



## *“I AM A MAN!”: Race, Masculinity, and the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike*

STEVE ESTES\*

On March 28, 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. directed a march of thousands of African-American protesters down Beale Street, one of the major commercial thoroughfares in Memphis, Tennessee. King’s plane had landed late that morning, and the crowd was already on the verge of conflict with the police when he and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) took their places at the head of the march. The marchers were demonstrating their support for 1300 striking sanitation workers, many of whom wore placards that proclaimed, “I Am a Man.” As the throng advanced down Beale Street, some of the younger strike supporters ripped the protest signs off the wooden sticks that they carried. These young men, none of whom were sanitation workers, used the sticks to smash glass storefronts on both sides of the street. Looting led to violent police retaliation. Troopers lobbed tear gas into groups of protesters and sprayed mace at demonstrators unlucky enough to be in range. High above the fray in City Hall, Mayor Henry Loeb sat in his office, confident that the strike was illegal, and that law and order would be maintained in Memphis.<sup>1</sup>

This march was the latest engagement in a fight that had raged in Memphis since the days of slavery—a conflict over African-American freedoms and civil rights. In one sense, the “I Am a Man” slogan worn by the sanitation workers represented a demand for recognition of their dignity and humanity. This demand caught white Memphians by surprise, because they had always prided themselves as being “progressive” on racial issues. Token integration had quietly replaced public segregation in Memphis by the mid-1960s, but in the 1967 mayoral elections, segregationist candidate Henry Loeb rode a wave of white backlash against racial “moderation” into office. Loeb took his election as a mandate to maintain law and order (i.e. the racial status quo). The mayor still referred to black Memphians as “his Negroes” when he spoke to the press, and observers characterized his vision of race relations as reminiscent of a “plantation mentality.”<sup>2</sup> Strike leaders focused much of their rhetoric on Loeb’s paternalism and denial of the strikers’ manhood. In this interpretation of the “I Am a Man” slogan, the

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<sup>1</sup>Joan Turner Beifuss, *At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Memphis: B & W Books, 1985) 244–245. This is by far the most comprehensive narrative of the sanitation strike published to date.

<sup>2</sup>Gary Wills, “Martin Luther King *Is Still on the Case!*” *Esquire*, August 1968, 99; David Appelby, Allison Graham, and Stephen John Ross, producers of the film *At the River I Stand*, California Newsreel, San Francisco, California. For an excellent analysis of paternalism and civil rights, see William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).



FIG. 1. Strikers and their supporters protesting in March 1968. Photographer Barney Sellers, *Commercial Appeal*. Courtesy of the Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis Library.

calls for manhood were also calls for respect of human dignity of all black Memphians, both women and men. But in another sense, “I Am a Man” represented a distinctly gendered dispute over what it meant to be a man.

On the surface, this fight for recognition of manhood seems straightforward. Once white men began to treat black men with the respect and dignity that black men felt they deserved, the problem might appear to be solved. But there are almost as many different definitions of manhood as there are men, and these change over time. The young men who ripped the signs off their sticks during the march were contesting not only white constructions of manhood, but also the manhood espoused by older black leaders. Definitions of manhood in Memphis were further complicated by the fact that black and white masculinity rested on definitions of womanhood as well as race, age, and class. The struggle for manhood in Memphis resists a simple black and white model of gender identity. The sanitation workers’ protest illuminates a spectrum of meanings for manhood and womanhood in both the black and white communities, and it offers a chance to investigate the ways in which gendered language has been used to confront and, at times, reinforce social and economic inequalities in America.<sup>3</sup>

Until the 1960s and 1970s, labor historians focused almost exclusively on men. Unstated gender assumptions allowed these scholars to use gender-neutral terms such

<sup>3</sup>Much of the recent scholarship on race and masculinity has shaped my analysis here, but the best work is Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For gender analysis in the civil rights movement, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

as “worker” and “organizer” to refer to men only. The rise of women’s history opened up new vistas for gender analysis of labor struggles, but this analysis has only recently influenced the way labor historians look at male workers and male-dominated labor movements. Alice Kessler-Harris, Elizabeth Faue, and others have urged labor historians to recognize that notions of both femininity and masculinity shape the way people understand work and worker rights. Kessler-Harris argues, for instance, “Working-class men continually renegotiated forms of masculinity ... that extrapolated the power of the household and utilized it in their struggle with employers,” even though she notes that these efforts were often only “marginally successful.”<sup>4</sup> While Faue and Kessler-Harris have begun to offer gendered analyses of labor history generally, Joe William Trotter admits that scholars of African-American labor history “know little about the construction of male identities and the changes therein among African American workers.”<sup>5</sup> More often than not, historians have had to read between the lines for gender analysis of labor movements that seemed to concern overtly class or racial issues, because the “normative nature” of masculinity often rendered it “invisible” to the historical actors.<sup>6</sup> Masculinity, racial identity, and labor relations were all highly visible, however, in the Memphis sanitation strike. Workers, union organizers, civil rights leaders, and city officials consciously wielded gendered rhetoric to negotiate wages, the right to unionize, and ultimately power relations between whites and blacks, men and women.

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The racial composition of the Memphis labor force began to shift around the turn of the century when increased mechanization of agricultural production and new urban job opportunities encouraged black migration from farms in the Mississippi Delta to cities like Memphis. This migration exacerbated tensions between black and white urban residents that erupted in periodic outbreaks of violence and lynchings and raised serious questions about race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Black people who had formerly worked the land as sharecroppers competed with whites for manufacturing jobs in Memphis. This led to a working class divided along racial lines. Most attempts to organize interracial alliances among workers in the South failed, and the majority of the Memphis labor unions that survived remained segregated. When white workers fought for raises, they usually demanded higher wages for whites only. As W.E.B. DuBois suggests, white supremacy in the workplace offered higher “psychological wages” for

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<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Faue, “Gender and the Reconstruction of Labor History,” *Labor History*, 34 (1993), 169–177; Alice Kessler-Harris, “Treating the Male as ‘Other’: Redefining the Parameters of Labor History,” *Labor History*, 34 (1993), 190–204. See also Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Laurie Caroline Pintar, “Herbert K. Sorrell as the Grade B Hero: Militancy and Masculinity in the Studios,” *Labor History*, 37 (1996), 392–416.

<sup>5</sup>Joe William Trotter Jr., “African-American Workers: New Directions in U.S. Labor Historiography,” *Labor History*, 35 (1994), 495–523. See also, Early Lewis, “Invoking Concepts, Problematizing Identities: The Life of Charles N. Hunter and the Implications for the Study of Gender and Labor,” *Labor History*, 34 (1993), 292–308.

