

Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968—Part 1



Director of Education
Jamie Lumm

The rain was torrential on Feb. 1, 1968, flooding streets and overflowing sewers. To escape the downpour for a few moments, Robert Walker and Echol Cole, two recently hired sanitation workers, sought refuge by standing in the back of their garbage truck, a common practice at the time. Suddenly, the compactor malfunctioned, the motor engaged and it began to close in on the two men. The driver frantically pounded the safety switch to stop

the compactor, to no effect. Walker and Echol tried to scramble out as soon as they heard the motor turn on but were hampered by their heavy wet clothing and were unable to break free as the compactor pulled them back in. According to witnesses, their screams could be heard along with a terrible snapping noise—the crunch of human bone and sinew—as the compactor mashed and ground them up inside. Their deaths became the spark that ignited the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968

In 1968, the city of Memphis had a population of 550,000, of which about 40 percent were African-American. At that time, nearly 60 percent of the black community were living below the poverty line, suffering disproportionately high mortality rates and deficits in basic education in a highly segregated school system. Nearly 85 percent of black men in the city worked as menial laborers and one of the most degrading forms of work was working for the city's sanitation department.

Because the city regarded them as “unclassified laborers,” they received no benefits, no pension, no overtime and no insurance and were provided neither uniforms nor raincoats. They wore threadbare hand-me-downs left on the curbs by well-meaning families and grew accustomed to homeowners who called them “boy.”

This was before the days of cinch-tied Hefty garbage bags and Ziplocs, so there was nothing to contain the drippy mess of bacon drippings, clotted milk and rotting food in the garbage cans. Sanitation workers' clothes were drenched in rain and encrusted with the fluid that had dripped from the cans all day as the malodorous ooze accumulated on them like a second skin. The city provided no showers or laundry for sanitation workers to clean themselves up at the end of the day, so when they got home, they usually had to strip down at the door.

Henry Loeb was Memphis's Public Works commissioner from 1956 to 1960 and, as such, was the head of the Memphis sanitation department. During his tenure, Loeb oversaw grueling work conditions, no restrooms, low pay and no grievance procedure for the numerous occasions on which they were underpaid. In 1959, he called for a “white unity” electoral ticket to oppose the increasingly organized black vote in Memphis and was elected the city's mayor from 1960-63. A white supremacist, Loeb supported

segregation, declaring support for “separate but equal facilities” and describing court-ordered integration as “anarchy.”

Sanitation workers had been attempting to organize since 1960; however, many were afraid to unionize for fear of retribution by Loeb and city officials. This fear proved justified in 1963, when 33 workers were fired immediately after attending an organizing meeting. Loeb did not run for re-election at the end of 1963, opting to spend time in the family business, and was succeeded by William Ingram, with the support of the black community. Sanitation workers made moderate progress during Ingram's tenure and successfully formed American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733 in November 1964. Although the city would not recognize the union, they did hold talks with the union's leaders and agreed to some improvements in working conditions. However, in 1967, their old nemesis Loeb was back, announcing his candidacy for a second mayoral term with slogans like “Restore Law and Order” and “Be Proud Again.” Sound familiar?

Receiving strong support from the white community, Loeb defeated Ingram and grew even more antagonistic to civil rights and labor in his second term, refusing to make any concessions to black union workers.

Following the deaths of Walker and Echol, hundreds of workers came to a meeting at the Memphis Labor Temple, furious with their working conditions and with a feeling that something had to be done—immediately. On Monday, Feb. 12, 1,375 workers did not show up for work. Some of those who did show up walked off when they found out about the apparent strike. Mayor Loeb, infuriated, refused to meet with the strikers.

The workers marched from their union hall to a meeting at the City Council chamber; there, they were met with 40 to 50 police officers. Loeb led the workers to a nearby auditorium, where he asked them to return to work. They laughed and booed him, then applauded union leaders who spoke. At one point, Loeb grabbed the microphone from AFSCME International organizer Bill Lucy and shouted “Go back to work!” and stormed out of the meeting soon after.

Within a few days, piles of trash were noticeable all over the city. The sanitation workers established a daily routine of meeting at noon with nearly a thousand strikers and then marching from Clayborn Temple to city hall. The marchers were met with mace, tear gas and billy clubs wielded by local police. On Feb. 24, while addressing the strikers after a “police assault” on their protests, The Rev. James Lawson said, “For at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person. You are human beings. You are men. You deserve dignity.” The reverend's message became embodied in the iconic placards worn by the Memphis strikers: “I Am A Man.”

In Part 2: The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s support for the sanitation workers ends in tragedy.