

1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike Chronology

Tuesday, Feb. 1 - Two sanitation workers are killed in an accident on a city truck.

Monday, Feb. 12 - Memphis sanitation and public employees strike after last-minute attempts to resolve grievances fail. Newspapers claim 200 workers of 1,300 remain on the job but only 38 of 180 trucks move. Mayor Loeb says strike is illegal but says "this office stands ready... to talk to anyone about his legitimate questions at any time."

Tuesday, Feb. 13 - An International Union official flies in from Washington to meet with the mayor. He calls for union recognition, dues checkoff and negotiations to resolve the workers' grievances. The Mayor says he'll hire new workers unless the strikers return to their jobs.

Wednesday, Feb. 14 - The Mayor delivers a back-to-work ultimatum for 7 a.m. Feb. 15. Police escort the few garbage trucks in operation. Negotiations between the city and the union break off. Newspapers say more than 10,000 tons of garbage is piled up.

Friday, Feb. 16 - Union leaders urge the city council to intervene. The council supports the Mayor. Memphis NAACP members endorse the strike.

Sunday, Feb. 18- AFSCME International President Jerry Wurf arrives and says the strike can end only when the workers' demands are met. The Ministerial Association arranges a meeting between the Mayor and union leaders moderated by a Memphis rabbi. It goes until 5 a.m.

Monday, Feb. 19 - NAACP and others stage all-night vigil and picketing at city hall.

Tuesday, Feb. 20 - The union and the NAACP call for a citywide boycott of downtown merchants.

Thursday, Feb. 22 - City Council sub-committee headed by Councilman Fred Davis urges that the city recognize the union, in rowdy meeting with council chambers packed by more than 1,000 strikers and supporters. Meeting adjourns without action.

Friday, Feb. 23 - The Council refuses to recognize the union. Police attack strikers during a march on Main Street, using mace.

Saturday, Feb. 24 - Black leaders and ministers form citywide organization to support the strike and the boycott. City obtains court injunction to keep union from staging demonstrations or picketing.

Sunday, Feb. 25 - Ministers call on their congregations to boycott and march.

Monday, Feb. 26 - Daily marches begin, amid rumors that a compromise has been received by the Mayor.

Tuesday, Feb. 27 - The Mayor backs down on the compromise. Hundreds demonstrate at city hall. Courts cite 23 union members for contempt of court.

Thursday, Feb. 29 - Mayor Loeb sends each striker a letter inviting him back to work without union recognition. Two strike leaders arrested for jaywalking. Union files suit in federal court.

Friday, March 1 - Mayor meets with black ministers. Windows at his home are broken and he blames the strikers. Federal judge rejects union's suit.

Sunday, March 3 - Eight-hour gospel singing marathon at Mason Temple raises money for strikers and shows community support.

Monday, March 4 - State Sen. Frank White proposes bill to create state mediation board to resolve impasse. Mayor opposes it.

Tuesday, March 5 - Ministers announce the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. will come to Memphis, as 116 strikers and supporters are arrested for sitting in at city hall.

Wednesday, March 6 - Seven union leaders given 10- day sentences and fines for contempt of court. Strikers stage a mock funeral at city hall, lamenting the death of freedom in Memphis.

Thursday, March 7 - City Council votes against dues checkoff proposal.

Friday, March 8 - Trash fires in South Memphis are blamed on strike supporters.

Saturday, March 9 - At Mayor's suggestion, National Guard begins holding riot drills.

Monday, March 11 - Students skip high school to participate in march, led by black ministers. Two students arrested.

Wednesday, March 13 - Nine demonstrators arrested at Main and McCall. Police claim they threatened shoppers.

Thursday, March 14 - National NAACP leader Roy Wilkins addresses meeting of 10,000 or more and expresses support for a firm, peaceful protest. Six pickets are arrested and charged with blocking the Democrat Road sanitation depot entrance.

Saturday, March 16 - Mayor says entire city should vote on dues checkoff questions in August. Union says no.

Monday, March 18 - Newspapers claim strike is failing as scabs operate 90 garbage trucks. But 17,000 Memphians attend rally where Dr. King calls for a citywide march on March 22.

Wednesday, March 20 - Mayor restates his opposition to union demands.

Friday, March 22 - Record snowstorm blocks Dr. King's return. March is cancelled. City and union agree to mediation. Round-the-clock meetings begin.

Wednesday, March 27 - SCLC Leader Ralph David Abernathy addresses rally in support of strikers. Mediation talks collapse.

Thursday, March 28 - March from Clayborn Temple, led by Dr. King, is interrupted by window breaking. Police move into crowds with nightsticks, mace, tear gas and gunfire. A 16-year old boy, Larry Payne, is shot to death. Police arrest 280, report about 60 injured, mostly blacks. State legislature authorizes 7 p.m. curfew and 4,000 National Guardsmen move in.

Friday, March 29 - Some 300 sanitation workers and ministers, march peacefully and silently from Clayborn Temple to City Hall — escorted by five armored personnel carriers, five jeeps, three huge military trucks and dozens of Guardsmen with bayonets fixed. President Johnson and AFL-CIO President George Meany offer assistance in resolving the dispute. Mayor Loeb turns them down.

Sunday, March 31 - Ministers urge restraint. Dr. King cancels trip to Africa and plans return to Memphis to lead peaceful march. Attempts to renew mediation of strike fail.

Monday, April 1 - Curfew is lifted.

Tuesday, April 2 - Hundreds attend funeral for Larry Payne. National Guard withdrawn.

Wednesday, April 3 - Dr. King returns to Memphis and addresses rally, delivering his "I've been to the Mountaintop" address.

Thursday, April 4 - A sniper, later captured and identified as James Earl Ray, assassinates Dr. King as he stands on the balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Hotel.

Friday, April 5 - Federal troops and Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark are in Memphis as FBI begins international manhunt for assassin. President Johnson instructs Undersecretary of Labor James Reynolds to take charge of mediation to settle the strike.

Saturday, April 6 - Reynolds meets with Mayor Loeb in the first of a long string of meetings-first with one side, then the other, rarely together.

Monday, April 8 - Mrs. King and dozens of national figures lead a peaceful memorial march through downtown in tribute to Dr. King and in support of the strike.

Tuesday, April 9 - Funeral services are held in Atlanta for Dr. King.

Wednesday, April 10 - Reynolds steps up meetings with city and union officials, most without publicity.

Tuesday, April 16 - AFSCME leaders announce that agreement has been reached. The strikers vote to accept it. The strike is over.

Source: AFSCME Local 1733 pamphlet