<sup>6</sup>Kessler-Harris, “Treating the Male as ‘Other,’” 196.

<sup>7</sup>Gail Bederman, “‘Civilization,’ The Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells’ Anti-lynching Campaign,” *Radical History Review*, 52 (1992), 13.

some poor white workers.<sup>8</sup> Integrated unions, like integrated public facilities, might have jeopardized poorer whites' social status.<sup>9</sup>

Low wages and poor working conditions in the Memphis Public Works Department of the 1950s and 1960s were a direct result of racial divisions in the workplace. White supervisors openly discriminated against black employees in job assignments, pay scales, and advancement. Black sanitation workers in Memphis earned so little money at this time that 40% of the men qualified for welfare even though many worked second jobs. In addition to paying minuscule wages, the city attempted to save money by refusing to modernize ancient equipment used by black workers. Until the Public Works Commissioner grudgingly purchased pushcarts and trucks with mechanical packers in the mid-1960s, workers had to carry leaky tubs of garbage on their heads, frequently enduring painful back injuries to remain on the job.<sup>10</sup> To cut costs further, supervisors often sent "nonessential" Public Works employees home on rainy days. Though he and other black workers were the first to lose shifts when it rained, L.C. Reed bitterly observed that "white men worked shine, rain, sleet, or snow. Them supervisors just sit there till four o'clock and then get up and go home ever since I been here. This is not the way to do things."<sup>11</sup>

Although they realized that they would have little support from their white co-workers, black sanitation workers united in the 1960s to gain better wages and working conditions and fight racial discrimination in the Public Works Department. Their first attempt to strike in 1963 failed because of inadequate organization. Former sanitation worker T.O. Jones helped his disgruntled co-workers form Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in 1964, but city officials refused to recognize the union. Another walkout in 1966 also failed to gain the union recognition, but it did win new recruits. "I joined Mr. T.O. Jones and the union in 1966 cause we just wasn't getting justice," said Ed Gillis.<sup>12</sup> These false starts prepared the Public Works employees for a longer struggle that began in earnest in 1968, after an old garbage truck malfunctioned, killing two black workers. The *Commercial Appeal*, one of two white dailies in Memphis, reported that the workers had been

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<sup>8</sup>Du Bois quoted in Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 20. Honey explains that employer control over unskilled black labor led to greater control over unskilled white labor, because a low floor for black wages reduced wages across the board. Michael Honey, "Martin Luther King, Jr., the Crisis of the Black Working Class, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike," in Robert H. Zieger, ed., *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940–1995* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997). For an examination of racial divisions within the American working class in an earlier period, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>For analyses of labor and racial tensions in the South during the first half of this century that were framed in terms of struggles for manhood and womanhood, see Bryant Simon, "The Appeal of Cole Blease of South Carolina: Race, Class, and Sex in the New South," *The Journal of Southern History*, 42 (1996), 1–30; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," in Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki Ruiz, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 298–321. The CIO did successfully unionize black and white workers in the Firestone, Ford, and Fisher plants during World War II. The Firestone union leaders lent their meeting hall to the sanitation workers during the 1968 strike. For examples of successful union organization in other southern cities during this period, see Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), 786–811.

<sup>10</sup>Honey, "Martin Luther King, Jr., the Crisis of the Black Working Class, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike," 154, 156. Beifuss, 33.

<sup>11</sup>Beifuss, 35.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

“ground up like garbage.”<sup>13</sup> The sanitation department paid the workers’ families an additional month’s salary and \$500 for the funeral expenses; but no city representatives attended the funerals, and no further compensation ever reached the families.<sup>14</sup>

On February 12, 1968 the sanitation workers’ union met to discuss the deaths of their co-workers and the partial pay that they had received for rainy days. These incidents pushed the workers beyond the breaking point. Even though they knew that a sanitation strike would have been more effective during summer months when uncollected garbage would have festered in the streets and led to much worse sanitary conditions, these men voted unanimously to walk off the job. They demanded higher wages, dues check-off, time-and-a-half for overtime, safety measures, and back pay for rainy days when they had been asked to go home.<sup>15</sup> All of the sanitation workers were men, but at least one woman attended that seminal meeting, and her speech concerning racial discrimination in the city of Memphis helped spur the men to action and focus their attention on the civil rights dimensions of the strike.

Cornelia Crenshaw reminded the sanitation workers that, despite some union leaders’ claims that this was a simple labor dispute, the “real” issue was race. While labor leaders tried to downplay the issue of race at the beginning of the strike, Crenshaw and the Reverend Ezekial Bell made sure that the issue of racial discrimination in wage rates and raises remained central to the workers’ demands. Bell labeled Crenshaw a “lady well-known as a civic and political leader,” but other public figures denigrated her role in the strike.<sup>16</sup> Gwen Awsumb, the only (white) woman on the City Council, said that Crenshaw “had a chip on her shoulder” after she was fired from the Memphis Housing Authority.<sup>17</sup> As a woman, Crenshaw’s outspoken leadership early in the strike was quite exceptional. Black ministers and white labor leaders quickly overshadowed her public role in the strike, as the media cameras and local citizens focused their attention on the more traditional male leaders of the labor and civil rights movements.

Television crews filmed the strike negotiations from the beginning at the insistence of Mayor Henry Loeb. Loeb knew how to manipulate the local media, and he came out of the early negotiations looking relatively calm and polite when compared to the brash national union representative P.J. Ciampa. Ciampa’s blunt negotiating style pushed many moderate Memphians into Loeb’s corner. Soon after televised negotiations began, some white Memphians showed their disdain for Ciampa with bumper stickers that read, “Ciampa Go Home.” National AFSCME President Jerry Wurf decided at this point that he needed to step in and deal with Loeb directly.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), Feb. 2, 1968.

<sup>14</sup>Beifuss, 30.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 32. Dues check-off is a procedure that allows union members’ dues to be taken directly out of their pay checks in the same way that state and federal taxes are taken out. This procedure ensures that all union members pay their dues on time.

<sup>16</sup>Reverend Ezekial Bell interviewed by Bill Wilson and Jerry Viar, May 28, 1968, University of Memphis, Mississippi Valley Collection #178, Sanitation Strike, Box 20 (Folder 14), 16. From now on, citations from this collection will be MVC Box # (Folder #) pages. Ms. Crenshaw remained an outspoken participant in the strike leadership as a member of the strategy committee for the ministers’ group Community on the Move for Equality (COME).

