Labor and Civil Rights Movements at the Crossroads: Martin Luther King, Black Workers, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike

Michael Honey
Harry Bridges Chair
African-American, Ethnic and Labor Studies
and American History
University of Washington Tacoma
mhoney@u.washington.edu

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Labor and Civil Rights Movements at the Crossroads: Martin Luther King, Black Workers, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike*

By Michael Honey

Thirty-five years ago an assassin killed one of the great human rights leaders of the twentieth century. Although most people know Dr. King died in Memphis, many don't know he died in a struggle for the right of the working poor to join a union. Many don't know that he came to Memphis leading a multi-racial Poor People's Campaign demanding that government shift from war spending to creating jobs and eradicating poverty. They don't know that King called for "dealing in a sense with class issues, the gulf between the haves and have-nots," and for a "planetary" movement to end hunger, militarism, racism, and war. 1

This is not the King that present leaders of the United States want to remember, but it is more urgent than ever that we remember, for King is always in danger of being appropriated by his enemies. President George Bush and his friends praise him while contradicting in practice everything that he stood for, replacing King's social gospel with Social Darwinism, using his call for a "color blind" society as a ploy to end affirmative action, and making the United States into just what King feared, a nation where "machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people." We are once again in a time of protest when, as Dr. King said, "silence is betrayal." 2

In times like these, when taking action to support the ideals King stood for is so urgent, is there any point in revisiting the past? I believe there is. Both King's economic justice agenda and the Memphis strike have received far too little attention. Memphis is not just the place where King died, but where his Poor People's Campaign began. It is the place where one of the great worker and community movements of the 1960s came to life.

In Memphis, poor black workers galvanized the entire black community to challenge the plantation mentality of racism. Their ultimate victory opened a new era that rebuilt a declining union movement through public employee organizing across the country. The movement of black workers in Memphis was truly historic for African-American history as well, in that it represented the fruits of generations of struggle by poor people in the Mississippi Delta for both labor and civil rights. The Memphis movement reincorporated an older civil rights culture of broad unity into the labor movement, to create what labor organizer Bill Lucy called "the spirit of Memphis." 3

That spirit and history is something social justice movements are returning to today as we confront a corporate culture and military state that threaten basic principles of peace and justice fought for by King and many others. Dr. King would be proud to see millions adopting his peace message in Seattle, where on the 2003 King holiday over ten thousand people marched to demand "money for the poor, no more war." King Day, coming as it

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did in 1991 and again in 2003 on the verge of massive U.S. military campaigns against Iraq, this time became a turning point for an anti-war movement bigger than anything seen in the past. He would also be glad to see that April 4 has become a day of action by anti-sweatshop, union and global justice activists. January 15 and April 4 are not days to reminisce, but to take action. However, we can't make the most of these opportunities unless we truly do remember, reflect upon, and celebrate our past.

My part in remembering the Memphis strike and Dr. King results from more than twenty years of research. But I really began my focus on Memphis through my own experience, when I came to Memphis in 1970 as a “New Left” organizer, amazed at what I found. The police department, nearly all white and male, specialized in insulting, beating, and killing young black men with near-impunity. I worked against police brutality and frame-ups and became a target myself. With Richard Nixon in the White House, America almost became a police state, although George Bush makes Nixon look moderate. By comparison.

Many of us in the movement mistook revolt around the world as a prelude to revolution. King had a much more sober and realistic appraisal. Until I came to Memphis, I don't think I fully understood the singular importance of his call for a broad coalition against the dangers posed by the radical right and his attempt to mount a Poor People’s Campaign. In retrospect, I want to focus on three things: the dangerous road King walked in 1968; the importance of workers like Taylor Rogers, who created such a powerful movement for change; and why the memory of King and the Memphis movement remain so important to us today.

Standing At the Cross Roads

Let's start with King. We can best understand the significance of what happened in Memphis through his analysis. King saw the movement in terms of phases. Remarkably, he characterized the massive organizing and terrible sacrifice from 1955 to 1965 as the "easy" phase of the black revolution. He said the freedom movement ultimately would be judged not only by the civil rights and voting rights victories that destroyed the legal infrastructure of Jim Crow. "What good is it to have the right to sit at a lunch counter if you don't have enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?" he told his audience in Memphis on March 18, 1968. New opportunities for the black middle class had to be matched by gains for workers and the poor.  

