

## **William Lucy**

Former Secretary-Treasurer of the American  
Federation of State, County, and Municipal  
Employees (AFSCME)

Founding president of the Coalition of  
Black Trade Unionists (CBTU)

## **“History Revisited: Memphis Sanitation Workers 1968”**

### **The 2018 Jerry Wurf Memorial Lecture**



The Labor and Worklife Program  
Harvard Law School

*Transcript by Richard Cranford. This transcript has been slightly edited and condensed, including dropping a few queries distant from the topic of Memphis and 1968.*

JERRY WURF MEMORIAL FUND (1982)  
Harvard Trade Union Program, Labor and Worklife Program,  
Harvard Law School

The Jerry Wurf Memorial Fund was established in memory of Jerry Wurf, the late president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Its income is used to initiate programs and activities that “reflect Jerry Wurf’s belief in the dignity of work, and his commitment to improving the quality of lives of working people, to free open thought and debate about public policy issues, to informed political action...and to reflect his interests in the quality of management in public service, especially as it assures the ability of workers to do their jobs with maximum effect and efficiency in environments sensitive to their needs and activities.”

# Jerry Wurf Memorial Lecture

January 24, 2018

**William Lucy**

“History Revisited:  
Memphis Sanitation Workers 1968”



***WILLIAM LUCY**, Photograph by Elaine Bernard*

**Sharon Block, Executive Director, Labor and Worklife Program and Harvard Trade Union Program**

I want to first welcome everybody to Harvard Law School. We are thrilled to have all of you here with us for this very special event.

I want to start by thanking our co-sponsors the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute and the Joint Center for Housing Studies.

As I hope you all know, the Labor and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School is Harvard's center for research, teaching, and creative problem solving related to the world of work and its implications for society. We have two remarkable faculty directors, Ben Sachs and Richard Freeman. And I really want to recognize we are here tonight almost in the exact middle of the Harvard Trade Union Program, and I want to recognize our class of 2018 participants. Do you all want to just stand up for a second? [Applause] We are lucky to have a truly outstanding class of participants this year and they are fulfilling the promise of the Trade Union Program, which is to help develop the next generation of leaders of the labor movement. As is particularly apt to note, we have a number of AFSCME leaders here in the program who are, as always, adding so much to the experience.

And at the heart of the Labor and Worklife Program is the Wurf Memorial Fund. The fund was created by our friends at AFSCME in 1982 in memory of Jerry Wurf, the late president of AFSCME. It enables us to do work

that reflects Jerry Wurf's belief in the dignity of work and his commitment to improving the quality of life for working people, especially those in the public sector. And, as I hope you all know, Jerry Wurf was a towering figure in the labor movement. He was President of AFSCME for almost twenty years and led the union in a time of incredible growth in terms of number of members, influence, and leadership in the labor movement. And there was no event that better reflected President Wurf's leadership than his involvement in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike in 1968. His commitment to supporting those sanitation workers demonstrated his moral leadership on issues of race, equity, economic justice, and the value of public service. And so we are so grateful to have with us his daughter Abigail and President Wurf's wife Mildred who was truly a partner in his life and has provided inspirational vision. [Applause] I can tell you in my time, my short almost-year here I have come to depend on Mildred for that leadership regarding the Wurf fund and how we can make the most of using that fund to realize that vision.

So each year we choose someone to deliver the Wurf Memorial Lecture who can illuminate President Wurf's vision. In the past we have had prime ministers, vice presidents of the United States, union presidents, and luminaries from all corners of the labor world. But I think it is fair to say that tonight is a high point in the history of the Wurf Fund.

Before we introduce tonight's speaker, however, I want to take a minute to say something about the loss of a very

special member of the AFSCME and Labor and Worklife Program family. As many of you know, Paul Booth was a key figure for many years in helping presidents of AFSCME and a long-time fighter for justice who passed away just last week. As President Saunders said, Paul was an organizer's organizer, a man of great generosity and integrity, a friend and mentor to so many people in AFSCME, the labor movement, and the progressive community. Paul had taught many years in the Trade Union Program. I was grateful to count myself among the legions who relied on him for advice and guidance, and he will truly be missed.

But now I would like to invite Elissa McBride, the Secretary-Treasurer of AFSCME, truly an inspirational leader who is playing a key role in helping AFSCME and the labor movement prepare for the post-Janus world, no small task. She has become a great friend and has always been a great friend of the program. She will introduce tonight's speaker.

### **Elissa McBride, Secretary-Treasurer, AFSCME**

Almost fifty years ago exactly, February 1, 1968, two men, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death in the back of a sanitation truck in Memphis, Tennessee. This sparked the strike that we are going to hear about from our speaker this evening. I wanted to start by reminding us of that because the current leaders of AFSCME Local 1733 in Memphis, Tennessee have invited us to observe a moment of silence this coming February 1<sup>st</sup> to honor their deaths -- but also their fight.

We are still in that fight fifty years later, now at the Supreme Court. The fight for a voice on the job and strong unions for public service workers continues. One way to honor that fight is to observe that moment of silence, and I'm happy to tell you all more after the program, but you can also find out by looking at the web site, which you see on the screen, [IAM2018.org](http://IAM2018.org). And if you need to remember that website you can come get a button up front. It's our way of both remembering and re-committing to that fight.

I have the enviable task of introducing our speaker tonight. A little bit about William Lucy: He joined the public service and AFSCME in the 1950s. In 1965 he became president of his local in Contra Costa County, California. One way to think about Mr. Lucy's work is that he is somebody who thinks globally and acts locally. He always was a brilliant mind and a strategic mind, and he brought that brilliant mind to the work of his own local. Then, when he came to work for AFSCME nationally, he shared this with many locals across the country, including Local 1733 where he was an organizer and a strategist and a leader on the campaign all the way through to victory for the Memphis sanitation workers. He is beloved in our union because of the ways in which he showed up shoulder-to-shoulder with members on every important fight.

But Bill Lucy is also somebody who thinks locally and truly acts globally. He brought his trade-union values to many other fights and movements. He was a founding president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. He

became president of the Public Services International in 1994. He was a leader of the Free South Africa movement to fight apartheid, and he helped bring Nelson Mandela to the United States upon his release from prison. So he brought his local union organizing experience and values to many global fights.