<sup>17</sup>Councilperson Gwen Awsumb interviewed by David and Carol Lynn Yellin and Anne Trotter, April 26, 1968, MVC 20(6), 8–9.

<sup>18</sup>Richard Lentz, “Sixty-Five Days in Memphis: A Study of Culture, Symbols, and the Press,” *Journalism Monographs*, 98 (1986), 10–11. Lentz shows how the two Memphis papers, which he characterizes as moderate during the desegregation of public facilities in the early 1960s, portray Ciampa as the quintessential northern “outsider,” the carpetbagger.

By February 20 Ciampa and Wurf had worked with local union leaders to edit the strikers' list of demands. The revised list included union recognition through a written contract, a grievance procedure, 10% wage increase, fair promotion policies, sick leave, pension programs, health insurance, and payroll deduction of union dues.<sup>19</sup> Mayor Loeb continued to refuse union recognition and dues check-off from wages, because he believed that this would set a bad precedent for unionization of municipal employees in "his" city. He argued that the sanitation workers were being duped by AFSCME officials ("outsiders"), who only wanted to line their pockets with the hard-earned money of local Memphians. Loeb saw himself as the sanitation workers' keeper. He vowed throughout the strike that he would not abandon his "moral obligation" to protect them from union officials.<sup>20</sup> To the sanitation workers and local black leaders, this kind of rhetoric smacked of paternalism reminiscent of slavery. The workers felt more than capable of making their own decisions about the intentions of the national union. After all, the sanitation workers were not children, but men.

Gradually, the strike leaders began articulating their demands in the gendered language of claiming manhood. Bill Lucy, the highest ranking black official in the national AFSCME organization, voiced the workers' feelings of pride and defiance in the simple slogan, "I Am a Man." Addressing the men at a union meeting in the first week of the strike, Lucy spoke of Loeb's paternalism with biting sarcasm, saying, "The honorable Mayor ... is going to take care of you. He's treating you like children, and this day is over because you are men and must stand together as men and demand what you want."<sup>21</sup> Lucy contrasted his own definition of a man, someone who stood up against the power structure, with a rhetorical caricature of the Mayor's vision of the sanitation workers as child-like, obsequious servants who let white leaders make important decisions for them.

The "I Am a Man" slogan resonated with the sanitation workers, in part, because it echoed a theme of the Delta blues that had pumped out of Beale Street clubs and juke joints since before World War II. Blues music had followed the migration of black sharecroppers from the farms and plantations of the Mississippi Delta to manufacturing and service jobs in cities like Memphis and Chicago. Blues guitar players like B.B. King and Muddy Waters electrified African-American urban audiences in the 1950s with a new amplified version of the acoustic blues that they had learned growing up in the Delta. Although King set the tempo for the Beale Street beat, Waters's Chicago blues recordings first popularized the genre nationwide and dealt directly with African-American manhood.

The title of Waters's song "Mannish Boy," first recorded in 1955, captured the ambiguous position of black men in America during the 1950s. This slow blues ballad began with a black mother telling her five-year-old son that he would one day be "the greatest man alive," but at the age of 21, the son realized that though he felt like a man, people continued to perceive him as a boy. The proof of manhood in "Mannish Boy"—as in many blues songs from this era—was the narrator's sexual prowess. With the chorus, Waters refuted those who questioned black manhood, belting out, "I'm a Man, spelled M-A-N!" and punctuating each line with instrumental breaks and a

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<sup>19</sup>Earl Green Jr., "Labor in the South: A Case Study of Memphis, The 1968 Sanitation Strike and Its Effect on the Urban Community" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, New York University, 1980), 170. Demands as of Feb. 20, 1968.

<sup>20</sup>Gerald McKnight, "The 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike and the FBI: A Case Study in Urban Surveillance," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 83 (1984), 142.

<sup>21</sup>Beifuss, 46.

responsive chorus sung by female vocalists. Waters's claim for manhood, based as it was on sexual prowess, challenged racially exclusive constructions of manhood without confronting the socio-economic basis for white male supremacy. But Waters and other bluesmen laid the cultural foundations for demands of respect for African-American manhood made by political activists during the 1960s. Drawing on the same gender and racial dilemmas that concerned Waters, AFSCME organizer Bill Lucy's "I Am a Man" slogan galvanized the sanitation workers in support of a challenge to white economic and political hegemony in Memphis.<sup>22</sup>

The sanitation workers supported Lucy's definition of manhood when 700 of them sat-in at a City Council committee meeting on February 22. Fred Davis, one of only three black Councilmen, presided over the Public Works committee meeting that began amicably enough, but ended in an angry demonstration by the union. At this protest, the workers listened as local black ministers gave speeches and led freedom songs. Reverend Ezekial Bell got the crowd riled up when he said that he would not care if somebody tore the city seal down off the wall of the meeting hall. After listening to this rousing rhetoric, the sanitation workers refused to leave the hall until the committee finally agreed that a full Council meeting would address a resolution about the strike. The committee recommended that the Council support union recognition and dues check-off, but the resolution passed by the Council the following day said nothing about either proposal. Instead, it recognized the mayor as the sole spokesperson for the city.<sup>23</sup>

The striking workers felt betrayed by the Council. The ministers and union leaders realized that they needed to come up with a nonviolent way for the workers to protest these injustices and release their frustrations. Jerry Wurf remembered:

The men were angry ... They were tired, beaten men, making a struggle that before they died they would stand up and be men. They were not bomb throwers ... But they were really worked up, and when that kind of guy gets worked up, he's worked up. And I was scared.<sup>24</sup>

The police agreed that the sanitation workers could march to Mason Temple Church of God in Christ as long as they stayed on one side of the street. Led by union organizers and ministers, the strikers and their supporters marched towards Mason Temple until a police cruiser reportedly crossed the center line and ran over a female demonstrator's foot. Some of the male marchers began rocking the police car to protect the female marcher, and the police retaliated by spraying the entire procession with mace, including ministers, union leaders, and federal civil rights officials.<sup>25</sup> Shocked and dismayed that they had been maced while wearing their clerical collars, the ministers recognized that the sanitation workers' strike held significance for the entire black community. Like the union officials, the ministers expressed their anger by attacking white paternalism. At a meeting immediately after the march, one minister

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<sup>22</sup>Muddy Waters, *His Best, 1947 to 1955: The Chess 50th Anniversary Collection*, MCA CHD-9370. For a song with similar themes, see Waters's "Hoochie Coochie Man." For a thorough analysis of masculinity and gender in the blues, see Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 72-79, 143.