After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, King said the movement had begun a second phase, a fight for, in King's words, "genuine equality, which means economic equality." Just what did he mean? In lesser-known speeches to unions and poor people, King focused on the historical importance of the exploitation of black workers during slavery and segregation, which he said had robbed the black community of most of the wealth it created. The government and business would have to create jobs or provide a guaranteed annual income, pegged not to minimum income but to the median income in the society.
To attain economic justice, he said, it was not enough to turn to government: rather, he called on blacks "to turn to the labor movement because it was the first and pioneer anti-poverty program." According to the AFL-CIO, African Americans today have the highest percentage of union representation of any group of workers, and King saw that statistic in the making. King also knew that corporations had begun to pull the economic props out from under the working-class and poor, shifting work to cheaper labor markets and computerizing and mechanizing away millions of well-paying, unionized jobs. By mechanization, they destroyed one of King's favorite civil-rights unions, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA).  

Eroding union jobs and union power, corporations and the right wing could also more easily divide people desperate for jobs, decent housing, health care and schools, playing one group off against another in elections, in communities, and on the job. Unlike some of us in the New Left, King did not think we were headed for a revolution. Rather, he warned that a militaristic cabal of business and military interests in the Republican Party would increasingly launch wars abroad while smashing unions, civil rights and civil liberties at home. Right wing politicians like Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Wallace, he said, would repeal the gains of labor and civil rights movements if they could, using racism to polarize working-class voters and weaken the New Deal alliance in the Democratic Party.  

In speeches to unions, King laid this warning out repeatedly. He told the Teamster's Union convention in New York in 1967 that the movement for social justice had in fact come to a cross roads, in which it had to move forward or fall back. The right-wing coalition would like "to compress our abundance into the overfed mouths of the middle and upper classes until they gag with superfluity," he said, predicting the stock market mania enabled by Reagan, Clinton, and the two Texas Bushes.  

To avert the coalition of greed that has now come to power, King throughout the 1960s called for a majority coalition of workers, the poor, the middle class, people of color, religious leaders and intellectuals, in a "planetary movement" for economic justice. This was a renewal of what A. Phillip Randolph, Bayard Rustin and King himself had previously called "the Negro-Labor Alliance." But things in 1968 mostly moved in the opposite direction. The Black Power slogan eclipsed the idea of multi-racial coalitions; the New Left had no strategic vision for building a broad mass movement; the AFL-CIO had fallen lock step into support of America's anti-communist terrorism abroad, and liberal Democrats were not much better. Civil rights groups like the NAACP and the Urban League practically disowned King for challenging American imperialism in Vietnam. It was not a time of unity on the left.  

The disarray of King's own Poor People's Campaign highlighted the difficulty. No one knew how to create a mass movement of the poor. King's organization did not have the means or even the ethos to do it. King had few unions involved. He lacked the day-to-day forms of grass roots organization that he called for in his last book, Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community. He made links with poor women in the Welfare Rights Organization only late in the game. He barely addressed the special oppressions
afflicting women of color. Ella Baker and SNCC organizers had criticized King all along for leading a preacher-based group instead of a membership-based, activist mass movement, for mobilizing but not organizing, for inspiring masses but not building mass movements. Younger people criticized non-violence as not militant or effective enough to challenge the federal government.\textsuperscript{10}

As King came under attack from within the movement for not being Left enough, the FBI and the paramilitary right stepped up their attacks on King as a Communist. FBI documents reveal an escalation of death threats against him, and the FBI’s own COINTELPRO operation against him. One month before King’s death, J. Edgar Hoover called on agents to “prevent the rise of a ‘messiah’ who could unify, and electrify, the militant Black Nationalist movement.” Interestingly, Hoover thought, “King could become a very real contender for this position,” although many in the movement continued to see him as a “moderate militant.”\textsuperscript{11}

The Memphis Struggle

King thus came to Memphis in a desperate time. He saw death coming and felt deeply depressed about his country and the movement. Memphis became the most dangerous and difficult place on what he often referred to as his Jericho Road, as he tried to help those less fortunate than himself. Memphis stood at the same crossroads as the one King had described for the black poor. Mechanization of cotton destroyed the employment base for black workers, who flooded out of the Mississippi Delta into Memphis, barely surviving on welfare or the worst jobs at the lowest pay in service and unskilled employment.

