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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

# SPEECH MARRIED RIGHTS, LABOR



Illinois State Armory to honor civil rights leader's 1965 speech

Steven Spearie Springfield State Journal-Register | USA TODAY NETWORK

SPRINGFIELD, Ill.

**T**he Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. may never have made it to Springfield if not for a unique series of events. • King delivered his only Springfield speech to some 4,000 delegates – and apparently a few curious State of Illinois employees – at an AFL-CIO convention at the Illinois State Armory on Oct. 7, 1965. • A bronze plaque will commemorate the visit sometime after a three-year, \$122 million renovation on the downtown Armory is completed by mid-2025. • Several events in Springfield pay tribute to King, whose birthday is marked Monday.

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**“If you look at all of the big moments that Dr. King had, you will see labor with him.”**

State Sen. Doris Turner, D-Springfield

**The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks at the 1965 AFL-CIO convention at the Illinois State Armory in Springfield.**

THE SPRINGFIELD STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER FILE

# Speech

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King's Springfield speech spoke to the intersection of the labor movement and the fight for civil rights, said State Sen. Doris Turner, D-Springfield, who helped champion the memorialization of the speech.

By the time of his appearance, King was a nationally recognized civil rights leader.

But King almost didn't make it to Springfield.

Longtime AFL-CIO president Reuben Soderstrom, who first met King in Florida in 1961, invited him to speak at Illinois' 1963 convention, said labor journalist and Soderstrom biographer Chris Stevens. Instead, King sent friend and mentor Ralph Abernathy.

King was scheduled to speak at the gathering in Peoria in 1964, but he was tending to his ill father, the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., and President Lyndon B. Johnson stepped in, Stevens said.

The state convention rotated between cities and Springfield was hosting when King accepted in 1965, Stevens said.

King flew from Atlanta to Chicago and then on to Springfield. Early in the speech, King noted the choppiness of the flight.

"I am always happy to get on the ground. I don't want to leave you with the impression that I don't have faith in God in the air. It is simply that I have had more experience with (God) on the ground."

King also acknowledged he was in the city of Abraham Lincoln, "the man whose sacred memory will remain a part of our thoughts as long as there is any memory in this great nation."

Bishop Jacson L. Moody studied King's theology at Morehouse School of Religion but wasn't familiar with the Springfield speech until he moved to town.

Moody, the pastor of the Redemption Center church in Springfield, recreated the speech at the Springfield and Central Illinois African American History Museum in 2018.

Moody said one particular line still resonates with him: King's call for a guaranteed annual wage.

"That's not something people are really thinking about," Moody said. "We don't mind talking about minimum



**A bronze plaque to commemorate the 1965 visit by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. will be installed sometime after a three-year, \$122 million renovation on the Illinois State Armory in Springfield is completed.**

THOMAS J. TURNEY/SPRINGFIELD STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

wage as far as hourly, but he called for a guaranteed annual wage. That was unheard of. With that, he was arguing it was a basic human and moral right. That's major."

While King had "no fear of speaking truth to power," Moody said, others, including some clergy members, weren't as intent on hearing his message.

"As beloved as King is now, and history has been kind, in the moment there were people who didn't care for what they determined was his radical thought process," Moody said. "King was on the right side of history and speaking out on those things and sharing that there was a line that correlated the civil rights movement into wage rights and labor rights but also end of the struggle for underpaid workers. It was one straight line for him. There was nothing that was mutually exclusive."

King, Moody said, also incorporated parts of the "I Have a Dream" speech into the Springfield speech and at the end used the familiar "free at last" refrain, a "calling card for King."

Stevens, who has researched King's speech and appearance in Springfield, said he tried to track down an audio recording of the speech to no avail.

While the speech was only open to credentialed delegates, an account by the Illinois State Register said several state workers on their lunch hour took in the speech.

Stevens was told that King may have

been targeted here. Robert G. "Bob" Gibson, the Illinois AFL-CIO community services director at the time, had to hustle King out after the speech because a bomb threat was phoned in to the Armory, said Stevens.

Stevens said Gibson, who went on to serve as the state labor union's president, recounted the story in an interview shortly before he died in 2021.

Stevens said Gibson recalled driving King around to various Abraham Lincoln sites in Springfield when the bomb threat was made known.

King didn't return to the Armory and took a flight out of Springfield the same day, Stevens noted.

While the newspaper didn't mention the bomb threat, it did report that King had plans to return home after the speech.

Another newspaper story also mentioned that King addressed a news conference before he left.

Turner and Robert Peters, D-Chicago, helped pass a Senate Joint Resolution officially acknowledging the commemoration of King's speech first advanced in 2020 by Turner's predecessor, State Sen. Andy Manar, D-Bunker Hill. Manar

worked with Illinois AFL-CIO president Tim Drea in drafting the resolution.

The seven-story Armory will be used for state offices once renovations are complete.

Turner, speaking last week, said the resolution caught her interest shortly after she was appointed to fill Manar's 48th District seat in February 2021.

"It was very important for me to see it through just because of the importance of the subject matter," Turner said.

Turner said there wasn't an exact line item for the plaque but that "funds will be found."

The commemoration was important, Turner said, on a personal note.

"I believe the labor movement really worked hand-in-hand to build the middle class and in a lot of ways I am a direct product of that partnership because my father was a very proud UAW member," Turner said. "I know first-hand what that union membership meant to my family, meant to my mother even after my father died. So I think it's really important to commemorate that."

"If you look at all of the big moments that Dr. King had, you will see labor with him."

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