

Memphis Sanitation Strike

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On April 3, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his final speech to a crowd in Memphis, Tennessee. It was a stormy night, but the turnout was impressive. Many people had come to hear the great civil rights leader give a speech in which he reflected upon the cause that brought him to Memphis, and <sup>Spoke</sup> speak on the labor conflict and equality issues taking place in the city. On that night, he expressed his<sup>a</sup> new goal of economic equality, saying, "We know that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. 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?" These powerful words tied strongly to the intensifying sanitation workers' strike taking place in the city, and resonated with civil rights leaders and activists across the country trying to reach the economic justice that Dr. King so passionately fought for.

It was the late 1960s. Vietnam was in full swing. Robert Kennedy had just announced his run for presidency. As a result, few people were concerned with the labor conflict of the sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Prompted by a combination poor pay and dangerous working conditions, the sanitation strike was a fight for dignity for the workers and dignity for African Americans in the city [that thought it had solved its problems, but still suffered from unconscious<sup>7</sup> white supremacy]. Sanitation workers in Memphis didn't have set hours, never knew how much they would be paid, or even if they would work on any given day. They received

no benefits, such as pension or vacation, and lived on poverty wages. They worked full time jobs but didn't receive a full time salary, so many employees couldn't support their families. But the pot boiled over when two workers were killed on the job, crushed to death by a malfunctioning garbage compactor on the back of truck. This event brought about the citywide strike in which sanitation workers hoped to gain recognition of a union, better safety standards, and ample wages. In retrospect, this protest was really a powerful movement and a difficult battle for economic equality and social justice in a city (fighting for equal rights.)

At the time of the sanitation strike, Martin Luther King Jr. was at the height of his civil rights campaign. Traveling city to city, sometimes getting only four hours of sleep at night, many members of his staff thought that it would be ill advised for King to go to Memphis. But at the same time, King was shifting the focus of his advocacy to economic rights and equality. King believed that economic justice and racial justice were intertwined. According to King, the country was composed of two Americas. Compared to the white society in the U.S., African Americans were collectively poor and at an economic disadvantage, living in dilapidated houses and struggling to put food on the table. King also believed that "all labor has dignity". In one of his speeches, he explains that is a crime for people to live in a rich nation, yet live on starvation wages even though they are working. Connecting this with the labor conflict, King decided to travel to Memphis to join forces with the sanitation workers striking to unionize. And with him he brought power. Unintentionally, he brought national media coverage, which in turn brought attention and monetary support to the campaign. King also delivered a compelling speech to the people of Memphis that called for the strike. Coming to Memphis brought excitement, jubilation, and power to the city, and ultimately brought the economic justice he worked so hard to bring to the people.

Going to Memphis was incredibly important to Dr. King, and I think his fateful decision to stand by the sanitation workers was profound and worthwhile. King's presence brought power. It brought a sort of anticipation, an excitement. The name of Martin Luther King Jr. was associated with trouble and brought dread to the white community, not because he brought violence or danger, but because MLK brought change. The people of Memphis were overjoyed that he was coming to join them, because they knew that someone cared about their struggle. King was a revered example of strength, peace, and good leadership, and taught humility to those in need of dignity. Furthermore, his untimely assassination and death intensified the strike and eventually led to the city's recognition of the sanitation workers' union. So, even though his being there resulted in some violence and ultimately his death, I believe that his decision to travel to Memphis produced outcomes that forever changed standards of economic equality and social justice for African Americans in the United States.

Many people know that Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in Memphis, but few are aware of the cause that brought him there. The sanitation strike was a fight for dignity and living wages for civil servants who worked tirelessly in abysmal conditions, yet couldn't afford their basic needs. But the protest wouldn't have been nearly as successful without the contributions of Dr. King. His dedication to economic equality and equal opportunity inspired him to travel to the city in need of guidance, direction, and change. I fully support this decision and believe that if King hadn't decided to get involved in the strike, the union might not have been formed and the workers might not have achieved their goals of economic justice. So, in conclusion, the words Martin Luther King spoke the night before his assassination were a powerful catalyst for the Memphis sanitation strike. They represent the unfairness and inequality that still remained in a society that thought it had evolved from its archaic ways. The sanitation workers' strike was a

powerful example of oppressed citizens standing up for themselves, and Dr. King's words on economic justice only strengthened the fight for genuine equality.