

From the PES Ending Racism Task Force:

**APRIL 4, 1968 AT 6:01 PM CST, ROOM 306 LORRAINE MOTEL, MEMPHIS, TN --  
A TIME OUT OF TIME**

By Kate Esposito

If we are of a certain age, we will certainly remember certain incomprehensible events... where we were, what we were doing and how we reacted to... the assassinations. In the 60s: Medgar, Jack, Malcolm, Martin, Bobby. And some years later, imagine, so hard to do, Beatle John in New York; and in San Francisco, where I lived at the time, Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk.

On Wednesday, April 4, 2018 it is fifty years since Dr. King was cut down on the Lorraine Motel balcony in Memphis. He was there to support the black sanitation workers who went on strike on February 12. Dr. King saw this strike as an important fight in the Poor People's Campaign, announced by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on December 4, 1967. One of the many precipitating events was the deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker, two workers who were crushed in a garbage compactor where they were taking shelter from the rain. AFSCME Local 1733 was in solidarity with the workers who are forever memorialized by the slogan "I Am A Man" echoed by Rev. James Lawson addressing them on February 24, saying: "For at the heart of racism is the idea that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person. You are human beings. You are men. You deserve dignity."

On the night prior to his assassination, at the Mason Temple in Memphis, King delivered his Mountaintop Speech when he eerily predicted his fate: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!"

As you know there are theories about those who were involved in the assassination, but there can be no disagreement about what Dr. King was doing in Memphis. Also from the Mountaintop Speech: "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."

The march Dr. King alluded to was to take place on April 5th the day after he was killed. However on April 8th, 42,000 marchers showed up in Memphis including Coretta Scott King. Her husband's funeral in Atlanta was the following day. The strike ended on April 16th with a

settlement that included union recognition and wage increases. The stopping point of this victory, Dr. King's life, was a very high price to pay.

So here we are 50 years later. What do we do to honor that high price and his legacy? Where is our march?

In my role as POWER's Economic Dignity Team Co-Chair, with Terri Burgin from St. Vincent's Catholic Church, I have had the opportunity to work with folks from the union UNITE HERE. I have learned that hotel workers in Philadelphia are largely underpaid, overworked and need the protection of a union. The housekeeping departments are largely comprised of Black and Brown women trying to keep up with unrealistic demands of management and provide for their families, much like the sanitation workers Dr. King was so concerned about.

Philadelphia is the country's poorest large City with over 25% of our citizens, most of them people of color, living in poverty. So it is time to ask ourselves the question: Now, are we going to march again? Are we going to honor Dr. King in a way he would want us to, as he asked us to, the night before he died? "Now, let me say as I move to my conclusion that we've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis. We've got to see it through. And when we have our march, you need to be there. If it means leaving work, if it means leaving school -- be there. Be concerned about your brother. You may not be on strike. But either we go up together, or we go down together."

This is our Memphis. See it through. Because for those living in poverty in Philadelphia, the urgency of now is indeed fierce.