



‘March on Washington’ was about freedom — and jobs

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This week, thousands will converge on the nation's capital for the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's March on Washington.

While the original march is widely remembered for the I Have a Dream speech and the fight for emancipation from political shackles like segregation and poll taxes, we sometimes forget that it was officially a March on Washington for jobs and freedom. The struggle was about political rights. But it was just as much about economic inclusion.

With an African-American family now living at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., it goes without saying that we've made real strides on the political front. But the struggle for economic inclusion is stalled, at best. Unequal access to education, a discriminatory and debilitating criminal justice system, legacies of exclusion in access to housing, credit and

employment networks have left most in our communities struggling desperately to make ends meet. Now, with Congress recklessly cutting jobs in education and other public services — long the mainstays of black employment — we're at risk of falling further behind. This week's March on Washington should be a wakeup call to Congress and the nation.

As of this summer, the unemployment rate for black Americans stood at 13.7 percent, more than twice the rate for white Americans. According to a recent study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, black Americans today have far higher levels of educational attainment than they did 30 years ago. Yet their chances of having a good job that offers a living wage, health insurance, and a retirement plan are actually lower today than 30 years ago.

MLK's dream of economic inclusion has yet to be realized. There are many reasons why: The United States is one of only three wealthy countries in the world that spends less on disadvantaged students than on other students. Black Americans are nearly four times as likely to be arrested for marijuana possession as whites, despite the fact that both groups use the drug at similar rates. It's easy to see how both these facts hold black communities back: a poor education or an arrest record spells economic doom for a worker in today's economy. Worse, with the "redlining" practices that until recently deprived African-American entrepreneurs and homebuyers access to credit, black workers can seldom rely on family connections or financial equity to close the wealth and opportunity gap.

Congress is now part of the problem. For generations, public sector professions like teaching and emergency response have been pillars of the black middle class. These professions have attracted black jobseekers not only because they've offered stability and the opportunity to improve conditions in struggling communities but also because their hiring policies have guaranteed a degree of opportunity not commonly found in the private sector. Unfortunately, the tea party-led House of Representatives has made layoffs in these vital professions the cornerstone of its government-cutting agenda.

Never mind the fact that teachers, EMTs, bridge-builders, and other public servants are needed more than ever, conservative politicians have forced more than 625,000 layoffs in these fields over the past three years. Now, they promise to cut far more by insisting on continuing the reckless across-the-board budget cuts known as sequestration.

Congress must be part of the solution. I have introduced the American Jobs Act of 2013 to stop teacher layoffs, restart desperately needed improvements and maintenance to roads and bridges, retrain the jobless, and create incentives for businesses to hire the long-term unemployed. This legislation also simply and immediately stops sequestration. Ultimately, this is just one of many sensible paths Congress could take to start standing with the oppressed and standing on the right side of history.

As we make progress toward MLK's dream of political and social equality, let's not forget that his dream of economic inclusion was equally urgent and vivid. As he declared atop the steps of the Lincoln Memorial 50 years ago this week, "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."

We refuse to believe it still today.

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