

Nwanneka Orukpe

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Workers Arise:  
The American Civil Rights Movement  
And the Victory of the Memphis Sanitation Workers in  
*At the River I Stand*

The origin of labor unions can be traced to the formative years of America as a nation, and therefore, are a very important part of American history. Although labor unions have been in existence since the 1950s, they were formed for and by white people. The film *At the River I Stand* captures the historical moment of the conflict between African American workers and the city of Memphis. At the time, blacks were relegated to menial jobs such as sanitation work. The sanitation workers of Memphis city earned the lowest wages and worked the longest hours. Many of them were eligible for welfare because of their low wages. They got no overtime pay, no sick leave, no paid vacation, and no grievance procedure. However, their vexations were heightened when two of their colleagues were gruesomely killed on the job by equipment malfunction, and the city refused to pay compensation to the deceased workers' families. They organized themselves, formed a labor union, and gained membership to the National Labor Party to demand better working conditions and higher pay. The sanitation strike resulted in a compelling chapter of the Civil Rights Movement that drew Martin Luther King Jr., a strong believer that economic injustice and racial injustice were intertwined, to Memphis. The victory of the Memphis sanitation workers gave rise to other workers who used their power to sit out of work or boycott buying certain things to negotiate for better working conditions. This

documentary is compelling because of the way the filmmakers narrate the story, educate the viewers on the formation and importance of labor unions, and most significantly, because of how the film continues to be relevant to the current moment in its mirroring of present history.

One of the impressive qualities of this film lies in the filmmakers' choice of narration. Hugh Jackman a movie director has this to say about what makes a film powerful, "The best movies can transport you to worlds you couldn't even imagine by yourself and make you feel things you might not be able to feel on an everyday level and challenge your life" ("What Makes a Movie Great"). This documentary does all these things by employing the use of old newsreel and stirring footage to capture the devastation and pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement. Watching the police use mace and tear gas against nonviolent protesters marching to the Memphis City Hall evokes strong emotions never felt before by the viewers. Also, the way the film captures the apprehension that pervades Dr. King's final speech, "I Have Been to The Mountain Top," and his assassination is heart-wrenching, leaving one without words. The filmmaker in his candor did not narrate in a way that shows viewers how to respond or think, rather he allowed the people to speak for themselves. An example was when one white woman was asked why she supported the mayor's decision not to increase the wages of the sanitation workers and better working conditions. She stated, "I have concluded that the more you pet somebody, the more you are going to have to pet them." The woman in question was unsympathetic to the plight of African Americans, and her comments were outrightly racist and vicious. The film did not comment on her but let her expose herself so the viewers can see the problem with her thinking. The film helps the viewer understand the struggle and determination of African Americans for economic justice and the deep-seated desire to be fully included as Americans and treated as one.

Another quality that makes the film great is its ability to educate the viewers on how labor union is formed, how it works, and the power it holds. According to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "It is a crime for people to live in a rich nation and receive starvation wages." Dr. King's words clearly describe the state of the Memphis sanitation workers who worked full time for the city and yet lived in abject poverty.

T.O. Jones a former sanitation worker made the first attempt at forming a union, but it backfired, and the city made its point that unionism was not allowed. He continued to fight for union organization and later became affiliated with the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), but few men were willing to risk their jobs by joining. The turning point came when the families of their dead colleagues were given no benefit. The sanitation workers walked off their jobs in protest and joined the union formed by T.O Jones, which was unrecognized by the city. AFSCME gave the workers their full support because of their affiliation and became a bargaining agent for them. In his plantation mentality that black men were subordinate to white men, and the white men knew what was best for the black men, the mayor mandated the workers to go back to work but was most surprised when they booed him. Furthermore, in addition to the strike, the black community boycotted buying Easter clothes to be heard. Against the mayor's stance, the union representatives negotiated with the city council and reached an agreement for a salary increase, better working conditions, and most of all recognition of the union by the city of Memphis. From the sanitation workers' strike, one could learn that there's power in number and unity. No impact was felt when 32 workers went on strike but with 1300 workers, the mayor was worried about public health and welfare. The mayor could replace 32 people easily but when he tried replacing 1300 sanitation workers, he fell short. Lastly, the labor union was able to secure privileges and benefits for the workers that they were unable to get individually. Labor unions wield a lot of power, and one understands from this film that the health insurance, better minimum wage, vacation, and other benefits, which full-time workers enjoy today, are made possible because of the intervention of labor unions.

The most significant and laudable quality of this film is how it continues to be relevant to present times. The film shows the great divide and anger in the city of Memphis as battle lines were quickly drawn, and the whites supported the mayor while the black community was firmly behind the sanitation workers. One sees a replay of the event during Trump's presidency where most Republicans supported the president blindly even when he was clearly in the wrong. An instance was when he refused to concede

the 2020 election and claimed that the election was rigged (Beckett). The issue of labor unions remains relevant even now. Much like the documentary where the sanitation workers walked off work to demand better working conditions, nurses at the Howard University Hospital in Washington D.C, recently embarked on a 24hr strike, demanding a fair contract and better staffing to protect the patients. The strike was due to failed negotiations between their union, the District of Columbia Nurses Association and Hospital management (“Nurses Strike”). Viewers can relate the Memphis march “I Am a Man” to the “Black Lives Matter” protests. African Americans have been in a continuous fight for justice, equality, and police brutality. From observations, black people are twice as likely to be killed by police as white people. George Floyd was one too many African Americans who were killed by white police. The policeman knelt on his neck for about 9 minutes even when he told the policeman that he couldn’t breathe. The death of George Floyd reawakened anger and stirred up the black community to protest in different cities for their basic right to life. One can see a pattern from past events to contemporary ones, and that history indeed repeats itself.

The film is praiseworthy because of the combination of narration, education, and relevance to current events. This film jogs the viewer’s memory to ask the incisive question, “Has one already forgotten what one learned from History?” History is meant to help one understand the present and learn from past mistakes and experiences. Practices of racism have changed over the years into more subtle ones, but the effect is still the same. One might be quick to claim that one is not a racist, but in the remarks of Rev. James Lawson, “At the heart of racism is the notion that a man is not a man” which means that any time one treats others as less than human whether at work or otherwise, then such a person is a racist. This film also helps viewers appreciate the price the people who participated in this movement and Martin Luther King Jr. paid to get the African Americans where they are today and the benefits one enjoys today because of labor unions.

Works cited

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