Memphis, Tennessee, sanitation workers strike, 1968

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

February 12, 1968

to: April 16, 1968

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Memphis, Tennessee

Goals:
- Recognition of sanitation workers local union,
- Dues checkoff (where employer withholds union dues from employees paycheck),
- Better safety standards,
- Decent wages.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 162. Sit-in
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 038. Marches
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 001. Public speeches
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 038. Marches
• 048. Protest meetings
• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 105. Establishment strike
• 106. Industry strike

**Methods in 4th segment:**

• 001. Public speeches
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 038. Marches
• 048. Protest meetings
• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 105. Establishment strike
• 106. Industry strike

**Methods in 5th segment:**

• 001. Public speeches
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 037. Singing
• 038. Marches
• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 105. Establishment strike
• 106. Industry strike

**Methods in 6th segment:**

• 020. Prayer and worship
• 038. Marches
• 045. Demonstrative funerals
• 071. Consumers' boycott
• 105. Establishment strike
• 106. Industry strike

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

**Classifications**

Classification: Change

Cluster: Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:
• Women
• black ministers
• high school and college students
• industrial workers
• leaders of prominent civil rights groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:  

Partners:  
Jerome “Jerry” Wurf, president of American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
Roy Wilkin and Bayard Rustin, rally organizers, National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP)
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

External allies:  
Not known

Involvement of social elites:  
After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., President Johnson and the undersecretary of labor pushed for a quick end to the strike, favoring the laborers.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• AFSCME
• NAACP

Groups in 2nd Segment:

• COME
  • Local high school and college students

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

• Martin Luther King Jr.

Groups in 5th Segment:

• SCLC

Groups in 6th Segment:

• Coretta Scott King
**Segment Length:** Approximately 11 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Henry Loeb (mayor of Memphis), and members of the Memphis City Council.

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Members of a militant youth group who were marching with the strikers broke windows, looted stores, and incited police violence.

**Repressive Violence:**
On February 23, police attacked strikers marching on Main Street, using mace. On March 28, in a march led by King, police attacked marchers with nightsticks, tear gas, mace, and gunfire after windows were broken and shops looted by individuals in the march.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
5 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
The sanitation workers local union was able to get the mayor and City Council to agree to all of their goals. However, after the close of the strike, the council failed to enact its commitments. The city eventually did do what it had promised, after another strike was threatened.

The sanitation workers' strike continued until an agreement was settled despite intense opposition.

The growth within this campaign was significant. With big name partners like King and the leaders from AFSCME, NAACP, and SCLC, support of the campaign was strong. Funds, organization, and membership growth increased as the strike went on.

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On February 12, 1968, sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, began a labor strike to protest unfair wages, unsafe working conditions, and the city’s refusal to recognize their sanitation workers union. Their union chapter, Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), had previously attempted a strike in 1966. The result had been a court-ordered injunction forbidding any future strikes by municipal employees. Though the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), of which AFSCME is the largest union, was chartered in 1964 by the state, the city of Memphiis refused to recognize it. What resulted in the second sanitation workers strike in 1968 began with several incidents that led employees to protest.

In early February two black employees were killed when taking sanctuary from a rainstorm in the barrel of their garbage truck. Because city policy did not allow for black workers to shield themselves from the elements on the porches of white individuals, the two workers were forced to hide in the truck which malfunctioned and crushed them to death. The families of the workers received only token payments from the city government who said that the employees were not covered by Tennessee’s workmen’s compensation law.
Local 1733 held a strike meeting on February 11, where Thomas Oliver “T.O.” Jones, explained to over 400 workers that the city refused to provide decent wages and working conditions and that for changes to occur immediate action was needed. On February 12, fewer than 200 employees showed up for work, and only 38 of the 108 garbage trucks continued to move. By February 14, more than 10,000 tons of garbage were piled up.

On February 16, the local chapter of the NAACP endorsed the sanitation workers strike, asking the City Council to intervene. The newly elected mayor of Memphis, Henry Loeb, III, declared the strike illegal. Though he refused to meet with black officials from Local 1733, he did agree to a meeting with the national officers of AFSCME who were in Memphis to support the striking workers. The meeting, which took place on February 18, quickly turned into a verbal fighting match wherein Loeb refused to give the workers the rights they demanded. On February 22 sanitation workers and their supporters performed a sit-in at city hall where they pressured the City Council to recognize their union and recommended a wage increase. Loeb rejected the Council’s vote, however, and protestors found themselves once again back where they had started.

