

AMERICA'S ALTERNATIVE SLAVERY

By Jack Hays (2019)

“We’ve gone from plantations to penitentiaries...”—Reverend Al Sharpton¹

I am the “white” son of a “black”² Labor Leader. That is what he called me...his “white son”.³ We spent many a day arguing over various issues before he died. This is what he enjoyed doing. One such issue that I found myself listening intently to was about his expertise: Labor and civil rights.

One day he volunteered to me, “You know why Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., died?” I knew this was a trap, because if I answered he would pounce on two subjects he knew intimately: Labor and civil rights.

Therefore, I invited, “Why don’t you tell me, Dad?”

Then the old man announced, “Dr. King was killed because he started his ‘War On Poverty’!”

My father was a big, dark brown man with a white beard and black hair doused with white hair here and there. After a look that clearly was hope I would challenge his insight, the old man’s face became solemn as a sage. He then explained to me why Dr. King died due to the ‘War On Poverty’. And this gift of insight he has given to me I will convey to you in the context of how it ties into the Prison Industrial Complex and Mass Incarceration here in the U.S.

My father explained that Dr. King was in Memphis, Tennessee, to support a Labor Union, after announcing his, “War on poverty.” I was taught that there are people whom would much rather have us—Americans, human beings, global citizens—arguing and fighting with each other about race, religion, and politics⁴ than about class and poverty. Indeed, I was told that it was safer for Dr. King to continue to argue about the terrible disparity between the races in this country than class and poverty.

¹ *Democracy Now*, Sept. 21, 2007, www.democracynow.org/shows/2007/9/21

² By “white” I mean what is generically considered “caucasian” and “black” what is considered “african American”.

³ My stepfather, Melvin Overton, was the first black President of the Mailhandlers’ Union for the United States Postal Service. After he died on Labor Day in 1994, he was featured in the Des Moines Register here in Iowa.

⁴ “[H]ostility erupts more readily between groups...”, *Subliminal: The Revolution of the New Unconscious and What It Teaches Us About Ourselves*, by Professor Leonard Mlodinow (Penguin 2012), pg. 127.