These proletarianized workers, black women especially, spurred the unrest that led to the Memphis movement. But mechanization and computerization also gutted urban blue-collar and laboring jobs, wrecking unions and communities. Jeff Cowie documents how unionized companies like RCA television evacuated for cheaper labor markets. Many companies came to Memphis in the first place to take advantage of a racially divided, non-union, low-wage labor market, enforced by the Taft-Hartley Act and Jim Crow. As soon as companies found an even cheaper market, they left.\textsuperscript{12}

Economic conditions in Memphis worsened as the war in Vietnam diverted government resources and as blacks died disproportionately on the front lines. Those with better education still found no prospects for a decent job. The black poor in Memphis had their own mini-riot in the summer of 1967; and, as whites moved and shifted the tax base to the suburbs, the city went into a fiscal crisis. The first phase of the freedom movement in Memphis had knocked down Jim Crow in public accommodations, but nearly sixty percent of the black community lived below poverty, suffering some of the nation’s worst education, housing, and police brutality. And, after one of the country’s worst political dictatorships under segregationist Boss E.H. Crump, blacks still suffered from the repressive plantation mentality of the oligarchy running city and county government.
Memphis also had another tradition, however. Black labor organizers like Leroy and Alzada Clark in Local 282 of the United Furniture Workers, Earl Fisher and Leroy Boyd of Local 19 Distributive Workers, George Holloway of UAW and Clarence Coe and Edward Lindsey at Memphis Firestone, had created an organizing tradition. Higher wages in a few industries produced more black college students and a new cadre of more educated ministers and professional people. CIO black workers joined with black business people, lawyers, students and civil rights activists to create one of the largest NAACP chapters in the South.\(^{13}\)

The NAACP in Memphis used street demonstrations as well as court cases, and demanded equal employment as well as political power and civil rights. Laurie Green tells us how African-American students at LeMoyne and Owen Colleges in 1962 led a powerful sit-in movement overturning segregated facilities far sooner in Memphis than in Birmingham and elsewhere. A black community in tune with its traditions also created a vibrant musical urban crossroads, black radio stations, STAX records, and newspapers.\(^{14}\) Crump had controlled it, but blacks in Memphis had never lost the right to vote. In the 1950s they combined with CIO voters to elect a relatively moderate mayor. They also helped to elect U.S. Senators Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore, Sr., and Congressman George Grider, who, unlike some Democrats today, actually supported both civil rights and the right of workers to join unions.\(^{15}\)

Some said the black community got lulled to sleep by success. In 1967, voters approved a new Mayor-council government, and district voting instead of at-large elections. Blacks elected three African Americans to the city council - the first black representation in city government since Reconstruction. But the shift to the right had also begun. An unrepentant segregationist businessman named Henry Loeb became mayor in 1960, followed by the lily-white campaign of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the election of free market, anti-communist, war-enthusiast Congressman Dan Kuykendal in 1966. White working-class voters, who had been aligned with blacks in electing moderate and even liberal whites, increasingly fell for the racial politics of Republican right-wing delusion. When Black candidates ran, they could not get more than one percent of whites to vote for them. Like Governor Orval Faubus in Arkansas, Loeb used segregationist appeals to further his political career.\(^{16}\)

In 1968, whites once again elected Loeb mayor, after he had polarized the city with his slogan, "make Memphis proud again," which many took to mean a return to segregation. Lily-white Republicans, George Wallace followers, the John Birch Society, and the American Legion all supported Loeb's resistance to integration and unions and his calls for combative anti-communist militarism abroad. Under Loeb, Memphis fit the "decaying river town" image conjured up by Time magazine after King's death.

Politically, it had become a bastion of white supremacy and militaristic, right wing anti-communism, even as black voters became increasingly able to elect blacks to office. The prelude to the strike of 1968 was that white voters had mobilized behind Loeb, who felt bound to this constituency, and they continued to support him to the bitter end when he refused on principle to recognize public employee unions. Like George Bush in
our own time, Loeb put his ideological principles ahead of the real needs and burning interests of his people. His moral absolutism led to disaster.

