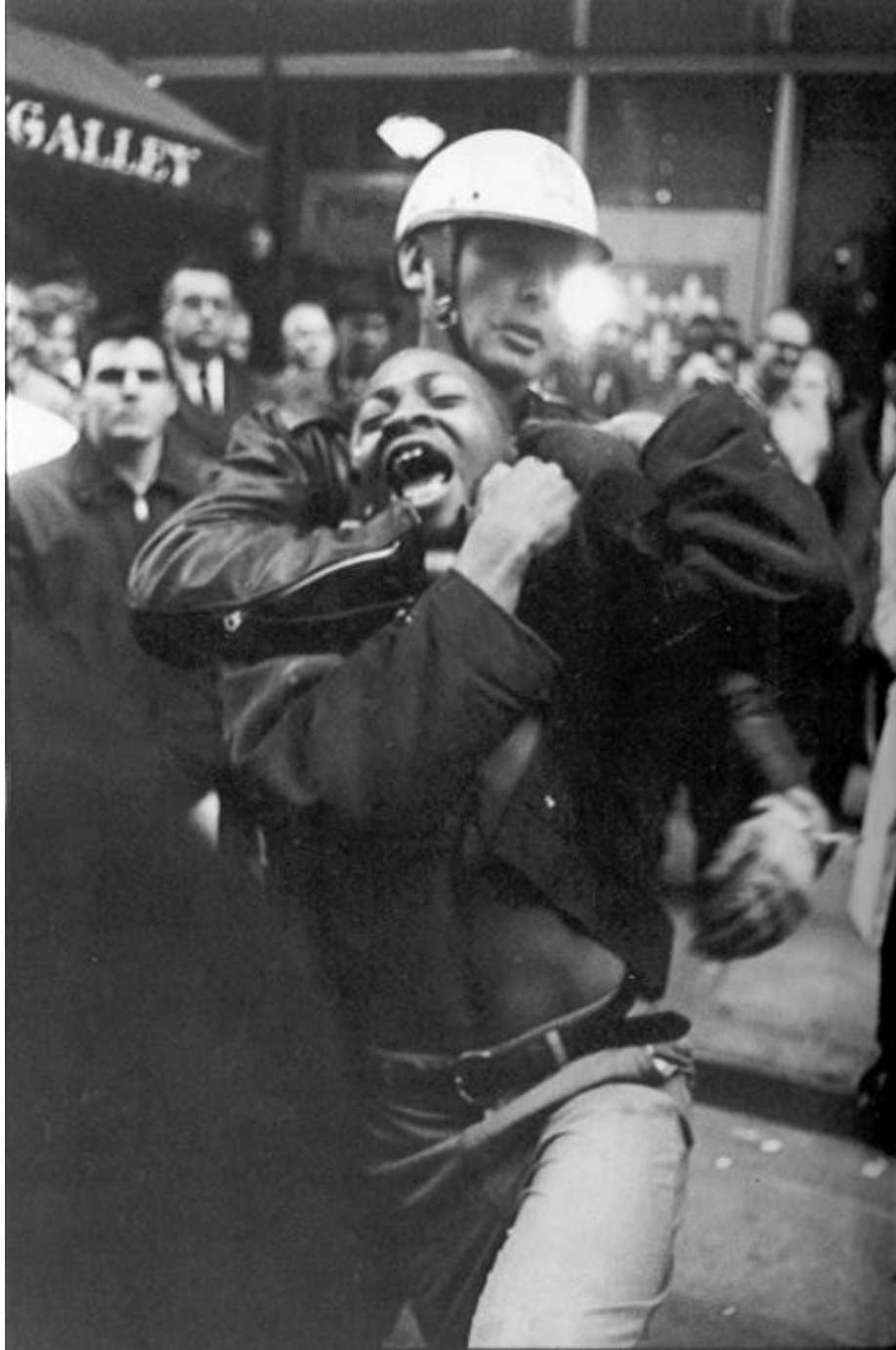


A disgrace before God: Striking black sanitation workers vs. black officialdom in 1977 Atlanta



This article is a case study of the betrayal of the African American working class by the Black political class brought to power by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960's.

"A disgrace before God"

Labour struggle in the American South has a long and proud tradition. From the historic textile mill strikes of 1934, to streetcar workers in 1949 Atlanta, to sanitation workers in Memphis and St. Petersburg, Florida in 1968, working folks have organized to control social relations and conditions of labour in their workplaces, and to regain a semblance of their own humanity in the face of attacks from company bosses, police, and government officials. And this was all initiated with little or no formal union infrastructure or support. Yet Southern labour history is portrayed as backward or underdeveloped in relation to the North, with its long tradition of unions in large industrial cities like New York, Detroit, and Chicago. Instead we see that Southern folks, blacks and whites alike, have struggled for years against bosses running company towns with an iron fist, against Jim Crow segregation pervading workplaces, neighbourhoods and cities, and against all authoritarian forces viewing organized labour struggles as the coming terror. These past battles give context to labour movements of the more recent past and present, showing how far society has come, and how far it still must go. When examining the gains and limitations of black liberation and workers self-management from the Civil Rights and Black Power era, the 1977 sanitation workers strike in Atlanta is very telling.

