

The Sanitation Workers Strike Tested MLK's Non-Violence Principles

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Tagged as : [I Am A Man](#), [poor peoples campaign](#), [sanitations workers strike](#)

Date : February 6, 2014



The Sanitation Workers Strike Memphis 1968

The '[Memphis Sanitation Strike](#)' began on February 11, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee.

Citing years of poor treatment, discrimination, dangerous working conditions, and the horrifying recent deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, some 1300 [black sanitation workers](#) walked off the job in protest.

They also sought to join the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733.

On February 1, 1968, a faulty packing ram on a "wiener barrel" sanitation truck in Memphis crushed to death Echol Cole and Robert Walker.



These two African American men had been riding in the truck's garbage bin to stay out of the rain. The City of Memphis under Mayor Henry Loeb, as a fiscal austerity measure, had continued to use such outmoded equipment in the Public Works Department when it should have been junked. The city paid most of its 1,300 sanitation workers a minimum wage of one dollar and sixty cents per hour; they worked until their routes were done, often putting in sixty hours a week at forty hours of pay; some forty percent of them were poor enough to draw welfare while working full-time jobs.

The city hired and fired unskilled black workers at will, provided them with no showers or other sanitary facilities, no access to supervisory jobs, no rights and no respect, minimal health and accident insurance. Cole and Walker, both in their thirties, left behind wives and children with no sources of income.

A few days after the deaths of Cole and Walker, Public Works supervisors added insult to injury when they sent sewer and drain workers home with no wages during a rain storm -- while white supervisors stayed at work and drew their full pay with little to do. After a Sunday night meeting to air their grievances, the sanitation workers went on strike on Monday, February 12, Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Jones, leader of Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers (AFSCME) did not ask for approval from his national office.

He knew it would not approve and had no strike fund with which to support Memphis workers. Mayor Loeb responded by threatening to permanently replace the strikers, while city police escorted garbage trucks and scabs to break the strike. During the next six weeks, the police

would attack workers and their supporters with clubs and mace, not once but twice. The strike became a huge battle over not just the worker's right to join a union, but over the dignity and self-respect of the city's black citizens.

While reluctant to join the battle at first, the city's black community, some forty percent of the city's population of half a million, saw the violent police response and the Mayor's hard line against the workers as a carryover of the "plantation mentality" of white racism that so many people had endured in the mid-South's history of slavery and segregation. When workers put up picket signs declaring "[I Am a Man,](#)" everyone knew exactly what they were talking about.



Rev. James Lawson, Henry Starks and other black ministers opened their churches to nightly rallies; Maxine Smith, Samuel Kyles, and others in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took a leading role; AFSCME organized mass picket lines and mass demonstrations confronting the Mayor and city council; black and white women boycotted downtown merchants; the Memphis Labor Council (AFL-CIO) passed a resolution and held demonstrations of support, led by Tommy Powell and Bill Ross; the United Rubber Workers union opened its hall for daily meetings; black students walked out of school to attend demonstrations; Black Power advocates called the Invaders threatened to escalate to incendiary tactics; AFSCME International President Jerry Wurf, Bill Lucy, Jesse Epps and other staff members of the international put everything the union had on the line to support the strike; numerous members of Local 1733, including Joe Warren, Taylor Rogers, James Robinson, and other workers too numerous to name carried the battle forward through twice daily marches, evening church rallies, and continual picket lines. Notably, even though the strikers were all male, women in both the black and the white communities played crucial roles through family,

church, and community organizations in providing food, clothing and shelter for striking families and in spearheading a consumer boycott that devastated downtown merchants.

Documentary about Dr. Martin Luther King's involvement and the events surrounding the Memphis Sanitation workers strike. Memphis sanitation workers remember ...

The Memphis strike created a true mass movement and perhaps the best example of the coalition of labor, the church, civil rights, and students that Martin Luther King, Jr., and generations of organizers had sought. The national media largely blocked out the strike, however, while the Memphis Commercial Appeal grossly distorted the facts and the issues and the white-dominated media largely refused to tell the worker and the union side of the story to the public.

Civil rights leaders Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin came to speak in hopes of getting national attention and clarifying the issues. But the strike did not get much national attention until March 18, when Dr. King gave an impassioned speech at a packed Charles Mason Temple, in probably the largest indoor mass gathering in the South during the civil rights era. King declared, "all labor has dignity" and made Memphis part of his Poor People's Campaign to take impoverished people to the nation's capitol to demand that Congress shift its war spending to address health care, jobs, housing, education, and other human needs.



On March 28, provocateurs and adventurists broke windows and the Memphis police attacked. Chaos, indiscriminate beatings, and the police murder of a defenseless sixteen-year-old named Larry Payne ensued. King returned again, intending to lead a peaceful mass march but an assassin murdered him with a single bullet on April 4. Mass insurrections took place in over 100 cities and forced the largest mass mobilization of the American military to suppress domestic rebellion since the Civil War.

Ultimately the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) captured an escaped convict named James Earl Ray, who confessed to the assassination in a plea bargain for his life. Few people in the black community believed he acted alone and many doubted whether he did it at all. The actions of the FBI, Military Intelligence, and the Memphis Police in the constant surveillance and harassment of Dr. King raised suspicions, especially in subsequent years as Congressional investigations exposed a widespread conspiracy by law enforcement authorities to disrupt, divide and destroy the black freedom movement.



The Memphis strike had widespread and historic repercussions, both negative and positive. King's assassination left his Poor People's Campaign to flounder; six weeks later, the murder of presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy provided a crushing blow to the social change movements of the 1960s. However, the example of the strike's success activated municipal, hospital and service workers across the South; AFSCME, viewing the strike as a seminal moment, evolved into one of the largest unions in the United States, and a powerhouse in electoral politics.

[Source](#)