**Memphis Workers**

This right-wing ascendancy and the history of plantation ways in Memphis combined to create the crisis that Martin Luther King entered in 1968. Briefly, what can we say about the special movement that he joined in Memphis? The most important thing to understand is that black workers themselves were at the heart of it. Even Reverend Ralph Jackson, a key supporter of the strike, said that the black middle class and political leadership had almost forgotten the black poor. By 1968, however, they also became totally disgusted with the limited results of the civil rights struggle. Nearly the entire black community had voted against Loeb - only to see him take power and to cut city budgets for workers and the poor. Politics had failed.

Neither the civil rights movement nor the unions knew quite where to turn. The sanitation workers, rather than black preachers or civil rights leaders, or union leaders, first challenged Loeb. As Brother Taylor Rogers told me, "This was a strike that we called. Labor didn't call it, we called it." The workers themselves, led by T.O. Jones, had struggled since 1959 to get union rights. In 1968, almost every one of the 1,300 workers walked out after two workers needlessly died due to unsafe conditions and the accumulation of numerous painful racial grievances. 17

For the next sixty-three days, workers marched, often twice a day, held daily rallies at the United Rubber Workers union hall, and joined mass meetings three to four nights a week in black churches. They withstood two violent police attacks with clubs and mace, as their wives and families backed them up and as neighbors, friends and churches, and their AFSCME international union, paid their bills.

The workers not only challenged Mayor Loeb's racism and refusal to recognize their union. They also defined the nature of the strike with picket signs that said "I Am a Man." This was not a call for shoring up patriarchy. Blues musicians like Muddy Waters had sung, "I'm a man" as a boast of sexual prowess, but the workers defined manhood as a form of economic citizenship. Manhood meant union rights, and it meant not being treated and spoken to by white supervisors and political leaders, as so many black men had been, as a "boy."18 "I Am A Man!" rejected both racism and paternalistic labor relations. The mayor said workers should come to him on an individual basis, hat in hand, but black workers told Loeb this was not his choice to make. Racism, Rev. James Lawson said, meant, "a man is not a man, a person is not a person" if they were black and poor. Workers set out to change that equation.19

By joining a union, black workers opted for self-determination. The last thing Loeb and the powers that be expected was a mass revolt by this mostly-older group of workers. Many of them hailed from the plantation districts, nearly illiterate, and so poor that their families drew welfare even as they worked. Their steadfastness inspired the community. Many who came into contact with a mass meeting of the sanitation workers testified that
nothing was ever the same for them again, as the "Spirit of Memphis" spread. The workers touched off a black community rebellion against the plantation mentality and all that went with it.

After the police maced and beat ministers and workers following a sit-in at the city council on February 23, an all-class mass movement appeared that was unlike anything seen since the Montgomery bus boycott. Huge mass meetings, singing, picketing and boycotting downtown stores, and a boycott of the city's two racist newspapers brought all of the old civil rights and labor movement weapons of non-violent resistance into play. Every element of white supremacy now came up for challenge.20

The "Spirit of Memphis" renewed King's faith in the possibility of rebuilding the movement. It combined the fervour and inspiration of the church with the non-violent discipline of a grass-roots union movement. It illustrated the plight of the working poor and built a community and union-based movement far more powerful than the Poor People's Campaign, and unlike any other seen during the civil rights era. But the workers also desperately needed the civil rights movement. They also needed King, who did not come to exploit the movement, as the city newspapers said, but because he was called. Bayard Rustin and Roy Wilkins also came to Memphis, but it took King to elevate the strike within the long arc of the black freedom struggle.

