

# MOVEMENT BUILDING

## INTERVIEW THREAD THREE: POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

### MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

"And he had been in Marks, he'd been in Marks [Mississippi] for a funeral and had gone to a center and saw children who were -- the teacher had one apple for lunch, and she's carved up that apple for four kids. And that was the first time Ralph Abernathy said that he's ever seen Martin cry in public, but he had to leave the school because he couldn't believe they were each getting a fourth of an apple. And the hungry Marks was palpable.

"But any rate, he responded immediately, and called his staff together who was not happy about this. And there was robust debate over the ensuing months about whether Vietnam should be the big issue or whether it should be economic opportunity and jobs, and obviously it was by -- obvious by then that the next step that the talking about changing laws was to get people jobs. They had to eat, they had to survive, they had to work, they had to have an income. And so that was a very interesting follow on set of months, but he stuck with it. And committed himself to doing a Poor People's Campaign."

### BERNARD LAFAYETTE, JR.

#### TREY ELLIS:

"And was everybody working towards the Poor People's Campaign? Was it all hands-on deck?"

#### BERNARD LAFAYETTE, Jr.:

"No. In fact, since we're talking the experiences with Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King did not have the support of his executive staff, and in fact, he went on a fast to unify the staff and to bring them together, 'cause they each had their own programs and they had their budgets and they wanted to, you know, get on about their work. And they didn't see this Poor People's Campaign as, you know, related to what they wanted to do. And Hosea [Williams], for example, had voter registration and he already had a plan, he had a staff and he had, you know, the area was going to work, that kind of thing. Same thing with each of them. Jesse [Jackson] was still in Chicago. He'd not moved, 'cause he'd organized business people and the Operation Bread Basket then was one where you got merchants and folks had products and Jesse had organized a full page ad so all of them were, you know, buying spots on the ad -- the full page. And it was very, you know, creative, I thought. So, this Poor People's Campaign was not something that Martin Luther King -- but Marian Wright Edelman had come up with the idea and Martin Luther King had embraced it and he wanted to move ahead with it. It was slow starting, actually, and it was postponed more than once. And so, as the administrator over all of the others, we took a certain part of the budget and said that this is going to be devoted to the Poor People's Campaign. So, I told each staff person that we need to find out how they plan to spend this money for the Poor People's Campaign that was in the budget for them, and so therefore, they began therefore they began to give some thought to how they could relate what they were doing to the Poor People's Campaign. But Martin Luther King made Hosea Williams the National Field Coordinator. So," he would deal with the bringing all the people on the- you might say the... "mule trains," and that sort of thing- mobilizing folks in the field to come on the campaign. They finally started coming aboard, one by one, and I had this conversation with Martin Luther King in the office after the staff meeting was over, and we were calling it the "Poor People's Campaign" and usually our campaigns were related to racism and overcoming segregation, and those kind of things, discrimination and that kind of thing. So, we were talking about, you know, black people for the most part.

"So, I said to him, Martin Luther King -- after the meeting was over, just the two of us- I said, 'Martin Luther King, we're calling this the Poor People's Campaign.' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Well, you know, there are'" and we said in those days -- 'There were Chicanos who are poor, you want them to be in?' He said, 'Yes, we want them to be involved.' I said, 'Okay, as I said what about the Native Americans?' He said, 'Well, yeah, Native Americans.' So, by this time he turned around and looked up at me 'cause he'd anticipated the next question. I said, 'Well, Doctor King, what about the poor whites?' And he said to me, a little disgusted, he said, 'Are they poor?' I said, 'Well, yes.' 'Well, we want them involved.' 'Okay, alright, the poor whites. And who's the leader of the poor whites, okay?' I said to myself.

“So, I began to mobilize them and I got Tom Houck and Mrs. King came to me and said, ‘You know, he’s our driver and anything etcetera, but he’s just so anxious to get involved in this, you know, actions and campaigns and everything, could you take him?’ I said, ‘Yes, I’ll take him.’ Young fellow, enthusiastic, just full of energy, you know. So, I gave him an impossible task. I said, ‘Alright, Tom, we want you to go and find the leaders of the Native Americans, the different groups, and the Hispanics, okay, Chicanos, and the poor whites.’ So be -- at my surprise, Tom Houck got going out there somehow and found different leaders of these different groups, all the way from Washington. But I did know some of them already because of the campaign we had to end of the war in Vietnam in New York the year before, in ‘67. Okay? We had mobilized some of these Native Americans and also the Chicanos, like Cesar Chavez,<sup>1</sup> and all of them, etcetera, so we just simply followed through and located them for this campaign.

“And we had a meeting at the Paschal’s and that’s when Martin Luther King was introduced to Cesar Chavez, and [Adolfo] ‘Corky’ Gonzales<sup>2</sup> out of Denver, and all the other people - and the labor union played a very important part in identifying these different ethnic groups because they knew them, and they were very much a part of the movement. So, we were very excited about Rose Crow Flies High from Seattle, Tilly Walker from North Dakota and Mad Bear Anderson from the Iroquois reservation, and just a number of them. And also, Dennis Banks, you know, from AIM [the American Indian Movement], you know, group, stuff like that. And so, it was really on the move when we got this Poor People’s Campaign going.”

<sup>1</sup> Cesar Chavez was a Chicano labor activist who worked on behalf of farm workers.

<sup>2</sup> Adolfo Corky Gonzales was a Chicano rights activist and civil rights advocate.