<sup>23</sup>Beifuss, 75-84, and Bell interview, MVC 21(77), 22. Memphis had just instituted the mayor and city council system of government. The council members were not sure who had the final say in a strike of municipal employees. They decided to pass the political buck on to the mayor.

<sup>24</sup>Beifuss, 86.

<sup>25</sup>Ed Gillis interviewed by David Yellin and Bill Thomas on June 2, 1968. MVC 21(77), 36.

preached, "I am sick and tired of Negroes getting on their knees and begging the great white father for the crumbs that fall from his table."<sup>26</sup>

On February 24, the day after the march, 150 black ministers met to form an organization to support the strikers. This group eventually took the name Community on the Move for Equality (COME), and called for an economic boycott against downtown businesses and the two white daily papers in Memphis (the *Commercial Appeal* and *Press-Scimitar*), which they believed printed biased accounts of the strike.<sup>27</sup> The active support of this ministers' group organized the black community behind the sanitation workers. What had begun as a strike of 1300 black sanitation workers had expanded into a city-wide civil rights struggle. The COME strategy committee, headed by Reverend James Lawson, soon realized that they could bring more pressure on the Loeb administration by inviting national civil rights leaders to Memphis.

Roy Wilkins, NAACP president, came to Memphis along with national labor leader Bayard Rustin on March 14, 1968 to address a crowd of over 9100 people. Wilkins chastised city leaders for not paying the sanitation workers enough to feed their families. This minimum level of acceptable wages was often called a "family wage" or a "living wage." "If I were the mayor of this city," Wilkins said, "I would be ashamed. I wouldn't want these men not to be able to feed their families on the lousy pittance they are paid."<sup>28</sup> With higher wages, Wilkins argued that the workers could fulfill their "traditional" role as men by taking care of their family's financial needs. When Martin Luther King, Jr. came to speak in Memphis four days later, he reiterated this call for a recognition of the strikers' manhood through payment of a living wage.

Local leaders brought King in to speak because they knew that he would bring national media attention to the strike which might force Mayor Loeb to reconsider his position. King succeeded in shining the media spotlight on Memphis, and he also offered his own analysis of the gender implications of the strike. Speaking to a crowd of over 10,000 people, King preached, "We are tired of our men being emasculated so that our wives and daughters have to go out and work in the white lady's kitchen, leaving us unable to be with our children and give them the time and attention that they need."<sup>29</sup> King went on to join the chorus against Loeb's paternalism, saying, "Don't let anybody tell you to go back on the job and paternalistically say, 'Now, you are my men, and I'm going to do the right thing for you.'" <sup>30</sup> King ended his speech with a promise that he would return to lead a massive, nonviolent march in Memphis to support the sanitation workers.

In his speech, King had equated low pay and racist treatment with the tradition of white emasculation of black workers that stretched back to the times of slavery. King's primary motive for addressing the emasculation of black men was an attack on the dehumanizing effects of paternalistic racism and low pay. But King also showed how paternalistic attempts to emasculate black men affected the status and role of black women. When he said that emasculation of black men forced "our wives and daughters ... to go out and work in the white lady's kitchen, leaving us unable to be with our children," he observed that the denial of black manhood affected the ability of black

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<sup>26</sup>David Appelby, Allison Graham, and Stephen John Ross, producers of the film *At the River I Stand*, California Newsreel, San Francisco, California.

<sup>27</sup>Green, 180–182 and Beifuss, 102–103.

<sup>28</sup>Joan Beifuss, *I Am A Man: Photographs of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Memphis: Memphis Publishing Company, 1993), 62.

<sup>29</sup>Transcription of King's first speech at the Mason Temple on March 18, 1968, MCV 22(121), 6.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.



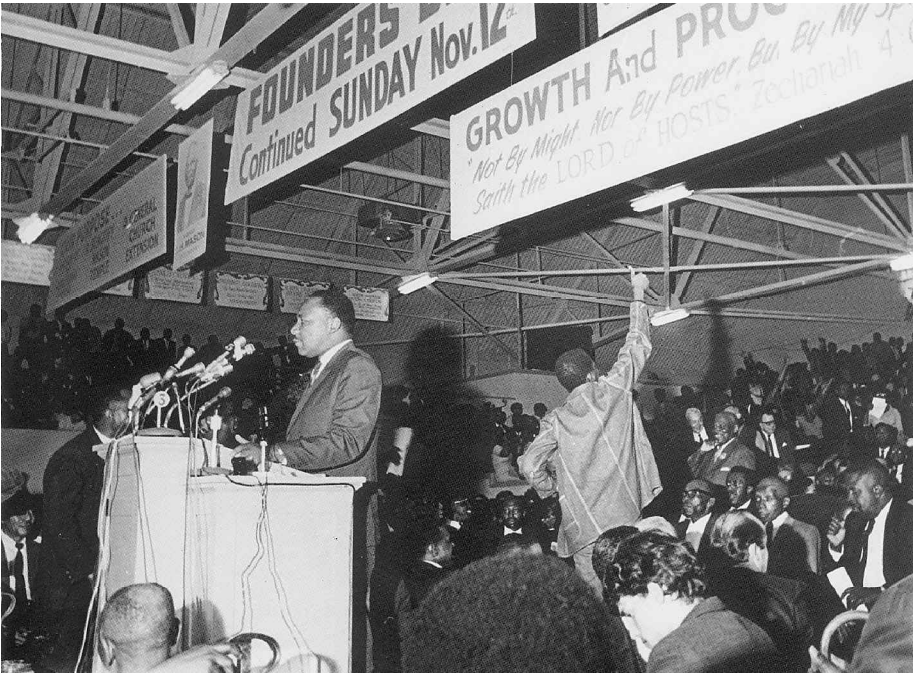


FIG. 2. Martin Luther King Jr., preaching to over 10,000 sanitation strike supporters at the Clayborn Temple in Memphis on March 18, 1968, less than a month before his assassination. Photographer unknown, *Press-Scimitar*. Courtesy of the Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis Libraries.

women to fulfill what he saw as their “true” role as mothers.<sup>31</sup> King accepted a patriarchal ordering of the black family in his call for higher wages and status for black men. He argued for a definition of black womanhood that did not include mandatory domestic servitude in white homes, but did accept domestic roles for black women in their own houses. At the very least, King believed that all families, regardless of race, should have enough income to allow women a choice of whether to work inside or outside the home.