On a personal level, he's been a generous mentor and teacher to me and, I bet, many other people in this room. He set the bar high for the secretary-treasurer role in AFSCME, and I am honored and a little daunted to be attempting to reach that bar. He's been a key advisor to our union in the IAM2018 campaign. He's a busy man this year. In fact, if he's only doing the things that I know about, he's already too busy in the year 2018.

And so it's incredible to have him here. He has lived the history that he's going to tell us about, he helped make the history that he's going to tell us about. He recently was awarded the NAACP Chairman's Award for his work on racial and economic justice over these many years. No living American better understands the nexus between civil rights and human rights than William Lucy. He's in great demand, which is why we are both grateful and honored to have with us this evening, William Lucy. Thank you.

## **WILLIAM LUCY**

Let me thank Elissa for that very kind and generous introduction. She made me sound so important I can hardly wait to hear what I got to say. This evening, what I'd like to do is speak for a while and hopefully generate



some questions that we can sort of use to probe the Memphis strike. We're going to talk about thirteen hundred sanitation workers and thirteen hundred families and thirteen hundred people who simply wanted a better life and had to struggle to figure out how to get there. And we will spend a little bit of time talking about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his contribution to this strike and other struggles.

But I want to make just a couple of things clear. When the discussion takes place around Memphis 1968 it generally takes place around the assassination, and the struggle of those men gets lost in the assassination. There was a strike taking place before Dr. King joined it. You had two tremendous forces in sync on the same issue. And then I just want to say a word about Jerry Wurf. He was mentioned earlier; but for me and my sense of social justice and trade unionism, we will find few committed trade unionists like Jerry Wurf. Jerry took over the union in 1964. By 1968 we had one of the massive strikes. Yet he bet on the union and committed it to giving support to these workers, many of whom he had never seen, heard of, and in his judgment, he said it from time to time, it was the dumbest strike he'd ever seen or heard of. February is not the month for a sanitation strike. And Jerry let it be known that he felt very strongly about it.

But as it turns out, Memphis, really for all of us who are trade unionists, ought to be a case study in community organizing, community education work around trade union issues and values, and community mobilization. Memphis is not what you would call a union town. Was

not then, is not now. So, thirteen hundred sanitation workers on strike was not a real big deal in the minds of many people who were there.

I want to thank the program for putting this together to have a conversation about essentially what is really one of the great challenges of our time. I said to Mildred a little earlier, we've got to find a way to deal with the question of the challenge of the plight of the working poor, people who work every day but still cannot raise themselves up out of poverty and have no process for changing their day-to-day situation.

Looking particularly at the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike and the issues raised by the circumstances of these men, these were men who simply wanted a way to find some process for changing their day-to-day situations, seeking workplace democracy, and coming to the conclusion on their own that a union was the place and a method by which, if they achieved that, they could find change in their lives.

Now this was an incredibly important issue to Dr. King. In addition to being a great civil rights leader, he was a great trade union advocate. He advocated for workers' rights as a fundamental part of his ministry. His life and his vision and his struggle to create a more fair, a more just, a more equitable society, was tied up in his belief that working people ought to have a right and have access to democracy in the workplace. This was his work, it was his dream.

A few weeks from now, on February 12, many of us will pause to recognize and acknowledge the beginning of this incredible struggle in Memphis, Tennessee. A struggle by—I keep saying—thirteen hundred of the working poor. Dr. King often said that we have a moral obligation to struggle to make America live up to what it said it was on paper. And he used to use that phrase all the time. And in the context he used it here, he was talking about the Preamble to the Constitution regarding this issue of all men being created equal and entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those are great statements for when we talk to each other; but for thirteen hundred sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness had all the earmarks of fake news

For Dr. King’s lifetime of work and fifty years after his death, we still have found no consensus around a policy that would provide for uneducated, unskilled, under educated or just working people in general of low-wage employment. We still have not found a process that we can find support for giving them the opportunity to believe that they can improve their lives and the quality of the lives of their families. It’s sort of like “go for yourself.” And with all of the issues on his plate, Dr. King came to the conclusion that at the core of this problem is the inability of folks to have a support system that recognizes their right to earn a decent living, to compete in the society and live with some degree of decency and dignity. They would have to fight for it.

Dr. King was in the process of organizing what was called the Poor People's Campaign. Can I see the hands of the people who remember that? Well, he was in the process of organizing the campaign for a simple reason: that these were people who worked every day but still were mired in poverty and could not, on their own, get out of their circumstances of the situation they found themselves in.

As we celebrated January 15 a few weeks ago, the date of his birth, we will recognize on February 1<sup>st</sup> the beginning of the conflict that brought about his death. And history will always associate his death with the struggle of these sanitation workers in the city of Memphis, Tennessee, a cause for which these men fought and he was prepared to join. Thirteen hundred workers trapped by their circumstances and by their situations, working at some of the dirtiest, the most dangerous, the most difficult jobs, with no possibility of change. We had a system where none of these men had access to anyone who would hear a grievance, hear a problem, rationalize an issue, or give them support for the difficulty that they had.

The jobs that they held were essentially the only jobs the system would give them. For in the South in general and Memphis in particular the jobs they held were reserved for exclusively Black men. They worked under conditions that defied belief for wages that allowed most of them to qualify for public assistance and welfare. Yet they worked every single day. James Robinson, a fellow I met, had worked for the city for fifteen years. He earned

a dollar and sixty-five cents an hour. Ed Gillis, a fellow worker, had worked for the city for twenty years. He earned seven dollars and eighty cents a day.

Raising a family, working every day, but mired in a system where the only way they would get a raise in pay is if someone downtown decided they need a nickel more, a penny more, an hour. For these workers, this was their situation, and with no way of changing it. Forty percent of their families lived below the poverty level. On a weekly basis the landlord, the utility company, the used-car dealer, the bank, the loan company, the payday lender, the corner grocery store, the doctor, the dentist, and everybody else who could find them competed for their portion of this guy's dollar and thirty-five cents average wage per hour. On a weekly basis.

Yet, they showed up for work every day and suffered the indignities of working for the city of Memphis in the position that they did. The work was dirty, dangerous, and it robbed them of their youth. These men were old before their time. If you look at some of the pictures from that era, these were men who the nature of their work had just beaten them down.

