

Celebrating Martin Luther King Day

Voices from the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike

By JAMES PARKS
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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 Ten-

nessee 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 substandard 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 achieved recognition of a union.

"Dr. King's involvement showed he



"The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome. When in the '30s the wave of union organization crested over the nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society."

—Dr. King's speech to the state convention of the Illinois AFL-CIO, Oct. 7, 1965

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."

• *The 2010 National AFL-CIO MLK Holiday Observance will be held Jan. 14-18 in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

• *International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 48 will host the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus Convention Jan. 14-17 at the Benson Hotel. The caucus has been meeting for the past 20 years prior to the MLK Jr. holiday. For that reason, in addition to workshops, panel discussions, a banquet, and the awarding of scholarships, the conference also includes a day of community service on Thursday, Jan. 14. For more information, go online to www.ibew-ewmc.com or ewmc@ibew48.com.*

• *A daylong tribute to Dr. King will be held Monday, Jan. 18, at the Highland Christian Center, 7600 NE Glisan, Portland. The tribute starts at 11 a.m. and goes to 6:30 p.m.*

• *One of the largest MLK celebrations in the nation will take place in Seattle on Jan. 18. "Justice Now! Health care, Housing, Jobs & Education" is a daylong event featuring workshops, entertainment, and a rally and march through the streets of Seattle. Workshops start at 9:30 a.m. at Garfield High School, 400 23rd Ave at East Jefferson. At 11 a.m., a rally with speakers, poetry, and music will be held. Then, at noon, participants will march to the Jackson Federal Building, 2nd & Marion, downtown for a rally.*



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