

The Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968—Part 2



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On Feb. 1, 1968, two Memphis garbage collectors were crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. Eleven days later, frustrated by the city's response to the latest event in a long pattern of neglect and abuse of its black employees, 1,375 sanitation workers went on strike, refusing to report to work until they received higher wages, safer working conditions and recognition of their union. (See the November *Postal Record* for Part 1.)

The strike might have ended on Feb. 22, when the city council, pressured by the accumulating garbage and a city hall sit-in by sanitation workers and their supporters, voted to recognize the union and recommended a wage increase. However, Mayor Henry Loeb rejected the vote, insisting that only he had the authority to recognize the union and refused to do so.

The following day, police used mace and tear gas against nonviolent demonstrators marching to city hall, and Memphis's black community was galvanized. By the beginning of March, local high school and college students, nearly a quarter of them white, were participating alongside garbage workers in daily marches; more than 100 people, including several ministers, had been arrested.

'If one black person is down, we are all down'

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived on March 18 to address a crowd of about 25,000—the largest indoor gathering the civil rights movement had ever seen. Speaking to a group of labor and civil rights activists and members of the powerful black church, King praised their unity, saying, "You are demonstrating that we can stick together. You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and that if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down." King encouraged the group to support the sanitation strike with a citywide work stoppage, and he pledged to return for a march the following week.

King returned on March 28 and found a massive crowd on the brink of chaos. Memphis city officials estimated that 22,000 students had skipped school that day to participate in the demonstration. King led the march but quickly called it off as violence erupted. Police followed demonstrators back to the Clayborn Temple, released tear gas inside the sanctuary, and clubbed people as they lay on the floor to get fresh air. Mayor Loeb called for martial law and brought in 4,000 National Guard troops.

King went home to Atlanta and considered not returning to Memphis, but decided that if the nonviolent struggle

for economic justice was going to succeed, it would be necessary to follow through with the movement there. He arrived on April 3 and was persuaded to speak by a crowd of sanitation workers who had braved a storm to hear him. A weary King preached about his own mortality, telling the group, "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop...and I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man."

The following evening, as King was getting ready to leave for dinner, he was shot and killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel by a man who was No. 277 on the FBI's Most Wanted Fugitives list. In 1967, that man, James Earl Ray, had escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary, where he was serving time for theft, by hiding in a truck transporting bread from the prison bakery. On the day of the assassination, Ray took a room in a boarding house that had a view to the Lorraine Motel, where King frequently stayed in Memphis. Ray stood in the bathtub, balanced his rifle on a window ledge, and shot King in the right cheek.

King's death sparked riots across the country and increased tensions in Memphis. A few days after the assassination, on April 8, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and other civil rights leaders led an estimated 42,000 mourners through the streets of Memphis in honor of King, demanding that the city's mayor give in to the sanitation workers' requests. After being pressured by President Lyndon Johnson and Tennessee Gov. Buford Ellington, the city finally agreed to a deal that would recognize the union and guarantee a better wage. While the deal brought the strike to an end, the union had to threaten another strike several months later to get the city to keep its end of the agreement.

Union helps turn motel into civil rights museum

Memphis had a long decline after King's assassination. The Lorraine Motel declined as well. In 1982, the owner—who it is said never again rented out King's room, No. 306—declared bankruptcy. A "Save the Lorraine" group, financed by the union and the state, bought the motel at the last minute, hoping to turn it into a museum. The plan took nearly 10 years, but the National Civil Rights Museum opened to the public on Sept. 28, 1991.

The front of the museum is the motel, with an original illuminated sign and vintage cars parked outside. Across the street, two other old buildings have become part of the museum, including the rooming house where James Earl Ray stayed. Behind the motel's facade, the building was greatly expanded and completely transformed, with a theater, bookstore and a sequence of exhibits that take the visitor from slavery to a perfectly preserved Room 306.