February - Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike

As in virtually the entire south, there was a long history of segregation and appalling treatment of African Americans in Memphis, Tennessee. Police departments throughout the south were full of cronyism, and officers were poorly trained and paid. The Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacy groups operated unchecked or with the tacit approval of white officialdom.

Even when blacks were able to find work with city or state governments they received lower pay and had no chance for promotions. The sanitation workforce was predominately black, and in 1968 the highest pay for black men was less than two dollars an hour. Many of the men worked several jobs or relied on welfare to help support their families. There was no grievance structure in place; they could be fired with impunity. Black workers were forced to work overtime for which they were not compensated, in all kinds of weather conditions, and were given the balkiest equipment. Refuse work has almost always been the province of those lowest on the socioeconomic scale, and it was no different from that in Memphis, Tennessee.

For years black sanitation workers had been complaining about poor wages, unpaid overtime, faulty equipment, and dangerous working conditions. During the Depression, African American sanitation workers were able to organize, but the Cold War and the virulent fear of communism ended their work. The Teamsters tried organizing the men, but many of them were so afraid of being fired, they would not join. However, in 1964, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) successfully formed a chapter in Memphis.
The mayoral election of 1967 was won by Henry Loeb, a segregationist and scion of a family who became wealthy by owning real estate and laundries. The Loeb family openly discriminated against black workers in their laundry business—mostly women—through low wages and miserable working conditions. The family also blocked all efforts of its mainly black workforce from organizing a union. True to form, he immediately took steps to ensure that black city workers remained poorly paid.

In 1964, two black sanitation workers had been crushed to death in a faulty truck. In spite of numerous complaints about equipment lodged by the sanitation workforce, the trucks were not replaced. Then on February 1, 1968, two employees decided to shelter in a truck to get out of the rain. Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death in the faulty garbage compactor. Again, the city did nothing.

On February 12, more than one thousand workers did not report for work. Loeb refused to talk to workers who had shown up, and many of them also walked off the job. Emboldened sanitation workers marched from their union office to city hall, only to be met by more than forty police officers. Loeb led the marchers to an auditorium, and asked them to return to work. He was drowned out by the angry employees.

As garbage piled up—it is estimated that there were ten thousand tons within a week, Loeb hired white men as strikebreakers. They were escorted to work by city police, yet some of them were still assaulted. On February 26 more than a thousand black workers met at Clayborn Temple, and raised $1,600 to support their efforts.

Of course, the media sided with city officials. In 1968, racism in the south was still deeply rooted, as was anti-union feeling. Strikers were portrayed as lawless, unruly thugs while
the mayor received favorable accolades. Yet the striking workers refused to back down; furthermore, they were very adept at presenting the role racism had in their poor treatment.

The strike gained national attention and attracted the support of civil rights activists and organizations at the highest level, and black-owned newspapers. Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, and James Lawson, seasoned black freedom fighters, participated in the demonstrations.

On March 18, King visited Memphis and met with the strikers. He returned on March 28 to lead a nonviolent demonstration. Pent up anger amongst the workers and black community spilled over into broken windows, deprecating signs, and general unruliness. Police sprayed tear gas and used their batons, and shot and killed Larry Payne, a black teenager.

Shaken by the violence, King regrouped and led a meeting on the night of April 3. In it he spoke of his resolve to continue the freedom movement. He also acknowledged the danger under which he operated and that he might be killed. He exhorted the crowd to continue pressing for freedom even if he himself was killed.

The next day, April 4, King was assassinated as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. His death was marked by violence in a number of American cities. Officials in the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson pressured Mayor Loeb to acquiesce to some of the demands of the workers in order to forestall more violence, but he refused.

Coretta Scott King and her children led a silent march in Memphis on April 8 that attracted more than forty thousand people Eight days later the strike ended as the Loeb administration agreed to raise increases and union recognition.

FURTHER READING
