

COMMENT

Martin Luther King Jr: The unfinished struggle

Thursday 5 April 2018, by [JONES Brian](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2008).

Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis 40 years ago in the midst of a struggle that he saw as part of the next stage for the civil rights movement—supporting a strike of African American sanitation workers. Here, Brian Jones reviews an excellent new book, Michael Honey’s *Going Down Jericho Road*, which tells the story of that struggle.



Martin Luther King at the 1963 March on Washington

WHEN MARTIN Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April 1968, he was in Memphis supporting 1,300 striking sanitation workers.

This particular fact is sometimes mentioned in civil rights histories; when it is, the significance of that strike—for King, and for the strikers—is little understood. Likewise, the role of Black workers generally in the fight for racial and economic equality is not nearly as well studied.

In *Going Down Jericho Road*, historian Michael Honey brings to life the story of the Memphis sanitation strike, illuminating it not only with an organizer’s sensitivity to the dynamics of the movement (Honey is a civil rights veteran himself), but with the voices of Black sanitation workers, union activists and Black radical youth.

Jericho Road is organized as two parallel stories—of the Memphis garbage workers fighting for union recognition, and of Martin Luther King Jr. searching for a way to build a movement for economic justice.

The white Memphis elite prided itself on granting enough concessions to Blacks to be able to avoid the explosive confrontations that had rocked other southern cities. Blacks could vote, and newspapers called for some compliance with the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling that outlawed segregated schools.

Black sanitation workers saw things differently. They worked in plantation-like conditions for starvation wages, under the watch of racist white supervisors. “Since many of the white bosses came from the plantations themselves,” Honey observes, “they treated black workers much like landlords

in the Mississippi Delta treated their sharecroppers and tenants.”

Workers could be fired for being one minute late or for “talking back.” They had no breaks. They had to eat their lunches in 15 minutes and couldn’t be seen in the shade of a tree. The shade of the truck was their only refuge from the Memphis heat, even though the trucks were old and outmoded, smelled horribly and often had maggots falling off the side.

The city didn’t require residents to pack up their garbage or even bring it to the curb, so the sanitation workers had to grab everything as it lay, including tree limbs, dead animals in the road, and unpacked garbage. “I wasn’t making a damn thing,” James Robinson recalled. After 15 years on the job, he was being paid \$1.65 an hour, only 5 cents above the federal minimum wage. “We were workin’ every day then for welfare wages.”

In the early 1960s, a group of sanitation workers with military backgrounds and experience organizing in the CIO’s “Operation Dixie” began trying to build a union. T.O. Jones, the leader of what became AFSCME Local 1733, got support from civil rights activists and Black ministers, and some limited backing from AFSCME’s national office.

But the effort never really got off the ground. For most of the decade, Jones persevered, despite the fact that the “union” only had about 40 dues-payers out of 1,300 workers.

On February 1, 1968, the death of two men changed the situation completely.

There was no room for Echol Cole and Robert Walker in the cab of the old garbage truck. So at the end of a long day, to avoid the rain,

Cole and Walker rode in a precarious, stinking perch between a hydraulic ram used to mash garbage into a small wad and the wall of the truck’s cavernous container. As crew chief Willie Crain drove the loaded garbage packer along Colonial Street to the Shelby Drive dump, he heard the hydraulic ram go into action, perhaps set off by a shovel that had jarred loose and crossed some electrical wires. He pulled the truck over to the curb at 4:20 p.m., but the ram already was jamming Cole and Walker back into the compactor.

Within a week, the deaths of these men galvanized the sentiment for change. T.O. Jones organized a meeting at the Memphis Labor Temple, hoping that if 500 workers showed up, he might have a force to demand negotiations. Instead, approximately twice that number arrived, and workers ended the evening shouting for a strike.

“It wasn’t T. O. Jones,” remembered worker Ed Gillis. “It was all of us labor got together, and we was going to quit work till we got a raise and got a better percentage, see—and could get justice on the job from the way they were treating us.”

