DURING A HEAVY RAINSTORM ON JAN. 31, 1968, about two dozen Memphis sewer workers – all of them black – were sent home without pay. Their orders came from supervisors – all of them white – who were paid for their day’s work.

The next day, two black sanitation workers were crushed to death by a malfunctioning compactor in an accident attributed to standard operating procedure during inclement weather.

The response to formal protests about these outrageous employment practices came about two weeks later. On Feb. 12, workers learned that virtually nothing was being done about their fallen comrades and that they would be compensated only two hours’ pay for the full day missed in January. More than 1,000 black municipal employees walked off the job in a wildcat strike, demanding union recognition.

Marching Through Memphis

The walkout drew scant national attention at first, even among Civil Rights activists and labor leaders. But workers stayed off the job and their noisy demonstrations in downtown Memphis and around City Hall soon made the nation take notice.

Mayor Henry Loeb III took a hard line. A municipal strike was illegal, and he announced that he would not negotiate unless the sanitation employees went back to work. Loeb was unequivocal: He was not about to become the first Southern mayor to negotiate with a black municipal union. He offered raises and improved benefits, but he would not consider union recognition.

The activists tried to work around the mayor. About a week into the strike, more than 1,000 strikers and supporters attended a meeting of the city council: A rumor had spread that the Public Works Committee would vote to recognize the union and approve the deduction of union dues from workers’ paychecks. But the full council instead declared the strike an “administrative matter” and put it back in Loeb’s hands.

The council action resulted in a massive departure from City Hall and an impromptu march – the largest yet – along Main Street to Mason Temple, a large building that had become strike headquarters. The marches soon became a daily feature in Memphis.

The slogan, “I Am a Man,” was chanted during marches through downtown Memphis.

The ‘Poor People’s’ Connection

At the time, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was organizing a “Poor People’s Campaign.” King’s plan was to stage a massive nonviolent act of civil disobedience on the streets of the nation’s capital (scheduled for April 22). The uprising by the working poor in Memphis, with its intertwining racial and economic themes, presented an opportunity to push the Civil Rights movement in the direction King felt it needed to go.

In Memphis, more than half of the black residents were living below the poverty line in 1968, compared with only one out of seven whites. Four out of 10 sanitation workers qualified for welfare, and they received no medical insurance, workers’ compensation, or overtime pay. They also lacked simple amenities such as a place to shower.

The workers wanted not just improved conditions, they wanted a union. Worker T.O. Jones had been trying to organize for the State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) for five years.

King, meanwhile, had long been arguing that unions had failed to reach poor people – organized labor had not gone beyond the ranks of well-paid, blue-collar industrial workers, he said, and had not begun to address “economic inequality.”
The inequity was keenly felt in American cities, particularly in the South. Low educational levels had left many blacks with few choices beyond unskilled labor. But in factories and on farms, such jobs were being mechanized out of existence. And as the numbers of rural workers fleeing the shrinking farm economy increased, unskilled labor opportunities in the cities diminished.

King’s First Appearance

When the strike was about a month old, King was traveling through the South as part of a “People-to-People Tour” to recruit for the rally in Washington. On March 18, while in Mississippi, he made a side trip to Memphis.

More than 10,000 workers, preachers, homemakers, and students greeted King at Mason Temple. It was obvious that the large black community was solidly behind what was essentially a labor organization drive. Poor black garbage collectors were five weeks into a strike and asking a racist city government not just for decent pay, but for a collective bargaining agreement. They also were asking for a place in the union movement.

“There is something wrong with the economic structure when you work and are still in poverty,” a striker said in a national interview. “It’s time people woke up to this.”

“Don’t worry about what’s happening to the workers,” said another. “Worry about what happens if the workers don’t win.”

Such remarks led King to conclude that if local blacks could make a city deal with poor sanitation workers, maybe his national movement could force Washington to deal
The Rev. Martin Luther King speaks to sanitation-strike supporters at a rally April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated.