

50 Years Ago: King, Memphis, and the Poor People's Campaign

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Most Americans know that a white racist assassinated Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968 – fifty years ago. But few understand the historical context and why King was in Memphis.

King came to Memphis in March of 1968 to support 1300 African-American sanitation workers that were on strike for a living wage, the right to form a union, and dignity in the workplace. Historian Michael Honey explains in his new book To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice that the sanitation strike marked the beginning of a nationwide Poor People's campaign launched by Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to address the root causes of poverty and inequality.

Second Stage of the Civil Rights Movement

In 1954 the Montgomery Bus Boycott ignited a decade of nonviolent protests by black and white Americans against racism and segregation in the south. The Civil Rights movement pressured Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that overturned racist Jim Crow laws in the south, barred employment discrimination, and ensured federal protection for minority voters.

After 1965, the civil rights movement entered a new stage. Addressing sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968 King stated: “Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?”

Memphis sanitation workers were black public employees at the bottom of a class and racial caste system. They had long endured poverty wages, filthy and hazardous working conditions, and racist treatment by all-white bosses. In February, when a malfunctioning garbage truck compactor killed two workers, hundreds of sanitation workers walked off the job.

Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb, a white supremacist and defender of segregation, refused to recognize or bargain with the workers' union, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Every day a thousand workers marched downtown wearing "I Am A Man" placards asserting their demand for economic citizenship and affirming black personhood. The strikers defied a court injunction prohibiting the walkout and were arrested, beaten, and maced by police, yet maintained remarkable nonviolent discipline.

The Memphis Movement and Community-Labor Coalition

One hundred and fifty congregations provided food, raised money, and hosted rallies each evening. The NAACP, the most respected civil rights organization in the city, joined with the religious community to organize a boycott of downtown businesses. AFSCME national leaders vowed to stand with the strikers until victory was achieved, and committed funding and organizers to the effort.

The strike became much more than a labor struggle as a broad multiracial coalition of community and labor emerged to directly challenge the white power structure. Ministers and NAACP leaders at nightly rallies in black churches emphasized the relationship between the workers' grievances and concerns about police brutality, segregated education, and slum housing. The strikers' highly visible daily marches became the anchor for the coalition's campaign.

King addressed the strikers and 25,000 supporters in March in Memphis and proclaimed, "All labor has dignity," and, "You are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages," and, "This is the plight of our people all over America." He told the sanitation workers, "Along with wages and other securities, you are struggling for the right to organize and be recognized." His speech drew national media attention and inspired support for the strike from unions and faith organizations across the country.

Labor Rights, Civil Rights, and the Poor People's Campaign

King claimed that African-Americans were attracted to the labor movement because it was "the first and pioneer anti-poverty program." He envisioned a convergence of the labor and civil rights movements to bring about "a radical redistribution of political and economic power."

Indeed King and the SCLC planned a 'Poor People's campaign' for the summer of 1968 to address the "triple evils of poverty, war, and racism." The foundation of the campaign was a multiracial coalition of grassroots, labor, faith, civil rights and community organizations representing the nation's poor.

The campaign's intent was to bring thousands of poor people to Washington, D.C. in May, construct a tent 'Resurrection City' on the mall, and engage in nonviolent civil disobedience to pressure Congress and President Johnson to approve an 'Economic Bill of Rights' for America's poor.

The campaign demanded \$30 billion annually to fight poverty; full employment and living wage public jobs for the unemployed; a guaranteed minimum income for those excluded from the labor market by age, automation, or caregiving responsibilities; an increase in the minimum wage to a living wage for all workers without exemptions; access to land and credit for the rural poor; construction of half a million affordable housing units annually; immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam; and the redirection of military spending to domestic reconstruction.

Deeply troubled by the urban insurrections beginning with Watts in August 1965, King believed that building a multiracial coalition of poor people could serve as an "alternative to riots" and the Memphis movement, that fused labor rights and civil rights and connected labor to the community, was a model for the entire nation. King claimed that: "We can all get more together than we can apart; and this is the way we gain power."

King's Assassination and the Aftermath

King was killed in Memphis by a single bullet fired by a white racist the day after his iconic "I've Been To the Mountaintop" speech on April 3rd. His murder ignited widespread rioting in more than 125 cities and the largest deployment of troops by the federal government to suppress the violence since the Civil War.

President Johnson ordered a federal mediator to Memphis to settle the strike. Ultimately the city capitulated to all the demands of the strikers including union recognition, automatic dues deduction, increased pay, and a grievance and seniority system.

While the Poor People's campaign was undermined by King's assassination and ended after six weeks by tear gas and police repression, the Memphis victory prompted sanitation workers across the south to organize, and public employee unions became the fastest growing sector of the labor movement nationwide.

AFSCME became the largest and most influential union in Memphis (with predominantly black members), and the black community and black voters began to reshape the city's political landscape in the 1970s by electing black school board members and the first black Congressman.

Moreover, over time growing union strength in the public sector resulted in decent jobs with living wages and benefits in sanitation and other blue-collar occupations, and enforcement of employment discrimination provisions in the 1964 Civil Rights Act opened up all public sector employment for previously excluded minorities, providing opportunities for upward mobility to people of color and women in Memphis and elsewhere.

A New Poor People's Campaign

However, poverty and low-wage work are more widespread today than in 1968. According to a new report by the Institute for Policy Studies, 43 percent of Americans are the impoverished or working poor who, due to low wages and cuts to the social safety net cannot make ends meet.

Inspired by the 1968 Memphis movement and the Poor People's campaign, a broad coalition of labor, civil rights, immigrant rights, and faith-based organizations has organized a new Poor People's campaign and issued "A Call for Moral Revival."

On Mothers' Day this past May, activists launched 40 days of mass action and civil disobedience in more than 30 state capitols including Sacramento. Additionally, they plan to construct another encampment in Washington D.C. to protest inequality, poverty, racism, militarism, mass incarceration, and ecological devastation.

The persistence and determination of the Memphis sanitation workers and the radical vision of Dr. King and the Poor People's campaign for economic justice should continue to inspire all Americans.

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For more information about the Poor People's campaign please see: <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org>