

NALC participates in ‘I AM 2018’ events in Memphis



Chief of Staff Jim Sauber

April 4 marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, TN. It was one of the most tragic days in American history, ending the life of America’s greatest civil rights hero. But it also ended Dr. King’s career as a champion for America’s workers. That’s because Dr. King’s appearance in Memphis in 1968 was undertaken to advance the cause of Memphis sanitation workers who went on strike for dignity and equality in the workplace. He gave his life for the ultimately successful campaign to win union recognition and collective bargaining rights for more than 1,000 African American workers who courageously announced to the world, “I Am a Man,” when they went on strike to protest low pay, discrimination and unsafe working conditions.

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To commemorate this sad day in history and to renew our commitment to the struggle for workers’ rights and civil rights, the American labor movement, led by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), joined with allies in the civil rights community to organize a series of I AM 2018 events, including a conference, a memorial service and a march in Memphis. NALC Branch 27 members were there to take part in all of it.

One of the highlights of the events was a panel discussion by veterans of the 1968 sanitation workers strike from AFSCME Local 1733. The men, now mostly in their 80s, described the life-altering impact of their strike and celebrated the power of solidarity. Their personal stories resonate with letter carriers—also beneficiaries of courageous strikers from decades ago.

The Mountaintop Conference, named in honor of Dr. King’s final public speech the night before he died, provided training to young activists and highlighted the continued need to organize unions to achieve equality and social justice in America. At the conclusion of his April 3, 1968, speech rallying the striking workers and their community of supporters at the Mason Temple in

Memphis, Dr. King said: “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. 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!”

At the pre-march rally on April 4, thousands of labor and community activists from all over the country and from dozens of unions heard from labor leaders, religious leaders, progressive politicians, civil rights activists and ordinary workers. The message was powerfully simple: To honor the values of Dr. King and to get closer to that hoped-for “promised land,” we must rebuild the labor movement and work toward a moral revival in America to support economic, social and racial justice.



Top: Dr. King, second from right, in 1968 at the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike. Above: Memphis branch members at the “I AM 2018” rally and march last month. Pictured (from left) are Torey Roberts, Portia Hagler, Clifford Jefferson, Branch President John Walker, Dennis Diffie, LaFerre Ryan, Lawrence Sharp and Larry B. Jackson; kneeling in front is Howard Williams.