

On Martin Luther King Day, Detroit rallies for jobs, peace and justice

written by Cheryl LaBash
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Martin Luther King marches down Woodward Ave. in Detroit during the Walk to

Freedom on June 23, 1963.

Frigid weather and the first winter snowstorm couldn't chill the spirit of solidarity and struggle at the 16th annual Detroit Martin Luther King Day rally at historic St. Matthews and St. Joseph Episcopal Church on Jan. 21. Gail Walker, executive director of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), gave the keynote address, reflecting on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for fundamental political and economic change — even using the word “socialism” at a time when it was not viewed as favorably as today.

Abayomi Azikiwe emceed the program. In his welcome, Father Kenneth Near explained his church's roots in the anti-slavery struggle. Other speakers explained current hot struggles in Detroit and Michigan plus some recent victories.

UNITE HERE Local 24 President Nia Winston's union won its strike at Marriott's swank Book Cadillac hotel, part of the victorious nationally coordinated “One job should be enough” strikes. The University of Michigan Lecturers' Employees Organization (LEO-AFT Local 6244) won a decent contract for nontenured faculty, reported Aurora Harris, union representative, poet and cultural organizer for the annual Detroit MLK rally.

The tax foreclosure mill continues to displace longtime Detroit homeowners in favor of profiteering investors. The property assessment of poor Black, Brown and white working-class Detroiters is out of whack from the actual exchange value of their homes, jacking up their tax bills. Youth organizer Jonathan Roberts coordinated a citywide campaign to organize people facing this wave of foreclosures. He asserted the right of his generation to decent housing and all the necessities of life.

Sean Crawford, an autoworker at GM's Poletown plant — a target of the latest round of plant closings — called for international working-class solidarity to fight back against capitalism.

Elena Herrada, member of the Detroit School Board in Exile, challenged the notion that migrant workers are “illegal.” She pointed out that the corporations that hire and exploit their labor are never considered the illegal ones.

The Rev. Bill Wylie-Kellerman, one of the Poor People’s Campaign activists arrested for blocking the downtown Q-line trolley, urged support in court for the “Gilbert Seven,” whose jury trial was set to begin the next day. There, they will challenge the crimes of the capitalist system against the poor.

IFCO administers the U.S. applications for scholarships at Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine. Walker encouraged those interested in applying for one of the 10 annual scholarships to learn the educational requirements at the Medical School tab on the IFCONews.org website.

A cultural afternoon followed the community meal served by Food Not Bombs.

