Striking memphis sanitation workers history essay

ASSIGN BUSTER

I Am A Man." Those were the simple words on the signs carried by many of more than 1, 300 striking Memphis sanitation workers nearly all black during the spring of 1968. Trouble had been brewing for years. Among the lowest paid of city employees, with no medical insurance, workers' compensation, or overtime pay, the sanitation workers had

unsuccessfully tried twice before to get the city to recognize their union. The slide toward a strike had begun on February 1, 1968, when two workers seeking shelter during a torrential rainstorm hid inside the rear of a garbage truck. They were crushed to death when a switch was accidentally thrown. The city refused to compensate the victims'

families, and other workers were infuriated. That tragedy was compounded a few days later when, in the midst of another storm, twenty-two black sewer workers were sent home without pay. The white supervisors who had ordered them home went to work after the weather cleared and were paid for a full day. Following a formal protest, the black employees received only two hours' pay. That prompted a work stoppage on Lincoln's

birthday, Monday, February 12. The demands were straightforward: All garbage and sewer workers wanted a new contract that guaranteed a fifty-cent-an-hour increase and the right to have their union dues deducted directly from their paychecks.

The strike would have had a different history if Memphis had not had Henry Loeb III as mayor. The forty-five-year-old Loeb, who was six-five with a booming voice, had been elected only five weeks earlier. He was an heir to

one of the city's wealthiest Jewishfamilies, and had converted to Episcopalianism just after being sworn in. An opinionated

and stubborn man, Loeb, while not a racist, had a plantation view of blacks¿½he would see they were taken care of since he knew what was best for them. That attitude ensured that in the recent election, forty-nine of every fifty blacks voted against him.

Now threatened with the sanitation strike, Loeb adopted a hard position. Since a strike of municipal workers was illegal, he refused to negotiate unless they returned to work, and in no case would he allow a paycheck deduction to the union, since that meant he would be the first major Southern mayor to recognize a black municipal union.

The day after the sanitation workers walked off their jobs, officials of the national union began arriving to lend their support. Loeb announced midweek that if workers did not return to work the following day, he would fire them. On Thursday, only four days after the walkout started, Loeb began hiring scabs, and with a police escort they made limited

attempts at picking up garbage.

The racial overtones were evident from the start. The bulk of workers were black, and most white Memphians had little sympathy for their cause. Initially, the only support came from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and local black pastors, led by James M. Lawson. Many of the strikers were members of Lawson's Centenary Methodist Church. Lawson himself was a friend of Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr., having met him shortly after the successful 1956 Montgomery bus boycott. Thirty-nine years old, he had served three years as a missionary in India, where he became a follower of Ghandi's principles of nonviolence, and had spent thirteen months in prison for refusing to fight in the Korean War. Lawson, together with the Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, called for a meeting between Loeb and the Memphis

Ministers Association. Loeb refused to talk to them.

On Friday, February 23, more than a thousand strikers and supporters crammed a meeting of the city council's Public Works Committee. The rumor was that the committee had decided to recognize the union and approve the paycheck deduction, but, once the meeting started, the city council dodged the issue and threw the strike, as an " administrative matter," back to Loeb. The reaction was swift and furious, with strike

leaders calling for an impromptu march down Main Street to Mason Temple, strike headquarters. It was the first defiant black march in Memphis history. The police shoved the men to the right side of the street, four abreast. After several blocks trouble started. A police car came too close to the crowd and ran over a woman's foot. In a moment, young black men were rocking the squad car. Riot police, clad in blue helmets and gas masks, then swarmed into the crowds, indiscriminately macing and clubbing protestors.

The violent police reaction converted the strike from the single issue of better conditions for the sanitation workers into a symbolic racial battle for better treatment of the city's black community. " It showed many people,"

recalled Lawson, “ beyond the shadow of a doubt, that we were in a real struggle.” That night, strike leaders met and elected a

strategy committee, Community On the Move for Equality (COME). Lawson was chairman, Jackson vice chairman, and Jesse Epps, an international union representative, an adviser. The next day, COME presented a five-point program to all 150 of the city’s black ministers and their congregations. The program included fund-raising campaigns and rallies in churches, a boycott of all downtown businesses as well as companies with the Loeb name, and two daily marches through downtown Memphis, the first for strikers, families, and supporters, and the second for students.

