

Labor History: The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike

By Ed Leavy

The Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike of 1968 is remembered today exclusively as the backdrop to Dr. Martin Luther King's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech and his tragic assassination the next day. The events of the strike itself say a great deal about that particular moment in history, when the civil rights movement began to fray. It also tells us about today, when some of the issues that caused the strike are still not resolved.

The problems the Memphis sanitation workers faced were numerous. Salaries were so low that most workers qualified for food stamps, and 40% qualified for welfare. The equipment had fallen into such disrepair that the job was extremely dangerous. AFSME organized the workers in 1964, but when they voiced the complaints of the workers – almost all of them African-American – the local press responded with blatantly racist editorial cartoons. An attempted strike in 1966 had failed when local civic organizations, especially the churches, failed to support the workers.

A severe storm on February 1, 1968 provided the incidents that spurred the workers into action. Two workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death when their truck malfunctioned. On the same day, twelve workers were sent home without pay because of the weather; the supervisors who made the decision – and, who unlike the workers, were white – were paid for the day. On February 11, the workers voted to strike to protest these events. A peaceful rally the next day was broken up by local police using teargas and mace. The police violence, more than the causes underlying the strike, spurred local churches and the Memphis African-American middle class into action. After a sit-in throughout Memphis, the City Council voted to recognize the union and recommended wage increases. The new mayor, Harry Loeb, was adamant that he would not be the first Southern mayor to recognize a minority-dominated union, and he rejected the Council's recommendation by claiming only he had the power to recognize a union. The strike dragged on.

The strike became a battle not just between the City and the union, but within the civil rights movement itself. Acclaimed national leaders such as Bayard Rustin and Roy Wilkins arrived in Memphis to rally workers. James Lawson got hundreds of college and high school students, many of them white, to commit to nonviolent resistance, and the jails were soon full of protesters. On March 18, Dr. King spoke to the largest indoor gathering of his career, and encouraged the group to stay united. "You are demonstrating that we can stick together. You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down."

The reality in Memphis though was that, at least in terms of tactics, the workers and especially their supporters were not united. A group of young people called the Invaders, who were inspired by Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers rather than Dr. King, became part of the marches, and incidents of violence and looting became regular occurrences. These incidents provided an excuse for Mayor Loeb to request and receive 4000 National Guardsmen. The situation in Memphis became so tense that Dr. King was tempted to cancel his return visit. A huge snowstorm delayed a planned event, and Dr. King decided to attend.

His final speech is recalled today for his chillingly prescient recognition that he may not be with us much longer. But his words on the strike, and the need for the community to support strikers everywhere, were no less remarkable: "Let us develop a dangerous kind of unselfishness...That's the question before you tonight. Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job.' Not, 'If I stop to help the sanitation workers what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day...' The question is not, 'If I

stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?’ The question is, ‘If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?’ That’s the question.”

Dr. King was assassinated the next day. On April 8th, his widow Coretta Scott King led 42,000 people on a silent march through Memphis. On April 16th, the City Council agreed to recognize the union and guarantee better wages. The union had to threaten another strike to get the City to actually pay those wages, but labor had perhaps its most tragic victory. Yet some issues that caused the strike have yet to be resolved. McDonalds has set up McResource, a call line that helps its workers get food stamps and heating assistance. Low-income workers, especially in retail and food service, are still routinely sent home without pay when work is slow. I recently met with an AFT local of visiting nursing assistants – all of them women, most of them minority –who had just been told that if there was a break of more than in an hour in their day they were no longer to go to the office to do work; they were to go home without pay during the break. The practice was deplorable in 1968; it hasn’t improved over the last 46 years.

Most of the information for this article came from a variety of articles found on the internet. Especially helpful was AFT.org’s section on Black History Month. The site also has a section that has lessons and resources for teachers on the strike and Dr. King’s final speech.