The patriarchal order of American society in the 1960s and the male domination of King’s own SCLC bolstered his patriarchal model of the black family.<sup>32</sup> Because of these societal and organizational gender biases, King and the other leaders of the sanitation strike equated the rights of all humanity to the rights of “mankind.” “I Am a Man” reflected this gender bias in the language and the larger society, but it was not merely an ungendered demand for human rights. Depending on their audiences and

<sup>31</sup>At one point during the movement, King reportedly said, “The primary obligation of women is motherhood.” For the quote, see Adam Fairclough’s *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>32</sup>Interview with Juanita Abernathy in author’s possession. Mrs. Abernathy noted that the only females who were regularly present at SCLC executive staff meetings, Septima Clark and Dorothy Cotton, were often asked to take notes. Clark and Cotton directed the Citizenship Education Program. This was one of the few avenues to leadership for women in SCLC, because it paralleled a “feminine” occupation in the larger society, the teaching profession.

goals, labor and civil rights leaders articulated the various meanings of this slogan in both gendered calls for manhood and gender “neutral” calls for human rights.

The ambiguities between calls for the rights of man and the rights of people can be seen in much of the strike rhetoric. Reverend Lawson told the press that the Mayor “treats the workers as though they are not men, [and] that’s a racist point of view.... For at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person.”<sup>33</sup> In this instance, Lawson was not saying that racism turned black men into women, he was saying that racism precluded full recognition of African-American humanity. But he could not escape the gendered language of the 1960s. At other times during the Memphis movement, strike leaders defined “I Am a Man” in a strict sense of men’s rights rather than the broader construction of human rights.

When King addressed the “emasculatation” of black men in Memphis, he alluded to what many participants and observers believed was the crux of the “I Am a Man” slogan.<sup>34</sup> White men and women had referred to black men in Memphis and throughout the South as “boys” since slavery. This verbal emasculatation paralleled the physical emasculatation of black men in slave beatings, Redemption-era lynchings, and 20th-century KKK retaliation for civil rights activities. The sanitation workers’ slogan was a direct response to the verbal and physical emasculatation of black men. Some strikers and their leaders believed that a nonviolent struggle against the paternalism of the city “fathers” constituted the best way to fight verbal and physical emasculatation, but by 1968 there was a strong, outspoken contingent of black men who saw nonviolence as obsolete.

One organization that advocated an alternative style of civil rights struggle in Memphis was a group of young militants known as the Invaders, made up primarily of black males in their late teens and twenties, who viewed themselves as the radical arm of the civil rights movement in Memphis. Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith organized the Invaders in 1967 as the “security” wing of a group called the Black Organization Project (BOP). Members of COME had made some attempts to include this group of young militants in their organizing efforts, but relations between the two groups were strained. The Invaders advocated Black Power, and their rhetoric often included calls for violent resistance to the city’s white power structure. This rhetoric did not fit into COME’s strategy of nonviolent direct action.<sup>35</sup>

In 1968 Calvin Taylor was a senior at Memphis State University, an intern for the *Commercial Appeal*, and a member of the Invaders. Taylor’s supervisors at the newspaper did not know of his ties to the Invaders, and he attended many of the strike demonstrations as both a participant and observer. Press reports about the Invaders angered Taylor. “It’s kind of cute that they call us Black Power boys,” he noted sarcastically. “White people just can’t get that out of their head, ‘boy.’”<sup>36</sup>

Like many young men on the cusp of adulthood, the Invaders were preoccupied with the rite of passage into manhood. Taylor described Invader recruitment strategies in terms of this rite of passage:

And so we decided, since black people when they’re fourteen years of age—a

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<sup>33</sup>David Appelby, Allison Graham, and Stephen John Ross, “At the River I Stand,” a film by California Newsreel.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, and interviews with Hosea Williams and R. B. Cottonreader in author’s possession.

<sup>35</sup>Calvin Taylor interviewed by Jerry Viar and Bill Thomas on August, 17, 1968, MVC 24(234), 18; and Beifuss, 131–132.

<sup>36</sup>Taylor interview, MVC 24(234), 40.

black boy, when he's fourteen, isn't really a boy, he's a man—'cause he knows what the world is all about. So we decided we'd go a step further—and we'd get people in high school ... and people who [were] freshmen and sophomores in college—to make up this Invader group.<sup>37</sup>

Standing in direct opposition to a racist white definition of black manhood that labeled black males “boys” until they were 60 or 70 years old, Taylor's definition of black manhood began at 14 because he believed that white racism forced young blacks to become worldly and mature at a young age.

If the Invaders' definitions of black manhood contrasted with traditional white definitions, they also contradicted definitions espoused by older, more conservative black leaders. One Invader, who defined himself as a “radical,” stepped up to the microphone at a mass meeting and said:

Preaching and money raising are fine. Somebody has to do it. But there are some *men* out there. We've got to do some *fighting*. Not marching—fighting! And when you talk about fighting a city with as many cops as this city's got, you better have some guns! You're gonna need 'em before it's over!”<sup>38</sup>  
[emphasis in original]

As staunch advocates of the philosophy of nonviolence, Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Lawson certainly did not agree with this construction of manhood that defined men by their willingness to fight the city power structure with violence. When Taylor talked about his conversion from a belief in nonviolence to a strategy based on violence (or at least the rhetorical threat of violence), he said, “It used to be, ‘Man ... okay ... we got beat last night. I got hit over the head five times. Beautiful thing.’ You know. ‘We're doing this for the brothers!’ After a few knocks ... you get kind of tired.”<sup>39</sup> Frustration drove Taylor and other Invaders to seek new forms of brotherhood and new definitions of manhood that accepted (or even sometimes required) participation in violent protest.

On March 28 Taylor and many of the other Invaders got a chance to participate in a violent protest. That was the day that King returned to Memphis to lead the ill-fated march down Beale Street that culminated in a police riot. Although most Invader leaders did not actively participate in the looting and violence, their rhetoric stirred up younger demonstrators and provided a cover for onlookers who came to the march with an agenda that included more than just nonviolent protest. Young protesters held up hand-painted signs with slogans like: “Loeb's Black Day,” “Loeb Eat Shit,” and most subtle of all, “Fuck You Mayor Loeb!”<sup>40</sup> These protesters hated Mayor Loeb's paternalism as much as their nonviolent elders, but they chose a different weapon of resistance.

Few observers could tell who started the looting at the time of the march, but Reverend Lawson remembered that the looters were “chiefly men, chiefly male, under thirty, I suspect.”<sup>41</sup> These young men altered the character of the sanitation strike by rejecting King's calls for nonviolence. After militants brought violence into the demonstrations, King felt compelled to remain involved in the Memphis campaign until he could prove the viability of nonviolent protest.

