

A Day of Protest as a Part of the Poor People's Campaign

This Monday, June 4, I returned home at 9pm, after spending the day going to Albany to take part in Week Four of the Poor People's Campaign Protest. My three dogs greeted me at the door, asked where I'd been all day, and pouted that I thought a protest could be more important than walking and playing with them. Here's what I told them:

The Poor People's Campaign revives a dream started by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., back 50 years ago: that America will come to care about how it treats those living in poverty and have a heart to help. That we will want justice and a decent life for everyone and see that we can really do this.

As you know, the day began at 6:30 am when I drove to Scarsdale to pick up a ride on Bus #2 from New York City. Joining me there were others from Westchester, both clergy and laity and non-religious alike. We got acquainted on the three hour drive to the capital, Albany.



In Albany we walked to a Baptist Church where we received lunch and orientation. I estimate there were about 150 people participating from all over the state. Everyone who took part in the protest had to sign a pledge to use only non-violent means of protesting. Also, if you were thinking of engaging in an act of civil disobedience

that probably would get you arrested, there were other forms to sign. We learned songs. We weren't mostly singing songs from the 1950's and 60's Civil Rights Movement, but new songs, led by young people. Then we marched from the church to the Capital Building.

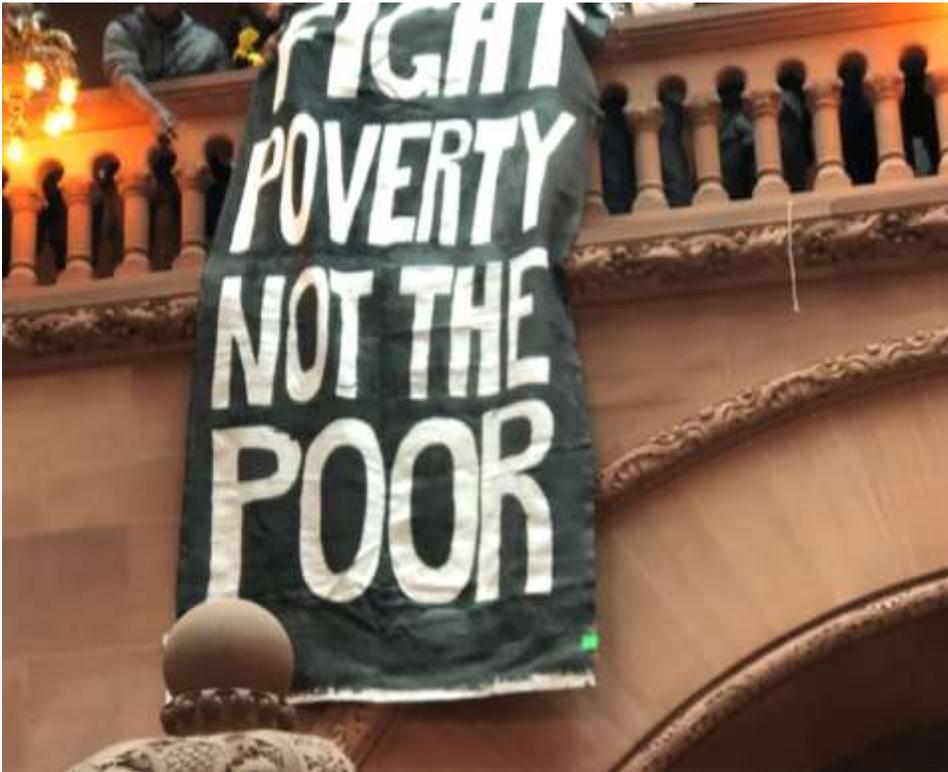


We entered the Capital Building with a sense of awe, but also frustration and even anger that our legislators aren't getting problems solved. Week Four of the Poor People's Campaign focused on the lack of affordable health care for all, and environmental devastation. I was heartened to learn that the Assembly was hearing testimony on a bill to create a one-payer health care system in New York State. This bill won't pass the Senate but it is gaining traction. However, I was shocked to learn that today, in 2018, New York State generates only 4% of its power from renewable sources. What's taking us so long?



The Poor People's Campaign isn't primarily about winning one legislative battle. It knows that one or two new laws aren't going to bring about what is needed. It plans to be around for a long time, helping us change the moral discourse about poverty. We went to Albany to begin the long job of changing how we think and talk about poverty. Ultimately we

hope to change the way our nation thinks. In short: poor people aren't to blame and they are not the enemy.



I like this motto: "Fight Poverty, Not the Poor." I can remember that. And I think it's true to my religious principles.



Inside the Capital we walked to a very grand staircase nick-named the Million Dollar Staircase for testimony time. We shared facts about how we are failing to help the lives of poor people in New York State with anyone who would listen.



Young people continued their front row leadership position in this section of the day, sharing info blurbs, and leading songs and chants.



Once everyone was singing and sharing in the testimony time, some folks chose to get arrested as a way of saying "No more Mr. Nice Guy" to the powers of greed, racism, and elitism that generally like to keep things as they are now.... with the Poor People always on the bottom.



This guy in the last photo looks a lot like me!

I must say that the Capital State Troopers, by and large, were respectful of the protesters' right to protest. I enjoyed a long conversation with "my Trooper" Chris while standing in line waiting to be processed. He told me that, growing up poor in Albany, he "got" the basic message of the Poor People's Campaign. Things aren't fair. We parted friends.

Well, doggies, that's how my day went. Was it worth it?

I think so. Everyone in the Poor People's Campaign understands that things won't change quickly. There are so many intersecting factors that collide in keeping poor people poor. Changing the way we think about poor people goes against popular stereotypes and the selected release of misinformation. But even after this first round of 40 days of Protest ends the Poor People's Campaign will continue. It's in it for the long haul. It's keeping Dr. King's vision alive. It's giving our young people a way of peacefully protesting and engaging the powers of the political process without selling out. It's re-igniting the conscience of religious organizations and clergy who, like me, haven't been motivated to protest for a long time.

It's a sign of hope.