

# All Labor Has Dignity: An Inquiry into the Memphis Sanitation Strike

Erin Green

Before teaching the civil rights movement, I always ask the same question: “What do you know about the civil rights movement? *Who* do you know?” Each year, the answers can be summed up in the words of Julian Bond: “Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, then the white folks saw the light of day”<sup>1</sup> The complexities of the civil rights movement are rarely presented in elementary social studies. Year after year, students repeat the same decontextualized “I Have a Dream” crafts and assignments, tasks that do little to help students understand our country’s history of racism or the racial dynamics of today. Instead of perpetuating the myth that a select handful of heroic figures made change on their own, educators should situate these figures within collective struggles for justice<sup>2</sup> and interrogate what these figures stood for and stood against.<sup>3</sup>

## A Short History of the Memphis Sanitation Strike

The Memphis Sanitation Strike took place from February 12, 1968 to April 16, 1968, and was led by Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, doing “full-time work for part-time pay” while being subjected to dangerous working conditions without opportunities for advancement. On February 1, 1968, sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were killed in the back of a garbage truck while seeking cover from rain. Cole’s and Walker’s deaths, combined with years of abysmal pay and poor treatment, convinced 1,300 Black sanitation workers to strike. For 65 days, they took to the streets, and for 65 days, Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb refused to negotiate.<sup>4</sup> The strike eventually brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis, where he gave his prophetic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, two weeks before he was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. King’s involvement in Memphis illustrates his commitment to labor justice and his deep critiques of capitalism, two aspects of Dr. King typically excluded from elementary curriculum. By inquiring into the Memphis Sanitation Strike, young students can investigate a more nuanced story of Dr.

King’s activism, the overlapping struggles of racial justice and labor justice movements, and the power of collective organizing led by ordinary people.

## The Inquiry

This upper-elementary inquiry centers the story of 1,300 ordinary men in Memphis, their struggle for racial and economic justice, and the labor movement that would ultimately be Dr. King’s final battle. Through a read aloud of Alice Faye Duncan’s picture book, *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop*,<sup>6</sup> a four-part primary source investigation, and the curation of a mock museum exhibit, students will engage with Dr. King as a multilayered player in a larger fight for justice, rather than a heroic speaker with a singular mission to end segregation. The inquiry is driven by the compelling question, “What does the Memphis Sanitation Strike teach us about labor and economic justice, Dr. King, and the ways in which ordinary people can make change?” This compelling question can be broken up into three supporting questions:

1. What does the Memphis Sanitation Strike teach us about what Dr. King advocated for and what he fought against?
2. What does the Memphis Sanitation Strike teach us about how labor and racial injustice are related?
3. How did Black workers and their community work together to make change during the Memphis Sanitation Strike?

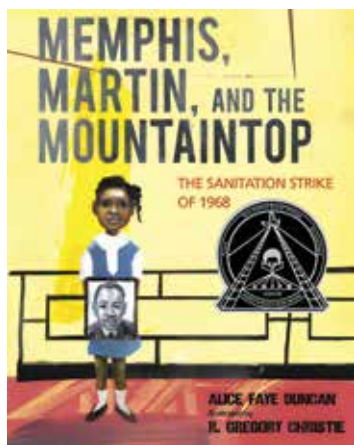
## Sparking Curiosity

To begin, ask students how their community gets rid of garbage each week. Then ask, “What would it be like if no one came to pick up your trash for several weeks or months?” Invite students to draw a picture of what the streets might look like in this situation and to share their drawings with small groups. Then ask students why they think trash would

not be picked up for an extended time. As students share, provide support to arrive at the word *strike*. Define the word for the class and tell students that they will be learning about the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968, a time of protest in which Black sanitation workers refused to go to work because they were not being treated fairly. Emphasize to students that you will be using the phrase *sanitation worker* because it carries more *dignity*, or respect, than other titles commonly used to describe this job.

In addition to the word *strike*, key vocabulary words that may be unfamiliar to elementary students include *sanitation*, *labor*, *union*, *economics*, *poverty*, and *dignity*. While young children may not know these words, they do have conceptual knowledge that will support their understanding, including ideas of fairness, work, pay, rich vs. poor, and respect. Teachers should start with and build on these familiar concepts to define new words as they arise throughout the inquiry.

### Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop



This inquiry is designed to be used alongside the picture book *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop* by Alice Faye Duncan. This book tells the story of the Memphis Sanitation Strike through the eyes of Lorraine, the young daughter of a sanitation worker. In lyrical prose, Duncan describes the context and working con-

ditions that led to the strike, the sacrifices that Black families and the Black community made for the sake of the strike, Dr. King’s arrival and involvement in Memphis, his assassination and its aftermath, and the eventual victory “on a blue note” of the strike. Before reading the book aloud to students, reiterate the definition of the word *strike*, and provide students with a definition and illustration of the terms *labor union* and *economics*. Then, pose the inquiry’s compelling and supporting questions to students. Write these questions down so that students can see and refer to them throughout the lesson. Read the book aloud to students, stopping both as needed to engage with unfamiliar words and also at the following moments for discussion. Teachers of younger students may want to split the read aloud over two or three days.

In the section “Marching Orders,” Duncan describes the working conditions and the demands of the striking workers. The sanitation workers’ demands can be summarized into three main points: (1) union recognition, (2) better treatment, and (3) better pay. Write these three demands down so that

students can see and reference them throughout the inquiry.

In the section “Winter Blues,” Duncan describes how the strike generated a loss of income for sanitation workers and their families. Ask students, “What is this family sacrificing to participate in the strike? Why are they willing to do this?” This will encourage students to think about the struggle and sacrifices of striking workers and the costs and affordances of collective organizing.

In the section “Silver Rights,” Duncan writes, “The Memphis struggle was an economic fight. Better wages and pay were a matter of Silver Rights. Poverty was a Silver War. My daddy and his friends were the working poor.” Ask students to consider what Duncan means by “Silver War” and how racial and economic injustices may be related. In this same section, Dr. King is quoted as saying, “All labor has dignity.” Repeat the phrase several times, and write it down on a whiteboard or chart paper where students can see it. Circle words in the phrase that may be new or unfamiliar, and invite students to replace unfamiliar words with familiar ones. Use this process to create a rewritten phrase such as, “All work has respect.” Ask students to discuss what Dr. King might mean by this statement.

Lastly, in the section “Dreamers,” Duncan says, “Somebody wanted to kill [Dr. King’s] dream of economic freedom for the working poor.” Ask students what “economic freedom for the working poor” might mean, repeating the process of circling and replacing unfamiliar words, if needed. These combined discussions should focus students’ attention on the economic struggle of the late civil rights movement and the overlap of labor and racial justice.

### Analyzing Primary Sources with Elementary Students

After the read aloud, students will analyze multiple primary sources (see sidebar on page 19). Analyzing primary sources can be an intimidating process that must be modeled and explicitly taught by educators,<sup>7</sup> but with proper support and scaffolding, engagement with primary sources can support students as they formulate their own evidence-based understandings of history and current events.<sup>8</sup> The National Archives outlines the process of primary source analysis in four steps: (1) meet the document, (2) observe its parts, (3) try to make sense of it, and (4) use it as historical evidence.<sup>9</sup> These first steps are crucial—before students can make inferences, analyze, or synthesize, they need ample time to focus on what they see, including both words and images. For example, before we can make the inference that “this document is a contract,” we must name the observation, “it looks like a piece of paper. There are signatures at the bottom.” Making the process of (1) observation to (2) inference to (3) analysis more transparent can break down the intimidation that students or teachers may feel about engaging with unfamiliar documents and can help build



Sanitation workers (1971, colorized)

## Inquiry Sources

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Clayborn Temple, or, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee (1974, colorized)

confidence toward engaging with more complex sources.

For text-heavy sources, “observing the parts” of the source might include highlighting or circling unfamiliar words. Students should then decide if they can understand the source without the circled words or if they need to replace them with familiar words. Teachers may choose to keep a running list of unfamiliar words with definitions and familiar synonyms that students can access throughout the inquiry.

Throughout this inquiry, further analysis is facilitated through document-based questions (DBQs). DBQs grow in complexity as they progress, and each previous question should help students to answer the next one.<sup>10</sup> In the following DBQs, observation questions are not explicitly named, but students should always answer “What do you notice?” before engaging with inference and analysis questions.

