

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Americas > USA > History (USA) > History of people's struggles (USA) > **1968 in the United States: A strike for dignity and civil rights in Memphis**

Comment

## 1968 in the United States: A strike for dignity and civil rights in Memphis

Thursday 5 April 2018, by [JONES Brian](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2018).

**Fifty years ago, Black sanitation workers in Memphis began a strike that would shake U.S. society and be remembered for generations. Brian Jones tells the story.**



*Sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, fighting for civil rights and union rights in 1968*

**ON FEBRUARY 1, 1968**, two sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were riding on the back of a garbage truck when the compactor accidentally activated.

They were part of a five-man crew, but only three fit in the cabin of the truck, so two had to ride on the back. Bad weather forced them to seek shelter closer to the opening of the compactor.

The driver heard screams, but by the time he stopped the truck and tried to halt the compressor, it was all over. One man was crushed instantly. The other had nearly escaped, but his coat got caught, and the compactor pulled him in. Both men were chewed up, like garbage.

The deaths of Cole and Walker set off a chain reaction of events—including a strike by the city's 1,300 sanitation workers and the participation of Martin Luther King Jr. that ended with his assassination on a Memphis hotel balcony—that have profound implications for the still-unresolved struggle against racism and exploitation.

Little did the striking sanitation workers know “that their decision would challenge generations of white supremacy in Memphis and have staggering consequences for the nation,” as Michael K. Honey put it in his book *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign*.

**SANITATION WAS a “Black” job**—meaning the conditions were terrible, the pay was low, and workers had no rights and no union. White supervisors belittled and demeaned Black sanitation workers in countless ways—calling a 72-year-old man “boy,” for example.

Workers could be fired for any reason, and their pay could be docked by supervisors on a whim.

“Before the union, it was whatever they decided they wanted to pay you,” one worker, James Robinson, recalled. “I wasn’t making a damn thing. You can’t pay the light bill on no 96 cents an hour.”

In 1968, after 15 years on the job, he was making just \$1.65 an hour—five cents more than the federal minimum wage. Sanitation workers could regularly put in a 40-hour workweek and still qualify for welfare.

It was difficult work. Fifty-gallon drums of garbage, covered or uncovered and filled with refuse of all kinds, had to be hauled from wherever their owners left them over to the truck, and then hoisted into the back for the compactor.

“Not only white supervisors, but also white citizens,” Honey wrote, “had disdainful attitudes toward Black sanitation workers.” Homeowners were not required to even use the drums or garbage cans, yet garbage workers were required to pick up everything as it lay. Piles of grass, branches, papers, boxes, even dead animals they found in the road—all had to be removed by the sanitation workers.

Outmoded, dirty trucks with faulty wiring—such as the one Cole and Walker rode—were common, adding to the physical danger of the job.

The 1968 strike didn’t emerge from nowhere. Organizers had laid the groundwork for years, but were repeatedly frustrated and fell short of their goals.

Beginning in the early 1960s, sanitation workers who were military veterans and had some experience organizing in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began trying to organize their co-workers in Memphis.

The most successful of these was T.O. Jones, the leader of what later became AFSCME Local 1733. Jones solicited support from civil rights activists, Black ministers and, to some extent, AFSCME’s national office, but never recruited a majority of sanitation workers to paying dues.

“Although he had no training,” Honey noted, “Jones understood the first principle of union organizing: that the workers themselves had to take action. He talked to them constantly about their need for a union and their own ability to do something about it.”

In 1966, Jones had organized 500 workers who were ready to strike, but he called off the walkout at the last minute in the face of a well-prepared scabbing operation ready to replace the workers and a court-ordered injunction against the strike.

After many years of organizing, Jones had only about 40 workers paying dues by 1968—and the mayor refused to negotiate on principle.

**THE DEATHS of Echol Cole and Robert Walker** created a new situation: the sanitation workers were now ready to act en masse. After pushing at the front for so long, T.O. Jones now had to run to catch up.

Jones organized a meeting at the Memphis Labor Temple on February 11, and hoped that if 500 showed up, he might have leverage to get negotiations going. Instead, somewhere between 700 and 900 arrived, and by 11 p.m., when they realized that the city would not negotiate, the sanitation workers shouted for a strike.

They had no leaflets, no treasury and no plan. “This was a strike that we called,” a veteran trash collector would remember. “Labor didn’t call it. We called it.” Their demands were simple: a living

wage, improved safety standards and union recognition. The next day, February 12, the strike began.

The sanitation workers quickly reached out to civil rights activists and clergy for support and solidarity. When the NAACP got involved, “alarm bells went off in white Memphis.”

The workers actually avoided making the strike an explicit “racial” issue at first, but their treatment at the hands of the police and the mayor was blatantly racist. Other city employees had unions—why not the all-Black sanitation workers?

Again and again, the intransigence of the mayor galvanized the strikers to press on with their struggle. Threats, intimidation, police violence and court injunctions no longer scared people back to work. Rather, they deepened the workers’ resolve and widened support for their cause.

Striking workers didn’t sit at home. They kept up morale, momentum and pressure through mass action that included daily midday mass union meetings of nearly 1,000 workers, followed by marches into the downtown area, followed by mass meetings with community members in Black churches.

