

Today's battle to preserve collective bargaining is rooted in a decades-old struggle over the same issue, which was waged by Memphis sanitation workers who wanted to form a union with AFSCME Local 1733. The men were fighting for economic justice, dignity and respect. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lost his life standing with them. This year's remembrance of Dr. King's life and work carries special significance as public service workers across the nation fight to defend basic rights against anti-worker politicians who want to take them away.

BY LISA KELLY & JON MELEGRITO

# I AM A MAN

---



Forty three years ago, on April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech—the last formal remarks he would give before being gunned down the following day.

That night, King addressed the striking sanitation workers and their supporters at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tenn. The men had walked off the job 51 days earlier over demands for higher wages, dues check-off, time-and-a-half for overtime, safety measures and recognition of their union: AFSCME Local 1733.

But the workers’ formal demands represented just part of what they wanted to accomplish. The real battle was over dignity and respect.

#### DIFFICULT, DIRTY WORK

In the 1960s, job opportunities were scarce for African-American men living in Memphis and the choice to haul the trash of others was a decision of last resort. The work was smelly, dangerous and back-breaking. Also, the wages were so low—\$1.60 an hour for those who loaded the trash, and \$1.90 an hour for

those who drove the trucks—that many relied on welfare and Food Stamps to support their families.

Despite their age and the obvious fact that they were husbands, fathers and full-time workers, the men—like many African-American males of their generation—also endured being called “boy” by whites, including their supervisors.

As former sanitation worker and striker Taylor Rogers said during a January 2008 roundtable discussion convened in Memphis to mark King’s birthday and the strike’s 40th anniversary: “We were being mistreated, underpaid and overworked.” Rogers described how the workers carried 50-gallon drums of trash on their heads as moisture leaked all over them from holes in the tubs.

During the roundtable, J.D. Trotter remembered this: “We had nowhere to hang our clothes up. They had some bolts driven on the walls and you’d hang your clothes up on the wall. We came in one evening and the cleaners had cleaned up, put our clothes in the trash can and we didn’t have clothes to put on.”

When storms drenched the city, the abhor-

**“WE WERE BEING  
MISTREATED,  
UNDERPAID AND  
OVERWORKED.”**

Taylor Rogers, former sanitation worker and striker

**Taking a Stand** | Rev. Theodore Hibbler (left) and Ted Brown were among the sanitation workers who protested the low wages and poor working conditions. They decided that “enough was enough” and went on strike Feb. 12. *Photo: Richard L. Copley*

**Heads Held High** | National Guardsmen in armored personnel carriers equipped with 50-caliber machine guns escorted Memphis sanitation workers when they resumed their strike on March 29, 1968. Recalled one striker: “We had to go through all that just to be treated half-way fair.” *Photo: Barney Sellers/Copyright, The Commercial Appeal*



**“WE ARE NOT GOING TO ALLOW A SMALL GROUP OF RADICAL POLITICIANS IN WISCONSIN OR ELSEWHERE TO FORCE THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO PROVIDE VITAL PUBLIC SERVICES TO SUFFER AND SERVE IN SILENCE. AFSCME IS IN THIS FIGHT FOR THE LONG HAUL.”**

AFSCME Pres. Gerald W. McEntee

rent working conditions became even worse. The City of Memphis Department of Waste Management sent the African-American workers home without pay. White supervisors and workers were paid their full wages, no matter the weather.

#### THE FINAL STRAW

Thursday, Feb. 1, 1968 was one of those rainy days. Sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker sought refuge by balancing on a perch between a hydraulic ram that smashed the garbage and the truck's inside wall. Somehow, as the truck bounced along, the ram was activated and the two were crushed to death.

The tragedy galvanized their co-workers. Infuriated, union organizer T.O. Jones called the tragedy a “disgrace and a sin.” That’s when the men decided to go on strike, igniting a movement that uniquely merged the labor, civil rights and religious communities.

The strike lasted two months. Along the way, workers and supporters marched daily, demanding union recognition from the mayor and city council. To protest treatment that reduced them to “things and tools rather than human beings,” the men wore signs that read: “I Am a Man,” a now famous slogan that still surfaces in civil rights campaigns.

