

1968

The Last Campaign of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

"All labor has dignity...it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages."

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

On February 12, 1968, 1,300 African American sanitation workers, went on strike in Memphis, Tennessee to protest poor working conditions and low wages and for recognition of their union American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733. These workers lived below poverty with almost no benefits. Heralding the slogan "I am a man," this strike was more than about raises but dignity and respect as a human being. When the mayor of the city refused to bargain with the workers, Rev. James Lawson and other local ministers invited Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to come and help. His presence helped lift the media blackout and he energized the community. He saw a union as the best anti-poverty program for the working poor. On April 3, Dr. King gave his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech to the strikers and supporters. He was assassinated the next day before seeing the successful conclusion of the strike.



"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."

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. after the passage of the civil rights and voting rights bills in 1964 and 1965

Why would some people feel more threatened by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's involvement in economic equality struggles rather than his previous campaign to dismantle segregation?

Why did King equate genuine equality with economic equality?

Michael Honey, Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign. New York: W.W. Norton & Company (2008).