

It's About Life or Death



June 2, 2020

In the past few months, we have all been dealing with the deadly global COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented collapse of our economy. While we have a lot of work to do on these fronts, these are issues that will be resolved with time, science and sound policies.

Many Americans have been dealing with an even worse disease for generations, and it is one that cannot be resolved quickly or with a vaccine. The illness is racism, it spreads even faster than COVID-19, and it has evidently infected the White House.

At a time when people are crying out so their voices can be heard, the president of the United States is deaf. He is more interested in photo ops than even acknowledging we have an institutional problem when a police officer can kill an unarmed, handcuffed black man. The United States has become a global embarrassment. Not because of the peaceful protests taking place around our nation, but because of how the Trump administration is responding to the issue.

Yesterday, I watched on live television as peaceful protesters were tear-gassed in front of my office at AFL-CIO headquarters because the president wanted to have his picture taken at the church next door. American citizens peacefully exercising their Constitutionally-protected right to free speech, their right to peacefully assemble, and their right to peacefully protest were tear-gassed so President Trump could take a

picture. It was a surreal, extraordinary and disturbing moment in American history.

The American labor movement was founded using the tools of protests and marches, and many of those who came before us gave their lives for the rights of working men and women. Today's powerful protests are for an even greater purpose; life itself. There are protests across the country demanding changes be made so people of color can feel safe in their own communities. So they can feel safe in their own homes. So they can breathe.

The United States is a country of laws. We all have a legal right to protest, but we have a president who believes he can use force to take away our First Amendment rights. Our government wants to destroy our civil liberties so a weak president can look strong. We cannot allow this to happen.

In school we were taught about the Constitution and how separation of powers and the system of checks and balances enshrined in the document protected our country from an oppressive monarchy or dictatorship. Our teachers did not tell us how the protections our founding fathers made the bedrock of our society would one day all come crumbling down when the legislative branch of government abdicated its role in defending our laws and instead chose to bend a knee to the president. Congress must take action to protect us from a president who literally threatened to use military force against law-abiding citizens. Our teachers did not tell us because nobody thought this day would come.

I weep for the family of George Floyd and the countless families who have had to deal with similar types of criminal police behavior. I am ashamed by the conduct of our president and Congress' refusal to hold him accountable. We should all follow the direction of George's brother, Terrence, and educate ourselves and know who we vote for. We need to continue our peaceful protests, condemn the few who are more

interested in destruction than change, and VOTE.

This is not about politics. It is not about being Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal. It's about life or death.

The only way to take back our country is at the polls. Our vote is more powerful than their weapons. We need to make America ours again.

Sito Pantoja

GENERAL VICE PRESIDENT