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>38</sup>Beifuss, 131.

<sup>39</sup>Taylor interview, MVC 24(234), 7.

<sup>40</sup>Beifuss, 219.

<sup>41</sup>Lawson interview on July 8, 1970, MVC 22(141), 17.

The classic story of the civil rights movement characterizes the dichotomy between violence and nonviolence in the movement as a generation gap. As the Invaders' story suggests, there is a certain amount of truth in this portrait, but the story of violence in Memphis cannot be fully explained by teen angst. The Invaders were not the only people who could be driven to violence by frustration with police brutality and the slow pace of change in the civil rights movement. James Lawson, who had worked as a missionary in India and studied Gandhian forms of nonviolent protest, admitted, "It has never been that everyone [in the movement] was a nonviolent person.... I don't pretend, for example, that the sanitation workers were nonviolent. I mean, however, some did get the idea and tried to use it well."<sup>42</sup> There were times during the strike that the strikers and even the ministers got so angry that they threatened violence.

During a mass arrest of strikers and their supporters after a sit-in at City Hall, a police officer told Reverend Henry Starks to "Get along, boy. Go on, boy. Move it, boy," and Starks fired back, "I'm not a boy. I'm the Reverend Mr. Henry Starks and if you call me 'boy' just one more time you are going to have to arrest me for assault."<sup>43</sup> Other well-to-do members of the black community also responded militantly to racist police rhetoric during the sanitation strike. On the day of the march and mini-riot, Harold Whalum, president of a local insurance company, was standing outside of the NAACP offices with Executive Secretary Maxine Smith and a few other women, when a police officer walked by and said, "Get in there you black motherfucker!" Whalum replied, "Is it necessary, do you have to talk to the ladies like this?" The policeman called Whalum a "Black SOB" and knocked him to the ground.<sup>44</sup> Like the working-class strikers, Harold Whalum, an upper-middle-class businessman, had to stand up and "fight" for his manhood during the strike. In this case, Whalum affirmed his manhood by defending the womanhood of fellow NAACP members in the face of police racism and brutality.<sup>45</sup>

Black and white newspaper coverage of striker violence and police brutality highlighted the struggle for manhood in the sanitation strike. The *Tri-State Defender*, the largest black weekly newspaper in Memphis, questioned the restraint and chivalry of national guardsmen who maintained "law and order" during the strike. The paper portrayed the guardsmen as trigger happy cowboys, "waving their shotguns out the window and rudely spitting tobacco on the streets where Negro women are standing."<sup>46</sup> One of the major white dailies, the *Commercial Appeal*, concentrated its attacks on King, who had been forced by his aides to flee Beale Street before the march turned violent. Since most of the other marchers were not so lucky, local white observers levied heavy criticism on King for his early departure from the melee. The *Commercial Appeal*

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<sup>42</sup>Reverend James Lawson interviewed by Joan Beifuss and Bill Thomas on August 21, 1969, MVC 22(135), 44. Lawson argued that people had always questioned the tactics of nonviolence in the movement: "The same question that you get now from among young people about nonviolence, I got them ten years ago from old and young.... There has never been an acceptance of the nonviolent approach. And this is why I dismiss those commentators, who say, you know, 'The Negro accepted nonviolence once and now he doesn't.' This is nonsense" (MVC 22(134), 4).

<sup>43</sup>Beifuss, 159. Reverend Richard Moon interviewed by Judy Schultz, Jerry Viar and Joan Beifuss May 29, 1968, MVC 28(179), 9-10.

<sup>44</sup>Maxine Smith interview, MVC 24(217), 30. Joan Beifuss has a slightly different version of this story, in which the police officer called the female NAACP workers "Black Bitches." *At the River I Stand*, 231.

<sup>45</sup>For an excellent discussion of the controversy over self-defense and issues of masculinity in the NAACP, see Tim Tyson, "Robert F. Williams, 'Black Power,' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History*, 85 (1998), 540-570.

<sup>46</sup>Beifuss, 248.

dubbed King's flight from the disturbance "Chicken a la King." If King was a coward or a "chicken," as the newspaper portrayed him, he certainly could not have been a "true" man.<sup>47</sup>

The white newspapers were not alone in their criticism of King's manhood. Members of the Invaders viewed his nonviolent philosophy as less than manly, even though they held him in high esteem. When King met with Invader leaders after the march debacle, Calvin Taylor observed, "For a man he had very soft looking skin.... But this man actually lived and believed nonviolence. This was one of the reasons he looked so soft to me." Taylor was awestruck by King's presence, but he questioned the civil rights leader's methods and manhood.<sup>48</sup>

King realized that he had to put these and other questions about nonviolence to rest. After violent incidents erupted in the first march, he vowed that he would come back to Memphis and lead a successful nonviolent march before he traveled to Washington for the Poor People's Campaign. He returned to Memphis on April 3, two days before the second march. That night, Ralph Abernathy convinced King to come to Mason Temple to speak to the three or four thousand Memphians who had braved inclement weather to attend the mass meeting. King accepted Abernathy's invitation and gave his now famous "Mountaintop" speech, the last public address of his life. During this speech, King recalled his victorious Birmingham campaign. Given his assessment of emasculation of black men in his first Memphis speech, his choice of metaphor in his second speech was telling. King reminisced, "And there was a power [in Birmingham] which Bull Connor couldn't adjust to; and so we ended up transforming Bull into a steer, and we won our struggle...."<sup>49</sup> King addressed the issue of manhood that had been raised by the sanitation strike, but he summed up the goal of the sanitation strike and the upcoming Poor People's Campaign in broader terms, saying, "And that's what this whole thing is about.... We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people."<sup>50</sup>

King would not be in Washington to lead the Poor People's Campaign, however. James Earl Ray gunned him down the day after the "Mountaintop" speech on April 4, 1968. With King's assassination, the eyes of the nation focused on Memphis and the sanitation strike. Civil rights leaders across the country warned white Americans that they had lost the person most likely to bring a peaceful reconciliation between the races. Former SNCC leader, Stokely Carmichael, predicted a "violent struggle in which black people would stand up on our feet and die like men. If that's our only act of manhood, then Goddammit we're going to die."<sup>51</sup> Carmichael's radical prediction of violent social upheaval came true in many cities throughout the United States, but Memphis remained relatively quiet.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Commercial Appeal*, March 31, 1968, 6; and Lentz, "Sixty-Five Days in Memphis," 29–30.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor interview, MVC 24(135), 41; Beifuss, 253. Taylor remembered that when King entered the room, "it seemed like all of a sudden there was a real rush of wind and everything just went out that was bad and peace and calm just settled over everything." MVC 24(135), 50.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishing, 1968 and 1994), 12–13.

