

# Never forget

## Echol Cole, Robert Walker and the Memphis Sanitation Strike

Echol Cole, 36 and Robert Walker, 30 were two sanitation workers killed while traveling in the back of garbage trucks in Memphis, Tennessee on Tuesday, February 1, 1968.

*“It was a gruesome chore to retrieve the two crushed bodies from the garbage packer (an old obsolete truck) and pronounce them dead at John Gaston Hospital. Echol Cole and Robert Walker soon became the anonymous cause that diverted Martin Luther King to Memphis for his last march. City flags flew at half-mast for them, but they never were public figures. . . . Cole and Walker would not be listed among civil rights martyrs, nor studied like Rosa Parks as the catalyst for a new movement.”* Adapted from Taylor Branch’s *On Canaan’s Edge*

Because the city listed them as unclassified, hourly employees they were not covered by workers compensation. The one month’s salary and \$500 for each man were less than their burial expenses. Neither man had life insurance. Walker’s wife Earline was pregnant when he died.



**Learn from history to help make history**



The sanitation workers strike began on February 11, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. Citing years of poor treatment, discrimination, dangerous working conditions, and the recent work-related deaths of Cole and Walker, some 1300 black sanitation workers walked off the job in protest. They sought to join the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733.

Over the next 64 days, the strike grew into a major civil rights struggle, attracting the attention of the national news media. AFSCME and the workers demanded union recognition, wage increases, and an end to discrimination. Local clergy members and community leaders also undertook an active campaign, including boycotts and civil disobedience. The strike ended on April 12, 1968, with a settlement that included union recognition and wage increases, although additional strikes had to be threatened to force the City of Memphis to honor its agreements.

Prior to his death on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. also took an active role in mass meetings and street actions in support of the striking workers as part of his Poor People's Campaign strategy to highlight the need to bring together a multi-racial coalition to fight poverty.

**On April 4, remember Reverend Martin  
Luther King, Ecol Cole and Robert Walker  
Pray for the dead, fight for the living**

**Connecticut Council on Occupational Safety and Health**