



The Memphis Campaign

Learning Targets/Objectives:

- Discuss the purpose of the Memphis Campaign.
- Understand the role of the Memphis Campaign during the Civil Rights Movement.

Success Criteria:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the Memphis Campaign by analyzing the "I am a Man" campaign signs.
- Write a "Thank you" note as if you were Elmore Nickelberry.

Lesson Content Overview:

During the early spring of 1968, King went to Memphis in response to an appeal from Black clergymen to help organize a group of striking Black sanitation workers. On February 1, two sanitation workers in Memphis died in an accident on a city truck. After an attempt to resolve grievances over safety and unfair wages failed, the workers started striking on February 12. The Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike did not occur in a vacuum. New York City sanitation workers commenced a strike for similar reasons a week earlier. On this initial day of the strike, Memphis city officials were alarmed that it could reach "serious" proportions within a few days. More than 900 garbage collectors, sewer cleaners, street maintenance men and asphalt plant workers were involved. Only 38 of 300 department vehicles ran on the first day.¹ The public works strike eventually consisted of 1,300 members of the State, County, and Municipal Employees (SCME) Local 1733. Threats made by Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb to return to work immediately or lose their jobs only energized strikers. Only 12 of the 180 work crews returned to work on day two.²

King believed that the economic conditions of Memphis were ripe and decided that Memphis was an ideal place to launch the beginning of the Poor People's Campaign. His long term vision for the Poor People's Campaign was to establish an interracial coalition of protesters willing to establish a campsite that would occupy much of the Washington Mall in the District of Columbia. King scheduled the protest in the nation's capital for April 22. In the meantime, he thought Memphis could both serve as a dress rehearsal for protesting for equality in jobs and help increase attention for his newest initiative.

The City Council of Memphis stubbornly refused to recognize the union, grant dues deductions, set up grievance machinery, and meet other demands of the workers. The strike caused remarkable coalescing of the Black community. The pent-up frustrations of the community were brought dramatically to the surface, with the strike serving as a catalyst to unify the city's 200,000 Black residents, who represented 36 percent of Memphis.

The striking workers included mass meetings, sit-ins at City Hall, marches through downtown, church rallies, all-night vigils, economic boycotts, as well as futile attempts to reason with Mayor Loeb, who remained quite obstinate as the strike moved into March.

¹ *Kingsport Times*. "Sanitation Workers Strike." February 12, 1968. 2.

² *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*. "Memphis Garbage Strike Continues." February 13, 1968. 6



A boycott of local merchants reinforced daily marches through the downtown area of Memphis. The boycott caused sales to decline drastically. The workers' protest also was extended to include the city's two daily newspapers, which encouraged Mayor Loeb's stand against the union from the beginning of the dispute. The strike continued with solid backing for the strikers by other Memphis unions.

One of the highlights of the numerous rallies was the appearance of Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Bayard Rustin of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. More than 15,000 people attended the March 14 rally, which was organized by Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., pastor of Centenary Methodist Church and a key figure in the strike. Wilkins gave a stern rebuke of violence: ". . . this doesn't mean to go out and tear up the town. This is as much your town as anyone else's. Don't foul your nest. Just don't give an inch in your demands."³

Headed by International President Jerry Wurf and SCME International Field Director P.J. Ciampa, negotiations between Local 1733 and the City Council of Memphis locked in round-the-clock sessions. The SCME negotiators forced a showdown with Mayor Loeb because he insisted that he would not meet as long as the employees remained on strike.

King's first appearance in Memphis was Monday, March 18, the 36th day of the strike. He spoke at Memphis's Mason Temple to support the Memphis sanitation workers' strike. In his speech to a crowd of between 9,000 and 13,000, King called for a general work stoppage by Black Memphis residents. "They will hear you then. The City of Memphis will not be able to function that day." He promised to return to Memphis on March 22 to lead a mass march.⁴ A snowstorm eventually postponed the March 22 march that was billed as a "dress rehearsal" for his April 22 "Poor People's Crusade" in Washington D.C. But on March 28, King finally led marchers through Memphis. The march eventually exploded into violence, looting and vandalism in isolated incidents. According to reports, Black youth influenced by "increasing militancy" was responsible for the violence. Window breaking interrupted the march from Clayborn Temple. Police moved into the crowds with nightsticks, mace, tear gas, and gunfire. A 16-year-old boy, Larry Payne, was shot to death. Police arrested 280 people, about 60 were reportedly injured, mostly Black. The state legislature authorized a 7 p.m. curfew and 4,000 national guardsmen moved in.

He promised to return to Memphis in early April for another try. He promised to return to Memphis in early April for another try. "I am convinced we can have a nonviolent demonstration," King told the media after meeting with three Memphis Black power group members called The Invaders, who took responsibility for disrupting King's first march. King explained further, as it pertains to the violence by members of The Invaders during the March 28 demonstration, "We [SCLC] had no part in the planning of the march. Our intelligence was totally nil." King explained that if he had known about such groups, he would have made them parade marshals.⁵

On Thursday, April 3, King returned to Memphis to rally support for a march planned for Monday, April 8, as lawyers battled Federal Judge Bailey Brown who threatened an injunction prohibiting such demonstrations. He addressed a rally at Rev. Samuel B. Kyles' Monumental Baptist Church, where he delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech.

