



Commissioner Brad Avakian
Bureau of Labor and Industries

COMMISSIONER'S MESSAGE – January 18, 2010

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Special Edition

Dear Friends:

Before becoming an elected public servant, I was a civil rights attorney in private practice. I went to law school and practiced mostly employment law because I know how important it is to help working Oregonians fight back when they are discriminated or retaliated against by their employers. Fifteen years of that work gave me critical experience and perspective to use now as Labor Commissioner, overseeing the state's Civil Rights Division. It also gave me a great sense of how fully Dr. King understood that there can be no social justice without economic equality.

In his last Southern Christian Leadership Conference presidential address, "Where Do We Go from Here?", Dr. King rightly noted that "the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished. The poor transformed into purchasers will do a great deal on their own to alter housing decay.... The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the means to seek self-improvement."

There can be no denial of the work still desperately needing to be done to secure equal opportunity in our state and in our country. We will never achieve such equality without building the sound foundation of equal access to educational and a living wage job. Striking at discrimination in education and employment is the key because those arenas yield not only the means to combat discrimination, but the means to improve individual lives while the fight goes on.

Beyond diagnosing the problem, we must be able to prescribe effective treatment. To develop educational opportunity that translates directly into job opportunity, Oregon must invest in career and technical education in our middle and high schools. Employers consistently tell me that their workforce needs are not being met because they can't find workers with the skills that they need, and it tracks back to the disinvestment in "shop" classes and other vocational training that was once a staple in Oregon public schools. The disappearance of these classes is doubly harmful to the families with the least means to pay for additional job training, who are in turn even less able to compete economically and become even more marginalized in our society.

Ensuring opportunities to learn real job skills and practical applications of classroom learning is the surest way to prepare the next generation of Oregon workers to get family-wage jobs in existing or emerging industries. Pre-apprenticeship programs that prepare students to weld wind turbines and install solar panels are just one kind of possibility. Reinvigorating Future Farmers of America programs to train Oregonians in the agricultural skills and technology of the 21st Century could create the same bridge from meaningful education to a meaningful, and good-paying, job in Oregon's new economy.

The mission of the Bureau of Labor and Industries is to protect employment rights, advance employment opportunities, and protect access to housing and public accommodations free from discrimination.

Our existing system does not feature this opportunity for all or even most of Oregon's kids, because we have let our schools subsist on the amount we are willing to pay, rather than the amount we need to invest to assure success.

Dr. King lived in darker times and with even greater burdens than we now face, and he kept up the faith in progress throughout his life. Although "A Testament of Hope" was published posthumously, it captures Dr. King's philosophy perfectly. Dr. King called himself a realist when it came to discerning and evaluating obstacles, but he was a true optimist. He said, of people surprised that he could or would be an optimist: "They fail, however, to perceive the sense of affirmation generated by the challenge of embracing struggle and surmounting obstacles.... Man has the capacity to do right as well as wrong, and his history is a path upward, not downward. The past is strewn with the ruins of the empires of tyranny, and each is a monument not merely to man's blunders but to his capacity to overcome them."

There is a real opportunity in our state, in the near future, to reinvest in public education and create the opportunity that has been withheld from far too many Oregonians. I am confident that we can do this. Before we celebrate many more of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthdays, I remain hopeful and optimistic that we will make progress on education and job opportunities in a way that pays tribute to his legacy. I hope that you share the same thorough optimism that I do.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "B. Avakian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Brad Avakian
State Labor Commissioner

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