About five years ago President Obama inducted them as a group into the Labor Hall of Fame. One of the fellows, in speaking to the president in the Oval Office when the president asked what kind of commitments did he make to himself as a result of his experiences, Mr. Alvin Turner, who has since passed away, said to the president that he promised himself that he would be the last

uneducated person in his family. Mr. Turner put three children through college, each of them MD's or PhD's. He did it working for the sanitation department in Memphis, Tennessee.

For those who came this evening and want to dig deeper into all the elements of the strike, I recommend three things. There's a video called "I Am a Man," which was produced by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. There's a second video called "At the River I Stand," which is a video taken from the book by Joan Beifuss. And the other is this book called *Going Down Jericho Road*. This is a book by Michael Honey that does an incredible job of going day-by-day through the strike and interviewing hundreds of the men who were participants in telling their story as to why they were doing what they did.

The 1968 Memphis strike lasted sixty-seven days and for many years was the longest strike in the history of the public sector. Each day it tested the courage, it tested the commitment of the men who had struggled for a better life and were prepared and committed to struggle if they could see a way to improve the quality of life for their families. I have never seen such a commitment and a determination to do something as in these men. They hoped, and they believed, like others, that a union could possibly bring them a better life. For them, there was no sick leave, there was no vacation leave, no safety plan, no health plan, no promotion plan, no grievance procedure. For them there was nothing. And many of

them had worked for fifteen or sixteen years for the city of Memphis under these conditions.

On February 12, 1968, thirteen hundred of them simply made the decision that they were not going to go to work. And they demanded not a dollar more an hour or anything. They simply demanded that their union be recognized, and they be allowed to have dues check-off to finance the work of their union. This was not an economic strike on February twelfth. They simply had grown weary of the conditions they were confronted with and wanted to change.

While there were probably any number of reasons that should have or could have triggered a strike, what appeared to stand out in the minds of many was a couple of simple things. One, someone mentioned earlier, the death of two of their coworkers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker. But the other was something unique, it was a policy that said if the weather is bad, all Black workers must go home, no matter what time it is, while all white workers stayed at work. For low-wage workers that is a serious question of unfairness. So for those two reasons they simply said they had had enough, and they wanted to see if they could find some way of changing their situation.

The young men who were crushed in the back of their truck had complained bitterly that the mechanism was not working and no one had done anything to look at it. Yet, I guess a lightning strike or whatever triggered the mechanism that crushed them in the back of the truck.

These and other issues may well have been on folks' minds, but those two things were what most men told us were the straw that broke the camel's back.

This was not a complicated strike. There were three settlements of the strike before the assassination of Dr. King. The mayor took the position that he would not talk to the union, he would only talk to the men, so we brought thirteen hundred men to the mayor's office to have him talk with them. In the first forty-five minutes we gave him a program that we thought made some sense, and even the mayor's advisors thought it made sense. We sat in a room, drew up an agreement, put it on the table. It provided what we call in the trade-union movement "members only" and a grievance procedure. These were not overwhelmingly demanding issues.

The mayor went ballistic. The mayor, who came from a period of time a lot of us would like to forget, had no intentions of talking to sanitation workers about their problems. The agreement met the needs of everyone in the room including his own advisors, and it was discarded. From there it took us two weeks to try and find a conversation among sane people who said we've got a massive problem here. The issue is let's find a solution and not try to pound our chest.

The Public Works Committee of the City Council of the city of Memphis had jurisdiction over the work area that these men worked in. So we went to see the Public Works Committee to encourage them to act on their jurisdiction. All we're looking for is a way to solve



problems and give workers a way to have their grievances heard and a process where their grievances can be handled. After some time in the city council chambers, the Public Works Committee agreed with us also, and took a formal action to recognize the union and give us a grievance procedure to settle our problems.

The following day they promised they would meet as a full city council and vote on this proposition which would end the strike. The mayor incidentally had been a John Wayne type if you know what I mean, and he acted the same way. He was not going to be told that he had to solve the problems of men who worked in the solid waste and sanitation department. So he went to work to carve out votes from the city council so they would not have a majority to act on this proposal. The Public Works Committee folded their tent. The next morning when the council met after we had spread word across the community that the strike was going to be settled, nine hundred people showed up, two or three hundred of them who were pastors and preachers and religious leaders in the community and other influential people. Everybody came down to be a part of the strike settlement. The city council opened its business, announced its agenda, voted to close its business, and left, with nine hundred to a thousand people in the city council chambers. That's twice we had settled the strike with terms agreeable to everybody.

The men left the city council disillusioned, to say the least. And we started to walk back to the union hall to try to figure out what to do. The police department was put

into the incredible position of having to enforce a rule that made no sense to anybody. They had never tested mace as a crowd control until February the twenty-fourth in Memphis, Tennessee. You had two hundred or more pastors, religious leaders of different levels, community leaders, and I'm not sure where the order came from but the order was to disperse the crowd that had been authorized to march back to their union headquarters. And chaos broke out. Hundreds of people were maced, many were beaten, including mothers and children. I mean it was a disaster in the making as a result of the inability of the city to understand its responsibility at this time.

We had to make a decision as to what we as a union would do. Because these were not violent men, they simply were looking for a way to settle a problem and have some hopes that they could resolve some other issues. I'm trying to think of how many were injured that morning. Hundreds of people who just came down to be a part of the problem-solving by the city council. The hospitals were filled up. And the Mayor refused to talk. This single action, the misuse of the police force, the misuse of the authority of the mayor, sent shock waves through the community. We were making the point that workers have a right to have a process to settle their problems. The Mayor as the chief officer of the city has the responsibility to deliver services to the city. You can't do this with thirteen hundred of your workers refusing to go to work.

On the following day, after the beating and the macing, a lady came to the union office with a list of names. She brought us a list of names of three hundred and fifty Black preachers, and she said you can call them and talk to them. Well, one thing you cannot do is beat a Black preacher in his community because those preachers know other preachers, and they have relationships across the city. So we sent them a letter. We didn't ask them to join the strike, we didn't ask them to become allies, we asked them to come down and let's just talk about the problem. So those two hundred and fifty who had direct experience and two hundred more came down and talked about the problem because nobody knew anything about these sanitation workers or what they did. They had no sensitivity to the role of the union.