<sup>50</sup> King, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," 7. SCLC leaders like Jesse Jackson used these same ideas to win a hospital workers' strike in Charleston in 1969 with the slogan "I Am Somebody." See Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of the Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

<sup>51</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 288.

<sup>52</sup> Almost one million dollars of property damage and three deaths resulted from the chaos in Memphis

In the wake of King's death, black and white Memphians came together to find meaning in the tragedy. A biracial, multi-denominational contingent of ministers had earlier scheduled a meeting with Mayor Loeb for April 5 to call for a strike settlement, but the meeting took on new importance in light of the assassination and national coverage of the strike. In a prepared statement, the ministers eulogized King as an "eminent preacher of peace, advocate of the power of nonviolent love, promoter and practitioner of true manhood."<sup>53</sup> The ministers used this public forum to throw their support behind King's nonviolent definition of manhood, but many white Memphians still opposed King and what he had stood for. Conservative white City Council members felt that they accurately represented these constituents throughout the strike.

During the month of March, the City Council had met on a weekly basis and continued to throw its support behind Mayor Loeb. While the three African-American members of the City Council backed the strikers in varying degrees, they stood against a strong majority of white Council members that endorsed the mayor's position. Tom Todd, one of the leaders of the Council's white majority, resented the pressure that union leaders placed on the Council with sit-ins. Todd offered a conservative analysis of the struggle, suggesting, "It would have made it a lot easier if these creatures (union leaders) had come down here and acted as men and not ... as gangsters."<sup>54</sup> One of the other Council members observed, "You couldn't have negotiated with any of them any more than you could negotiate with the devil."<sup>55</sup>

While Todd and a few of his compatriots held firm to their anti-union position throughout the strike, other white Council members vacillated. Jerred Blanchard swung his vote behind union recognition before any of the other white Council members. To some angry white constituents "I became the fourth 'nigger' on the Council," Blanchard remembered, and, "That was the night the phone started ringing."<sup>56</sup> Blanchard was not the only one who received calls from irate white Memphians after he altered his strike position. When the papers misquoted Councilwoman Gwen Awsumb as suggesting that it was time for the mayor to compromise, she received calls from many of the white citizens that had helped elect her. One woman screamed, "I voted for you and now you are doing things for those niggers. You are nothing but a cigarette smoking bitch."<sup>57</sup> Awsumb had merely observed that it might be time for the mayor to reconsider his position on the strike, but any breaking of ranks in the sanitation strike was seen as traitorous in certain parts of the white community. If some white Memphians recognized African-American humanity and equality, then what would it mean to be white? This conflict over masculinity and racial identity forced white Memphians whose status rested primarily on their race to attack whites who supported the strikers.

White women who actively supported the strikers, or who had husbands who did, received the brunt of these types of attacks. Reverend Richard Moon, a white minister

after King's death, but other urban areas witnessed more destruction and even heavier casualties. Honey, "Martin Luther King, Jr., the Crisis of the Black Working Class, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike," 166.

<sup>53</sup>J. Edwin Stanfield, "In Memphis: Mirror to America?" (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, Inc. 1968), 5; and Selma Seligman Lewis, "Social Religion and the Memphis Sanitation Strike" (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Memphis State University, 1976), 131.

<sup>54</sup>Beifuss, 150.

<sup>55</sup>Quote is by Bob James. David Appelby, Allison Graham, and Stephen John Ross, "At the River I Stand" a film by California Newsreel.

<sup>56</sup>Beifuss, 163.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, MVC 20(8), 24. Prior to the misquote in the paper, Awsumb had received calls from black women who also disagreed with her position, but she did not note what those callers said.

who went on a hunger strike outside Mayor Loeb's office after King's assassination, said that his wife received the most offensive calls. He said that "both men and women ... would express themselves in very vivid terms about how my wife had had sexual intercourse with blacks, ... and that there were probably certain parts of her anatomy that were black."<sup>58</sup> The sexual nature of this attack reveals the extent to which white male supremacy rested on control of white women's and black men's sexuality. Criticisms of Moon and Awsumb highlight the degree of gender and racial conformity expected of southern white women during this period of social upheaval when notions of masculinity were in flux.<sup>59</sup>

Black women offered vital support for the sanitation workers, but their actions raised different questions about the gender and racial hierarchy of Memphis society from the challenges posed by white women. Many of the sanitation workers' wives and female supporters worked double shifts out of necessity before and during the strike. They cooked and cleaned for white families during the day and performed these chores again for their own families at night. For these women, the struggle for black equality included the struggle to attain an equal footing with the white women for whom they worked. While white women were learning from Betty Friedan about the feminine mystique and the stifling seclusion of the domestic sphere, black female domestics left their own "domestic sphere" only to enter another one in the white community. They faced an entirely different mystique from their white "sisters."<sup>60</sup>

During the 1968 school year, white teachers at St. Mary's Episcopal School for Girls in Memphis asked their students to write essays about their black maids. The girls' essays reveal how members of the white community learned of the "proper" place for black women in southern society. One student said that Catherine, the black woman that worked in her house, was "very modern, but ... still as loyal and kind as the old plantation mammies." She went on to thank "those Dutch traders that brought such a valuable commodity to America."<sup>61</sup> This student recognized a difference between "modern" and "traditional" attitudes in black women, but she still viewed African-Americans as "commodities" rather than people. Other students echoed these sentiments in their praise of "loyal maids" and criticism of "uppity" ones. One student saw that black maids could allow white women to break out of the role of homemaker. She said, "I feel that a mother should not be required to stay at home because society feels it is good for her children. There are so many things that they have to do today that a maid can ease the burden."<sup>62</sup> While this student questioned "traditional" gender roles for white women, she completely accepted older roles for black servants. She recognized, without a hint of irony, that black women's labor played a key role in white women's liberation.

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<sup>58</sup>Richard Moon interviewed by Judy Schultz, Jerry Viar, and Joan Beifuss on May 29, 1968. MVC 28(179), 19.

<sup>59</sup>After the strike, women in Memphis organized to tackle their own issues. Some of the female supporters of the strikers organized as the Concerned Women of Memphis in 1968. This group pressured Memphis leaders to reach a relatively quick settlement in a hospital strike that followed the sanitation strike. Lawson interview on Sept. 23, 1969, MVC 22(137), 29. For more information on the Concerned Women of Memphis, see a publicity pamphlet and summary in MVC 7(42)—Item #21.

