

Review

Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign

Michael K. Honey (2007)
Reviewed by Steve Faulkner

If you can only buy one book this year, I urge you to seriously think about buying *Going Down Jericho Road*. This is the story of the historic 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers strike (municipal garbage collectors) and their fight for union recognition. This account is however, much more than that. This was also the strike that claimed the life of Dr Martin Luther King Jnr (MLK).

The book provides an inside view of what led to the strike of the most downtrodden and exploited workers employed by the City of Memphis. Workers who after extensive overtime did not earn a living wage. There is much here that many of our own SA Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) comrades will have experienced. The chronic working conditions of the garbage collectors, the appalling racism that they experienced on a daily basis and the merciless victimisation of all those who refused to be subservient.

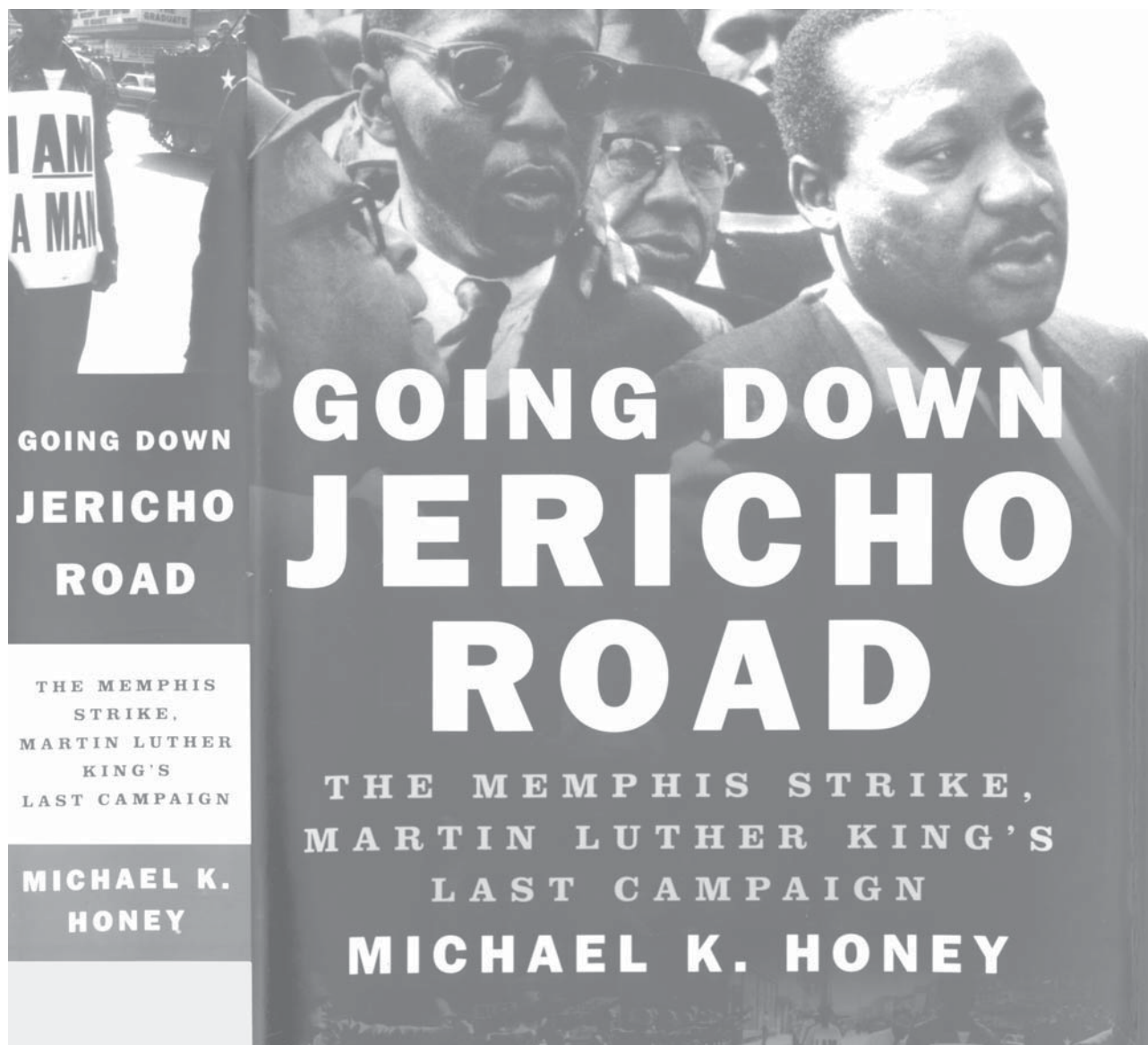
In those days, union recognition was a matter to be negotiated at local level, despite the passing of federal laws in Congress allowing unionisation in the public sector. While public sector unionism was gaining momentum elsewhere in the United States, in the Southern States all manner of illegal and