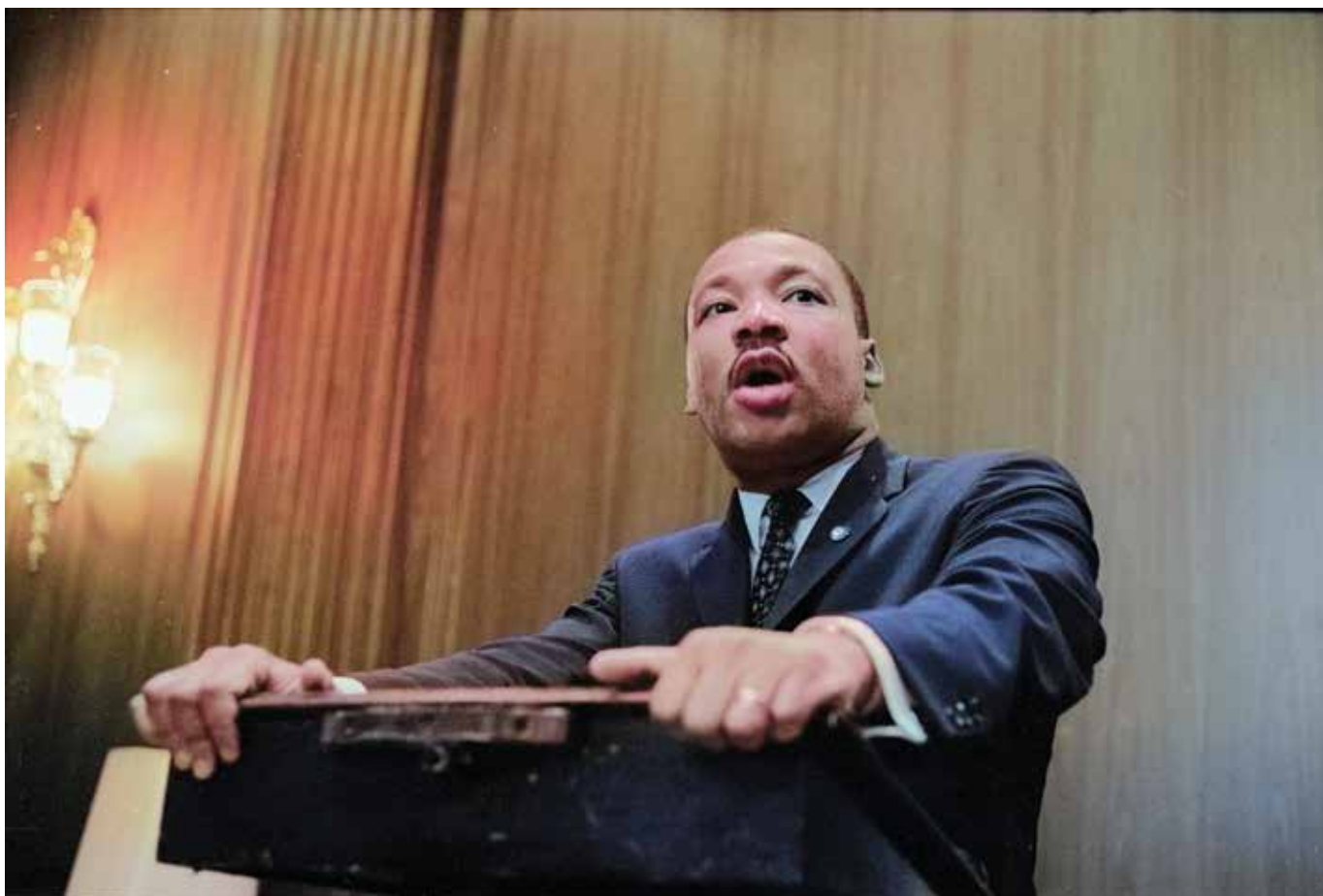
It will be helpful to analyze the first few sources (perhaps all of Part One: Working Conditions, sources 1–4) together to practice this progression with students. As students gain confidence in the process, they can be gradually released to continue working through DBQs in small groups, in pairs, or independently. Teachers of younger students might choose to employ additional scaffolds, such as continued whole-group or small-group instruction, using an abbreviated selection of sources or relying more heavily on visual sources and the

continued use of *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop* in place of the text-heavy sources (i.e., sources 8, 10, 13, and 14).

### Primary Source Analysis **Part One: Working Conditions**

Garbage collection in the 1960s looked very different than it does today. Trash receptacles were metal bins of varying sizes, and people were not required to use trash bags or to bring their trash to the curb. Sanitation workers were required to walk through lawns and driveways to collect bins of trash, oftentimes stacking overflowing, rusted metal containers on top of each other. Additionally, workers were paid wages that left them well below the poverty line and were dismissed from work without pay on rainy or snowy days. Without a union, workers were left with few opportunities to improve their conditions.<sup>11</sup>

Have students examine the following quotations (source 1), two photographs illustrating scenes similar to the one described by Thomas (sources 2 and 3), and a 1968 pay stub showing a net income of \$137.13 for 90 hours of sanitation work (adjusting for inflation, this would be about \$1,000 today) (source 4). Students may also want to look at these primary sources alongside a reexamination of the section “Marching Orders” in *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop*,



**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at a press conference at the U.S. Capitol in 1964 (colorized)**

which features an illustration that echoes the photographs and provides more context on both the demographics of the sanitation workers, who “shared one common trait: ... most of the men were Black,” and also the amount of money included on the paystub. Duncan describes, “Even with a full-time job, [sanitation workers] needed government help to buy groceries.” Additionally, teachers may choose to bring in a clean metal trash barrel like those used in the 1960s for students to see and touch.