Well, we had four hundred or more preachers who then brought their counterparts from across the city. We've now got about seven hundred, give or take a little bit, Black and white preachers who see the responsibility of the city as sitting down and helping to resolve the problems of these workers. They agreed to form an organization that would share the information on the plight of these workers and other workers like them who were low-wage workers. We had brought the leadership from all of the major denominations in to talk to us. That day they formed an organization called Community on the Move for Equality. This issue had gotten bigger than the strike. It was no longer an issue of the grievances. It had become a recognition of the inequity within the city of Memphis. They committed to some very specific

things to try and ease the situation. They committed to form a city-wide organization to help the strikers. They would teach their congregations about the role of unions in our democratic society, something very new for Memphis, Tennessee. They would develop a fact sheet for ministers to talk to each other who were lacking in understanding and knowledge of the trade union movement.

And to increase the pressure they agreed that they would set up a nightly religious rally program so that the word could be spread city-wide as to what was the positive, or, lack of positive action between the union and the city. They would recruit volunteers for the daily marches that we agreed we would have to have if we were going to sensitize the entire city to the plight of these workers. There was a view, based on the mayor's comments, that this was going to be a long struggle. So we had to prepare for a long struggle. We had to raise funds to help these strikers, those who were in need. We established food pantries in key churches in the community because some families may not be as well off as others.

By February 25<sup>th</sup> virtually every Black congregation in the city of Memphis was talking about, singing about, praying about, shouting about, or planning how to help these workers. What had happened was their commitment to changing their situation had caught the minds of people across the city who had never given them a thought before this activity started. They even went to the length that there were committees formed across town to keep the garbage from being picked up.

Folks were saying that in order to help these men what we can do is keep our garbage in our yard. It was kind of strange, we had rats as big as small dogs. And we were concerned about the health issues and what have you, but that was a decision that the community was making to support the strikers.

We were thrust into this, and we had no idea how long it would go on. But what we knew is that unless the men understood what they were doing, they would be pushed back into the workforce. So what we said to them was we wanted them to go home and talk to their wives and tell them what you're doing or what you think you're doing and if she agrees with you we'll see you tomorrow. Because the greatest pressure that would force them back to work is a home situation that would not give them the strength to confront what we thought they were going to have to deal with later on.

We took on the responsibility of doing a real education job on the public. Since most people assume that they put their garbage out back and it disappears, people had to understand and know what these men did. So we had each one of them take a leaflet, a flyer, to every house that they serviced in the course of their daily work and give this to the lady at the door so she reads it and understands what's taking place.

We had to interest the business community in what was taking place. And, while they wanted the strike ended, they didn't want to have any investment in bringing it to an end. So we talked to them about the marches that were

going to take place downtown, the boycotts that would possibly take place, and how if they could just use their influence we could help this whole process along.

This was a strike that had grown out of the frustrations of workers. And we thought that there needed to be at least some identification with what holds it all together. Perhaps you've seen signs that say "I Am A Man." Well, the glue to this was the fact that these men had worked for the city for all these years. They were fifty, sixty years old, many of them. They had gone from "boy" to "uncle" to "grandpa" without ever passing a station called "man." And what was grieving them the most was the fact that they were not recognized as men, that their manhood was not recognized and was treated with disrespect.

A Canadian pastor of a Black church, a fellow by the name of Malcolm Blackburn, allowed the strikers to print posters in his church's basement. We were tasked with trying to find the words that would give energy for these people to keep fighting. James Lawson, who has spoken at a previous Jerry Wurf Memorial Lecture, had made one presentation where he talked about the roots of racism. There had been preachers who had tried to give energy to the marchers. From those discussions, we came up with the four-letter phrase "I Am A Man." And this was a real breakthrough. The impact of that statement, not just among the workers of the city of Memphis, but the city as a whole, was just absolutely incredible, because folks realized they had grown up in a town where their manhood had never been recognized or

respected. They saw a sense of dignity, a sense of respect, in being just treated as a human being. In the videos, there's a fellow there by the name of Clinton Burrows who speaks to the fact that instead of wages these folks were given handouts and hand-me-downs. They were, in their own minds, disrespected throughout their working lives.

So, "I am a man" became their slogan. The city recognized the power of this also, and set out to try and squash not only the impact of that statement but kill the morale of the men as well. We started getting arrested on what I call rinky-dink charges. Jaywalking. They would arrest our members on Friday and try to keep them in jail until Monday with the hope of breaking their spirit. They required us to bail them out in cash, so on Friday we would have to have upwards of fifty to seventy-five thousand dollars to bail every striker out of jail who the police had put in jail for infractions of the law. They were arresting students and labeling them as part of the striking group.

They deputized newspaper reporters and sent them to our meeting to write on the conduct of our meeting to later on subpoena the newspaper reporters into court to testify against the strikers and ourselves. And the charge was, with the men, that they refused to go back to work when they knew they were supposed to go back to work. And for us, the charges against us were that we did not tell them to go back to work when we knew they should be back to work. I still have ten days to do in the city jail in Memphis, Tennessee. Twenty-three union members

were cited for contempt of court because they would not go back to work. They still somewhere have days to do. Jerry Wurf and myself, because we were outside agitators, as I said we got ten days.

The struggle, and the simple proposition of just finding a solution was getting out of hand. It had become national. National unions were supporting it, national leaders were supporting it, and all we were doing was trying to do is find a way to help these men get a grievance procedure and get their union recognized.

Dr. King, who was in the process of organizing the Poor People's Campaign, was speaking in Marks, Mississippi when he heard about the confrontation in Memphis, Tennessee. And for him it was the symbol of the working poor. People who worked every day and still could not raise themselves out of poverty. Dr. King had a long-term commitment to try and build an alliance between organized labor and the religious community and the civil-rights community, believing that those are the most powerful forces in our society to work for the good for all people. He instantly identified with the struggle and committed to come to Memphis and speak for the sanitation workers. Twenty thousand people showed up to hear his speech on March 18<sup>th</sup>. And sometimes our great leaders go one step too far in their support for our cause. Dr. King called for a city-wide work stoppage. I'm not altogether sure why he wanted that but he called for it, and he called for it and set a date for it. Jerry went ballistic because that's not what we wanted. And due to our luck (and proof there is a God) the greatest



snowstorm in twenty years hit Memphis, Tennessee on the date that Dr. King called for the general strike. Everything came to a halt. I mean, there was no work, the city shut down.

