

The Memphis Strike: Martin Luther King's Last Campaign

by Michael Honey

Located in the heart of the Mississippi River delta, Memphis often drips with humidity so heavy that merely walking outside is the equivalent of taking a shower. When the skies finally burst open, rain falls so hard that people scurry for shelter.

On February 1, 1968, Echol Cole, 36, and Robert Walker, 30, rode out a driving Memphis rain-storm by climbing inside one of the sanitation division's old "wiener barrel" trucks. The walls inside the packer were caked with putrefying garbage of all sorts--yard waste, dead chickens, moldy food. Any port in a storm, they say.

At the end of a miserable, cold workday, Cole's and Walker's soiled, worn-out clothes smelled of garbage. The City did not provide them with gloves, uniforms or a place to shower. They did hard, heavy work, lifting garbage tubs and carrying them on their shoulders or heads or pushcarts to dump their contents into outmoded trucks. On this particular day, Cole and Walker rode in a precarious, stinking perch between a hydraulic ram used to mash garbage into a small wad and the wall of the truck's cavernous container.

As crew chief Willie Crain drove the loaded garbage packer along Colonial Street to the Shelby Drive dump, he heard the hydraulic ram go into action, perhaps set off by a shovel that had jarred loose and

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crossed some electrical wires. He pulled the truck over to the curb at 4:20 pm, but the ram already was jamming Cole and Walker back into the compactor.

One of the men lurched forward and nearly escaped, but the ram snagged his raincoat and dragged him back. "He was standing there on the end of the truck, and suddenly it looked like the big thing just swallowed him," said a horrified woman.

T.O. Jones, a union organizer, knew both of the men. He called their deaths "a disgrace and a sin." Two men had already been killed in 1964 due to a faulty garbage packer that rolled a truck over. And Jones had already taken a grievance to the commissioner of the Department of Public Works (DPW), asking that this particular truck no longer be used. Instead of junking the old garbage packer, the sanitation division of DPW had tried to extend its life by putting in a second motor to run the compactor after the first one wore out. Workers

jump-started it in the morning and let the motor run all day long, pouring in fuel periodically. It was an accident just waiting to happen.

The two dead men were black. Jones was black. Almost everyone working in sanitation was black, except the bosses. Hauling garbage was the kind of work the City assigned to blacks only.

The City provided a voluntary, self-financed life insurance policy covering death benefits up to \$2,000, but Walker and Cole could not afford it. Because the City listed them as unclassified, hourly employees (they could be fired on a moment's notice), the state's workmen's compensation didn't cover them. The two men's deaths left their wives and children destitute. A funeral home held the men's bodies until the families found a way to pay for their caskets. The City gave their families one month's salary and \$500 for each man, but burial expenses of \$900 for each worker used that up.

These avoidable deaths rubbed raw some long-existing frustrations. Workers had sparred with the administration of the Department of Public Works about many issues, including the use of faulty equipment. The city had no facilities for black workers to wash up, to change clothes or to get out of the rain.

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The Context

African Americans constituted nearly 40% of a Memphis population of 500,000 in the mid-1960s, and 58% of the city's black families lived in poverty--10% above the national average and almost four times the rate of poverty among Memphis' white families. Many black families shattered under the pressure; the unemployed and people with marginal jobs suffered disproportionately from diabetes, sickle-cell anemia, high blood pressure and cancer. More than 80% of employed black men worked as laborers, while most black women with paid jobs worked in the homes of whites or in the service economy.

Industrial unions had organized some of the manufacturing industries, but most had not reached out to workers in what economists called the secondary labor market. White employers and craft union members alike for many years had barred African Americans from entry into skilled jobs. The ready prospect of getting fired forced many black workers to take what the white man dished out. Segregation denied them adequate education, training and promotion ladders to better jobs. They routinely endured police brutality and unjust incarceration.

Many sanitation workers made so little that they qualified for welfare even after working a 40-hour week. And they couldn't even count on those hours--white supervisors sent them home without pay or fired them on the slightest pretext. Like most whites in Memphis, many of these supervisors thought of blacks as their personal servants. They called people like Ed Gillis--72 years old in 1968--"boy."

On February 12--Lincoln's Birthday--Gillis and others on the sewer and drainage crew had had enough. They and nearly 1,300 black men in the Memphis Department of Public Works, giving no notice to anyone, went on strike. Little did they imagine that their decision would challenge genera-

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tions of white supremacy in Memphis and have staggering consequences for the nation. Six weeks later, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis, prepared to defy an injunction and lead a community-wide mass march on behalf of the strikers.

