Rev. Liz Theoharis

World Conference – April 25, 2020

It is an honor to address this international conference today. I was raised by a family that was very active in the anti-nuclear movement. Who followed the words of Rev. Dr. King that peace is not just the absence of tension but the presence of justice, who was impacted by that bible quote in Jeremiah “my people are broken, shattered, and yet they put on Band-Aids, Saying, It’s not so bad. You’ll be just fine. But things are not “just fine” Our leaders say, Peace, peace when there is no peace.”

We live in a time and in an economic system in the United States and around the world that values our lives relative to our ability to produce profits for the rich. Our wellness is measured by our efficiency and -- a particular lesson in the age of the coronavirus -- our sickness, when considered at all, is seen as an indication of individual limitations or moral failures, rather than as a symptom of a sick society, ill with violence and war – sick with systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy and the distorted moral narrative of religious – especially Christian – nationalism.

There are about 87 uninsured and uninsured the US. 62 million workers make less than a living wage. 15 million families can’t afford water and 4 million whose water is poisoned. There are 8-11 million homeless. And although the US doesn’t have a military draft, there is a poverty draft where many young people have no potential of getting an education or stable employment without joining the military. Thousands of communities contaminated by petro-chemical companies, industrial waste, and raw sewage – all made worse by climate change and the militarization and destruction of the earth.

Using the US Census Bureau’s Supplemental Poverty Measure there are at least [140 million people](https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PPC-Audit-Full-410835a.pdf) who are poor -- or just a $400 emergency from poverty.

Family farmers who live in food deserts with rural hospitals closing.

Moms who have had to bury their children not because they were called home by God but because they have no health care.

Teenagers whose homeless encampments have been bulldozed by the police and white supremacist militias.

Native Americans whose sacred lands are being mined by multi-national extractors.

[According to](https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PPC-Audit-Full-410835a.pdf) our Souls of Poor Folk audit of America, the poor or low-income today consist of 24 million blacks, 38 million Latinos, eight million Asian-Americans, two million Native peoples, and 66 million whites.

These staggering numbers, already a deadweight for the nation, are likely to prove a grotestque underestimate in the coronaviral world we now inhabit and yet none of this should be a surprise.

In the last few decades, unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and homelessness have become ever more deeply and permanently structured into this society.

Over the years, one political narrative has been trumpeted by both parties in the US: that we don’t have enough to provide for everyone. This scarcity argument has undergirded every federal budget in recent history and yet it falls flat when we look at the [53%](https://bostonreview.net/class-inequality/liz-theoharis-war-against-poor-knows-no-borders) of every federal discretionary dollar that goes to [the Pentagon](https://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176669/tomgram%3A_mandy_smithberger%2C_letting_the_pentagon_loose_with_your_tax_dollars), the trillions of dollars that have been [squandered](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2019/budgetary-costs-post-911-wars-through-fy2020-64-trillion) in this country’s never-ending war on terror, not to speak of the unprecedented [financial gains](https://www.forbes.com/sites/hayleycuccinello/2020/04/11/billionaire-gainers-ortega-bezos-buffett/#e54c9463e8d3) the wealthiest have made (even in the midst of the current crisis).

When the coronavirus first became a national emergency, the US Federal Reserve materialized [$1.5 trillion dollars](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/3/13/21178457/1-5-trillion-stimulus-loan-fed-federal-reserve) in loans to Wall Street. In the following weeks, a congressional bipartisan stimulus package has funneled trillions more in bailouts to the largest corporations. Meanwhile, tens of millions of Americans were left out: 48% of the workforce did not receive paid sick leave; 27 million people remain uninsured; 11 million undocumented immigrants and their five million children will receive no emergency provisions; 2.3 million of the incarcerated have been left in the petri dish of prison; and homeless assistance funds were targeted at only about 500,000 people, although eight to 11 million are homeless or housing insecure.

Such omissions are guaranteed to prove debilitating, even potentially lethal, for many. They also represent cracks in a dam ready to break in a nation without a guaranteed living wage or universal healthcare as debt mounts, wages stagnate, and the pressures of ecological devastation and climate change intensify.

The dual crises of pandemic and inequality, alongside war and the destruction of the earth, are revealing ever more clearly how the descent into poverty is helping to destroy American society from the inside out. In a remarkably brief span of time, these crises have also highlighted our collective interdependence.

Isn’t it time to demand a transformative moral agenda that reaches from the bottom up? 75 years after the wholescale destruction wrought by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, isn’t it time now for peace and justice?

If the US shrank our war economy, eliminating nuclear weapons and cutting US military bases in countries across the world, and had fair taxes for the rich and corporations. If we invested in universal health care, living wages, and a guaranteed income, decent and affordable housing, strong programs for the poor, we can indeed end poverty and turn our war economy into a peace economy.

This crisis is offering us a striking demonstration of how an economy oriented around the whims of the rich and the drums of war, brings death and destruction in its wake. A society organized around the needs of the poor, on the other hand, would improve life for all of us -- and in this Covid-19 moment, exactly this might be possible.

This is why the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival is building power among the 140 million poor and low-income people in the US and building bridges with movements of the poor across the world.

In 2018, we pulled off the largest wave of nonviolent civil disobedience in the US in the 21st century. We are organized in 43 US states, have 16 national faith bodies and 100 labor unions and partner organizations that have endorsed this campaign of the poor. We presented our Poor People’s Moral Budget to the House of Representatives Budget Committee, and are engaging in mobilizing, organizing, registering, educating people for a movement that votes.

The Poor People’s Campaign has the understanding that to address poverty we must simultaneously address five interlocking injustices: systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism.

We’ve seen in US history, whenever we’ve faced the forces of regression, moral movements have arisen to call us to higher ground. It’s what the abolitionists did in the 19th century and the women’s suffragists did in the early 20th century.  
  
It’s what happened in the 1950s and 1960s when Rosa Parks, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and many other grassroots moral leaders of every race, creed, class, color, and sexuality did when they built the civil rights movement.

And it’s what Martin Luther King and others called us to in the Poor People’s Campaign 50 years ago - challenging the nation to address racism poverty and militarism before he was shot and murdered.  
  
In every generation, we’ve needed a fusion movement where people come together through our deepest moral values to build an agenda – an agenda that promotes earth rights, immigrant rights, poor people’s rights, women’s rights – all human rights.

But just articulating our agenda, our vision is not enough. We also need moral activism. We are required sometimes not just to dissent but to disrupt the forces of injustice. Not with hate, no. With revolutionary love.

There is a moral uprising, a new and unsettling force of people who refuse to give up, and refuse to settle and surrender to suffering. A force of people who believe in fusion. Who are united by morals.

Who are crying out somebody is hurting our people and it has gone on for far too long and we won’t be silent anymore.

And we’re organizing for the largest online mass gathering of the poor. On June 20, we will hold the Mass Poor People’s Assembly and Moral March on Washington. We will broadcast stories, songs and solutions to the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and poverty and deepen and grow a moral fusion movement of people of all races, genders, religions, geographies, issue area that can in the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr “make the power structures of this nation say yes when they may be desirous of saying no”. Please join us.