From the beginning, the strikers were involved in constant activity. Almost 1,000 gathered daily at noon to be addressed by community supporters; afterward, they would march through the downtown area. Each day ended with mass meetings in Black churches.

The workers avoided explicitly making the strike a “racial” issue at first, but their treatment at the hands of the police and mayor was blatantly racist. Other city workers had unions; why not the all-Black sanitation workers? Again and again, the intransigence of the mayor galvanized the strikers to press on.

The slogan they carried on placards, “I Am a Man,” said it all—this was a question of racial and economic justice.

THE SANITATION workers were carrying out, in many ways, precisely the kind of movement that Martin Luther King Jr. was struggling to organize in the last year of his life.

Honey documents the degree to which King, from the beginning of his career, saw unions as essential vehicles for Black advancement. He cultivated allies among union activists and leaders such as the white UAW President Walter Reuther and the Black union pioneer A. Philip Randolph.

While King firmly believed in American democracy, his “social gospel” was rooted in the demands of the Black working class. In 1957, he told a gathering of activists at the Highlander Folk School that “the forces that are anti-Negro are by and large anti-labor,” and argued that true integration meant “complete political, economic and social equality... a whole series of measures which go beyond the specific issue of segregation.”

At its 1966 convention, King told the organization he co-founded, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), that the early civil rights and voting rights gains “didn’t cost the nation one penny” and called for a more radical, economic “distributive justice.” He told a private gathering of ministers, “Something is wrong with capitalism as it now stands in the United States. We are not interested in being integrated into this value structure.”

King began at this point to lay out his idea for the next step in the struggle, which he called the Poor People’s Campaign.

He wanted the SCLC to bring thousands of people from America’s impoverished cities to camp out in Washington, D.C. They would form a “tent city” that would be host to mass marches and rallies. The idea was to also organize mass civil disobedience—blocking traffic, shutting down government buildings—until the Congress or the president created jobs or guaranteed income for the poor.

But after the legal destruction of Jim Crow, there was anything but a consensus that such a campaign was the logical next move. “King saw the Poor People’s Campaign as a way to go beyond past limitations and to create a new, interracial, class-based movement among the poor,” Honey writes. But “it required a hard sell to get other Movement strategists on board.”

SCLC wasn’t really equipped for this kind of organizing. As Honey observes,

They had spent their lives in the civil rights movement and the Black church. Now, King called on them to organize a new multiracial constituency around class issues among Mexican-Americans, Indians, and poor whites as well as African Americans. SCLC did not have the resources and organizing structure to make it happen. Almost alone, King had to convince not only the civil rights community and a broader public, but also his own reluctant staff members, that they could organize the poor.

King and his staff fanned out across the country to recruit ministers for project—and largely failed. In Virginia, 120 ministers were invited to a planning meeting, and not one showed up.

King recognized that some of the hesitation came from the illusions of the Black middle class in the power of their own bootstraps. As he told a group of activists in Birmingham: “You know, we have too many Negroes who have somehow, through some education and a degree of economic security, floated or...swam out of the backwaters...[But now they have] forgotten the stench of the backwaters.”

The Ford Foundation gave King a \$230,000 grant for minister training, which he used to bring 150 ministers together for a conference in Miami. For five days, he spoke to them about following the example of Jesus, “the greatest revolutionary that history has ever known.” King called for a

“dangerous altruism,” arguing that they needed to use the power of the church to mobilize the poor.

But by the end of the five days, most of the ministers were noncommittal, and King fell into depression. “There’s no masses,” King told his staff, “in this mass movement.”

ON MARCH 18, these two stories—of King and of the sanitation workers—converged at the Mason Temple in Memphis.

King arrived for the event demoralized by his failure to build the Poor People’s Campaign. The sanitation workers arrived demoralized by a strike that dragged on, its activists persecuted by the courts and its marches dogged by police brutality. In joining forces, however, they gave each other courage and strength.

Some 25,000 people came out to see King that night. King told the Biblical story of Dives, who went to hell because he passed Lazarus every day and refused to see his plight. “If America does not use her vast resource of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she, too, is going to hell,” King warned, to raucous applause.

