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COMMENT

1968 in the United States: When Martin Luther King's murder set off the uprisings

Thursday 5 April 2018, by [PETERSEN-SMITH Khury](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2018).

Fifty years ago, the assassination of Martin Luther King stunned the world and began a new chapter in the Black freedom struggle, as Khury Petersen-Smith explains in the next article in *SocialistWorker.org's* yearlong series marking the 50th anniversary of 1968.



In the streets of Newark, New Jersey in 1968

IF THE year 1968 marked a turning point for struggles for justice all around the world, April 4 marked a turning point within the year.

It was on that day that—while relaxing with friends in the evening at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had to come to support striking sanitation workers [\[1\]](#)—Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

There was a range of responses to King's murder. One was despair, for obvious reasons. If the man whose life had embodied hope in nonviolent struggle to end injustice and inequality could be taken by violence, how realistic was the possibility of freedom through such means? Was freedom possible at all?

In a performance that she dedicated to King three days after his assassination at the Westbury Music Festival in New York, Nina Simone mournfully sang the song "Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)" [\[2\]](#):

*[H]e had seen the mountaintop,
And he knew he could not stop;
Always living with the threat of death ahead.
Folks you'd better stop and think.
Everybody knows we're on the brink.
What will happen, now that the King of love is dead?*

But the most visible response to the murder of the beloved leader was Black rage. In more than 40

cities across the country, Black people rose up in furious rebellion.

Speaking to journalists in Washington, D.C., on April 5, Black Power militant Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) said:

When they got rid of brother Martin Luther King, they had absolutely no reason to do so. He was the one man in our race who was trying to teach our people to have love, compassion and mercy for what white people have done. When White America killed Dr. King last night, she declared war on us...We have to retaliate for the deaths of our leaders.

As Carmichael spoke, flames engulfed buildings in the capital city of the United States. As rioting reached within blocks of the White House, President Lyndon Johnson mobilized 13,600 troops by executive order. The military mounted machine guns on the White House.

KING'S PRESENCE in Memphis was itself a sign of the transformation of the Black freedom struggle in the preceding years leading up to 1968.

King had committed himself to supporting a strike of Memphis' Black sanitation workforce. The strike began in mid-February after the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two workers who were crushed to death by malfunctioning equipment.

Their deaths were the culmination of countless injuries and insults at a job where wages were poverty-level, working conditions were dangerous, and the effects of the racism of Memphis' white elite were felt in countless ways.

The sanitation workers struck for higher wages, safer conditions and union recognition as members of AFSCME. But their demand to be treated with dignity was as important as the issue of wages—strikers carried their now-iconic "I AM A MAN" signs on the picket lines.

Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb—who had built his political career on defending segregation in the face of spreading civil rights struggle—unleashed the heavy hand of police throughout the strike.

Thus, the sanitation workers' strike—standing at the intersection of the civil rights and labor movements—both galvanized the city's Black community and drew national attention, especially with the participation of civil rights leaders like King [3].

King, having been at the forefront of civil rights struggle in the South since the mid-1950s, had moved onto campaigns against racism and poverty in the North. He was drawing connections between racism, poverty and U.S. violence abroad—he had begun speaking out against the U.S. war in Southeast Asia on April 4 one year earlier, with a speech at Riverside Church in New York City [4].

While these increasingly radical stances alienated liberal former allies, they brought him into contact with the workers' struggle in Memphis.

After several earlier appearances and initiatives to build support for the strike, King had returned to Memphis and, on April 3, gave his famous and painfully prophetic "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech [5].

In it, King touched on a range of ideas, his energy fueled by an enthralled and vocally responsive audience. He called for the solidarity of the Black community as the way to defeat the city and win a victory for the strikers. He put forward the idea of boycotts as another means to exercise Black economic power.

Then, reflecting on his own, precarious life, King considered his survival of earlier assassination attempts and his gratitude at being able to be part of the struggle in Memphis:

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. And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

Less than 24 hours later, an assassin's bullet ended King's life.

THE UPRISINGS that swept the country after the assassination were hardly the first.

Black rebellions against racism, poverty and police violence in Northern and West Coast cities had become part of American life. The Watts Uprising in Los Angeles in 1965 was the largest urban revolt in U.S. history at that point, only to be eclipsed by Detroit's Great Rebellion of 1967.

But King's assassination and the mass uprisings that followed opened a new chapter in the Black struggle more generally.

Years of struggle in the South had won local victories against Jim Crow segregation, culminating in the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, which struck down legal segregation. The end of formal, American apartheid in the South was won—at least on paper—at the cost of Black people facing fire hoses, mass arrests, assassinations and terror.

Yet de facto segregation persisted in cities beyond the South. Steadfast mass struggle against it was met by year after year of white supremacist terrorism and state repression.

When that was combined with the murder of the most prominent pacifist civil rights leader in the country, the result was a social explosion—and stark political conclusions about the possibility of ever achieving equality within the United States. As the Black radical writer, poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron said in his poem "Evolution (And Flashback)" in 1970:

*Martin is dead
With Martin as our leader
We prayed and marched
And marched and prayed
Things were changing
Things were getting better
But things were not together...*

We're tired of praying and marching and thinking and learning
Brothers wanna start cutting and shooting and stealing and burning

ULTIMATELY, THE rebellions forced a reckoning with the deep injustice of the racism at the heart of U.S. society, in a way that was uncomfortable—to say the least—for the political establishment.

