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### Martin Luther King Jr.: His Actions Formed Our Future

Martin Luther King Jr.'s name seemed to fit him perfectly. He seemed to be the king of the Civil Rights Movement. Instead of being called a king, he was recognized as a leader, a brave leader. He fought for what he dreamed of not only for his family, but for all African Americans to possess. King dreamed of equality for all, and he was determined to achieve it. With this mindset, King was loved and hated. Loved by the African Americans he was fighting for and possibly some white men and women who agreed with his concepts. Hated by white men and women, mostly southern, who believed that whites and African Americans were not equals. Amid all the tension and hate he was creating, King continued devoting his life to making advances for civil rights.

Before his assassination in 1968, King took part in his final campaign. Two garbage collectors were killed by a faulty truck, in Memphis Tennessee. Angered by the ongoing neglect and abuse of African American employees, thirteen hundred black men, of the Memphis Department of Public Works, went on strike (*MLK's Legacy Reaches Into This Century*).

During a Memphis speech, King asked, "What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee" (*The 50th Anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "All Labor Has Dignity"*). King wanted integrated lunch counters and other facilities, but it felt almost unattainable because

blacks were not paid enough. Integration could occur, but nothing would change if blacks could not afford to eat at lunch counters or restaurants. Sanitation workers in Memphis could not afford to eat at integrated lunch counters. Sanitation workers were paid low wages for long hours. Sanitation workers' families were living off of food stamps to feed themselves and relied on welfare in an attempt to survive. King continued to say "you are reminding not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages" (*Eyes on the Prize-(Part 10) The Promised Land 1967-1968*).

"Our struggle is for general equality, which means economic equality," said King. Reasonably enough, strikers were demanding higher wages, safer working conditions, and recognition of their union. Despite all their attempts including sit-ins, boycotts, and daily marches; the workers struggled to change the mind of city officials. Pressured from the actions of the union, the City Council voted to show recognition of the union and advocated for a wage increase. Mayor Henry Loeb rejected the vote, claiming only he could recognize the union, and he refused to do so (*Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike*).

With constant urging from Reverend James T. Lawson, Martin Luther King Jr. made his way to Memphis. King agreed to lead a nonviolent demonstration for the workers. The striker's motto was "I Am A Man". During King's march, over five thousand marchers carried signs that read that exact motto (*Memphis Sanitation Strike Workers*). These men wanted to be treated with respect. Although, the ideal of the protests was nonviolence, the protest turned violent. When the march started, a riot broke out. Windows were broken and liquor was stolen. A large mass of police assembled with their gas masks, clubs, and weapons drawn. It seemed more of a riot than a march (*Author Interview Terry Gross, National Public Radio [Michael Honey] Audio File*).

As a leader, King always received a large amount of attention. Memphis was in need of a leader, someone to depend on and to help. Memphis welcomed King with extreme support. He was called in when the strikers were contemplating whether they could win. King arrived, and brought the media with him, and it gave them national attention. King called for a general strike and received an enthusiastic reaction (*Author Interview Terry Gross, National Public Radio [Michael Honey] Audio File*).

King became the dedicated and dependable leader the sanitation workers needed. The progressing strike became a long journey for everyone. While speaking with a group of striking sanitation workers, King explained that there was no point in stopping when they had already gotten so far. He felt that they needed to completely give in to the protest and all of their hard work because they had already gotten so far (*Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike*).

On April 4th, 1968, King's journey in Memphis ended. He had been assassinated. Although he did not get to follow through with his efforts in Memphis, his actions were memorable. He was exhausted and overwhelmed with the FBI trying to catch him for all of his actions and tired of struggling to justify to his staff why he was in Memphis (*Author Interview Terry Gross, National Public Radio [Michael Honey] Audio File*). King's decision to come to Memphis led the way to one of his most popular speeches, "I've Been to the Mountaintop", where he foreshadowed his own death. He left the world making a very large impact because he put others before himself, and he led the Memphis Sanitation Strikers when they were in need.

Before his assassination, King influenced many people and changed their views on how blacks and other minorities should be treated. Although his death caused a lot of grief, he left behind a legacy. Today, he is both remembered and praised. Many people thank him for his

efforts and what he did. He did not live to see the changes that he helped develop, but he helped establish a new mindset. Personally, as a black woman, I realized that he helped me see that I should not allow anyone to undermine me as a person because of my skin color. I thank him for that.

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