We've got some difficult days ahead," civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., told a crowd gathered at Memphis's Charles Mason Temple on April 3, 1968. "But it doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get

³ Roy Wilkins quoted in *The Memphis Press-Scimitar*. "Advice from Roy Wilkins." March 16, 1968. 4.

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr. quoted in K.W. Cook. "King Urges Work Stoppage by Negroes to Back Strike." March 19, 1968. 1.

⁵ Thomas BeVier. "King Disappointed in March—He'll Try Again Next Week." *The Commercial Appeal*. March 30, 1968. 1.



there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.

On the evening of April 4, King was assassinated by a sniper as he stood on the balcony outside his room (306) at the Lorraine Motel (now the National Civil Rights Museum) in Memphis.

The cause of the strikers was so close to Dr. King that his widow, Coretta, went to Memphis to lead the march he had planned. This occurred on the day before King's funeral in Atlanta. King's death also brought the personal intervention of President Lyndon B. Johnson in the strike resolution discussions. The President dispatched under-Secretary of Labor, James J. Reynolds, to Memphis to aid in resolving the issues.

Negotiations between the union and the city were recessed on April 8 while more than 40,000 persons from all over the nation marched silently in memory of Dr. King. Leading the huge column were Mrs. King, the three older King children, King's successor, Dr. Ralph Abernathy, Jerry Wurf, Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers, and many other leaders of labor, clergy, and civil rights.

On April 16, the 65-day strike came to a conclusion. Union recognition, dues deduction, wage increases, a four-step grievance procedure ended in arbitration. Local 1733 successfully convinced Mayor Loeb and the City Council to end discriminatory practices in promotions and job assignments. The Union made other notable gains for its 1,300 members.

Mayor Loeb, who had vowed that he would never recognize the union nor grant dues deductions, ended up doing both. He also agreed to pay a 10-cent-an-hour increase. The mayor's unyielding attitude and racial overtones had been rallying points during the strike. Even before Dr. King's death, the strikers had won the solid support of the Black community, labor movement, civil rights leaders here and throughout the nation, clergymen of all faiths, and other concerned citizens.

To learn more about the life, teachings, and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visit The King Center at www.thekingcenter.org.

SEL Opener:

- **Discussion:** What kinds of things do you throw in the garbage? Who takes the garbage out in your house? Do you take the garbage out? Should someone get paid a lot to do that everyday? How much would you want to get paid to take the garbage out? What if your sibling or cousin got paid more than you to take out the garbage? How would you feel?

Instructional Activities:

- Activity 1: Read *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop* by Alice Faye Duncan
 - Discuss the characters, plot, feelings, vocabulary, summary, and them



- Activity 2: Read the [Flyer Distributed to Striking Sanitation Workers in Memphis, TN 1968](#).
 - **Small Group/Individual Work:** Complete the [Guided Notes](#)
 - **Large Group Discussion:** Review the guided notes.
 - Discussion Questions: *Which action would you take? Why? Would any of these actions not work today?*
 - Acknowledge the themes among students' answers.

- Activity 3: Read [The 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike That Drew MLK to Memphis](#).
 - **Small Group/Individual Work:** Complete the [Guided Notes](#) / [Answer Key](#)
 - **Large Group Discussion:** Review the guided notes.
 - Discussion Questions: *Why was Dr. King in Memphis? How did it relate and impact the Civil Rights Movement?*
 - Acknowledge the themes among students' answers.

- Activity 4: Take a virtual tour of the [I Am - Tennessee State Museum](#)
 - Complete the [Self-Guided Tour Worksheet](#)
 - **Website Discussion Questions:**
 - 1) Name three reasons why the Memphis sanitation workers went on strike.
 - 2) Name two leaders who helped the sanitation workers' strike.
 - 3) What do you think Dr. King meant when he said: *I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.*

Assessments:

- **OPTION 1:** Complete the [I am a Man Picture Prompt](#).
 - Have the students look at the picture. Encourage them to look at the faces and postures of those in the march and read the signs that they carry.
 - **Prompt:** Have the students pretend they are one of the people in the crowd and have them write about their experience: *What do you see? What do you hear? How do you feel? Why are you there?*

- **OPTION 2:** Watch [The Memphis Strike 1968 - Elmore Nickelberry](#)
 - Write Dr. King a "thank you" note as if you were Elmore Nickelberry.
 - Use the [Thank You Note Worksheet](#)



Adaptations for Student Needs

IEP:

- Sizes of student groups range
- Students team up with a peer partner, while others would prefer to work individually.
- There is a variety of small-group work
- Chunking information
- Visual cues and wait time
- Visual supports (maps, images, PowerPoint slides, handouts)
- Assessments will be modified, and students given extra time

ELD

- Modified/simplified reading material
- Content-related lists/handouts of key terms
- Text is supported by visuals and connected to real-life experiences