Building a Movement

For King, the Movement had already reached a turning point. Too many crises erupted at the same time, so that whenever he tried to address one set of circumstances, another set would quickly arise. To counter the Movement's fragmentation, he increasingly tried to find a unifying theme and strategy in a "second phase" that would lead to the realization of economic and social justice as well as civil rights. King still pushed for the coalition between labor and civil rights that had triumphed in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and

the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But King's second phase required a more radical demand: to resolve centuries of intertwined racial and economic injustice by overhauling American capitalism.

As if that were not enough, King had opened yet another front. In a stunning speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4--one year to the day before his death--King offered the most severe moral indictment of imperialism of his generation. He boldly condemned America's Vietnam War as an unjustified, cynical and hopeless slaughter of poor people of color. He critiqued the origins and effects of the war, in which a million Vietnamese had already died, but he went further, saying, "The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit." He spoke of corporate investments abroad and American support for military dictatorships,



and of greed. “We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a ‘person-oriented’ society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

But rather than making the war his top priority, as James Bevel urged, King thought the Movement should merge its issues—linking racism, poverty and war as parts of an oppressive system that needed to be changed. He tried to move from an “inadequate protest phase to a stage of massive, active, nonviolent resistance to the evils of the modern system.” Rather than seeking to integrate into existing values, he said, blacks had to change those values and the system that produced them. The black freedom movement, he said, “is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws of racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are deeply rooted in the whole structure of our society.” Life itself, not theory, had revealed “that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.”

King made numerous speeches to unions throughout the 1960s, and in them he pointed out that the United States had reached a crossroads. Many people who experienced the Movement of the 1960s felt tremendous bitterness at its shallow gains and at the ongoing crisis afflicting the black urban poor. King therefore planned to create a nonviolent campaign to attack war, poverty and racial oppression as interrelated parts of the same problem. He projected sit-ins and camp-outs in the nation’s capi-

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tal, combined with massive economic boycotts and calculated disruption to demand that the nation reorder its priorities. He called it the Poor People’s Campaign.

As part of that campaign, King came to address the workers and their allies in Memphis on March 18, 1968, speaking to perhaps as many as 15,000 people at Mason Temple. It was the largest indoor mass meeting of the civil rights era. After many years of preaching before unions, King spoke to workers as a labor leader as well as a Christian moral leader: “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 and be recognized [applause].” Instead of Black Power, he spoke to them about union power.

“All labor,” he exclaimed, “has dignity,” and he called on the middle class and the community to join with the working class to win this strike. Memphis became, and should be seen historically as, a great example of what can be accomplished through an alliance of union and community forces. Workers, clergy, students, academics, black and white, joined together more successfully here than in any other place during the freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

After making a high-powered, emotional speech, King realized the issue came down to, What should we do next? Amid cheering and applause, a new level of energy had

been created -- so much so that King could not end simply with rhetoric. He needed to take the Movement to a higher level. He paused for a moment and seemed to be thinking out loud. “You know what?” he asked the crowd. “You may have to escalate the struggle a bit.” Then he dropped a bombshell: “I tell you what you ought to do, and you are together here enough to do it: In a few days you ought to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis!”

One man rose from the audience, rhythmically shouting, “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Pandemonium broke loose. King had invoked a latent power that black workers in the Deep South possessed because they did so much of the hard work. Now King helped them to envision what it might be like to use this power: “And you let that day come, and not a Negro in this city will go to any job downtown. When no Negro in domestic service will go to anybody’s house or anybody’s kitchen. When black students will not go to anybody’s school and black teachers...” His voice got lost amid another thunderous ovation from the crowd. People stood, cheering and yelling, clapping, dancing, singing, celebrating the very audacity of his idea: Black people could shut down Memphis! Merely by withholding their labor, in good, nonviolent fashion.

It was one of King’s finest moments. But when he came back to lead a mass strike on March 28, teenagers broke out some of the windows along the march route and police viciously attacked every black person in sight, killing 16-year old Larry Payne at a nearby housing project. King’s enemies attacked him and questioned his ability to lead a nonviolent Poor

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People's Campaign in the nation's capital, forcing him to come back to Memphis to prove he could do it. On April 3, King gave another marvelous speech, saying "I have been to the mountaintop," looking back to the time of slavery and forward to a day of victory.

