primarily composed of women, people of color and immigrants and not rightly valued by the larger labor movement. Indeed, Nana Fahari said in being inducted into the San Diego County Women's Hall of Fame, "It's an honor as a woman and it's an honor as an African-American woman. There are many women who make groundbreaking, enormous contributions to our community that we will never meet or hear of, and I want them to know that their work is valued and recognized and that it has made a difference".

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HERE SHE REAFFIRMS THE DIGNITY, centrality and sustaining character of Black women's labor and our need to recognize and respect them, their work and their role in bringing good into the world. And I thought here of how my mother was both a domestic worker and a farmworker, and I remembered and rejoiced in the many other roles and respon-

sibilities she joyfully assumed for our family and our community. And I reflected again about our moral obligation to seriously and joyfully honor and live the legacy of our foremothers and forefathers by continuing the *sacred work and struggle* for freedom, justice and a shared and inclusive good for all of us and for all the earth.▲

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