When the police had attacked and maced the Memphis demonstrators, Martin Luther King, Jr., was in Miami, at a ministers’ retreat sponsored by the Ford Foundation. One of those attending was the Reverend Samuel “ Billy” Kyles, a tall, thin, charismatic pastor of Memphis’s Monumental Baptist Church. Kyles, in his early thirties, was a prominent Memphis pastor who, together with Lawson and Jackson, helped form public opinion in much of the city’s black community.

“ The Miami police begged Martin not to leave the hotel because there were so many threats against him,” recalls Kyles.* “ So we stayed inside. And we got around to talking about the threats. “ You just kind of live with it,” he said. “ I don’t walk around every day scared, but I was really scared twice.” Once was when the three civil rights workers were

killed in Mississippi. At a church rally there, Ralph [Abernathy] and Martin were praying, and Martin said, ‘ Oh Lord, the killers of these boys may be

hearing us right now.' And a big sheriff who was standing there to guard Martin said, ' Damn right!' The second time was when he had marched in Cicero, Illinois, back in 1966. He had never encountered

that type of hatred, even in the South. People lined the streets hurling insults and threats at him. And when he walked along a street with trees, he said, " From those trees, I expected any moment to get shot.' "

When Kyles called home, he learned about the police attack on the demonstrators. His own seven-year-old daughter was among those maced. Later that day, " I mentioned it off-handedly to Martin, that they had a march in Memphis and had been attacked. Maybe you have to come down and help us out. ' I may do that,' he said."

By coincidence, a few days after Kyles had spoken to King, Lawson proposed that prominent national figures be invited weekly to rally the strikers and their supporters. Memphis newspapers and television had given the strike minimum coverage. Lawson hoped to force their hand by transforming the strike into a national issue. Among those considered was Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the National Urban

League, Bayard Rustin of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, and Dr. King. Wilkins and Rustin, the first approached, agreed to speak in Memphis on March 14. When King was invited, he was hesitant, saying that his doctors had recently told him to get more rest. " All of his staff was against Martin coming," recalls Kyles. " He was way behind schedule for

the preparation for the [Poor People's] march on Washington [scheduled for April 22]."

Most of King's energies were going toward the Poor People's Campaign. His announcement the previous November that he wanted " waves of the nation's poor and disinherited" to descend on Washington, D. C., and stay there until the government responded with reforms had already caused many whites to fear that the summer would be racked by major civil disturbances.

However, the sanitation strike seemed a clear-cut issue of right or wrong, and King and his staff relented, finally shifting a March 18 meeting of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) executive committee from Jackson, Mississippi, to Memphis.

The strike, meanwhile, remained at a standstill. On Monday, March 18, King arrived shortly after 7: 00 p. m. Lawson and Epps picked him up at the airport. He was tired, but the sight of a packed auditorium¿½15, 000 people at Mason Temple¿½revitalized him. There were people standing in the rafters, in the back, and on the sides. " You fellows must really have something going on here," he told Lawson. A huge white banner¿½not

by might, not by power, saith the lord of hosts, but by my spirit¿½was draped behind the podium. King, a rousing orator who was best before large crowds, was in rare form that night. Time and again, he had the crowd on its feet. By the end of his talk, the three shiny garbage cans on the stage near him had over $5, 000 in contributions for the strikers.

“ Martin, we are having daily marches,” Lawson said to King on the podium. “ Why don’t you come back and lead a big march? You see how they receive you. It would be terrific!”

