

Four Decades After His Death in Memphis Dr King's Legacy

Written by Dr. Robert D. Bullard ID4268
Friday, 04 April 2008 01:16 -

"Dr. King was called to Memphis in 1968 on an environmental and economic justice mission involving 1,300 striking sanitary public works employees," writes Dr. Robert Bullard, a leader of the anti-environmental racism movement that has become integral to progressive Black movement politics. The toxic results of exploitative race relations can now be measured on graphs of relative neighborhood health, community well-being, and purity of local resources. In all categories, Blacks are clustered on the dangerous, polluted side of the tracks. Dr. King's legacy of struggle did not end with the defeat of Jim Crow, but expanded to tackle the unnatural environment that results when powerful men consider the entire planet to be their private property.

Dr. King's Legacy Four Decades After His Death in Memphis by Dr. Robert D. Bullard

"The city will seek to deepen and strengthen partnerships to grow smarter and make communities of color healthier, greener, cooler, and more just."

Growing Just and Green Black Communities

Today marks the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King was called to Memphis in 1968 on an environmental and economic justice mission involving 1,300 striking sanitary public works employees from [Local 1733](#)

The strike shut down garbage collection, sewer, water and street maintenance. Clearly, the Memphis struggle was [much more](#)

than a garbage strike. The "I AM A MAN" signs reflect the larger struggle for human dignity and human rights. Although Memphis was Dr. King's [last campaign](#)

, his legacy lives on even to this day.

Memphis again this year will take center stage on April 2-6 when an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 people and several national conferences descend on the city to commemorate Dr. King's death. The city will host the [10th](#) National Action Network (NAN) 2008 Convention and the [Dream Reborn](#)

Conference, seeking to deepen and strengthen partnerships to

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and make communities of color

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,
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,
[cooler](#)

, and more

[just](#)

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Toward a Darker Shade of Green

The Memphis gathering offers an excellent opportunity to commemorate the life, death, and legacy of a great American hero. It also provides the nation with a time to take stock of the many on-going environmental and economic justice and human rights [struggles](#) taking place across the nation. Memphis offers a space for veteran and emerging leaders to develop new strategies for making African Americans and other people of color communities some of the "[best places](#)" to live, work, and play.

"Everyone produces garbage but everyone does not have to live next to where the garbage is dumped."

Seldom do places where African American are in the majority make the ranking as the [richest](#), [healthiest](#)

,
[cleanest](#)

,
[greenest](#)

,
[fittest](#)

,
[safest](#)

,
[most walkable](#)

,
[most livable](#)

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, and

[most sustainable](#)

. Making communities of color more sustainable and "

[greening the ghetto](#)

" through innovation, opportunity, and community enrichment with more vibrant planning and healthier living is the right and just thing to do.

As was true in Dr. King's era, everyone produces garbage but everyone does not have to live next to where the garbage is dumped. In 2006, U.S. residents, businesses, and institutions produced more than [251 million tons](#) of municipal solid waste, which is approximately 4.6 pounds of waste per person per day. Far too much of this garbage and toxic wastes end up in poor and people of color communities.

Memphis has changed since Dr. King's death. The city's black population grew from [39.2](#) percent black in 1970 to

[63.5](#)

percent black in 2006. The nation is also very different in 2008 than it was forty years ago.

Nationally, the black population grew from 11.1 percent of the U.S. population in 1970 to

[13.4](#)

percent in 2006. Hispanics now make up

[15](#)

percent of the U.S. population.

Whites are now in the minority in nearly [one in ten](#) counties. Non-Hispanic whites now make up less than half the population in 303 of the nation's 3,141 counties. Nationally, people of color topped 100 million for the first time in 2006, about a third of the population. By

[2050](#)

, people of color will account for half of U.S. residents. Non-Hispanic whites, who were 67 percent of the U.S. population in 2005, will drop to 47 percent, growing only 4 percent from 2005 to 2050.

Taking Back Black Health

If Dr. King were alive today, there is a good chance he would be leading the fight to [bury](#) toxic racism and environmental injustice. He would be leading the charge to take back black health. Forty years after the tragedy in Memphis, low-income and people of color communities are

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[exposed](#)

to higher levels of pollution than the rest of the nation and these same populations experience certain diseases in greater number than more affluent white communities. Ironically, people of color are disproportionately represented among the record

[47](#)

million uninsured Americans. One-third of Hispanics and one-fifth of blacks were

[uninsured](#)

in 2006, compared with just over ten percent of whites.

