

Cleophus Smith, a Memphis sanitation worker and minister, keeps up fight for rights

Smith is one of the surviving workers whose strike brought Martin Luther King Jr. to Tennessee in 1968.

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [May 9, 2018](#) issue



Cleophus Smith, a sanitation worker and minister in Memphis, Tennessee. RNS photo by Karen Pulfer Focht.

Cleophus Smith was in the congregation on April 3, 1968, as Martin Luther King Jr. preached his last sermon at the Church of God in Christ headquarters in Memphis,

Tennessee.

“From the speech he made, we had hope that there was going to be a brighter day ahead, ” said Smith, 75, one of two surviving sanitation workers remaining on the job who were involved in the two-month workers’ strike in 1968.

King’s last encouragement to the workers came in [that final sermon](#). He compared their situation to the parable of the good Samaritan: “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?”

The next day, when Smith learned that King had been shot, he said, “The only thing I could think of was that all hope was gone.” But decades later he no longer feels that way.

“No, no, no, ‘cause we can fight,” he said. “We’re going to keep the dream alive and we’re going to move forward.”

Smith still drives a truck five days a week to collect garbage. He spends much of the rest of his time as an associate minister of his congregation, Eternal Peace Missionary Baptist Church. To him, the continuing struggle for better working conditions is a spiritual one.

“We are fighting for the betterment of mankind, if I might put it that way,” Smith said, sitting at the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Local 1733 headquarters.

Smith started as a Memphis sanitation worker in 1967 after leaving the cotton fields of Arkansas. Smith still has an “I Am a Man” protest sign used in the rally on March 28, 1968. He remembers the day that two sanitation workers, Robert Walker and Echol Cole, died that February: “When we got the news that they had got crushed in the back of their truck, we weren’t allowed to take leave from work. We had to keep on working. We just felt like we were less than men.”

Violence broke out at the protest King led a few weeks before his death. The marchers endured water hoses, tear gas, and billy clubs, Smith recalled. He narrowly escaped getting bitten by a police dog or getting shot by an officer.

King was determined to return to Memphis and prove that a peaceful protest was possible. But he was killed by an assassin’s bullet before he could march again.

Within days of King's death, the Johnson administration pressured city officials to reach a settlement with workers, which occurred on April 16.

Over time, Smith has seen improvements. He used to only have Christmas Day and the Fourth of July off. Now he gets five weeks of vacation because of his length of service and a total of 13 holidays, including the one honoring King.

"We have all our working equipment given to us now, such as safety working shoes, safety working gloves, safety eyeglass goggles, safety helmets, uniforms," he said.

He often changes out of his uniform and puts on church clothes to go on visits after his shift: "My passion and my ministry are evangelistic ministries, going out to the hospital or to the jails and convalescent home."

Just last year, workers obtained a retirement plan from the city.

"I knew it wasn't going to help me, but I was trying to help somebody else," Smith said. "It will benefit the younger generation that's out there now."—Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on April 23, appears in the print edition under the title "People: Cleophus Smith."