By the end of February, what had been a local labor dispute was transforming into a civil rights struggle. Though Loeb put garbage trucks back on the street manned by white supervisors and non-strikers with police escorts, over 1,000 blacks were striking. On February 23, the same day that Loeb ordered the city attorney to prepare an injunction against the strike, union leaders and black ministers held a protest march through downtown Memphis. The first reported instance of police brutality occurred that day.

The march had been approved of by the fire and police director’s office and by Loeb on the condition that the protestors walk eight men abreast and agreed to a police escort. After marching for six blocks, the police ordered that the marchers walk four abreast. Several protestors began to rock the escort cars in defiance and riot police came out and began to club and mace marchers.

The day after the march, February 24, 150 black community leaders joined together to form the Community on the Move for Equality (COME). Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, a dedicated revolutionary pacifist, was elected chair of the organization which also counted pastors, converts to nonviolent direct action, and angry militant youth among its members. COME took over the direction of the strike and protest movement, advocating nonviolent direct action. In order to pressure the mayor and City Council into meeting the unions demands COME employed economic boycotts of downtown stores and two of the cities newspapers that portrayed the strikers in a biased and negative way.

Workers, college and high school students, and other members of the black community attended almost daily marches and nightly prayer meetings.

At the invitation of COME, NAACP’s Roy Wilkin and Bayard Rustin spoke to 9,000 strike supporters at the Mason Temple on March 14. On March 18, at the urging of Reverend Lawson, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis to support the strike as part of his Poor People’s Campaign. King’s speech at the Mason Temple drew 15,000 attendees and underscored the need for massive nonviolent disobedience. He urged the crowd to escalate the pressure and shut the city down with a massive work stoppage. King’s popular status brought a great deal of local and national attention to the striking sanitation workers cause.

Though King promised to return to Memphis on the 22nd to lead a demonstration through the city, he was forced to postpone his visit to March 28 due to a massive snowstorm. Meanwhile the union, COME, and city officials began mediation talks. On March 26, leaders gathered to form a final settlement creating a memorandum of understanding; however, on March 27, the mediation talks collapsed as Loeb refused to grant the union its demands.

On March 28, King and Reverend Lawson led strikers and supporters in a march on downtown Memphis. After peacefully marching for several blocks, singing “We Shall Overcome,” black youth armed with iron pipes and bricks, and carrying signs, began smashing windows and looting stores along the march corridor. Police immediately reacted to the “riot,” moving into the crowds using nightsticks, mace, teargas, and gunfire. They arrested 280 individuals and 60 people were reported injured, most of them black. A sixteen-year-old boy was also shot and killed by police. That night Loeb declared martial law and authorized a 7
p.m. curfew, bringing in 4,000 National Guardsmen.

On March 29, the day after the peaceful-turned-violent protest, over 200 strikers continued their daily march, carrying signs that read, “I Am a Man.” Many walked in peaceful silence from Clayborn Temple to City Hall, escorted by armed personnel carriers and guardsmen with bayonets. That same day the local media, influenced by reports from FBI and police officials, began a smear campaign against King, blaming him for the violence that occurred at the previous day’s march. In response, King planned a return trip to Memphis to lead a peaceful march.

After gaining the support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) for his return trip, King arrived in Memphis on April 3. There he was persuaded to speak to a crowd of sanitation workers and their supporters and delivered his famous, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” address. This was the last speech he would give.

On the evening of April 4, King was shot and killed on the balcony of his hotel in Memphis. King’s murder led to massive civil unrest in Memphis and across the country. President Johnson issued the undersecretary of labor, James J. Reynolds, to Memphis with instructions to encourage a quick settlement of the strike. The City Council and prominent white businessmen, who had been affected by the economic boycotts, also urged Loeb to end the strike.

The negotiating process began on April 6 with Loeb, Reynolds, and Jerry Wurf, international president of AFSCME, present. On April 8, a crowd of 42,000 people joined Coretta Scott King, members of SCLC, and union leaders in a march through Memphis in honor of King. They demanded that Loeb agree to the union’s requests.

On April 16, the union leaders and Loeb agreed on a settlement that met virtually all of the union’s demands. The final agreement was incredibly similar to the “memorandum of understanding” submitted to Loeb on March 26 which dictated that the City Council recognize the union and guarantee a better wage, among their other goals. The night of April 16, strikers and their supporters gathered at the Clayborn Temple where the union membership voted unanimously to accept the agreement.

Though the sanitation workers union was able to form a deal and ultimately bring the strike to an end, several months after the agreement the union was forced to threaten another strike when the city failed to enact its commitments. However, the city eventually did do what it had promised.

Research Notes

Sources:


Additional Notes:
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