

‘I’ve been to the mountaintop’: A call to action then and now

written by Penny Pinotti

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On Jan. 11, members of the Baltimore community gathered at the Harriet Tubman Solidarity Center for a screening of “At the River I Stand,” a film documenting the Memphis sanitation workers strike in 1968. The working class civil rights struggles intertwined in this strike drew Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Poor People’s Campaign to Memphis. Just two months later, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Memphis sanitation workers at the time were predominantly Black, working long hours in dangerous conditions, compensated with wages so low that workers qualified for welfare. Working conditions are described in the film as a plantation mentality, with Black workers under-compensated while toiling in inhumane conditions, all under the oversight of racist government officials and supervisors.

After two garbage collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death by a garbage compactor, 1,300 Black sanitation workers went on strike. Workers demanded recognition of their union, safer working conditions, and fair wages.

Members of the community engaged in a boycott and supported the strike, and a sit-in of sanitation workers and supporters pressured the City Council into voting to recognize the union and increase wages.



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'I am a man'

However, Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb rejected this resolution. The strike and daily marches continued, and the now famous anti-racist slogan, "I am a man," developed.

In March, Mayor Loeb called for martial law and brought in 4,000 National Guard troops to patrol the streets after police escalated the non-violent protest into essentially a police riot. Dr. King Jr. returned on April 3 and delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech to sanitation workers.

The next day, he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The sanitation workers strike concluded on April 16 when the City Council agreed to union

recognition and increased wages for the sanitation workers.

Baltimore sanitation workers

Although the film depicts struggles that took place 57 years ago, the issues in the film are strikingly similar to issues faced today. Two sanitation workers in Baltimore City were killed in 2024 due to unsafe working conditions: Ronald Silver II died at work in August due to heatstroke and Timothy Cartwell was crushed to death by the garbage collection truck on which he worked in November.

Their deaths are directly connected to the gross negligence and inadequate working conditions of the Department of Public Works. Their deaths could have, and should have, been avoided with proper safety training and regulations to protect workers in extreme weather.

It is necessary for the Baltimore City Council to improve the safety conditions of workers. Much like the community in Memphis in 1968, the Baltimore community needs to rally around sanitation workers to pressure the Baltimore City Council to act.

As pointed out by community members who attended the film screening, Dr. King Jr. fought for worker power and against racism, not some broad ideal of “freedom” as often is asserted in the mainstream press. To honor his legacy, community members in Baltimore can fight for material change for city workers.

Other issues in the film that are present today are the suppression of unions and the plantation mentality. Workers at Amazon and Starbucks are striking for fair wages and safer working conditions.

However, much like Mayor Loeb refused to negotiate these demands, leadership at these corporations refuse to work with unions to increase wages and improve worker safety.

Inmates fighting California wildfires

The plantation mentality plagues incarcerated workers, with inmates fighting wildfires in California. Inmates fighting fires face dangerous conditions while earning between \$5.80 and \$10.42 per day. This labor is only possible due to an exception in the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery: “except as punishment for crime.”

The struggle in Memphis for workers’ rights and civil rights never truly ended. Since that time, oppressed peoples and workers across the United States have fought the capitalist state to achieve basic human rights. As this struggle goes forward, we must remember the legacy of the Memphis sanitation workers and Dr. King’s fight against racism and capitalism.

