

A Union Man
MLK's last days were spent in support of a strike

by Harvey Mars, Esq.

It began with a tragedy. On Feb. 1, 1968, two Memphis sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death when the trash compactor mechanism in their sanitation truck malfunctioned.

The city's paltry response to this tragedy was extremely frustrating to the 1,300 black individuals who comprised the Memphis Department of Public Works and who had been working under horrific conditions. Twelve days later they went on strike.

The striking sanitation workers, with the assistance of T.O. Jones, a garbage collector and union organizer, demanded that the city of Memphis recognize their union and negotiate for better, safer working conditions as well as a living wage.

The NAACP and a coalition of labor, religious, and community groups joined in support of the strikers, many of whom had to rely upon food stamps and public assistance to make ends meet, because their pay was so low.

After a sit-in, the City Council – bowing to public pressure – voted to recognize AFSCME Local 1733 as the workers' union. However, the city's mayor, Henry Loeb, rejected the vote and absolutely refused to bargain. The strike and protest continued.

Police used mace and tear gas against the non-violent protesters who marched upon City Hall. Memphis' black community became unified.

Roughly 150 local ministers formed an organization to assist the protesters called Community on the Move for Equality. The group was committed to nonviolent civil disobedience and vowed to fill Memphis jails and bring attention to the plight of the sanitation workers. And they did.

Young people got involved, too. On March 28, over 22,000 students bravely skipped school to participate in a rally. The police's response was chilling. A 16-year-old boy was shot and killed by a Memphis policeman. Protesters who sought to escape the violence sought sanctuary in a church. Police followed them into the church and clubbed and tear-gassed them.

Mayor Loeb enacted martial law and called upon 4,000 National Guard troops to restore order. Nevertheless, the strike continued and over 200 sanitation workers continued to march on City Hall. The U.S. District Court in Memphis issued a temporary restraining order against the protesters.

On April 3, a black minister was asked to speak before a crowd of dedicated strikers. In his eloquent speech entitled "I've Been to the Mountaintop" he said: "Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be."

The next day, this same black minister, who was getting ready for dinner, stepped out onto the balcony of his hotel room and was shot and killed.

Four days later, 42,000 people marched silently in his honor.

About a week after that, negotiators reached a deal in which the City Council recognized the union and guaranteed better wages and working conditions for the sanitation workers.



Martin Luther King Jr. waves to supporters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, the day he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" address.

Almost five years later, he was killed while supporting sanitation workers in their fight for a union.

Photo: AFP/AFP/Getty Images

As you know, the minister was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and he would have turned 82 this Jan. 15 – a birthdate which is shared by my daughter Sarah, who helped write this article. May we never forget the past and may all of us work together to improve the future.

Harvey Mars is counsel to Local 802. Legal questions from members are welcome. E-mail them to jurmars566@aol.com. Harvey Mars's previous articles in this series are archived at www.harveymarsattorney.com. Nothing here of in previous articles should be construed as formal legal advice given in the context of an attorney-client relationship.