Lawson had approached King at the right moment. Reveling in the excitement of the tumultuous reception he had just received, King checked with two of his closest advisers, Andrew Young and Ralph Abernathy, both of whom agreed it was worth returning. “ He said it was like the old days,” says Kyles. “ It really energized him.” King pulled out his appointment book and checked for an open date. The crowd fell silent as they saw him back at the microphone. “ I want to tell you that I am coming back to Memphis on Friday. I want all of you to stay home from work that day. I want a tremendous work stoppage, and all of you, your families and children, will join me, and I will lead you in a march through the center of Memphis.” That announcement prompted a thunderous response from the crowd.**

During the following days, the union leaders and ministers prepared for the day Memphis would be shut down. King’s entry into the sanitation strike exacerbated the division between blacks and whites. Many whites thought King was an interloper who had latched on to the strike as a way of burnishing his own image. They resented his involvement. Blacks, on the other hand, welcomed it. “ We never viewed him as an outsider,” says

Kyles. “ We didn’t need Martin Luther King to come and tell us to be free, we just needed him to come and help us be free.”

On March 21, the day before King’s return, a freak storm hit the area. It began snowing about 4: 00 p. m. Snow is rare in Memphis, and almost

unheard of in March. “ I looked at it with curiosity,” recalled Lawson. “ I really thought the stuff would stop, it won’t last, it’s too wet.” It snowed, however, through the night, and by dawn a foot was on the ground, on the way to seventeen inches, the second-largest snowstorm in Memphis history. Lawson telephoned King, who was scheduled to take a flight into the city by 9: 00 a. m. Everything was canceled, but they agreed on a new date, Thursday, March 28. Many white Memphians, however, greeted the snowstorm’s arrival with relief. “ Our prayers were

answered,” says the wife of the city’s then police homicide chief. Yet the tension among whites only temporarily lessened, since a new work stoppage was only six days away.

On Wednesday, March 27, around 1: 30 p. m., a middle-aged man¿½slim, with dark brown hair, a thin nose, thick black-framed glasses, manicured nails, and a complexion so pale it appeared he was seldom in the sun¿½walked into the Gun Rack, a Birmingham, Alabama, store some 240 miles from Memphis. “ I would like to see your . 243-caliber rifles.” His voice had a slightly high pitch, but was soft, hard to hear. Clyde Manasco, the clerk, thought he recognized him and that he had been in the shop before, always alone. He was the man with all the questions: What was the most accurate rifle? How much would a bullet drop at one hundred yards? At two hundred? What rifle provided the flattest and longest trajectory? What scope was the best, affording excellent sighting with no distortion? He had even inquired about a Browning automatic . 264 that had been written up in gun magazines but not yet shipped to stores.

On other occasions, Manasco, as well as the owner, Quinton Davis, had given the customer some booklets¿½one on Redfield scopes and another on Winchester guns¿½as well as referred him to books that contained manufacturers’ technical specifications. The questions did not strike Davis as odd, since he assumed the customer might be interested in doing his own hand reloading of ammo. At other times, Davis had taken guns off the rack and offered them to him, but the customer never handled them.

Instead he just looked and studied.

Whenever Davis or Manasco talked to him, the man stared back. Both later recalled his unusual light blue eyes. Davis thought he might be a Southerner, and while he talked intelligently and was always neatly dressed in a sports jacket, he somehow seemed “ under a strain or slightly mentally disturbed.”

When the man walked through the front door that Wednesday, Manasco sighed. The Gun Rack did not get many customers as difficult as him. Most knew what they wanted. But this time, Manasco had a feeling the man with the questions might be, as he later put it, “ about ready to buy a gun.”

Manasco informed him he did not have any Remington . 243s in stock, and instead tried to interest him in a Remington . 30-06. “ No, it’s too expensive,” the man said. Instead, he asked Manasco for a ballistics chart, but since he could not take it with him, he studied it for a few minutes before leaving. At the curb, he got into a white Mustang and drove off. The employees at the Gun Rack never saw him again.

* In this book, whenever a person is quoted in the present tense, it reflects an interview conducted by the author. The past tense indicates all other sources.

** James Earl Ray's latest attorney, William Pepper, contends in his book Orders to Kill that " a team of federal agents conducted electronic surveillance on Dr. King in his suite at the Holiday Inn Rivermont Hotel on the evening of March 18." Pepper cites a source " who must remain nameless." The problem, however, is that King actually spent the night of March 18 at his regular motel, the black-run Lorraine.