"African Americans are more than twice as likely as whites to live in neighborhoods where air pollution seems to pose the greatest health danger."

African Americans are [79](#) percent more likely than whites to live in neighborhoods where industrial pollution is suspected of posing the greatest health danger. In 19 states, African Americans are more than twice as likely as whites to live in neighborhoods where air pollution seems to pose the greatest health danger. A similar pattern holds true for Hispanics in 12 states and for Asians in seven states.

African Americans have the [highest](#) death rate and shortest survival of any racial and ethnic group in the U.S. for most cancers. The death rate for all cancers combined is 35 percent higher in African American men and 19 percent higher in African American women than in white men and women. Lung cancer accounts for the largest number of cancer death among both black men (31%) and black women (22%), followed by prostate cancer in men (13%) and breast cancer in women (19%). Breast [cancer](#) is a major killer of black women. Black women under the age of 50 are

[77](#)

percent more likely to die from the disease than white women of all ages.

Toxic Wastes and Race.

"Nine out of ten EPA regions have racial disparities in the location of hazardous waste facilities."

A 2007 United Church of Christ [Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty](#) report found African Americans and other people of color make up the majority (56%) of the residents living in

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neighborhoods within two miles of the nation's commercial hazardous waste facilities, nearly double the percentage in areas beyond two miles (30%). They also make up more than two-thirds (69%) of the residents in neighborhoods with clustered facilities. Forty of 44 states (90%) with hazardous waste facilities have disproportionately high percentages of people of color in host neighborhoods, on average about two times greater than the percentages in non-host areas (44% vs. 23%). Nine out of ten EPA regions have racial disparities in the location of hazardous waste facilities and 105 of 149 metropolitan areas with hazardous waste sites (70%) have disproportionately high percentages of people of color, and 46 of these metro areas (31%) have majority people of color host neighborhoods.

Dirty Power Plants.

More than [68](#) percent of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant-the distance within which the maximum effects of the smokestack plume are expected to occur-compared with 56 percent of white Americans.

Toxic Public Housing.

Some [870,000](#) of the 1.9 million (46 percent) housing units for the poor, mostly minorities, sit within about a mile of factories that reported toxic emissions to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Toxic Schools.

More than [600,000](#) students in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Michigan and California were attending nearly 1,200 public schools that are located within a half mile of federal Superfund or state-identified contaminated sites.

The "Poster Child" Case of Environmental Racism

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The UCC report profiled a case in Dickson, Tennessee and tagged it the "[poster child](#)" for environmental racism.

[Dickson](#)

is located some 175 miles down the road from Memphis. The culprit is the Dickson County Landfill-suspected of

[poisoning](#)

the African American Holt family's

[wells](#)

and drinking

[water](#)

with the toxic chemical trichloroethylene (

[TCE](#)

), a suspected carcinogen. The landfill has created a toxic

[nightmare](#)

on Eno Road. The Holt's homestead is located just 54 feet from the landfill property line. It is ironic that barrels containing toxic chemicals were dumped in Dickson's mostly Black Eno Road community in 1968 - the same year that Dr. King was killed in Memphis.

TCE was found in the Holts' wells as early as [1988](#) and later on in the early 1990s. But government officials informed the family in letters that their water was safe. TCE was later found in private wells and is believed to be the cause of severe illnesses, mostly cancer. TCE contamination has rendered water from wells and springs as far as two to three miles from the landfill unfit for human consumption.

All levels of government failed the Holt family. It is ironic that generations of Holts and their relative in the Eno Road community survived the horrors of post-slavery racism and "[Jim Crow](#)" segregation, but may not survive the toxic assault and contamination from the Dickson County Landfill.

"After drinking contaminated water at least since 1988, many family members are struggling with cancer and other illnesses."

In 2003, the Holt family sued the city and county of Dickson, the State of Tennessee, and the company that dumped the TCE. The family is represented by the New York-based NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. ([LDF](#)). The case is still pending.

