LESSON PLAN: ‘I’VE BEEN TO THE MOUNTAINTOP’

Essential Question:

What are the connections between economic justice and racial justice?

Sub-Questions:

1. Why was Dr. King in Memphis in 1968? What was he fighting for?
2. What did Dr. King mean by economic justice?
3. How can supporting economic justice help advance the cause of racial justice?
4. What are some economic injustices in the world today?

Activities/Instructions:

1. Ask students: ‘What did Dr. King fight for? Today, 40 years after his assassination, what do we remember him for?’ Have class brainstorm together for five minutes. Write students’ answers on the board. Leave the discussion on board throughout the lesson.

2. The answers will likely include references to Dr. King fighting against segregation and discrimination, and for civil rights and racial justice. Mention to students that though Dr. King is widely known for his work against racial injustice, he often spoke out against the ‘Three Evils’ – racism, war and poverty (write these on the board). Today, the class will be focusing on another aspect of Dr. King – his ideas on economic injustice and poverty.

Explain to the class that Dr. King had always been concerned about poverty and economic justice. In an early letter (31 August 1952) to Coretta Scott King when they were dating, he states:
“Let us continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color. This is the gospel that I will preach to the world.”

Show students how these words reflect his concern with the ‘Three Evils’ – war, poverty and racism.

3. Ask students why Dr. King was in Memphis in April 1968 when he was assassinated. Students may or may not know that Dr. King was in Memphis to support the sanitation workers who were striking for recognition of their union, better safety standards and a decent wage. Briefly discuss the goals and progress of the strike and of Dr. King’s role to give students background and/or distribute a handout on the strike. Use the King Encyclopedia entry on the strike for background information.

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/liberation_curriculum/encyclopedia/index.htm

4. Have students read the following excerpt from Dr. King’s last speech ‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop’, given the night before he died. Explain to the students that the words in parentheses represent the responses of the audience to Dr. King’s words.

And so, as a result of this, we are asking you tonight (Amen) to go out and tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in Memphis. (Yeah) [applause] Go by and tell them not to buy Sealtest milk. (Yeah) [applause] Tell them not to buy—what is the other bread?—Wonder Bread. [applause] And what is the other bread company, Jesse? Tell them not to buy Hart’s bread. [applause] As Jesse Jackson has said, up to now only the garbage men have been feeling pain. Now we must kind of redistribute the pain. [applause] We are choosing these companies because they haven’t been fair in their hiring policies, and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike. And then they can move on downtown and tell Mayor Loeb to do what is right. (That’s right, Speak) [applause]

Now not only that, we’ve got to strengthen black institutions. (That’s right, Yeah) I call upon you to take your money out of the banks downtown and deposit your money in Tri-State Bank. (Yeah) [applause] We want a "bank-in" movement in Memphis. (Yes) Go by the savings and loan association. I’m not asking you something that we don’t do ourselves in SCLC. Judge Hooks and others will tell you that we have an account here in the savings and loan association from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We are telling you to follow what we’re doing, put your money there. [applause] You have six or seven black insurance companies here in the city of Memphis. Take out your insurance there. We want to have an "insurance-in." [applause] Now these are some practical things that we can do. We begin the process of building a greater economic base, and at the same time, we are putting pressure where it really hurts. (There you go) And I ask you to follow through here. [applause]

Source: Dr. King, ‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,’ 3 April, 1968.

Have students underline the parts of the excerpt that deal with specific strategies for change as recommended by Dr. King i.e. concrete things Dr. King asks the audience to do and not to do.
Then pass out the handout (‘Document Analysis Worksheet’, included after this lesson) and ask them to work in pairs or groups to discuss and write their answers on the handout. Finally, bring the class together and discuss the answers of different groups/pairs.

When discussing Question 3, remind students that the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act had been passed in 1964 and 1965 respectively. The fact that Dr. King was in Memphis in 1968 after African-Americans were granted civil and political rights indicates that Dr. King continued to be concerned about economic justice.

Access the following section of the Liberation Curriculum website: http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/liberation_curriculum/resources/index.htm

Click on ‘Voice of King’ → ‘Autobiography’ → ‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop’ (Quicktime). Play this short clip of Dr. King’s last speech for students. (For the text of the entire speech, click on ‘I’ve Been to the Mountaintop’)

The text of the excerpt covered by the clip is provided below in case you want to hand it out to students.