### **Sources and Analysis**

Quotations (source 1):

Sanitation worker James Robinson: “Before the union, it was whatever they decided they wanted to pay you. If they wanted to pay you they did, if they didn’t want to they wouldn’t. I wasn’t makin’ a ... thing. You can’t pay the light bill on no 96 cents an hour. ... We were workin’ every day for welfare wages.”<sup>12</sup>

Sanitation worker S. T. Thomas: “We were the pickers, with our hands. ... They would set [the trash barrels] right under the edge of their house or the garage to where the water run off the house right down in the cans. ... Extremely heavy. So we’d

team up on it and tote the barrel out ... it’s gonna be stinkin’ and have flies and things.”<sup>13</sup>

Looking at sources 1–4, students should first name their observations, define unfamiliar words, and then engage with the following questions:

- What were the working conditions like for sanitation workers?
- How might these working conditions and lack of pay have motivated a strike?
- How do these sources show a connection between racial and economic injustice?

### **Part Two: Striking**

On February 12, 1968, sanitation workers began their strike knowing that Tennessee law declared strikes by city workers illegal. During the 65-day strike, sanitation workers met daily in union halls and churches, marched across the city from Clayborn Temple to picket Memphis City Hall, staged all-night vigils, and called for a boycott of businesses supporting the mayor.<sup>14</sup> They made their demands clear: They wanted formal union recognition, union dues to be automatically taken from paychecks, a pay raise, and better working con-

ditions. Week after week, Mayor Loeb refused to negotiate. Despite Loeb's unwillingness to cooperate, hostile White media portrayals of the workers, and violence by the police, strikers and the Black community in Memphis continued their protest.<sup>15</sup> Before beginning this section of the inquiry, remind students of the three big demands made by striking workers: (1) union recognition, (2) better treatment, and (3) better pay. Ensure that students can access these three demands throughout the inquiry.

### Sources and Analysis

During the strike, White community members hauled their own trash to impromptu dumping sites to show their support for the mayor. In contrast, Black communities displayed solidarity with the striking workers.<sup>16</sup> Show students the photograph "Street Scene during the Memphis sanitation strike, 1968," (source 5), a scene very similar to that described on the picture book pages titled "Winter Blues," and ask them to consider the following questions:

- Why do you think the people in this neighborhood are not picking up their trash?
- What did Black community members sacrifice in their support of the strike?
- What impact do you think street scenes like this may have had on the success of the strike?

Next, show students two protest photographs (sources 6 and 7). The first photograph shows Black men marching through the Memphis streets, holding signs that read "I Am a Man." The second showcases a similar scene and includes a view of armed police officers lining the street. These scenes are also described in the "Beale Street" pages of *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop*. Ask students to look at both photographs as they consider the following questions:

- Why do you think their signs say "I Am a Man"?
- Why do you think the police are armed?
- What do these photographs teach you about the relationship between Black protestors and the police?

Finally, show students Mayor Loeb's letter to sanitation strikers (source 8), and focus students' attention on this particular excerpt:

A strike of public employees is illegal. We are a nation governed by laws and as Mayor I have given my oath to uphold the law. As a precondition to any rearrangement of wages and working conditions, the strike must end. After this condition is met, I will again sit down with representatives of employees of the Public Works Department. ... I will recommend to the Council a salary increase of 8¢.<sup>17</sup>

After identifying and defining or replacing unfamiliar words, ask students to consider the following questions:

- What is the big idea of Mayor Loeb's letter?
- Mayor Loeb insists that the sanitation workers are breaking the law by striking. Why do you think he focuses on this?
- Does this proposal meet the sanitation workers' demands? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the strikers continued to refuse to go back to work after receiving this letter?

### Part Three: Dr. King's Involvement

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s focused on ending legal segregation and prioritized the advancement of the Black middle class. By 1968, working class Black communities still struggled with poor wages and harsh working conditions.<sup>18</sup> Dr. King argued that the Black middle class was out of touch with the realities of the Black working poor, and he envisioned a multiracial coalition of poor people working together for economic justice: The Poor People's Campaign.<sup>19</sup> It was this fight for economic justice for the poor that brought him to Memphis.