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Earlier this month, the Natural Resource Defense Council ([NRDC](#)), a national conservation group, Sheila Holt Orsted and her mother Beatrice Holt, filed a federal lawsuit against the City and County of Dickson, Tennessee claiming local governments have not done enough to control toxic wastes around the contaminated landfill. The lawsuit alleges that

[TCE](#)

, an industrial chemical disposed at the Dickson Landfill that has been linked to neurological and developmental harm and cancer, poses an imminent and substantial endangerment to human health and the environment. The

[lawsuit](#)

seeks to get the water contamination cleaned up.

The Dickson County [solid waste department](#) currently operates a recycling center, garbage transfer station and a Class IV construction and demolition landfill at the Eno Road site, where 20-25 heavy-duty diesel trucks enter the sites each day, leaving behind

[noxious fumes](#)

, dangerous particulates, household garbage, recyclables and demolition debris from around Middle Tennessee. Residents have continually called for operations at the landfill to be shut down and the site cleaned up.

After drinking contaminated water at least since 1988, many family members are struggling with cancer and other illnesses. The family patriarch [Harry Holt](#) died of cancer in January 2007. Forty-six year old Sheila Holt Orsted, his daughter, is currently undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Her mother, Beatrice Holt, suffers from cervical polyps.

A Call to Action

Because of the urgent environmental health disaster created by the leaky Dickson County Landfill and government inaction, the UCC report called for the following actions:

*The Dickson County Commissioners immediately close all solid waste operations (recycling center, garbage transfer station and Class VI Construction and Demolition landfill) at the facility on Eno Road.

*The State of Tennessee institute a moratorium on the siting and permitting of waste facilities

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and other polluting facilities in the Dickson Eno Road community.

*The federal EPA and the State of Tennessee clean up the contamination caused by the Dickson County Landfill under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) Corrective Action Program, a law passed by Congress compelling responsible parties to address the investigation and clean-up of hazardous releases themselves.

*The U.S. Congress hold hearings on the EPA handling of the Dickson County Landfill and the treatment of black and white families whose private wells and springs were contaminated by the leaky landfill.

*The U.S. EPA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conduct an independent study of the Dickson County Landfill Superfund site evaluation and hold hearings on the treatment of the Holt family and the African American community on Eno Road in Dickson, Tennessee, per EPA's requirements under the 1994 Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898.

*The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Civil Rights conduct an investigation of the City of Dickson, County of Dickson, and State of Tennessee handling of the contamination in the Holt family wells and the protection of their civil rights.

Clearly, toxic racism is also stealing the Holt family's property wealth. Unfortunately, the Holts are not alone as this practice is repeated from New York to California. Much of the black [land loss](#)

is occurring in the South where

[56](#)

percent of the nation's 40.2 million African Americans now reside. The black farmland

[theft](#)

was achieved largely through cheating, intimidation at gunpoint, even murder, and through manipulation by racist officials. A 2001 AP

[Torn from the Land](#)

series document a violent history of racial injustice that continues to have human consequences. In 1910, black Americans owned at least 15 million acres of farmland, nearly all of it in the South, according to the U.S. Agricultural Census. Today, blacks own only 1.1 million acres of farmland and are part owners of another 1.07 million acres.

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"Much of the black land loss is occurring in the South where 56 percent of the nation's 40.2 million African Americans now reside."

The weapon used to steal the Holt's land and diminish their transformative wealth was not a gun but a nearby leaky county landfill loaded with toxic chemicals. Nevertheless, the results are the same, loss of land. Forty years after Dr. King's death, there still exists a [hidden cost](#) of being black in America.

A [black tax](#) still stymies wealth accumulation of [African Americans](#) who live in our nation's cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Lacking the "transformative" asset of family wealth, such as land, millions of African American families must rely on their income and personal savings to qualify for [homeownership](#), the greatest source of American family wealth.

Almost [80](#) percent of black children begin their adult lives with no assets whatsoever. The average black family holds only 10 cents of wealth for every dollar that whites possess. Wealth creates opportunity. Theft of black land translates into theft of black wealth. As was the case in Memphis forty years ago, the Dickson case in 2008 is more than a landfill struggle. Again, the struggle of the Holt family and other African American families in Dickson's Eno Road community is about human dignity and human rights.

Robert D. Bullard directs the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. His most recent book is entitled [The Black Metropolis in the Twenty-First Century: Race, Power, and the Politics of Place](#) (Rowman & Littlefield 2007). Dr. Bullard can be contacted at www.ejrc.cau.edu

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