

Celebrating Martin Luther King Day

Voices from the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike

By JAMES PARKS
National AFL-CIO

In the fall of 1967, T.O. Jones and Joe Warren, the first two leaders of the effort to organize a union of sanitation workers in Memphis, Tenn., met with then-Mayor Henry Loeb to recognize and bargain with the almost all-black union, AFSCME Local 1733.

As Warren recalls: "He told us you can have it, but you can never get dues checkoff or recognition. When I told him we would strike, he told me I would be the first one fired."

But after a two-month strike in 1968, the sanitation workers, many of whom were standing up against white authority for the first time in their lives, won recognition of the union. That victory was the catalyst for change in the paternalistic racist environment in Memphis. Today, the city has a black mayor and county executive, and Local 1733 represents public workers across the city.

Warren joined seven other veterans of the strike and told their stories at the annual AFL-CIO Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration last year in Memphis. King, a longtime supporter of unions, went to Memphis in April 1968 to lend his support to the sanitation workers' strike, and was assassinated while he was there.

The Rev. Ezekiel Bell was the first minister to support the strikers and one of their strongest backers. The city's only black Presbyterian minister at the time, Bell had turned down a scholarship to Harvard to attend all-black Tennessee State University. His father had been a Mississippi sharecropper and once worked as a sanitation worker, so Bell says he understood the workers' pain.

"I felt my place was out there with them. These men were working for sub-standard wages. For me not to be there would have been a denial of what I was preaching about every Sunday," he said.

Now retired, Bell says the strike was a key turning point in Memphis and the nation because it showed the power of being organized and determined.

"It was time for change. They helped people to see that we could make things better for us all if we worked together, he said.

AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer William Lucy agrees. The sanitation workers recognized the importance of union membership to lifting black workers out of poverty, says Lucy, who was one of the organizers working with the Memphis strikers in 1968.

As Lucy says today: "The workers in the Memphis public works department, and I think workers across the South, recognized that their future was tied to their ability to organize a union and have a union represent them in the areas of wages, hours and conditions of employment. So no matter how bad the situation was, it would be worse if they were not able to form a union. And as bad as the strike got and as tough as life was, they were not about to give up until they



Martin Luther King Jr. addresses striking sanitation workers the day before he was killed in Memphis.

achieved recognition of a union.

"Dr. King's involvement showed he recognized the fact that you had people who worked every single day and yet were not able to raise themselves out of poverty ... and that the civil rights struggle and the struggle for workers' rights are intertwined."

Hattie Jackson says the strike happened because blacks in Memphis were tired of being treated like slaves. "You wake up one morning and say 'no more.' You just have to get on with it and not be a slave anymore," she said.

Jackson and her late husband, the Rev. H. Ralph Jackson, were involved in the strike from the beginning. Ralph Jackson was one of the leaders of the strike. The strike was a family affair for the Jacksons, she says. Not only were she and her husband marching with the strikers, one of their daughters came home from college to march with them.

Contrary to the common perception that the strikers and marchers were all poor, Jackson says they had many middle-class black supporters. She was, at the time, the only black principal of an all-white school in Memphis, and her husband was a national officer of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination.

"A lot of teachers and principals came to the mass meetings and gave money to support the strikers, but they hid their faces because they were afraid of losing their jobs," she said.

Jackson says the strike was good not only for black men, but for women as well. "You know that slogan 'I Am A Man,' well we wanted to let them know that 'I Am A Wo-man' and we deserve dignity and fair treatment as well," she said.

Bell, who says he was arrested more times than he can count during the strike, says he was enraged with the racism not only of Memphis' political leaders, but he was even more outraged at the racism of its white religious leaders.

He recounts that on the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he and a representative

of the national Presbyterian church met with the white Presbyterian ministers in Memphis to deliver a \$10,000 check from the national Presbyterian Church to help support the strikers.

"They went on about how it was an illegal strike and they refused to take the money. So I got [the national Presbyterian staffer] out of there and we were on the way to the Lorraine Motel [where King was killed] to pick up his bags and take him to the airport. That's when the news came over the radio that Dr. King had been shot. Later they reported he was dead," he said.

"When we got to the Lorraine, those same ministers called to say they would take the check. I'll never forget that."

(Editor's Note: The 2009 National AFL-CIO Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday observance will be held Jan. 15-19 in New Orleans. In addition to celebrating the historic election of Barack Obama as the nation's first black president, union members will examine what the election means for working families. They also will volunteer with community service projects in and around New Orleans, which continues to suffer from the effects of Hurricane Katrina. For more information, contact Eva Walton in the AFL-CIO Civil, Human and Women's Rights Department at ewalton@aflcio.org or at 202-637-5274.

Portland State University will host a full week of events Jan. 19-24 to commemorate the legacy of Dr. King. In addition to library exhibits, films, and a musical performance, PSU's Student Leaders for Service will take part in a day of service — "A Day On, Not a Day Off" — with Portland VOZ, an organization that supports day laborers in the city. PSU also will host former Georgia Congressman Andrew Young as the "Living the Legacy" guest lecturer on Thursday, Jan. 22, from 3 to 4:30 p.m., at Smith Memorial Student Union. For more information, call Haili Jones Graff at PSU at 503 725-8763.)

AFSCME Local 88

**acknowledges the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day
January 19, 2009**

In 1968 Dr. King marched with striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Today, we honor Dr. King and those who struggled and stood for the dignity and rights of all workers. We acknowledge their many sacrifices in helping to create AFSCME Local 1733.

In addition, we acknowledge the historic inauguration of Barack Obama on January 20, 2009. President-elect Obama supports workers, the right to form unions, and the Employee Free Choice Act.

On this national holiday, let us reach out and help serve our community. Let us continue to organize those who are unrepresented and fight for the dignity and rights of all workers.

AFSCME Local 88
Representing Multnomah County,
Central City Concern,
Transition Projects, Inc., and
American Friends Services Committee