And, thinking we had dodged a bullet, Dr. King, in his wisdom, set another date. He set a date of March 28 for a city-wide march in support of the strikers. And that created something very unusual. It created a new and very different kind of pressure for the city leaders and certainly the mayor. The mayor conceded the possibility of participating in a mediation session of some kind. The weirdness of our situation was the mayor took the position that since we were violating the law he could not speak to us without him being a party to violating the law. It requires thought to get to something like that. So in the mediating session the union's on one side, the city was on the other side, and pastors and preachers in between. The mayor would not speak to us, he would speak to a preacher who would then say to us what the mayor said. And we could then say something to the pastor who would then follow up. It was bizarre! But it provided, at least, an opportunity to talk.

But the pressure was mounting beyond even what we could control. Luckily for us, people were beginning to see the strike in a different light. We were trade unionists trying to find a vehicle for these workers.

The march of the 28<sup>th</sup>, little did we know that it would be destroyed by forces beyond our control. I'm going to just put on the table the name of J. Edgar Hoover, and I want

somebody to ask the question later on “what did I mean by that?” The march on the 28<sup>th</sup>, which was city leaders from all across the city, people of good will who wanted this to end, had come down to be a part of this march. They had brought their families, they had brought their children, we saw this as a real victory. About a half-hour after the march started, windows were broken, plate-glass windows. Fires were started. Not by us, not by strikers, but by provocateurs put into the mix by the afore-said three-letter word FBI. I’ve said it now. And I hope somebody raises the question.

The purpose was to diminish the image of Dr. King and show him as a leader of a violent, out-of-control march. For his personal safety we took Dr. King away from the march. Families, people who had come to just be part of this settlement, were caught in this madness. People being beaten, injured. A young sixteen-year-old kid by the name of Larry Payne was shot at point-blank range with a twelve-gauge shotgun. The police report says that he lunged at the police with a pocket knife, but he was dead. And his death was associated with the strike.

The men’s goal of simply trying to build a union had gone far beyond the control of ourselves and anyone else. And as chaos spread, we were at a loss as to what to do. But we knew we had to re-think the entire agenda for trying to help settle this strike. The religious communities were being tested. Are they relevant? The business community was being tested. Are they engaged? And workers’ groups saying “we’re going to continue this until the end.” And every single day, from

then on, they were prepared to march, rally, do whatever they had to in order to make sure people did not forget that their original intent was to build their union.

Dr. King was confronted with the proposition: can he hold a peaceful rally? Is his image so damaged now that he can no longer be in control of a non-violent civil-rights movement? That troubled him. At our meeting he said we have to march. He set a march for April 5 back in Memphis to make the point that non-violence was still not only his commitment but also the commitment of any movement that he was a part of. I don't have to remind you that on April 4<sup>th</sup> he met his demise... I'm not one of the James Earl Ray crowd. I got a different view. But we are aware that James Earl Ray never had a trial. Never had a trial. He was convicted on confession although he recanted. Never had a trial. Never appeared before a judge to hear the evidence. And I hope somebody will ask that question in the Q&A session because there's some interesting things I want to talk to you about.

But the assassination of Dr. King set off a wave of violence across the country. Lyndon Johnson, president at the time, called into Memphis to speak to the Mayor, to encourage him to get to the table and find a way to resolve this. The Mayor said to the President of the United States, "you run the country, I run Memphis." Lyndon Johnson was not a person who took things lightly. He suggested that he would cut off every nickel that went into the state of Tennessee unless they found a solution to this problem, and he advised the mayor that he was going to send his own person down to help out.

He assigned a fellow by the name of James Reynolds, who was Undersecretary of Labor, to come into Memphis and bring the sides together.

Well, Mr. Reynolds came and succeeded. We met for eleven days. The issues had gone far beyond a grievance procedure at this point. There was money involved, there was procedures for promotions, a whole host of things. And we found a proposal that we thought would meet the needs of the workers. And we took it to them. If you've seen the news clips, it was ratified unanimously by the workforce.

And let me just read to you what it had in it, and then we'll open it up for some questions. The original argument was just recognize the union, give us a grievance procedure, and let us settle some of our problems. The final agreement recognized the union and included dues check-off, you'll recall, that's all we asked for. And then it went on. We had a grievance procedure, a wage increase, a promotional policy based on seniority and competence, a non-discrimination clause, no penalty for strike participation or union activities, all strikers would return to work without prejudice, and advisory arbitration. In Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968. So it went a little bit better once we got into the room. For the men in Memphis, it was the greatest thing that ever happened in their lives. Their families' lifestyle changed, not because of the money but because of the pride that came from being a part of building the union that worked not just for them but for the community as a whole.

Our union, of which I couldn't have been prouder than staying with this thing for sixty-seven days and beyond, had established a record for ourselves and for the trade union movement as a whole.... that unions are a good thing for workers.

Let me just stop right there and see if we can generate a question or two.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**John “Jack” Trumbour, Research Director, Labor and Worklife Program, Harvard Law School:** One of the things that I got from Michael Honey's book is how you were brought into the struggle. He talks about how originally P. J. Ciampa was under a lot of stress because he was sort of told, listen, we have got to re-think the strategy. He was told, can you tell the thirteen hundred men not to strike. And he said well, you know, I'm an Italian-American, I'm a white guy, and I'm gonna tell thirteen hundred African-American men who were fired with passion for justice not to strike? He thought it was really wrong, that it wasn't really going to be a good situation. And so, presumably, that put you in a difficult situation because you were being sent down there by the union to then have to talk to them about possibly pursuing a different strategy, and I'd be interested to hear how you dealt with the kind of pressure that was put upon you.