Looking Back

What the nation mostly remembers about Memphis is King's death there on April 4. But Memphis sanitation workers remember what King accomplished by his sacrifice on their behalf. Striker Willie Sain, who later became a minister, remembered King almost as an emissary from God, a Moses figure who enabled the workers and their allies to win. King broke the media blackout of the strike, energized the community, and came into a new role as a labor leader that he played to perfection.

Taylor Rogers, President of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers (AFSCME) Local 1733 for nearly 20 years after the workers won their strike, said King had merely followed the model of the Good Samaritan, just as he had urged others to do. "Even if it had been poor white workers, King would have done the same thing. That's just the kind of person he was.... All his staff thought it was outrageous of him to stop and come to Memphis. But he went where he was needed, where he could help poor people.... He didn't get all accomplished he wanted accomplished, but I don't think he died in vain. Because what he came here to do, that was settled."

Memphis was one step on King's dangerous Jericho Road, in which he, like the Good Samaritan in the Old Testament, stopped to help someone in need. Following the parable of the Good Samaritan, King said everyone could be great, because everyone could save and serve humanity. He lived and died by that creed.

As the result of their own actions in going on strike, and as the result of support by King and almost the entire black community, blacks in Memphis changed themselves and their relationship to whites. It was part of a national transformation, in which the civil rights and the labor movements joined in 1968. The old ways of white supremacy and black subervience would never be the same.

Five years after King's death, an African-American TV news reporter named Ed Harris, whom police had sprayed with mace in 1968, asked an unnamed sanitation worker for his reflections on what had happened. "I don't think we can show enough appreciation for what Dr. King give." He believed the strike would have been lost without Dr. King.

Before, he had worked six days a week; now he worked five. Before, he had worked as long as it took to bring in the garbage with

no extra pay; now he worked eight-hour shifts. Before, he had had no breaks; now he had at least two 15-minute breaks and time for lunch. Before, white supervisors would fire black men on a whim; now they "can't 'buse you round anymore." With a union, his wages and benefits had steadily improved, even as the City mechanized away many sanitation jobs.

"See, when he was here in the strike, every man wanted to stand up and be a man. And that was the whole story. We wasn't counted as men before then. Every man be counted as a man now. It's no more 'boy'. ... It's no more of that Uncle Tom now... . You be treated like a man."

This was the message of the 1968 strike: dignity and respect for the individual, and the demand for a living wage and the right to belong to a union. For nearly 40 years after King's death, sanitation workers have kept their own memory of King and the Movement alive, bringing out the old picket signs reading, "Honor King: End Racism," and "I Am A Man."

What happened in Memphis in 1968 is now a matter of historical memory for the whole nation. AFSCME became the fastest-growing union in the nation, and in Memphis in the 1970s, as teachers, police and hospital workers organized. AFSCME also helped to save the Lorraine Motel from destruction and turn it into the National Civil Rights Museum, where people today can learn from the history of the freedom movement. (One hopes someone today can also save Clayborn Temple, the

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historic black church where most of the strike's marches began.)

Things have changed a great deal since 1968. Memphis and Shelby County have black mayors; black professionals and academics play leading roles; and a police department once used to enforce white supremacy has become populated by minorities and women.

But some things have changed for the worse. As American corporations have shifted production to cheaper labor overseas, millions of unionized industrial jobs with family wages and good pensions have been lost.

Mechanization has cut the number of sanitation jobs in half in

Memphis, and cuts in public funding continually endanger city services and family-wage jobs in the public sector. Poverty remains widespread in the black community.

King's agenda of a transformed society remains unfulfilled. But those involved in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike remember a moment in history that opened people's eyes to the injustices of poverty and racism. The strike and the events around it gave them hope for a different world. King had told his staff when he launched the Poor People's Campaign in January of 1968 that keeping hope alive is the reason people must continue to

organize and demonstrate for a better world. "If I didn't have hope, I couldn't go on."

Despite the unmitigated tragedy of King's death in Memphis, we should remember Memphis in 1968, as we do Montgomery in 1955, as moments when the Movement and King challenged America to become a different country. Both places were important stops on a long road to freedom that people have traveled for generations, and still do.

For those workers who lived through this epic event called the Memphis sanitation strike, the time for remembering is drawing short. For workers and the poor today, battles for decent jobs, housing, health care, education and an end to racism and war still remain.

We all have much to do to make a better world. As we do so, we should stop to remember King and the black workers of Memphis who stood up for justice, dignity and self-respect. It is a history that should never be forgotten.



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