

Handout #9b Social Justice Leaders and Workers Rights

Read the following articles and answer the discussion questions attached.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

Martin Luther King Jr is one of the most important civil rights leaders of our time. His non-violent methods and powerful oratory won the admiration and support of people from all walks of life. However, what is not as well publicized is his support for workers and workers rights and his frank criticism of capitalism and economic injustice.

One of his most famous speeches, the last given before his assassination, was in support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, 1968.

In February 1968, two black sanitation workers were killed on the job. They had taken shelter in the barrel of their truck during a fierce rainstorm. The truck malfunctioned, killing them both. Black workers were forbidden from taking shelter on white porches. Their families were denied any real compensation, as the city argued they were not covered under workers compensation.

Two years before, the union had tried to strike but were immediately ordered back to work, and the city ruled that municipal workers had no right to strike. The city also did not recognize the union.

After the deaths, workers held a meeting and the next day less than half of the workers went to work and only a third of the trucks were moving. Garbage piled up.

Shortly after, the NAACP endorsed the strike, and the mayor declared the strike illegal. The mayor refused to meet with black union leaders, only white ones from the head office. Even this meeting did not go well, and workers staged sit-ins at city hall. Even though the city council recommended union recognition and wage increased, the mayor vetoed council's decision.

By the end of February, the strike had become a civil rights issue. More than 1000 black workers struck, workers and union leaders marched with black ministers from local churches, and were met with police brutality. The new organized group of workers, civil rights leaders, students and community activists directed non-violent strikes, boycotts of downtown white businesses, daily marches, and boycotts of newspapers that negatively portrayed the strikers.

By March, Martin Luther King Jr. had come to give speeches as well, as part of his 'Poor Peoples Campaign'. King urged citywide work stoppages. This drew national attention.

As a result of King and others' speeches, the city, union, and activists sat down for talks which collapsed. Another march on the 28th of March resulted in some window smashing and looting, and then police responded with almost 300 arrests, firing into the crowds, and one 16

year old shot and killed by police. Martial law was declared and the National Guard dispatched.

Nevertheless, there were continued non-violent daily demonstrations.

King returned and gave a speech to workers and their supporters. This was his 'I've Been to the Mountaintop' speech, his last. He was shot and killed the next day, April 4. The federal government under Johnson sent in its labour minister to settle the strike, and with added pressure from city council and white business owners, urged the mayor to settle the strike. By April 16 the union was presented with a settlement that met nearly all their demands, and the settlement was approved unanimously.

Excerpts from "I've Been to the Mountaintop"

The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers.

That's the question before you tonight. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to my job. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?" The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" The question is, "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?" That's the question.

Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be -- and force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue. And we've got to say to the nation: We know how it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory.

Sources:

Memphis, Tennessee, sanitation workers strike, 1968 from Global Nonviolent Action Database. A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility. *Global Nonviolent Action Database* (<http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

"I've Been to the Mountaintop" excerpts from American Rhetoric, at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> Speech delivered 3 April 1968, Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee

Discussion Guide:

- 1.) Summarize King's views on workers' rights and social justice.
- 2.) Summarize King's role in this social justice event.

- 3.) What questions/comments do you have on the reading? What new information did you gain, or what else do you want to learn?
- 4.) Was the dispute a victory or a loss?
- 5.) Did leadership play the biggest role in the resolution of the dispute, 'people power', or a mix? Explain.

Gandhi and Workers' Rights

Gandhi and the Ahmedabad Textile workers strike of 1918

Gandhi, well known for his role in the development of non-violent resistance, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation in South Africa and then India also advocated for the rights of workers and economic justice. Gandhi's first hunger strike was in fact in support of Ahmedabad textile mill workers in India for their rights to a fair wage and to be treated with dignity.

In the previous year, monsoons had caused plague conditions. Mill owners offered bonuses to workers to remain in Ahmadabad. Once the plague began to die down, the owners withdrew the bonuses. At the same time, workers in India, as in most of the First World War belligerent nations, were facing massive inflation in food, housing, and overall living conditions. When textile workers asked for 50 percent increase for cost of living, they were fired and replacement workers brought in from elsewhere.

The mill workers asked a prominent social worker related to mill owners to help them. She asked Gandhi for help for the workers. Gandhi proposed an arbitration board, which both sides agreed to. However, mill workers struck after rumours of a lockout by the owners. The owners saw this as bad faith. Gandhi apologized on behalf of the workers. Arbitration failed and workers were locked out in February of 1918. The owners agreed to only hire back those who would take a 20 percent increase. Gandhi saw this as a betrayal of the arbitration process.

Gandhi told the workers not to return and to hold out for 35 percent. As a result Gandhi encouraged and organized a full strike that included daily meetings, leaflets, education programs, and medical help for workers. Gandhi gave speeches to the strikers on the banks of the river every day. Workers sang songs and spoke poems. At Gandhi's nearby ashram a weaving school was created so striking workers could support themselves during the strike.

However, support began to weaken and many were heading back to work. Gandhi then took his first fast. In response, the owners offered 35 percent if Gandhi stayed away from the workers forever. Instead, Gandhi insisted they bring in an impartial arbitrator. Owners and workers agreed and in the end the workers received a 35 percent increase. This event influenced the labour movement in India long after.

Sources:

“Ahmedabad textile laborers win strike for economic justice, 1918”, from Global Nonviolent Action Database. **A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.**
<http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>)

“Non-Cooperation : Gandhi & Ahmedabad from Indian Saga”
http://indiansasaga.com/history/non_cooperation_ahmedabad.html

Gandhi and Workers’ Rights

Gandhi and English Textile Mill Workers, Lancashire

In 1931 Gandhi's non-cooperation movement was in full swing in India. The colonial system imposed on India by Britain was designed in part to exploit Indian raw materials. Britain sent cotton out of India to mills in England, where it was woven into cloth to be sold back to Indians at a price they could rarely afford. This had the result of injustice for Indian workers in the textile industry and for Indian consumers. Gandhi proposed the way to disrupt this system was non-cooperation and boycott, by developing the “homespun” movement. Indians from all walks of life were encouraged to spin and weave their own cloth for themselves. This was a way for Indians to regain self respect, autonomy, and protest British rule and exploitation.

By 1931 this was have a very negative effect on English mill workers. Owners in places like Lancashire had closed factories and laid off workers. In that year Gandhi traveled to India for talks with the British government. At the invitation of a local Quaker in Lancashire Gandhi went to visit laid off English textile workers and their families. He was sympathetic to their cause but not so to the owners.

Workers were quite resentful of the impact his movement had on their communities. Many officials even worried for Gandhi’s safety. However, groups of workers and locals crowded to see him and he was shown around local mills and towns.

While sympathetic, he was frank with the locals.

“A great crowd of workers turned out to meet him, men and women, many of whom felt they had been thrown out of work by this one man. “Please listen to me for just a few minutes,” Gandhi asked them quietly. “Give me a chance to present our point of view, and then, if you like, condemn me and my people. You tell me that three million people are out of employment here, have been out of employment for several months. In my country, three hundred million people are unemployed at least six months in every year. You say there are days when you can get only bread and butter for your dinner. But these people often go for days on end without

any food at all.” such fraSk, respectful, but completely determined language won their admiration, and at the end of Gandhi's talk they all cheered him, the man who had brought about heir unemployment”. (Quoted in Easwaran, 1978, p81.)

Gandhi the Man, by Eknath Easwaran 2nd edition 1978
The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, Inc., USA.

“Gandhi in Lancashire and Sussex”, *Making History*, BBC
http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/making_history/makhist10_prog2f.shtml

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