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Strike that changed the nation

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On Feb. 1, 1968, Echol Cole, 36, and Robert Walker, 30, rode out a driving Memphis rainstorm by climbing inside one of the sanitation division's old "wiener barrel" trucks. The walls inside the packer were caked with putrefying garbage of all sorts - yard waste, dead chickens, moldy food. Any port in a storm, they say.

At the end of a miserable, cold workday, Cole's and Walker's soiled, worn-out clothes smelled of garbage. The city did not provide them gloves, uniforms or a place to shower. They did hard, heavy work, lifting garbage tubs and carrying them on their shoulders or heads, or dumping the contents of pushcarts into outmoded trucks. On this particular day, Cole and Walker rode in a precarious, stinking perch between a hydraulic ram used to mash garbage into a small wad and the wall of the truck's cavernous container.

As crew chief Willie Crain drove the loaded garbage packer along Colonial Street to the Shelby Drive dump, he heard the hydraulic ram go into action, perhaps set off by a shovel that had jarred loose and crossed some electrical wires. He pulled the truck over to the curb at 4:20 p.m., but the ram already was jamming Cole and Walker back into the compactor.

One of the men lurched forward and nearly escaped, but the ram snagged his raincoat and dragged him back. "He was standing there on the end of the truck, and suddenly it looked like the big thing just swallowed him," said a horrified woman.

T. O. Jones, a union organizer, knew both of the men. He called their deaths "a disgrace and a sin." Two men had already been killed due to a faulty garbage packer that rolled a truck over in 1964. And Jones had already taken a grievance to the commissioner of the city Department of Public Works (DPW), asking that this particular truck no longer be used. Instead of junking the old garbage packer, the sanitation division of DPW had tried to extend its life by putting in a second motor to run the compactor after the first one wore out. Workers jump-started it in the morning and let the motor run all day long, pouring in fuel periodically. It was an accident just waiting to happen.

The two dead men were black. Jones was black. Almost everyone working in sanitation was black, except the bosses. Hauling garbage was the kind of work the city assigned to blacks only.

The city provided a voluntary, self-financed life insurance policy covering death benefits up to $2,000, but Walker and Cole could not afford it. Because the city listed

them as unclassified, hourly employees (they could be fired on a moment's notice), the state's workmen's compensation didn't cover them. The deaths left the wives and children of the two men destitute. A funeral home held their bodies until the families found a way to pay for their caskets. The city gave their families one month's salary and $500 for each man, but burial expenses of $900 for each worker used that up.

These avoidable deaths rubbed raw some long-existing frustrations. Workers had sparred with the administration of the Department of Public Works about many issues, including the use of faulty equipment. The city had no facilities for black workers to wash up, to change clothes, or to get out of the rain.

Strike over pay inequity brings King to Memphis

African-Americans constituted nearly 40 percent of a Memphis population of 500,000 in the mid-1960s, and 58 percent of the city's black families lived in poverty - 10 percent above the national average and almost four times the rate of poverty among Memphis' white families. Many black families shattered under the pressure; the unemployed and people with marginal jobs suffered disproportionately from diabetes, sickle-cell anemia, high blood pressure and cancer. More than 80 percent of employed black men worked as laborers, while most black women with paid jobs worked in the homes of whites or in the service economy.

Industrial unions had organized some of the manufacturing industries, but most had not reached out to workers in what economists called the secondary labor market. White employers and craft union members alike for many years had barred African-Americans from entry into skilled jobs. The ready prospect of getting fired forced many black workers to take what the white man dished out. Segregation denied them adequate education, training and promotion ladders to better jobs. They routinely endured police brutality and unjust incarceration.

Many sanitation workers made so little that they qualified for welfare even after working a 40-hour week. And they couldn't even count on those hours - white supervisors sent them home without pay or fired them on the slightest pretext. Like many other whites in Memphis, many of these supervisors thought of blacks as their personal servants. They called people like Ed Gillis - 72 years old in 1968 - "boy."

By 1968, Gillis had been crushing rock with a hammer and putting down asphalt for the City of Memphis for 20 years. He had not once been late to work, yet his effort and punctuality counted for nothing with his white bosses.

A few days after the incident in which Cole and Walker died, Ed Gillis and other workers on the streets and gutter crews got shortchanged on their pay. A new city government headed by Mayor Henry Loeb had renewed old policies from his days as Public Works commissioner in the 1950s: When it rained, the sanitation division dismissed black workers for the day, with only two hours' pay. White supervisors got paid rain or shine. In a city where 60 inches of rain fell every year, this policy meant many lost days of work that shrank the already-meager wages of black workers.