When King spoke at Mason Temple on March 18, ten to fifteen thousand heard him challenge the middle class to join the struggles of the working class and the poor. His oratorical and analytical gifts elevated the struggle to a higher, more prophetic level. "It is murder, psychologically," King said, to deprive people of jobs and income, yet "millions of people are being strangled in that way. The problem is international in scope. And it is getting worse." If the nation did not change its values and its structures of power, he said, or "we're going to find ourselves sinking into darker nights of social disruption," while depriving millions "of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." King told his audience that "You are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages."21

Just as he had in Montgomery, King grounded the Memphis movement in ideals of compassion, love and justice, but he now spoke as not only a minister or a civil rights leader, but in a sense as a labor leader. This was not new terrain for King. He long had relations with leftist, activist, anti-racist and anti-war unions, with Highlander Folk School, labor leftists like Carl Braden, Anne Braden, and leftist intellectuals in New York. Now King saw before him in Memphis a grass-roots labor movement that could potentially alter the landscape of the freedom struggle. He took the chance to move things dramatically forward by calling for a general strike of black workers and students in Memphis. Such a bold proposal had never been tried in the civil rights struggle, nor had the U.S. labor movement done it since a brief general strike in Oakland, California, at the end of World War II, and more protracted battles in Seattle in 1919 and San Francisco in 1934.
Loeb and his supporters claimed they had the strike licked, but after King's appearance both labor unions and the black community unified and mobilized as never before. Conservative white unionists opposed the strike, but the Memphis AFL-CIO strongly supported it, and after King's speech the national AFL-CIO, the UAW and other unions gave surprisingly strong financial and moral support.

King's general strike turned into reality when a sudden massive snowstorm shut the city down completely. Rev. Billy Kyles called it divine intervention: what strike could be more effective than that? But the intervention did not turn out to be providential. When King returned on March 28, the mass march he led disintegrated into window breaking and looting by youths and street people. A vicious police riot injured many people and police shot down sixteen-year old Larry Payne, a march participant, at a nearby housing project. The mayor and governor called in the National Guard and the city became a garrison state.22

The determination of the workers and the civil rights leadership fused and became crucial at this point. The brilliant photography of Ernest Withers captures workers continuing to march in defiance of tanks and troopers with drawn bayonets patrolling the streets. If you look at the faces of these hard-working poor people, you see not fear, but determination. Their slogan "I Am a Man" meant they refused to turn back.23

At this moment of crisis, however, a split emerged between youthful Black Power advocates and older civil rights ministers. It was not the finest hour for the street group the Invaders, who had called for provocative militancy but then absented themselves from the march and afterwards used the crisis to demand funds from SCLC. They offered to join the movement in a real way, as marshals and organizers, only after King’s patient counsel. Rev. Henry Starks, who walked with the workers from the strike’s inception, described them as “sideliners” in the movement.24

The far worse problem, however, was that the Memphis police riot imperilled both the strike and the Poor People’s Campaign. When Rev. James Lawson had first beseeched King to come to Memphis, King's advisors had also beseeched him not to go. They knew Memphis would not produce easy victory, but, more like Albany or Chicago, could draw him into one of the most difficult and dangerous spots on the American map. The police riot forced King to return under militarized circumstances, at a time when he had alarming premonitions of death.25

FBI-promoted news stories that King stayed at fancy hotels forced him to go to the black-owned Lorraine Motel, where he usually stayed but where security was non-existent. This drew King into the cross hairs of an assassin's gun, producing the outcome that everyone had feared. After King's death, 8,000 Memphians, most of them white, gathered in prayer, and another 20,000 people on April 8 came from all around the country to hold a silent mass protest that resembled the high point of civil rights unity in the Selma to Montgomery march of 1965. The hardheaded Mayor Loeb never recognized the union, but he finally allowed the city council to do it. Victory finally came for the sanitation workers, but it took a national tragedy to make it happen.26
King's Unfinished Agenda

Was the outcome a victory or a defeat? It was both. The disaster in Memphis looked like the death of non-violence as massive riots erupted everywhere. Robert Kennedy's assassination followed King's. The Poor People's Campaign left Washington, D.C., as a defeated army. The split in the left and between the mass movement and people at the top of the unions like George Meany, widened irretrievably. Richard Nixon's election and hardhat construction worker riots against anti-war protestors in New York signalled the failure of the labor/civil rights alliance. American politics careened onto the right-wing trajectory that we know so well today.