**William Lucy:** Jack, there are two parts to that. I'm going to start with the first. I was working in Detroit, right? And I got the call to go to Memphis and so I asked, what's the deal? And it was so simple. I figured I'd go, spend an hour or two, and come back. I had the highest parking bill in the history of the union. I parked in the short-term parking at the Detroit airport, and I came back seventy-five days later. But the meeting where the decision to strike took place in the Central Labor Council of Memphis, Tennessee. A fellow by the name of Bill Ross was the Executive Secretary of the Central Labor Council and he was upstairs in his office and the men were downstairs in their office. Somebody called him and told him to go down and tell them to go back to work. He said I am the only white man in this building and I ain't about to go down and tell folks to go back to work. Well, I'm with Bill, I wasn't about to go down and tell folks to go back to work. Because this was an absolute commitment that they had made to fight, to change their situation. And for us in the union, while we didn't think it was a good strike, we didn't think logic and planning had taken place because workers are on strike because they're mad and they should not strike because they're mad. You only strike when you can win. And we didn't see how you won. But it became very clear the workers there were not going to go back until they had some commitment to change their situation. The leader of the organization was a fellow by the name of Thomas Oliver Jones, T. O. Jones. He didn't have a Harvard B.A. or any other, he was just a regular pool-hall guy who had the respect of thirteen hundred men who were willing to give

up their security, to the extent they had it, and join this fight until they could get themselves a union.

**Jack Trumbour:** One thing about Jones, just very quickly, as I understand about him, he was somebody who went into the navy and was in Oakland. You're somebody who had your childhood in Memphis but you moved out to the Oakland area. Was that something that helped you to work together with him, because they do say that one thing that helped Jones was the Oakland background: he saw unions at work in Oakland and saw that people in his field had a much better life than the people in Memphis.

**William Lucy:** California is a very strong labor state, and certainly in the Bay Area he could see that all over the place, but irrespective of what union, what kind of work you did the unions were very strong there and workers' rights were very well entrenched in the culture. T. O. Jones was an amazing fellow. It takes a special kind of person to take thirteen hundred needy workers committed to a cause without any certainty of what the outcome is going to be. For me, he has all the respect in the world. They gave me this award which really was a great award but it should not be for me. It's for those men who fought the fight, who made the sacrifices, who made the contribution to build that union and give themselves some sense of "we can make change in our lives if we're at the table." So I said that, and I still think that those men really made a sacrifice the likes of us can't do.

**Jennifer:** Hello, my name is Jennifer, I'm coming from the Harvard Kennedy School. I just want to say thank you for coming out to speak tonight and the organizers of tonight's event. I am from Memphis, Tennessee and my grandfather was a sanitation worker so I personally know this story pretty well. I couldn't help but get a bit emotional just remembering his narrative and listening to what you have to say, how you eloquently described Memphis in 1968... I just want to say thank you for helping those men and their families during that time. Because my grandfather is no longer here, this year will be, I think, eight years since he's passed away, but on his behalf I just want to say thank you for helping us. Thank you. [applause]

**William Lucy:** Thank you for your comments. Let me make a point: Many of us have no idea what some of these small cities are like, where the operation is geared to survive off the backs of working people. One of the things that Jerry Wurf said we were going to do when we wrap this thing up was attack the usury laws in the city of Memphis. Some of us may be familiar with Ferguson. In the city of Memphis the lending laws were so geared to punishing people who were already in difficult straits. So when we ended the strike we went to state court and filed to have the usury laws changed as much as we could in the state but certainly in the city of Memphis, Tennessee, so they would not take advantage of people the way they did. You know, a jaywalking ticket turns into almost a felony if you don't show up. I mean, there's all kinds of crazy stuff, and this happens on a daily basis



in small towns all across this country. And that was a role that was not a traditional trade union role, but it was something that came out of what we learned as a part of this process.

**James Williamson, community activist, Cambridge, Massachusetts:** Thank you, it's an important struggle and story. April fourth is also noted by many as the one-year anniversary to the day when Martin Luther King gave his famous speech in Riverside Church criticizing the war in Vietnam on the eve of the first massive demonstration against the war in Vietnam in Central Park. And some people have wondered is that just a coincidence. But I had the pleasure and privilege of getting to know D'Army Bailey who was a wonderful person who came from Memphis. He had a bit of an odyssey. At the time he was a civil rights lawyer, and he tells a story of flying back to Memphis when he got the news about Martin Luther King. D'Army ended up being the person who, I think, was singularly involved in helping to raise the money to buy the Lorraine Motel at an auction and organize the process that led to the founding of the National Civil Rights Museum there. It's a long story. But I want to get to what you said, "please ask about this." D'Army seemed to be in the camp of those who thought it was James Earl Ray, he recommended the book *He Slew the Dreamer*. I also happen to have had the chance to meet Bill Pepper, another figure in looking at what happened, who has now written three books where he hypothesizes something quite different. So I would like to ask you what your view

of the assassination is, the best understanding that you've been able to develop. But I'd also like to ask you, specifically, when you said there were FBI provocateurs. If you could talk about the evidence that eventually may have been uncovered for that, and also when you talked about the newspaper reporters being deputized, many many years later there was an African-American photographer who was one of the most important photographers with intimate access to the civil rights movement who turned out to be an FBI informer as well. So, thank you.

**William Lucy:** Let me start with your first. D'Army Bailey was an old and dear friend. What is now the Civil Rights Museum was purchased by the union. I mean, the union put up the money to buy the Lorraine Motel, which was up for auction at that point in time. And, for fear that that history would be lost, AFSCME put up the money to purchase it from auction and D'Army Bailey became the first chair of the board who was working to construct the museum as we now know it.

Senator Frank Church held hearings about a year or so after the strike ended. And as a part of his hearings we started to see strange things show up that suggested that there was something more on the table than what we knew. There was a belief, and I say this with some humor, that Memphis, Tennessee was the start of overthrowing the government starting in the public works department of Memphis, Tennessee. I mean, that was the thinking. And it's reflected in the FBI's reports, at least in Hoover's reports, that the union was this

subversive force out to overthrow the government. We were just trying to settle a strike. But that began to impact the thinking of people who were making decisions in Memphis, Tennessee. And we had all kinds of strange people showing up playing roles. The strike in Memphis was a month old before anybody knew it. Because you couldn't get news out of town. The stories would not be carried. We at headquarters learned about the strike quite by accident. And that's when we got engaged. And it would be interesting if you would read the Church hearings from that period.

And you're right: Dr. King's speech in Riverside was his first public identification and opposition to the war in southeast Asia. And it's interesting how his support waned when he made this analogy between the war, militarism, ta-da, ta-da, ta-da. And even in the Black community his level of appreciation dropped from his peers because of this connection that he made.

