

## Unions mark MLK's death with protests

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ATLANTA -- The eldest son of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said Monday if his father had not been killed more than four decades ago, the civil rights icon would be fighting alongside workers rallying to protect collective bargaining rights.

Martin Luther King III joined about 1,000 marchers in Atlanta and thousands more across the country to support workers' rights on the anniversary of his father's assassination. King was in Memphis, Tenn., supporting a black municipal sanitation workers strike April 4, 1968, when he was shot to death on a hotel balcony.

King III laid a wreath at his parents' crypt before leading a group of clergy, labor and civil rights activists through downtown to the steps of the Georgia Capitol. Marchers held signs that read, "Stop the war on workers" and "Unions make us strong," and sang "This Little Light of Mine."

King III told the crowd at the statehouse that his father lost his life in the struggle for workers' dignity and democracy for all Americans, comparing the struggle to today's battle over collective bargaining rights in states including Wisconsin, Indiana and Ohio.

"If he were with us today, he would be at the forefront of this struggle to retain the rights of workers," King III said to the cheering crowd. "I would've hoped we would be in a different place in this nation 43 years after his death. Something has gone awry in America."

The rallies were part of a coordinated strategy by labor leaders to ride the momentum of pro-union demonstrations and national polls showing most Americans support collective bargaining rights. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and other GOP leaders have fought to reduce or strip those benefits.

Walker has argued that collective bargaining is a budget issue. He signed into law a bill that strips nearly all collective bargaining benefits from most public workers, arguing the move will give local governments flexibility in making budget cuts needed to close the state's \$3.6 billion deficit.

Labor unions want to frame the debate as a civil rights issue, which could draw sympathy to public workers being blamed for busting state budgets with generous pensions. Arlene Holt Baker, executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, was in Atlanta for the "We Are One" campaign, which she said included teach-ins and vigils in dozens of cities nationwide. Holt Baker said the two movements are linked and that economic justice was King's dream.

"We need to thank these governors," she said. "They did for us what we haven't been able to do for ourselves for a long time. They have woken us up. They say it's about balancing budgets, but we know it's about union busting."

At a rally in Cleveland, about 300 union supporters denounced Ohio Gov. John Kasich and workers vowed to block the bill he signed last week that bans public worker strikes, eliminates binding arbitration and restricts bargaining for 350,000 public employees. U.S. Rep. Betty Sutton, D-Ohio, said Republicans are trying to silence workers at the bargaining table and told the crowd that Republican lawmakers are counting on us quitting.

"We pay respect to the dignity of your work," she said. "We thank you. We can't quit."

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<http://www.adn.com/2011/04/04/1792348/unions-mark-mlks-death-with-protests.html>