### Sources and Analysis

To learn about Dr. King's involvement with the strike, students should begin by reading the following quotation from Dr. King, spoken prior to his involvement in Memphis (source 9).

There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. ... Why should there be hunger ... in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life? ... There is no deficit in human resources, the deficit is in human will. ... The time has come for an all-out world war against poverty.<sup>20</sup>

Students should consider the following questions:

- What is Dr. King arguing for?
- How is this quotation different from other Dr. King quotations you have heard?
- Dr. King wrote this months before traveling to Memphis. How do you think his thinking during this time period influenced his involvement in the sanitation strike?

Then, have students read and watch the following portion of Dr. King's "All Labor Has Dignity" speech delivered to striking workers at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in 1968 (source 10):

You are doing many things here in this struggle.

You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. ... All labor has dignity.<sup>21</sup>

Have students discuss the following questions:

- What was Dr. King’s message to the striking workers?
- What did Dr. King mean by his statement “all labor has dignity”?
- How do you think poor people and striking workers responded to this message?
- How do you think wealthy people in power responded to this message?

Last, engage students in an analysis of photographs taken after Dr. King’s assassination.

The first image shows King’s funeral march, led by the widowed Coretta Scott King (source 11). The second photograph features an Atlanta sanitation worker kneeling at Dr. King’s grave in 1970, wearing a sign featuring the Memphis strike’s poignant slogan, “I Am a Man” (source 12). Students can look at both images together to consider the following questions:

- What do these photographs tell you about how people were impacted by Dr. King’s death?
- How do you think Dr. King’s death impacted the sanitation strike? How might it have impacted the larger civil rights movement?

#### **Part Four: Impact of the Strike**

After 65 days of striking, boycotting, marching, and organizing, and 12 days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mayor Loeb finally negotiated with union representatives, and sanitation workers accepted the terms unanimously.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Sources and Analysis**

To begin an analysis of the impact of the strike, instruct students to read the key contract terms (source 13). After reading the terms, engage students with the following questions:

- What were the striking workers’ three big demands? How do these accepted terms compare to their original demands?
- Do you consider this a victory? Why or why not?
- How do you think the strike and these victories have impacted sanitation workers today?

The final source included in the inquiry features the 1969 *Time Magazine* article titled, “The City: Echoes of Memphis” (source 14). Focus students’ attention on the beginning of the article:

Disturbing the stagnant peace are more than 350 black hospital employees, most of them women, most of them of limited education and skill, who work as nurse’s aides, practical nurses, orderlies, kitchen help, janitors and maids. The majority earn between \$1.30 and \$1.60 an hour. They are striking two hospitals, making the issues not wages and working conditions, but simply union recognition and the right to collective bargaining.<sup>23</sup>

Discuss the following questions with students:

- How are the events in Charleston, South Carolina, similar to those in Memphis?
- How do you think the Memphis strikers may have influenced the Charleston strikers?
- What does this article tell you about the impact of the Memphis sanitation strike?

#### **Concluding the Inquiry: Curating a Museum Exhibit**

After analyzing all sources, return to the inquiry’s compelling and supporting questions. Give students time to independently brainstorm their answers in response to these questions, using their DBQ responses for support. Then, direct students to answer the inquiry’s supporting questions through the curation of a museum exhibit (either with printed sources and poster paper or through a digital slideshow). Working independently or in small groups, students should choose one primary source from the inquiry that helps to answer each supporting question, for a total of three sources. Students should then caption each source with one to three complete sentences that (a) describe the source in their own words, (b) answer the supporting question, and (c) use key vocabulary words from the inquiry. Teachers might also choose to have students caption their selected images with related quotations from *Memphis*, *Martin*, and *the Mountaintop*.

After selecting and captioning sources, students should title their exhibits and purposefully order their chosen sources in the way that they think best tells the story of the sanitation strike. Last, students should write one paragraph that ties all three sources together, answering the inquiry’s compelling question. After students have completed their projects, facilitate class presentations or a gallery walk.

#### **Conclusion**

Through this inquiry into the Memphis Sanitation Strike, teachers and students can engage with a more complex pic-



ture of Dr. King and the civil rights movement, challenging the narratives typically presented in elementary classrooms. Learning about social movements like the collective organizing of 1,300 sanitation workers in Memphis instead of focusing on Dr. King as a singular messianic leader could provide opportunities for students to make connections between the past and the present and to see themselves as one of many potential activists engaged in a collective struggle for a better world. ■

#### Notes

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