On Feb. 12 - Abraham Lincoln's birthday- Gillis and others on the sewer and drainage crew had had enough. They and nearly 1,300 other black men in the Memphis

Department of Public Works, giving no notice to anyone, went on strike. Little did they imagine that their decision would challenge generations of white supremacy in Memphis and have staggering consequences for the nation. Six weeks later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to Memphis, prepared to defy an injunction and lead a community-wide mass march on behalf of the strikers.

Sanitation workers recall King's legacy: 'I Am a Man.'

What the nation mostly remembers about Memphis is King's death there on April 4, 1968. But Memphis sanitation workers remember what King accomplished by his sacrifice on their behalf. Striker Willie Sain, who later became a minister, remembered King almost as an emissary from God, a Moses figure who enabled the workers and their allies to win. King broke the media blackout of the strike, energized the community, and came into a new role as a labor leader that he played to perfection.

Taylor Rogers, president of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733 for nearly 20 years after the workers won their strike, said King had merely followed the model of the Good Samaritan, just as he had urged others to do. "Even if it had been poor white workers, King would have done the same thing. That's just the kind of person he was. . . . He didn't get all accomplished he wanted accomplished, but I don't think he died in vain. Because what he came here to do, that was settled."

Memphis was one step on King's dangerous Jericho Road, in which he, like the Good Samaritan in the Old Testament, stopped to help someone in need. Following the parable of the Good Samaritan, King said everyone could be great, because everyone could save and serve humanity. He lived and died by that creed.

As the result of their own actions in going on strike, and as the result of support by King and almost the entire black community, blacks in Memphis changed themselves and their relationship to whites. It was part of a national transformation, in which the civil rights and the labor movements joined in 1968. The old ways of white supremacy and black subservience would never be the same, in Memphis or anywhere else.

Five years after King's death, an African-American TV news reporter named Ed Harris, whom police had sprayed with mace in 1968, asked an unidentified sanitation worker for his reflections on what had happened. "I don't think we can show enough appreciation for what Dr. King give." He believed the strike would have been lost without Dr. King.

Before, that man had worked six days a week; now he worked five. Before, he had worked as long as it took to bring in the garbage, with no extra pay; now he worked 8-hour shifts. Before, he had no breaks; now he had at least two 15-minute breaks and time for lunch. Before, white supervisors would fire black men on a whim; now they "can't 'buse you 'round anymore." With a union, his wages and benefits had steadily improved, even as the city mechanized away many sanitation jobs.

"See, when he was here in the strike, every man wanted to stand up and be a man. And that was the whole story. We wasn't counted as men before then. Every man be counted as a man now. It's no more 'boy.' . . . It's no more of that Uncle Tom now. . . .

You be treated like a man."

This was the message of the 1968 strike: dignity and respect for the individual, and the demand for a living wage and the right to belong to a union. For nearly 40 years after King's death, sanitation workers have kept their own memory of King and the Movement alive, bringing out the old picket signs reading, "Honor King: End Racism," and "I Am A Man."

'A moment in history that changed everything'

What happened in Memphis in 1968 is now a matter of historical memory for the whole nation. The AFSCME union and community advocates saved the Lorraine Motel from destruction and turned it into the National Civil Rights Museum, where tourists and students alike can learn from the history of the freedom movement.

Things have changed a great deal in America since 1968, and not all for the better. Millions of unionized industrial jobs have been lost as U.S. corporations shifted production to cheaper labor overseas. The old Firestone factory in Memphis looms as a hulking ghost of its former self in North Memphis. The high wages and good pensions its workers made have been lost.

Mechanization has also cut the number of sanitation jobs in half in Memphis, and cuts in public funding continually endanger city services and family-waged jobs in the public sector.

But those involved in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike remember it as a moment in history that changed everything, because it opened people's eyes to the injustices of poverty and racism. The strike and the events around it gave them hope for a different world. King had told his staff when he launched the Poor People's Campaign in January of 1968 that keeping hope alive is the reason people must continue to fight for a better world. Said King, "If I didn't have hope, I couldn't go on."

Despite the unmitigated tragedy of King's death in Memphis, we should remember the history of the Memphis movement as we do the Montgomery movement of 1955, in which King first came to the attention of the world. Both places have been important stops on a long road to freedom that people have traveled for generations, and still do.

For workers who lived through this epic event called the Memphis sanitation strike, the time for remembering is drawing short. For workers and the poor today, there is another battle ahead, for decent jobs, housing, health care, education, and an end to racism and war.

We all have much to do to make a better world. As we do so, we should stop to remember King and the black workers of Memphis who stood up for justice, dignity and self respect. It is a history that should never be forgotten.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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