bureaucratic means were being used to stop municipal workers from forming a union, having their dues deducted and electing their own representatives. In this case, Mayor Loeb of Memphis, a manipulative populist, waged a vicious and personalised campaign to prevent workers from being members of the AFSCME (an affiliate of the AFL-CIO) with disastrous consequences.

Much of what took place in Memphis was defined by the years of crude and institutionalised racism that had characterised life in the South. Michael Honey describes the political context brilliantly, and has skillfully used recently released FBI records to throw new light on what took place. This was a turbulent period. The war in Vietnam was raging, and being 'lost'. US Vietnam war veterans, many of whom were black, returned home after defending 'democracy' to be greeted with chronic unemployment, poverty wages, decaying housing and poor or non-existent services. They were returning to a growing anti-war movement, and welcomed not as heroes, but as pawns in a shallow game of global anti-communism. To make matters worse, especially in the South, many of the racist practices that had been in place since the abolition of slavery had barely changed.

The FBI and whole sections of government, (if FBI records are to be believed) thought that the US was on the edge of a moral, political and social precipice, and that communism posed a real threat to civilization. The definition of communism was very wide and included those who had contact with organisations deemed to be 'communist fronts'. This latter category included many of the civil rights faith-based organisations, and helps to explain why MLK was seen as a particularly dangerous person by the head of the FBI, the notorious J Edgar Hoover, and by many in government.

Across America, a slow burning fuse had been lit. So-called 'race riots' were increasingly common. A new leadership in the black community emerged that was much less prone to compromise and laid the basis for the birth of Black Power. MLK, even though at this stage, a veteran of the struggle was radicalised further by what was going on around him. He reached out beyond his own immediate constituencies by arguing for a poor people's coalition, in effect a class alliance of workers and the poor. He was convinced that a united and active Poor Peoples Campaign was the only way to challenge the vested interests of capital. Despite fierce



'red baiting' he deliberately made linkages to the progressives in the union movement and in civil society organisations.

These considerations were uppermost in his mind when he came to Memphis to lend supports to the sanitation workers. At this time all attempts to persuade the mayor to enter into meaningful discussions had already floundered.

What happened next makes for riveting reading. The book charts the roles of all the key players, often through conversations and personal memories, including of the strikers and their families, the mostly white national union officers who came in to help settle the strike, the local and courageous rank and file leaders, the other local and predominantly (and some exclusively) white unions, and

crucially, the role played by community activists and church leaders.

The book shows how the militancy of the workers was maintained around daily meetings and mobilisations. Funds were raised through the churches, sympathetic unions and community groups. Community activists joined the campaign and brought in their considerable expertise and knowledge of political processes. Sympathetic unionists raised the issue in other parts of the country, and gave donations and moral support. The strikers themselves behaved with astonishing dignity given the abuse that was heaped upon them. When Loeb banned their daily marches they walked instead in single file, several metres apart and carried picket signs

urging consumers to boycott local stores, especially those owned by the mayor's supporters.

This became a fight not just for union recognition, but something much more fundamental. After endless harassment, and racist press coverage, the strikers took to carrying placards that symbolised the aspirations of millions of black workers. The placards said simply 'I am a man'. In other words, we will no longer be treated as non-persons.