At the same time, AFSCME's success also created the largest and strongest union in Memphis, as it organized police, firemen, and others. AFSCME and the NAACP together went on to open up elected offices and jobs to African Americans throughout Memphis. As Taylor Rogers tells us, King did not die in vain. "What a lot of people in Memphis don't realize, white folks and people with good jobs, is that black folks wouldn't be in the position they're in now if it had not been for King comin' here and dyin.' All the banks have got colored tellers, and school principals. Before that, we didn't have that. [Today] city hall is full of blacks, even to the mayor." 27

The Memphis strike also became a turning point in labor history. Jerry Wurf and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers union recognized that public employee unionism in the United States was at a cross roads in Memphis. As AFSCME organizer Jesse Epps put it, "Memphis was either the dam or the gate" for public worker organizing. Defeat would have stalled it, but success opened the way for a huge growth of public employee unions. 28 Ever since 1968, union growth has rested largely on the backs of public workers, most of them people of color and women. George Bush still is trying desperately to hold back public employee unionism today, as he takes 170,000 Homeland Security workers out of collective bargaining and seeks to privatize the jobs of 850,000 federal employees.

The Memphis struggle crystallized a new identification between labor, ethnic, and poor people's struggles that could not be easily turned back. After 1968, labor and civil rights could no longer be seen as two separate concerns. Black workers, at Charleston, South Carolina, in hospitals in 1969 and on the docks in 2001, at the Memphis Furniture Company in 1980, and in the mines in Pittston, West Virginia in the late 1980s, drew strongly on the tradition of civil rights unionism. Black and white miners in Pittston carried signs that read "labor rights are civil rights." Workers continue to invoke the memory of 1968 to the present day. 29

However, we need not only to remember 1968, but how it connected to a far deeper history in which the freedom struggle had always been as much about economic justice as civil rights. Some of the CIO industrial unions had established the ground floor for it when black and white workers together had braved vigilantes and police repression to build strong unions like the United Rubber Workers that provided a meeting place and
support for the sanitation strike. The link between labor and freedom struggles goes even further back to slavery, as W.E.B. DuBois explained long ago in *Black Reconstruction* (1935). And it continued during the 1960s freedom struggles at the grassroots everywhere in the South and North, in movements that usually consisted primarily of poor people and workers.

The power of what happened in Memphis, however, remains partly a matter of historical consciousness, and that is contingent upon how we choose or if we choose to remember it. Membership in the sanitation union had dropped from 1,300 to about 500 today, as the result of mechanization. But in a much broader sense, the legacy left by King, the workers, and the Memphis strike still applies to the universe we now inhabit. As student and labor action groups take up April 4 as a day of action for worker rights and civil rights, focussing on the working poor, who are primarily immigrants, women, and people of color, they draw on the connections made during the Memphis movement in a real way.\(^{30}\)

Rev. James Lawson, the ministerial leader of the Memphis sanitation strike, now fights to organize Latino immigrants and black janitors, day laborers and house cleaners in Los Angeles, while the civil rights and labor group Black Workers For Justice uses April 4 to celebrate the fusion of labor and civil rights struggles. Memphis, in other words, brings up a memory that reminds us the need for human solidarity.\(^{31}\)

On April 3, in his "Mountaintop" speech, King asked the middle class to join hands with the working poor, saying, "Either we go up together or we go down together." That moment and that message should still deeply inform our understanding of King’s legacy to movements for social justice. For remembering what happened in Memphis takes us not back to glory days of the civil rights movement, but to a time of crisis much like our own today, and to King’s still unfinished agenda for economic and social justice.\(^{32}\)

Tourists today enjoy nice, new hotel and convention facilities as well as an upscale, renovated Beale Street in downtown Memphis, but are still surrounded by legions of the urban poor. While Memphis today has black elected officials, it has not gone to that next phase of economic equality that King demanded. Most black students still go to segregated schools, and most whites have fled to the suburbs to the east. Many African Americans have moved into the middle class, but unrelenting poverty remains for many others. Most working-class and many middle-class people live only a paycheck away from losing everything. Meantime, the tax base, the jobs, the educational infrastructure, the budget of the whole state government of Tennessee, is in a massive crisis. The federal government demands that students meet Sheriff Bush’s "no child left behind" scholastic tests, but it has all but withdrawn from funding the needs of middle-class, working-class and poor people.