Well, I don’t know what will happen now; we’ve got some difficult days ahead. (Amen) But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. (Yeah) [applause] And I don’t mind. [applause continues] Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. (Yeah) And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. (Go ahead) And I’ve looked over (Yes sir), and I’ve seen the Promised Land. (Go ahead) I may not get there with you. (Go ahead) But I want you to know tonight, (Yes) that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. [applause] (Go ahead. Go ahead) And I’m happy tonight; I’m not worried about anything; I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. [applause]

Ask the class the following questions –

A. What does Dr. King mean by the ‘Promised Land’? What did the ‘Promised Land’ look like for African-Americans in 1968?

B. What are some of the things Dr. King faced on his way to the ‘mountaintop’? Why does he compare his work in the African-American freedom struggle to climbing a mountain?

Use your personal knowledge and your previous learning of the events of the 50s and 60s to answer this question.

Note: This can be asked if students have already studied other events of the civil rights movement/African-American freedom struggle. English teachers can use the ‘Mountaintop/Promised Land’ section to explain the use of metaphor and how using metaphors can be especially powerful rhetoric in oratory.
Optional Question –
C. How can the lives of other African-Americans who came before Dr. King be compared to climbing up a mountain? What are some of the things that made life difficult for African-Americans who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries?

5. Service Learning:

Have students find a partner they didn’t work with in the previous exercise. Ask each pair to share with each other their answers to Question 4 of the Document Analysis Worksheet they have already filled out.

Ask each pair to choose one business or company (of the many they may have listed) that treats its employees unfairly or does not pay them a livable wage. Referring to Dr. King’s strategies in the document as examples, ask students to discuss concrete strategies they can put into action to bring about fair treatment of employees by that business.

Some examples of companies are: Nike, FedEx, Donna Karan (DKNY)
Here are some articles discussing these companies’ unfair treatment of employees:
http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/12/13/BU36755.DTL (FedEx)
http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E05E0DE133FF93BA35755C0A9669C8B63&scp=6&sq=sweatshops&st=nyt (DKNY)

Optional: Teachers can hand out these articles for students to read. Students can choose to focus on the companies referred to in the articles. If students plan to wage a campaign of action against these companies’ practices, remind them that some of these articles are dated and that they should research the companies’ current practices before launching a campaign.

Examples of strategies are awareness raising campaigns, letter-writing campaigns, negotiation, sit-ins etc. On the back of the worksheet or on a blank piece of paper, have students list the strategies they discussed. Encourage students to constantly evaluate the effectiveness of each strategy before they list it as a possible plan of action. Bring the class together and ask each pair to share with everyone the business they chose as well as the strategy they identified to resolve unfair treatment of employees by that business.
Possible Assessment: Have each pair put into practice the strategy they chose to resolve the issue of unfair treatment of employees by a business. After they have implemented their plan of action, ask students to write a short reflection on their experience. If many pairs come up with the same company to target or if the class as a whole is enthusiastic about targeting a particular company, have students organize a plan of action and implement it together. Afterwards, ask students to write a short reflection on the process (what it was like to work in a team and whether the size of the group working on this issue helped or hampered the process). Do discuss with students before they put their plan into action that some issues are continuing and widespread and need a long term plan of action before they can be resolved. Assure students that though their contribution might not solve the issue, it will certainly help in the process.
Title of Document: 

Type of Document: 

Author(s): 

Intended Audience: 

Date of Document: 

Topic(s) addressed in document: 

Based on your study of this document, answer the following questions.

1. What are the things Dr. King asks the people of Memphis to do and not to do? Make two lists.

2. Why does Dr. King ask the people of Memphis to support certain companies and boycott others?

3. Dr. King says: “We begin the process of building a greater economic base, and at the same time, we are putting pressure where it really hurts.”
   
   A. How can putting pressure on certain companies help African-Americans in Memphis build “a greater economic base”?

   B. What are Dr. King and others fighting for in Memphis?
4. What are some examples of economic injustice in your own community or in the wider world? Specifically, list examples of companies or businesses that treat their employees unfairly or pay them a wage that is hard to survive on.

5. What does ‘economic justice’ mean to you? What does ‘racial justice’ mean to you? Can supporting economic justice help the cause of racial justice?