King went on to explain how the strike was a part of the new direction for the movement as a whole:

With Selma and the voting rights bill, one era of our struggle came to a close, and a new era came into being. Now, our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For 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 cup of coffee?

Honey describes how the urgency of the situation pushed King to put forward practical ideas for how to carry the struggle forward.

Amid cheering and applause, a new level of energy had been created—so much so that King could not end simply with rhetoric. He needed to take the movement to a higher level. He paused for a moment, and seemed to be thinking out loud.

“You know what?” he asked the crowd. “You may be able to escalate the struggle a bit.” Then he dropped the bombshell: “I tell you what you ought to do, and you are together here enough to do it:...you ought to...have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis!”

Over the next weeks—the last of his life—King tried to build on this energy.

Here, again, he was unsuccessful. When the day of the work stoppage came, a snowstorm kept everyone home from work and school anyway. The rescheduled mass march turned into a riot, and King had to flee for his life. King, his staff and the strikers eventually re-grouped, and planned to try again on April 8.

On April 3, King warned, in an impromptu speech: “You see, the Jericho road is a dangerous road...The question is not: if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? The question is: if I don’t stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?”

An assassin’s bullet took his life on the next day. As Honey writes,

African Americans everywhere recognized King’s death as a watershed moment that required a massive response. Riots destroyed Black communities most of all, but riots also hurt white owners of capital far more than any economic boycott or nonviolent protest. King’s death burst the dam of whatever patience held back the rage of Black America at Depression-level unemployment; job,

housing and school discrimination; pervasive police brutality; useless deaths of Black soldiers in Vietnam; and the plethora of ills that stalked the ghettos.

By April 8, there had been riots in at least 125 U.S. cities. President Lyndon Johnson deployed 73,000 Army and National Guardsmen and had another 50,000 standing by at military bases. As Honey points out, this was “the largest domestic deployment of military forces since the Civil War.”

The scale of the crisis galvanized national support for the Memphis sanitation workers. Johnson sent a personal emissary to work out a settlement. The final agreement was far from perfect, but it allowed the men to bargain collectively as a union.

Honey describes an emotion-packed scene on April 16, when the workers gathered to hear the terms and vote on them. The question was called, and those who supported the agreement were asked to vote by standing.

People rose as one to their feet; no one remained seated. “All those who oppose?” There was no one. Jones declared, “The motion has carried!”

Wild jubilation engulfed Clayborn Temple, where tear gas still stained the walls. On the podium, Jones [and others] shook hands, hugged, laughed and cried. Some workers rushed to the front to congratulate their representatives... [James] Lawson called it a scene of “great joy and happiness and bedlam.”

Jones momentarily silenced the bedlam to say, “We have been aggrieved many times, we have lost many things,” tearfully referring to the man who was not there—Martin Luther King. “But we got the victory.”

Brian Jones

WHAT ELSE TO READ

Brian Jones expands on the final months of the civil rights leader’s life in “Martin Luther King’s last fight,” published in the *International Socialist Review* as part of a series of articles on the high points of the revolutionary year 1968.

<http://www.isreview.org/issues/58/feat-MLK.shtml>

Michael Honey’s *Going Down Jericho Road* tells the story of the Memphis sanitation strike and vividly renders its dynamics and lessons, and King’s role in it.

<https://www.amazon.com/Going-Down-Jericho-Road-Campaign/dp/0393043398?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1206902561&sr=8-1>

For an overview of the struggle against racism in the U.S., from slavery to the present day, get *Black Liberation and Socialism*, by Ahmed Shawki. For more on the development of the civil rights struggle specifically, read Jack Bloom’s *Class, Race and the Civil Rights Movement*.

One of the best biographies of King is *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, by David Garrow. The struggle in Memphis is taken up in *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68*, the final volume of Taylor Branch’s multi-part biography.

For more on how King's political ideas developed, see Michael Eric Dyson's *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King Jr.*

P.S.

* April 4, 2008 | Issue 668:

<https://socialistworker.org/2008/04/04/king-unfinished-struggle>