When I try to look with perspective at the real historical picture of the last decade I find that I am helped by the experience of labor when it first embarked on mass organization in the 1930s...Strikes meant long weeks and months of intense hunger, conflict, and physical violence, a press and public opinion that depicted the strike as an insurrection. With the settlement of many of these early strikes there was little or nothing added to the pay envelope, little or nothing for job security, and a mountain of debts to pay and harsh memories to forget.

Yet there was one thing that was won—one thing that was fought for as indispensable, one thing for which all the pain and sacrifice was justified: namely, union recognition.

It seemed so minuscule a victory that people outside the labor movement scorned it as, in fact, just another defeat. But to those who understood, union recognition meant the real beginning. Union meant strength, and recognition meant the employer’s acknowledgment of that strength, and the two meant the opportunity to fight again for further gains with united and multiplied power. As contract followed contract, the pay envelope fattened and fringe benefits and job rights grew to the mature work standards of today. All of these started with winning first union recognition.

[King to the Teamsters Local 815 shop stewards, 5/2/67]
We are saying, “Now is the time.” Get the word across to everybody in power in this time in this town that now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to make an adequate income a reality for all of God’s children. Now is the time for city hall to take a position for that which is just and honest. Now is the time for justice to roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. Now is the time.

...Nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice. The thing for you to do is stay together, and say to everybody in this community that you are going to stick it out to the end until every demand is met, and that you are gonna say, “We ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around.” Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you are also struggling for the right to organize. We can all get more together than we can apart; we can get more organized together than we can apart. And this is the way we gain power. Power is the ability to achieve purpose, power is the ability to affect change, and we need power. What is power? Walter Reuther said once that “Power is the ability of a labor union like UAW to make the most powerful corporation in the world—General Motors—say yes when it wants to say no.” That’s power. And I want you to stick it out so that you will be able to make [Jeff Bezos] and others say yes, even when they want to say no.

Now the other thing is that nothing is gained without pressure...Never forget that freedom is not something that is voluntarily given by the oppressor. It is something that must be demanded by the oppressed. Freedom is not some lavish dish that the power structure and the white forces in policy-making positions will voluntarily hand out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. If we are going to get equality, if we are going to get adequate wages, we are going to have to struggle for it.

[King to the AFSCME Local 1733 on strike, 3/18/68]

The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome.

When in the thirties the wave of union organization crested over the nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society. Civilization began to grow in the economic life of man, and a decent life with a sense of security and dignity became a reality rather than a distant dream.

[King to the Illinois State AFL-CIO, 10/7/65]

The two most dynamic movements that reshaped the nation during the past three decades are the labor and civil rights movements. Our combined strength is potentially enormous. We have not used a fraction of it for our own good or for the needs of society as a whole. If we make the war on poverty a total war; if we seek higher standards for all workers for an enriched life, we have the ability to accomplish it, and our nation has the ability to provide it.

If our two movements unite their social pioneering initiative, thirty years from now people will look back on this day and honor those who had the vision to see the full possibilities of modern society and the courage to fight for their realization. On that day, the brotherhood of man, undergirded by economic security, will be a thrilling and creative reality.

[King to the Illinois State AFL-CIO, 10/7/65]

This will be the day when we shall bring into full realization the dream of American democracy—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few.

[King to the AFL-CIO Convention 12/11/61]