

Labor returns to Memphis for Martin Luther King Jr. Day event

By JAMES PARKS
National AFL-CIO

In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. told striking sanitation workers that we all are "tied together in a single garment of destiny. If one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we're all down. It is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive slave wages."

With studies showing that 45 percent of African Americans who were born in the late 1960s into middle-class families have fallen into the bottom 20 percent of income, more than 600 union and civil rights activists are gathering in Memphis this week to reaffirm their commitment to making King's dream a reality.

The annual AFL-CIO King Day celebration Jan. 17-21 in Memphis — the city where King died 40 years ago while helping striking sanitation worker — will focus on taking political action, helping workers form unions and building coalitions to ensure that King's dream becomes a reality.

"In 1961, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told the AFL-CIO convention that

'when the Negro wins, labor wins,' and that is just as true now as it was then," said AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Arlene Holt Baker. "He warned us that the forces that fought against unions also tried to keep Negroes from voting and in poverty."

Holt Baker continued: "He said, 'Those who in the second half of the 19th century could not tolerate organized labor have had a rebirth of power and seek to regain the despotism of that era while retaining the wealth and privileges of the 20th century. Their target is labor, liberals and the Negro people.'"

Holt Baker said the big change is that the list of those most disdained by the ultraconservative right wing has only expanded. "It no longer includes just labor, liberals and the Negro — it now includes new immigrants of all races, young people, gays and lesbians and the working poor, who are disproportionately single mothers and people of color."

Holt Baker said it is those on that list "that we in the labor movement have aligned ourselves with in a coalition that will make possible the real-

ization of the dream we all share for the economic and social justice Dr. King lived and died for."

The activists will celebrate King's life by taking a look back at what the Memphis sanitation workers strike meant to working people and people of color. The 64-day strike ended with a union contract for some 1,300 members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1733. The strike is credited with reviving a dormant union movement in Memphis and initiating a wave of public employee union organizing in other parts of the South.

The activists will hear about the strike and its impact from speakers including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was one of King's aides; the Rev. James Lawson, Vanderbilt University distinguished professor, who helped the sanitation workers; Michael Honey, author of *Going Down Jericho Road*, which chronicles events in the strike and King's assassination; and AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer Bill Lucy, who was a union organizer dur-



ing the strike.

On Friday, Jan. 18, Lucy will lead a special roundtable discussion with veterans of the strike, including members of the clergy, community organizers and sanitation workers.

But the conference will not just look back — the participants will look forward to find ways to bolster the movement for economic and social justice. An entire afternoon of the conference will be devoted to political education and training.

Ronald Walters, a political analyst and professor at the University of Maryland, will discuss the importance of the 2008 elections for people of

color, and AFL-CIO Political Director Karen Ackerman will address how workers can win in 2008. Participants also will spend almost four hours Friday afternoon in get-out-the vote training sessions.

The weekend will be devoted to community service projects designed to serving the community that King worked to help — the poor and disadvantaged. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney will present a computer lab paid for by union members to a local elementary school, and AFSCME and the Transport Workers will make contributions to schools and the Head Start program.

IN MEMORIAM

Gary Thrasher, a former president of Graphic Communications International Union Local 43, passed away Dec. 22 of cancer. He was 58.

Thrasher grew up in Southeast Portland, where he attended Washington High School and Portland Community College. He entered the field of commercial printing in 1972 and worked as a journeyman press operator and pressroom foreman for 35 years.

A member of the Choctaw Nation, Thrasher served as Local 43's president for 10 years. He was a volunteer bell-ringer for Salvation Army and volunteer for the Oregon Peace Institute.

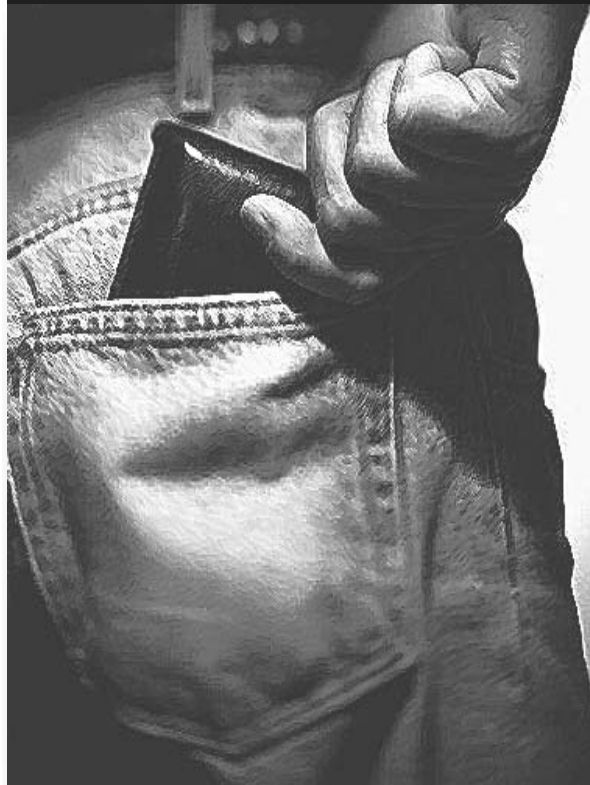
He is survived by his wife, Suzanne; daughter, Keely LeDoux; stepdaughters, Randi Adai and Mikki Adair-Berens; son, Tyler; brothers, Harold and Darrell; and five grandchildren. Remembrances can be sent to Mercy Corp.

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