

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT THE MEMPHIS SANITATION WORKERS' STRIKE OF 1968

Throughout our history, a significant portion of the American working class has consisted of immigrants and people of color. Racism has combined with the American capitalist system to assign many of the dirtiest, most dangerous, and lowest paying jobs to non-white workers. At times, white workers have used unions which they dominate to exclude people of color from particular jobs or departments, or even entire industries. But, at other times, immigrants and workers of color have organized and used unions to fight against racism and discrimination, to empower themselves, and to make their lives better, on and off the job. On some of these occasions, they have found supporters and allies among white workers.

In the 1950s and 1960s African Americans, with some white, Latino, and Asian American supporters, pushed forward an impressive movement for "civil rights." They demanded an end to "Jim Crow," a system, mostly in the U.S. South, which had rigidly separated African Americans from whites in schools, on buses, in neighborhoods and public spaces. Blacks also demanded the right to vote and to serve on juries, and they sought access to better jobs and wages. Led mostly by ministers, the movement relied on marches, rallies, and direct action civil disobedience (such as sitting in at white-only restaurant facilities or white-only sections of buses), as well as voter registration drives and worker protests. Some unions played key roles.

These forces came together in a very important strike in Memphis, Tennessee, in the spring of 1968. There, 1,300 African American sanitation workers, employed by the city, went on strike for union recognition, higher wages and benefits, and the right to negotiate their own contracts. They became members of AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. These workers had been treated miserably for years, not only paid low wages but also made to work in miserable conditions and treated disrespectfully by their supervisors. Their strike was spurred by the deaths of two workers who had crawled into a garbage truck to get out of a cold rain, only to be crushed to death. As the strike unfolded, the workers brought new signs of their own to the picket lines, proclaiming "I AM A MAN." This sign expressed, simply, a protest against being called "Boy" by supervisors, and against being paid wages which denied them the opportunity to earn a decent living for their families. The appearance of these signs brought the strikers community support in Memphis and got them attention across the country. Other unions contributed to their support for more than two months.

The strikers and their union invited the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement, to come to Memphis and organize support for them. King led a march and addressed a massive rally in the city's largest African American church. But on the evening of April 4, 1968, King was assassinated, shot while standing on the balcony outside his motel room. Cities across the country erupted in protests and riots. In Memphis, the city government yielded to the strikers and signed a contract which recognized their union and raised their wages and benefits. The workers had reached a victory, but at a high price.