The slogan they later carried on placards, “I Am a Man,” communicated the multiple layers of meaning behind the strike: Black sanitation workers were fighting for recognition as human beings.

For the mayor to enter into negotiations would require acknowledgement of their fundamental equality—that the sanitation workers were social equals deserving of the same treatment and consideration already extended to other white municipal workers.

**MARTIN LUTHER King’s staff** begged him not to go to Memphis.

They feared he would get “bogged down,” as he usually did, and they would have to postpone the planned Poor People’s Campaign that had already been delayed at least once.

Through the Poor People’s Campaign, King hoped to gather a multiracial coalition of the poor to engage in mass, nonviolent civil disobedience in Washington, D.C. This would tie up traffic and shut down the city to demand that the government take action to end poverty, hunger and homelessness.

The idea was in keeping with King’s analysis that the civil rights movement needed to move on from “phase one” (civil rights) to “phase two” (economic and human rights).

But King’s allies from the first phase—clergy, leaders of large trade unions, and Northern liberal politicians—weren’t nearly as enthusiastic about carrying out the second. King failed to draw any significant numbers to join in planning the Poor People’s Campaign. “There’s no masses,” he complained, “in this mass movement.”

The Memphis strike was different. There, the working poor had organized themselves to demand justice. Their determination and energy had drawn support from local clergy, students and civil rights activists.

In Memphis, King could do what he probably did best: give confidence and a sense of larger purpose to a mass movement already in progress. The workers could benefit from the greater attention their cause would gain by King’s presence, and King could get a chance to make “phase two” a reality.

On Monday, March 18, a month into the strike, King spoke to the sanitation workers for the first time, at the Mason Temple in Memphis.

He arrived frustrated by his failed attempts to pull together a coalition to get behind the Poor People's Campaign. The sanitation workers he addressed were exhausted by a strike that was dragging on, and enduring weeks of harassment and police brutality. But 15,000 people came out to see King that night—indicating that the movement had spread far beyond the 1,300 sanitation workers.

That night, King put the Memphis struggle in the context of a national struggle for economic justice and human rights. "You are reminding not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages," King said.

He told the Biblical story of Dives, who went to hell because he passed a poor man, Lazarus, every day and refused to see his plight. "If America does not use her vast resource of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life," King warned, to thunderous applause, "she too is going to hell."

As the tension and energy in the room only grew, King proposed a major step forward for the struggle.

"You know what?" he asked the crowd. "You may be able to escalate the struggle a bit." Then he dropped the bombshell: "I tell you what you ought to do and you are together here enough to do it...you ought to...have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis!" This time, historian Taylor Branch wrote, "cheers rose into sustained, foot-stomping bedlam, which drowned out further words."

**MAKING THAT idea a reality** proved more difficult. When the day of the work stoppage came, a rare snowstorm kept everyone home from work and school anyway, sucking some of the momentum from the movement. Still, King remained committed to trying again. "I've never seen a community as together as Memphis," he told an adviser.

The rescheduled mass march turned into a riot—when a group of young people broke some storefront windows, the police used it as a pretext to attack the march with tear gas. One 16-year-old youth was shot and killed at point-blank range by a police officer.

President Lyndon Johnson and the FBI blamed the protesters for the "violence," and the national media tried to scapegoat King. King, his staff and the strikers eventually regrouped, and planned to try again in a few weeks.

On April 3, King was back in Memphis, and was once again summoned to give an impromptu speech. It would be his last:

*You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. The question is not: If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? The question is: If I don't stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?*

Prophetically, he spoke about his own death:

*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. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land.*

The next day, as he leaned over the railing outside his second-floor motel room, joking with his companions, an assassin's bullet ripped through King's jaw and spine, killing him instantly.

**THE RESPONSE was unprecedented.** Black people everywhere took to the streets in huge numbers, in some places looting and setting fires. “Brotherhood was murdered in Memphis last night,” Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Julian Bond said. “Nonviolence was murdered in Memphis last night.”

In less than four days, 125 American cities, including Memphis, saw uprisings. The president called out 73,000 Army and National Guardsmen, with another 50,000 standing by—the largest domestic military deployment since the Civil War.

The mayor of Memphis, Henry Loeb, had stood firm against the unionization of sanitation workers through all of this, but after King’s death, he began to get pressure from the local business community.

The national media story about Memphis was no longer about a progressive Southern city, but a backward one, stuck in old ways. Tourism collapsed, and profits were suffering.

By April 16, the union had a tentative deal—union recognition and collective bargaining, automatic dues deduction with a local credit union, promotions on the basis of seniority, and as of May 1, the sanitation workers would receive a raise of 10 cents per hour.

We should never forget that King died in a struggle for public-sector unionization—a pillar of economic stability and mobility for Black people in the U.S. and today the strongest section of the union movement.

We can learn from the fact that King saw this job action in Memphis as central to the fight for human rights. Of all the places where we struggle today to make Black lives matter, the workplace remains the most central.

**Brian Jones**

---

**P.S.**

\* February 12, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/02/12/a-strike-for-dignity-and-civil-rights-in-memphis>