Now, you mentioned the James Earl Ray thing. Normally, and I don't want to play lawyer without a license, but if you recant a statement you can get a hearing. There's no record that I've seen of a hearing on James Earl Ray's recantation. A friend of mine, Judge Joe Brown, some of you guys ever watch the Joe Brown show? As a part of some process the King assassination was put on his plate to carry through. And I don't know what struck him but his first order of business was to have the rifle tested and check the rifling marks. Lo and behold, according to the report, the rifling on the bullet didn't match the rifle barrel. That's the record. Now,

James Lawson and I, we found the money to have a trial of James Earl Ray on the basis of the evidence on the table. And to make sure that at least we were as fair as possible and as transparent as possible we would not have a trial in Memphis, Tennessee but bring folks from as far away as possible to participate in looking at the evidence and listening to lawyers make a case. At the end of the trial, and at the end of our money, [laughter] Earl Ray was found innocent. I don't know about all the ins and outs, but that was the result.

The family of Dr. King ultimately came to the conclusion that James Earl Ray was not the assassin, by himself or on his own. So maybe that's fake news, I don't know.

**James Williamson:** Thank you. Do you want to comment on if there was evidence of the FBI's involvement in the provocations on March 28<sup>th</sup>?

**William Lucy:** If you read the book you will find out that there was a small group of young folks in town called The Invaders, which was sort of a poor peoples' Black Panther kind of thing. And their mission in life was to prove that the older folks and the unions were not carrying out the struggle the way it should have been. And that they had a better idea how to raise the pressure level. And they were always at the union hall with proposals of how to move the agenda. Well, it turns out at least one third of them were agents of the three-letter department. And all this is in the Church committee hearings in DC.

**Robert Mootry, Jr., HTUP Class of 2018 and former president of the Buffalo chapter of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists:**

The coalition with the start of the ground-building with the community, the pastors, the garbagemen, and somewhere along the line, as we moved through the 1960s, the 70s, the 80s, 90s, the growth in the union movement and the community coming together somewhere has been lost. Do you see a connection with community-based organizing along with labor?

**William Lucy:** Absolutely. I don't think organized labor other than in some very specific skills can sustain itself without finding and building an alliance between community and community supporters. We are now seven, eight percent of the workforce in trade unions, I mean, you become irrelevant when it comes to public policy if those are your numbers. And if you look at both the private sector and the public sector, if you look what's happening to the public sector now in Janus and in other cases that challenge our ability to play a role, to represent workers, that flows directly from our declining numbers. I think organized labor has to go at its role in a different way. I think as long as the battle is a fight between the boss and the union, the boss is going to win, I think. But when it becomes a battle between the boss and the community, the boss and the workers who identify with the community, that's a different kind of struggle. So I think we've got to figure out ways to make our movement more relevant to a broader community where it was in years past, when we were engaged in so

many things that were the heart and blood of families. And I think we have a chance of coming back but we've got a lot of work to do. And I think we've got to get it done before we get too much smaller. I mean the trade stuff, you know TPP and all these things, each one of those major problems diminishes our ability to effectively represent the interest of workers. And we fought Obama on TPP because he was wrong. I mean we owe him a lot but we don't owe him our future jobs.

**John Stocks, Executive Director, National Education Association:** I want to ask you a question about the strike that just surfaced in my email a couple of days ago. Our organization in the sixties merged the American Teachers Association with the NEA, and the ATA was the Black Teachers Association primarily in the South. And in the context of the strike, out of that merger came the creation of the Human and Civil Rights Department at the NEA, and it was led by a gentleman by the name of Sam Etheridge.

There is a staff person who worked there in '68 and wrote me this email because I was trying to figure out if there was any involvement of the NEA staff in the strike activities, and his name is Boyd Bosma, is his name. He says "during the strike by the Memphis sanitation workers Sam was directly involved. He played a major role in the creation of Black Mondays during the strike. The union and civil rights leaders had called for a boycott of Memphis schools by Black students. Sam met with them and convinced them that the kids needed to be in school and proposed that they be asked to boycott school

only on Mondays...” and then he says “and attend schools and continue their education the rest of the week. They agreed and Black Mondays became a positive force in the conduct of the strike.” Is that a correct recollection in your mind, or do you know about that?

**William Lucy:** I don’t know the fellow in particular, but there were activities to get kids to boycott on Mondays. We didn’t engage in trying to tell other organizations how to support, but we were concerned about schools in Memphis as well as any other place across the South where you were asking kids to come out and be a part. I mean, I got a real strong sense that education is treated as mandatory but learning is optional. You know, I mean, that’s the contradiction. We can’t encourage kids not to be in school, it’s too easy for them not to be there in the Memphis school system in particular. You know, they needed twenty-four-hour classes. So, yes, they tried to help in that way.

**Chris Gardner, CEO, Happyness:** Tell us about the book, man, I mean hasn’t it been in process for a little while?

**William Lucy:** Chris has been trying to get me to do a book, and I keep trying to tell him that several more people got to pass. There is no book, there is no book. There is an effort being made to try and make the Memphis sanitation strike into a movie. And it ought to be. And we ought to have a guy who’s real close to Will Smith [laughter]....

**Christopher Mackin, founder and President, Ownership Associates:** Good afternoon, Bill, thank you for coming. My name's Chris Mackin, friend of Omar Abdul-Malik, who says hello, by the way, in DC.

I just wondered if we could get you to share your perspective on national politics, on what happened in 2016 and what you think the Democrats need to do, just some general observations on politics?

**William Lucy:** Well, first question, we lost in 2016. And I honestly think we're going at this fight in the wrong way. We're not going to win, or take over the House, or take over the Senate, or win the presidency based on how bad Trump may be. I don't think we're going to win on that basis. I don't even think we're going to win calling him a racist every other day. I have to say, I don't believe that everybody who voted for Trump is a racist, I don't believe that. Although I do believe that every racist voted for Trump, I'm clear on that.

What we've got to do is give a program to the people who believe the program affects their lives and improves the quality of our lives.... We cannot win based on how bad the other party is. I mean, this has got to be an arena of ideas and we got to compete for the votes of people based on ideas. And if the Democratic Party comes forward with a plan that captures the imagination of the people it's going to do well. If it does not we're in for a long slog.