<sup>60</sup>For an analysis of black women's relationship to the movement, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William and Morrow Company, Inc., 1984).

<sup>61</sup>Speeches on "Maids" from St. Mary's Episcopal School for Girls. University of Memphis, Mississippi Valley Collection #178, Sanitation Strike, 23 (209).

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

Black women advocated civil rights because southern society tied their status to their race, but their public advocacy of racial equality also challenged existing constructions of gender. While black women from Memphis did not organize and protest for their own rights as women in 1968, they certainly recognized the broader implications of the sanitation strikers' claims to manhood. Higher wages for black male workers meant the possibility of freedom from the double burden borne by black women. Black women in Memphis supported the sanitation strikers' calls for manhood and higher wages because recognition of African-American manhood would lead to increased recognition of African-American humanity. Mrs. L.C. Reed, the wife of one of the strikers, summed up her view of the strike in yet another bitter critique of Loeb's position:

He was telling them like some little child, like you tell a little child, "Go on back to work, I'll give you some candy." ... You can[']t treat them like little children, you know, anybody. Mens are mens these days, no matter what color they are.<sup>63</sup>

As a woman and executive secretary of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP, Maxine Smith also recognized the salience of gender roles in the sanitation strike. She described the difficulties of raising a child while being active in the movement. Smith was asked if she thought she had "failed" her child by taking him to demonstrations and "not teaching him to respect police." She responded that she "didn't have to teach him," because his "first confrontation with police was a very negative one."<sup>64</sup> Like many mothers, Smith was expected to take care of her child before she joined the demonstrations, but she had other ideas of maternal responsibilities. These included ample doses of protest as well as loving care.

Union and civil rights leaders knew that without the assistance and participation of black women, their movement would have ground to a halt. Women marched and attended the mass meetings just as frequently as men, and their actions spoke louder than many of the men's words quoted in the daily papers. During one march to City Hall, the male leaders consciously placed the women in the front of the crowd as a shield. One male observer remembered that "some of the men decided ... "Well, they're not going to hurt the women, so put [them] out in front."<sup>65</sup> These leaders borrowed this strategy from King's Birmingham campaign, in which public opinion had swung against Bull Connor when he turned fire hoses on women and children. Conflict between armed male authorities and unarmed female protesters served SCLC well in news coverage of Birmingham, Memphis, and later in Charleston. But women were not limited to "silent" roles in these civil rights campaigns. During a mass meeting after King's assassination, one observer noted, "In a large place like Mason Temple, women set up nuclei around the hall and sang their own variations on the sermon coming out of the loudspeakers."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Mr. and Mrs. L.C. Reed interviewed by Bill Thomas on July 15, 1968. (Mrs. Reed's first name not given.) MVC 23(203), 18.

<sup>64</sup>Smith interviewed on June 13, 1968, MVC 24(217), 35.

<sup>65</sup>Reverend Richard Moon interview, MVC 28 (178), 28.

<sup>66</sup>Wills, "Martin Luther King Is Still On the Case," 101. For more on women's roles in the movement see Vicki L. Crawford, Jacquelyn Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); and Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), especially Chapter Nine, "A Woman's War."



The continued mass meetings at Mason Temple, pressure from local merchants and Federal officials, and the specter of the King assassination weighed heavily on Loeb and the other city officials during the first half of the month of April. On April 16 city and union officials got together to formalize a strike settlement. The final agreement included a 15 cent hourly wage increase, a “memorandum of understanding” concerning the existence of the union, dues check-off, strictly merit-based promotion, and an end to racial discrimination in the workplace.<sup>67</sup> The union had not received official recognition as the sole bargaining agent for the workers, but the memorandum of understanding allowed both sides to exit the dispute claiming victory. Loeb believed that nothing had really changed in Memphis due to the sanitation strike, but strikers and their supporters felt differently. Local union official Robert Beasily proclaimed 20 years later, “I am a man; I guess that really did mean something. Didn’t it?”<sup>68</sup> SCLC staffer Hosea Williams elaborated on Beasily’s statement:

White folks, and particularly white southerners, have addressed African-Americans as “boy,” and a boy is someone controlled by a parent. But a man is someone [that] makes his or her own decisions in relation to the conditions, so what they were saying to the city [was] ... “We are no longer your children. We are men, and men make decisions for themselves.”<sup>69</sup>

The male sanitation workers fought hard for recognition of their manhood and their union, but both struggles ended inconclusively. The struggles for human dignity and new definitions of manhood do not end in the tangible victories or defeats that are usually found in studies of civil rights and labor conflicts. Gender and racial identities are constantly being reconstructed and contested. The sanitation strikers won higher wages and challenged the mayor’s paternalism. For a time, their local, AFSCME 1733, became the largest single union in the city with almost 6000 members, the vast majority of whom were black. And beyond the Memphis city limits, the strike, according to union official Bill Lucy, won “a new kind of respect and a new kind of recognition” for sanitation workers across the country.<sup>70</sup> In short, the strikers gained pride and dignity—for themselves, for their families, and for working-class black men and women in Memphis and the rest of the nation. But the movement continued. For over a year after the sanitation strike, black employees who tried to organize other city departments in Memphis wore “I Am a Man” signs.<sup>71</sup> When African-American auto workers in Michigan formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in 1968, they sang:

For hours and years with sweat and tears  
Trying to break our chain ...  
We broke our backs and died in packs  
To find our manhood slain ...  
But now we stand for DRUM’s at hand

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<sup>67</sup>Green, 315–316.

<sup>68</sup>David Appelby, Allison Graham, and Stephen John Ross, “At the River I Stand” a film by California Newsreel.

<sup>69</sup>Hosea Williams interview in author’s possession. In this quote, Williams exhibits the disparity between the language of 1968 and 1996—the tension between the “rights of man” and “human rights”—when he says that “a man is someone [that] makes *his or her* own decisions.”

<sup>70</sup>Honey, “Martin Luther King, Jr., the Crisis of the Black Working Class, and the Memphis Sanitation Strike,” 167–168.

<sup>71</sup>Henry P. Liefermann, “A Year Later in Memphis,” *Nation*, March 31, 1969, 401–403.

To lead our freedom fight,  
And now til then we'll unite like men  
For now we know our might ...<sup>72</sup>

These workers realized that the fight for manhood and human dignity was not over. And as the recent Million Man and Million Woman marches suggest, the struggle continues today.

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<sup>72</sup>William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 97.