The *New York Times*, other mainstream media and many liberal politicians tried to cast the nonviolent civil rights struggle as the "right way" to go about achieving Black freedom—though, in truth, they were ambivalent at best toward that, too—and the uprisings as the "wrong way."

As the *Times* claimed after the Detroit Rebellion in 1967, “The riots, rather than developing a clamor for great social progress to wipe out poverty, to a large extent have had the reverse effect and have increased the crises for use of police force and criminal law.”

But far from being the misguided and counterproductive mistakes or senseless spasms of violence that the power structure portrayed them as, the urban uprisings were a critical part of a wider Black Power revolt. As author and SW contributor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor wrote [6]:

Over the course of the 1960s, public spending on housing and other urban issues went from \$600 million at the beginning of the decade to more than \$3 billion by the decade’s end—and the federal government created the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

From this increase in spending to the spreading discussion about urban conditions during the 1960s, it’s difficult to believe that any of this would have unfolded if not for the rebellions that made public the horrid conditions in which Black families struggled to survive.

The rebellions built on the legal victories won by the civil rights movement in the South. They forced to the fore the question of the redistribution of the country’s wealth as a means of ameliorating the effects of institutional racism—making good on the very conversation that King was contributing to at the end of his life.

And the uprisings also sent a message, especially after King’s assassination, that Black people would refuse to succumb and take injustices lying down.

MOREOVER, FOR a generation of radicalizing activists, King’s assassination also marked the moment when they dedicated themselves to a deeper, revolutionary struggle.

In his memoir *My People Are Rising*, Aaron Dixon, who would become the defense captain of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Seattle, describes the night of the assassination as a catalyst for his embrace of revolution.

Dixon was behind bars on April 4, having been arrested for leading a protest. He processed the loss of King in the isolation of a jail cell:

Anger filled me that night. There would be no more tears and no more dialogue. The war began that night all across America. I vowed to myself that Martin’s death would not go unavenged. If a man of peace could be killed through violence, then violence it would be. For me, the picket sign would be replaced, and in its place would be the gun.

Within a few days, Dixon was driving to the Bay Area with comrades of his to attend a Black student conference. But while there, he sought out the Black Panther Party, which he then joined and built in Seattle.

Assata Shakur, in her autobiography *Assata*, also writes about King’s assassination: “It crosses my mind: i want to win. I don’t want to rebel, i want to win. The revolution will not be televised on the six o’clock news. I have to get myself ready. Revolution. The word has me going.”

Like Dixon, Shakur then traveled to the Bay Area for a visit. While she visited the sites of resistance struggles that inspired her—such as Alcatraz Island, recently the site of an Indigenous occupation—her primary purpose for going to the Bay was to explore the revolutionary organizations thriving in the area.

In Oakland, she met members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in the city where it was

founded in 1966. Upon returning to her home in Harlem, Shakur joined the party.

Shakur began this chapter of her autobiography by recounting King's assassination, but she ends it this way: "Of all the things i had wanted to be when i was a little girl, a revolutionary certainly wasn't one of them. And now it was the only thing i wanted to do."

Dixon and Shakur had engaged with the politics of Black radicalism and been involved in activism before April 4, 1968. But that day for them—as for many others—signaled a call to dedicate their lives to revolutionary struggle.

EACH YEAR on Martin Luther King Day in January, we're reminded of King's "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered at the March on Washington in 1963. The speech is powerful and inspiring, with the uplifting imagery of a society characterized by harmonious integration rather than violent segregation.

But in official narratives of U.S. history and the Black freedom struggle, King's life tends to be reduced to this one speech.

Radicals and others who are truly concerned with ending oppression can learn and take inspiration from the March on Washington. But it is worth—in considering King's legacy, the time that shaped him and his impact on that time—to go beyond one speech whose content feels uncontroversial today. Which, of course, is why it is the preferred speech of politicians and others invested in maintaining the status quo.

It is worth considering the full breadth of King's work, and what he did and said at a later and more mature stage of the struggle. It is important to appreciate not only the era when federal officials in Washington tolerated King—while secretly using to FBI to monitor and undermine him—but also the end of his life when he was increasingly vilified by liberal media and politicians for becoming "too radical."

And it is critical to acknowledge his assassination, which is an indictment of the country whose politicians today present a saintly version of the leader.

King left us with his dream, but the vision that he described on April 3, 1968, went a step further. In his last public speech, King describes, from his view atop the mountain, a promised land of liberation that is not so distant as to be out of reach.

He didn't get there with us. But generations have marched forward since his murder toward the promised land we look toward today.

Khury Petersen-Smith

P.S.

*April 4, 2018 :

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/04/04/1968-when-kings-murder-set-off-the-uprisings>

Footnotes

- [1] ESSF (article 43927), [1968 in the United States: A strike for dignity and civil rights in Memphis](#).
- [2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wh6R0BRzjW4&t=396s>
- [3] ESSF (article 43928), [Martin Luther King Jr: The unfinished struggle](#).
- [4] ESSF (article 43929), [United States: When Martin Luther King broke the silence on Vietnam](#).
- [5] ESSF (article 43930), [United States, 1968: Martin Luther King's "Taking us to the mountaintop"](#).
- [6] <https://socialistworker.org/2011/08/12/urban-revolts-and-social-change>