I tend to think that some of the new things that are happening, whether it's the women's march, or all the



new candidates who want to get into the game, or people who are really exploring new kinds of policy concepts, I think we can compete pretty actively. But I do think we've got to shift away from every day, he's the bad guy. I mean, Mueller's going to take care of whatever needs to be taken care of with him. We're seeing other candidates, and from both parties, who just can't stand the heat and don't have the ideas. Here is where the trade union movement, I think, is missed and is going to be missed so desperately, because it no longer has the solid support that it can advocate for and fight for plans and programs that mean so much to the American people. I mean, some unions have not formulated what their folks think yet. And unless you provide leadership, unless you provide programs and approaches, we're just going to be talking about how bad the current president is. And that's not a winner. It's not a winner.

**Sharon Block:** So, taking us back to the strike, I'm fascinated by the chronology of the decision-making about the direction of the strike. The national union did not think it was a great idea to go out on strike, then it became about the very specific demands of those thirteen hundred sanitation workers, and then it became a national cause. I wonder if you could share some about what was that process by which you managed the message of the strike and the objective of the strike, when you had all these competing interests, all of which seem completely valid, but somewhat at odds with each other?

**William Lucy:** Jerry Wurf promised the strikers that they would have the support of the union so long as they chose to pursue this. And for him that meant giving them the right to talk about how the strike was going to go, what we were going to focus on, and who we would engage in making decisions about what we did. And when the organization Community On the Move for Equality was formed, that brought a new element into this. There were people in the community who saw this as a civil rights struggle, not necessarily a trade union struggle. And we had to keep it in both camps. But primarily it was a worker's struggle. There were younger people who said, well, even if you get what you're demanding we think there ought to be more. That was one element we had to deal with. There were competing forces all over the place. And we were trying to make sure that this struggle was going to be about what the men themselves believed made sense.

The civil rights aspect caught on quickly. Roy Wilkins. Bayard Rustin. Other civil rights leaders who recognized that here was a situation where people worked every single day but still had no possibilities of changing their work. And in those days the civil rights community was not necessarily a pro-labor community. So we did the best that we could in terms of sharing the decision-making process with as many partners as we could, certainly raising and reaching out for support in as many places as we could. And I think here is where Jerry's skills and his commitment and his sense of social justice had such an impact, because we've had people who

wouldn't give Jerry ten minutes but they knew he was a solid trade unionist. If he was battling for a cause, they were going to be with him.

And I think the movement as a whole benefitted from the Memphis strike. I don't mean just our union, but we saw that we could really capture the imagination of the workers if you were simply true to your call and your calling. That was the way we went at it....

I got into big trouble when President Meany was the president of the AFL-CIO and I was a brand-new secretary-treasurer under President Wurf. We got into this discussion: Why doesn't the trade union movement organize more folks? Well, back in the twenties and the thirties we could organize the key areas and be able to affect change by virtue of the power we had there. Things have changed now. The workforce has changed, the people who are in the workforce have changed. We've got younger people, we've got immigrants, we've got women, we've got everything now. And we're still hanging on to the same model that we had back in the day. But in the building and construction trades, that's where the work is going to be. We're going to have infrastructure, we're going to have a whole host of new things come on line. If we can't share these with people who we know need them, I mean the jobs, we're watching ourselves go down the drain. There are some unions that are going to survive no matter what. But the by-product of that is a society of people who cannot function in a rapidly-changing society. And the building

trades is a perfect place to be a new starter, for bringing folks out of the communities and onto meaningful jobs.

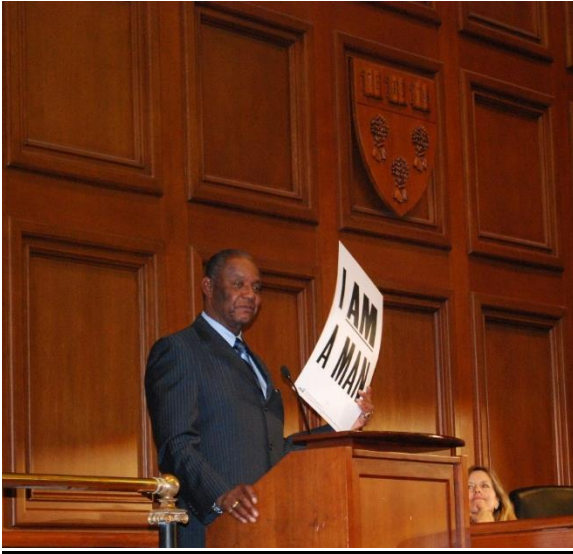
**Mildred Wurf:** One of the important factors about the Memphis strike was that the attitude of the AFL-CIO at that time was that labor should fight its own fight and be itself but should not really engage with other community groups when there are struggles. And if there was anything that was true in Memphis, it was that the religious community led to other parts of the community becoming part of the struggle. And that was a really controversial approach for a union, I think. It was essential that they do that, but I think that was a big issue.

**William Lucy:** You're absolutely right, Mildred. Part of the difficulty in answering, you know I'm no expert, but labor's historical role in relating to communities of color has not been a great role, and, for reasons that may be valid on all sides. But we're in a situation now where we can get every labor vote out there and lose by a landslide. I mean, our future is tied to our relationship with communities, new and old, building relationships that share not only the decision-making but also the results of successful efforts. We've got to open up our ranks to more people, otherwise we're almost a losing game.

In Memphis in '68, I can remember Jerry Wurf being so exasperated talking to the labor council about support and being treated as if he were an outside force. They just did not understand the nature of the job that these folks had, nor did they have any reason to be concerned about it. Our support came from what is now the United

Food and Commercial Workers Union. I mean, we had rubber workers' support. But I think it's important that we see the need for the trade union movement to form the alliances with the broader community, for not only policy and program purposes but also for political purposes. Because there will be no pie to cut up unless labor is at the table demanding the kinds of programs that are necessary for its members and its families.

And I think we're seeing change now, we're getting newer leaders, we're getting more diversity among the leadership, and I think in the end all of that will be good. But we've got to change. We've got to change. As I said before, and maybe some unions are perfectly happy with the nature of the leadership that comes from the White House now. But it's going to get worse, and they may be coming after us today. You can probably say they'll go after everybody else tomorrow.



*At an awards ceremony in 2012 also at Ames Courtroom, Harvard Law School, William Lucy holds up the “I Am A Man” placard that captured the public imagination during the Memphis sanitation strike of 1968.*



*MLK confers with Jerry Wurf. Photograph courtesy of AFSCME District Council 37.*