On March 28, Dr. King led a march to city hall. A riot erupted and police attacked the demonstrators with Mace, tear gas, nightsticks and gunfire. That violence unleashed community outrage leading to a boycott of all downtown businesses. Within days, ministers, community activists and students marched alongside the striking sanitation workers. Then-AFSCME Pres. Jerry Wurf met with the mayor and assisted with negotiations that returned the strikers to work. The workers won collective bargaining rights and recognition of their union two weeks after King’s murder.

Recognition of the union became a central issue in the strike, and the sanitation workers’ success inspired thousands of other employees from Memphis schools and hospitals to demand collective bargaining. This led to the establishment of new AFSCME locals in Baltimore. And – despite right-to-work laws and anti-union sentiment – Miami sanitation workers gained one of the best union contracts in the nation. Community support for the Memphis strike – especially among churches, labor and civil rights organizations, were key to the workers’ win and set the foundation for successful partnerships that have helped score victories for working families for decades.

**Justice For Workers** | Dr. Martin Luther King addresses a rally of strikers and their supporters in Memphis on April 3, 1968, delivering his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. He was assassinated the next day. *Photo: Richard L. Copley*

**A Nation Awakens** | Thousands joined a peaceful memorial march through downtown Memphis in tribute to the slain Dr. King and in support of the strike. *Photo: Richard L. Copley*

**Victory For Local 1733** | Increased pressure on the city to settle the strike succeeded when the city council, by a vote of 12 to 1, adopted an agreement on April 16. Local 1733 and national AFSCME officials celebrate with their supporters after the settlement was ratified. It included a \$.15 per hour wage increase, dues check-off, a memorandum of understanding, promotion language and an end to racial discrimination. *Photo: Richard L. Copley*



## TODAY'S STRUGGLES

And the tradition continues today. Shortly after last year's midterm elections, anti-union, anti-worker legislatures and governors moved quickly to eliminate workers' rights. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R) was first, signing a bill in March that took away collective bargaining from public service workers. Having a voice at work is the heart and soul of collective bargaining. Without it, workers don't have a say on critical issues like pay and benefits or health and safety.

That the current struggle for collective bargaining began in Wisconsin is a critical element of AFSCME history. The union was born in the state 75 years ago this year. Wisconsin was also the first state to enact a collective bargaining law.

Other governors are also promoting disastrous anti-union bills. Ohio Gov. John Kasich (R) recently pushed the state Senate to pass S.B. 5, which would eliminate collective bargaining rights for 360,000 public service workers in Ohio. Protests forced the House to hold hearings on the bill. Americans know that "public service workers are the key to a society that works, a society of decency and obligation to community and hope," says Sec.-Treas. Lee Saunders.

Twenty other states, including Florida, Indiana and Michigan, are now considering collective

bargaining legislation, while 16 states – Maine, Minnesota and Washington among them – are looking at right-to-work laws, which are designed to weaken unions. Eighteen other states want to cut pension costs by increasing employee contributions, raising the retirement age or curbing cost-of-living increases.

But these temporary setbacks have only strengthened AFSCME's resolve. Like never before, we are fighting back and we are gratified by the presence of workers, students, religious leaders and community supporters who are standing with us – rallying, filling up state capitols and gathering recall petitions. In remembering the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr, AFSCME proudly reaffirms its commitment to his dream for our nation and the world. "Dr. King stood with us, fighting for better lives for the working families of Memphis," says AFSCME Pres. Gerald McEntee. "We are not going to allow a small group of radical politicians in Wisconsin or elsewhere to force the men and women who provide vital public services to suffer and serve in silence. AFSCME is in this fight for the long haul."

The battle over dignity and respect continues.

**"PUBLIC SERVICE WORKERS ARE THE KEY TO A SOCIETY THAT WORKS, A SOCIETY OF DECENCY AND OBLIGATION TO COMMUNITY AND HOPE."**

Sec.-Treas. Lee A. Saunders

**Demanding Their Due** | AFSCME members from around the country joined the protest marchers in solidarity with the sanitation workers. *Photo: Richard L. Copley*

**It's An Honor** | Tributes for some of the surviving men, who went on strike in 1968, were given at a dinner event in Memphis marking the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's historic efforts on behalf of AFSCME's sanitation workers. From left: Taylor Rogers, Joe Warren, Baxter Leach, Elmore Nickelberry and Ben Jones. *Photo: John L. Focht*

To purchase a T-shirt or poster commemorating the strike, visit [afscmestore.com](http://afscmestore.com).