As the strike progressed the mayor became more intransigent and provocatively stepped up the hiring of scab labour to break the strike. It soon became clear that more militant actions were needed. MLK caught the mood brilliantly when he made the call for a mass march. This ignited a blaze of

activity well beyond the reaches of Loeb's territory. All of a sudden, Memphis was becoming national news.

Honey provides fascinating insights into the discussions that took place in the run-up to the march. MLK insisted that all organisations be invited into the organising structure. For him, the need to build unity of all the oppressed was a critical goal. He increasingly saw the Memphis experience as a litmus test for his vision of a national Poor Peoples Campaign, his blue print for a mass movement capable of challenging government.

On the day of the strike, all went well until a few fringe elements, probably of disaffected youth, who were outside of the control of any of the structures, started taking advantage of the situation and looted some of the stores on the route. This gave an excuse for the police, to indiscriminately attack the marchers and create chaos. After the police riot, the local news media continued to throw its weight behind the mayor and police. The most blatant acts of police brutality went unreported. Black ministers were ferociously attacked for providing a front for the 'black power militants' and were held responsible for the damage to property and for ruining the good name of Memphis.

By this stage the strikers might have been expected to retreat and consider a return to work. However, the vast majority of workers knew there could never be a return to the 'old' days. Against these formidable odds, the workers decided to carry on their strike. Plans were made for another march which would be more extensive and bring the city to a standstill.

For MLK, the police riot was a shocking blow. He had invested all

his remaining energy into building a united front, and maintaining a broad alliance based on non-violence. He began to doubt whether his Poor Peoples Campaign could ever become a reality while death threats against his family escalated. It was clear (and later confirmed) that the FBI was intercepting all calls, bugging meetings, and sabotaging activities.

Before the march was to take place, King lay virtually paralysed in his hotel room. He asked one of his deputies to take his place at a rally of the workers and their supporters in a local cathedral, where several thousands had gathered.

Maybe it was because of the police riot, the blatantly racist local press and the determination of the strikers themselves, but the campaign reached a new high. For the first time, the mayor's support base started to rock under the pressure. Now many of those who had stood on the sidelines were compelled to join in rather than be associated with racist reaction.

When MLK's deputy reached the meeting, he was stunned by the numbers present who demanded that King speak. He eventually arrived to a tumultuous reception, and made what many now acknowledge as one of the greatest speeches of his life. It was certainly the last speech he was to make.

Recalling the story of the Good Samaritan who was travelling down the Jericho Road (hence the title of the book) King said: 'You see the Jericho Road is a dangerous road. The question is not: if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me? The question is: if I don't stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?'

Those present remember the impact. Many were in tears. Hardened worker leaders and community activists were deeply

moved by the speech. In a haunting prophesy, he explained that he might not make it with them to the promised land, but he had been to the mountain top, and had seen life on the other side, and it was definitely worth fighting for.

On the eve of the march while standing on the veranda of his hotel laughing and joking with well wishers and his staff, a white segregationist who was known to the FBI, took aim through telescopic sights and gunned down MLK. He was rushed to hospital, and died on arrival.

The march went ahead with no disturbances or violence. Shortly afterwards, the President sent his own emissary to try and encourage a settlement and to report directly back to the White House. Loeb remained immovable for a while longer and was then forced to concede. A form of union recognition was eventually negotiated. It was not all the sanitation workers demanded, but they unanimously accepted it, in the spirit that their struggle would continue, in or out of work.

This book also provides a new focus for a fresh appreciation of MLK, and what he represented. Many of the leaders of the world's different liberation movements are often canonised (made saints) by the very people who once condemned and attacked them. What they stood for is often oversimplified, watered down, and 'spun' to reinforce the ideologies of the powerful. So it has been with Martin Luther King. After reading this book, I am convinced there is a strong case to reclaim MLK for the working class! What he stood for and what he tried to do belongs to us, not our class enemies.

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