In our neo-conservative environment, even some black leaders have forgotten basic principles. At LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, where we began a commemorative march honouring King on April 3, the college president refuses to recognize the teacher’s union, despite the fact that faculty have voted overwhelmingly for collective bargaining
rights within the American Association of University Professors, and despite the fact that the National Labor Relations Board has upheld those bargaining rights. As Taylor Rogers told me, "you keep your back bent over, somebody's gonna ride it." For him, the solution was that "we wanted a union, we wanted somebody to represent us." The same is just as true for college teachers and many other working people in Memphis today.  

King would say that too many have turned their backs on the working class and poor. Will we use money to build bombs or jobs? Create tax cuts or health care? Will we put more priority on human needs or profits? These questions remain as sharp today as in 1968. We are still in a time when "silence is betrayal." We are still in a time "when a man is not a man, a person is not a person" if you are poor. Social justice movements are still at a crossroads. King would still feel compelled to denounce the giant triplets of militarism, racism, and materialism. He would have to fight our President's demand for war, war, and yet more war, to resist budget-busting military spending and tax cuts for the rich, and to fight give-aways to corporations exploiting the environment, destroying unions, and stranding workers.

King would still have to say that we cannot protect the rights of the people without expanding the rights of the poor. As William Lucy explained it, "Dr. King really highlighted the great contradiction... if you relieve the civil rights shackles or barriers, that does not necessarily guarantee that your economic situation will change. There is something wrong with the social structure. There is something wrong with the economic structure."  

In his own day, King said he would never adjust "to economic conditions that ...take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few," and he warned us to beware of leaders who "possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight." He called for a "radical revolution of values" to create "a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concerns beyond one's tribe, race, class, and nation" that would finally get us to the Promised Land.

More than thirty-five years since King's death, we need to remember not only where King died, but also why. And we need to remember the power of the working poor. Without historical memory, we might not understand the power of poor and working people organizing themselves, or the importance of others supporting them. "I Am a Man," sanitation worker James Robinson said, meant we "weren't gonna take that shit no more." When a new movement of the poor arises, will the rest of us be there to recognize and support it?  

Notes


4. “Address of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., on March 18, 1968, at Mason Temple Mass Meeting in Memphis,” in the Mississippi Valley Collection Sanitation Strike Papers, University of Memphis Library.

5. “Economic equality” quote is in King’s March 18 speech; and see Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 192-194.

6. King’s alliances with the UPWA and its decline are reflected in the UPWA Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society; and see his “Address Before the United Packinghouse Workers of America,” May 21, 1962, in King Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Non-violent Social Change, Atlanta.

7. See King’s posthumous article “Showdown for Non-violence,” Look April 16, 1968, 23-25.


9. Where Do We Go From Here, 177, and see treatments by David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), and Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).


11. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall reprint the FBI March 4, 1968 memo from The COINTELPRO Papers, Documents from the FBI’s Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent. (Boston: South End Press, 1990), quote on 110. See also David J. Garrow, The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From “Solo” to Memphis (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981).


13. Honey, Black Workers Remember, passim.
14. See the dissertation by Laurie Beth Green, "Battling the Plantation Mentality: Consciousness, Culture and the Politics of Race, Class and Gender in Memphis, 1940-1968," Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1999. The Memphis movement is well documented in the pages of the Tri-State Defender, on microfilm, at the University of Memphis library.


17. Quoted in Honey, Black Workers Remember, 298.


20. For a fine and pioneering blow by blow account of the strike, see Joan Turner Beifuss, At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King (Memphis: B and W Books, 1977).


22. Samuel Kyles interview for "At the River I Stand" film, transcript of reel 45 on loan from Steve Ross.


27. Rogers quoted in Honey, Black Workers Remember, 301.

28. Jesse Epps interview, Memphis Sanitation Strike Collection, July 31, 1968, 35, and see Shaffer, “Where are the Organized Public Employees?”

29. For an account of the Charleston strike, see Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: a history of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); on the Pittston strike, see James R. Green, Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); on the Memphis Furniture strike, see Honey, Black Workers Remember, 343-347, 366-367.


33. Rogers quoted in Honey, Black Workers Remember, 296.

34. Lucy quoted in Honey, Black Workers Remember, 318.


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