

September 20, 1963

MEMORANDUM

TO: Local Committees and Contacts of the March on Washington

FROM: Bayard Rustin, Deputy Director

SUBJECT: National Day of Mourning, Sunday, September 22nd.

The brutal murder of Negro children in Birmingham has shocked the nation. There should be no need to elaborate on the necessity for swift and vigorous action by the forces represented in the March on Washington Movement.

Accordingly, the chairmen of the March, in response to pleas from the beleaguered Negroes of Birmingham, are calling upon all Americans to observe this Sunday, September 22nd, as a Day of Mourning.

Especially do they appeal to all who participated in the March to fulfill the pledge they made at the Lincoln Memorial. Our ability to respond to the challenge of Birmingham with militant, effective, and nonviolent activity will be a profound test of that pledge.

Because time is short and our response must be immediate, the National Office of the March on Washington cannot coordinate a uniform protest throughout the nation. We can only offer the suggestions below and urge you to tap local resources and initiative and imagination to register the sentiments of your community with a resounding impact. The anger and frustration now building up in Negro communities must be molded into coherent and meaningful protests at the grass-roots levels.

Bear in mind that the suggestions below are precisely suggestions; they are not intended to be restrictive or to discourage other activities that may seem more appropriate in your area. We do urge, however, that your activities be such that there is something for everybody to do--however symbolic or small--and that you adhere to the spirit of the Lincoln Memorial pledge.

Suggestions

(1) Local Negro and white ministers may be asked to lead their congregations in silent marches following Sunday morning services. Many ministers will also be willing to dedicate their services to the murdered children of Birmingham.

(2) What happened in Birmingham affects all children everywhere. Therefore, local groups may want to sponsor children's protest marches--perhaps after Sunday School, where the meaning of the "Love that Forgiveth" Sermon that was being preached when the bombing occurred could be explained. Special Friday or Monday morning school assemblies should be arranged. In addition, you may ask schools to set their flags at half mast on Monday.

(3) One symbolic act in which everyone could engage would be to wear a black armband until the murderers are caught and punished. (Women could wear a black ribbon on their dresses if an armband is inconvenient.)

(4) In New York James Baldwin has called upon his colleagues and neighbors to join him in a vigil in Washington Square. Similar actions by prominent members of your community--intellectuals, celebrities, civic leaders, etc.--will draw widespread attention.

Again, these are only suggestions. You may choose to combine several of them or to reject all of them. I would suggest, however, that whatever project you undertake, the wearing of black armbands would be a simple way to link local protests together in a national symbol.

In any event, please keep this office informed of your activities. We want all America to know the scope of our indignation, and we want to pass on to other groups any ideas you may have.