Workplace organizing among sanitation workers, by 1977, had a proud history. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in places like New York City, Cleveland, Atlanta, St. Petersburg, and most famously Memphis in 1968, sanitation workers, as individuals and as organized groups, battled city bosses against slave wages, unsafe working conditions, and for the right to form unions and workplace associations on their own terms. These struggles went hand-in-hand with the black liberation movement, for defeating white supremacy was a challenge met in neighborhoods and in workplaces.

Memphis in 1968 best demonstrated this connection, where wildcat strikes by an all-black workforce against overtly racist city officials became a larger battle for black liberation and community self-management. This struggle eventually saw the involvement of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights establishment figures. When Dr. King was assassinated the day after giving a stirring speech to assembled sanitation workers, victory for striking workers followed shortly for much of American liberal official society sympathized with the strikers against the racist city officials. The city recognized the strikers' call for union recognition, nationally backed by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and conceded to demands for better pay and improved workplace conditions. This scene repeated itself in St. Petersburg and Cleveland later that year. This also occurred in Atlanta in 1970, where civil rights figures, some of whom were newly elected city officials, supported striking sanitation workers threatened with termination by Atlanta's white mayor Sam Massell.

Fast-forward seven years to the Atlanta of 1977 and something strange, one may think, happened. The script was flipped. The same black officials who supported sanitation workers against firings by a white mayor decided to replace striking city sanitation employees with scabs. This occurred with the full support of many old guard civil rights leaders and organizations, allied with business and civic groups associated with Atlanta's white power structure during Jim Crow segregation. What explains the apparent about-face by black officials?

The Atlanta strike of 1977 shows the coming of age of a coalition of black and white city officials, along with civic and business elites, under the leadership of the city's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson. Just seven years earlier Jackson publicly sided with sanitation workers against a white mayor seeking to fire them. Jackson and some members of the civil rights establishment, in positions of local government by the mid 1970s, did not hesitate to marshal the forces of official society against the self-activity of black workers. They allied

with white business and civic elites, the same people that just a few years earlier openly supported white supremacist segregation, all in the name of smashing the sanitation workers' strike by any means necessary.

This showed the open class hatred of black and white elites against working people, a prominent feature of communities in Atlanta for generations. This played out most clearly in times of crisis like the infamous race riot of 1906. Prominent blacks apologized to white officials for the "vices" of working folks in their community who, whites claimed, helped create a climate leading to outright racial violence. These black elites pledged to work with whites to police their community. This occurred, even though many of these same black elites had to defend themselves against white supremacist violence. Yet they still had the nerve to scold black working folks who organized community self-defense against the attacks, calling them lazy, violent, and deficient in virtue.[1]

The coalition of black and white elites 71 years later helped foment class antagonisms that ultimately bubbled to the surface. The difference from 1906 was blacks had a seat at the table of Atlanta city government. The demise of the 1977 sanitation strike appeared to be a blow to the black liberation struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, showing that its mainly reformist victories actually signaled a defeat of the broader movement towards anti-racism and self-government. It signaled to working folks, black and white alike, that the promised land Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of while addressing sanitation workers in Memphis, just a day before he was assassinated, appeared open only to business, political, and religious elites.

Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, 1968

To fully understand conditions leading to the 1977 Atlanta strike, one must first examine perhaps the most famous sanitation workers strike in twentieth century U.S. history. Memphis in 1968 was ruled by social and economic segregation, even after the passage of federal civil rights legislation. These laws, won through years of popular protest, were barely worth the price of the paper they were written on in the eyes of most white civic and business leaders in Memphis.

This was evident in the treatment of city sanitation workers. This job, socially open only to black men, paid such menial wages that most workers lived below the poverty line. After numerous attempts to create a union to counter the city bosses and improve social and material workplace conditions, sanitation workers finally struck in February 1968. What ultimately sparked the strike was the death of two men crushed by faulty garbage trucks. With no formal union support through the national AFSCME leadership, who initially told folks to stay on the job, men organized a complete work stoppage, asking for significant improvements in pay, work conditions, and the right to unionize.[2] Led by mayor Henry Loeb, Memphis city government took a firm line against these individuals that would dare challenge the social, economic, and racial divisions prevailing in Memphis. But it would be white supremacists like Loeb and his ilk who would be left rotting on the trash heap of history by the strike's end in April 1968.

Unionization efforts began a few years earlier, led within the ranks by T.O. Jones. For his efforts, Jones was fired, but he continued working towards unionization as an organizer for AFSCME Local 1733. By the cold winter of 1968, sanitation workers were tired of workplace conditions, faulty equipment, and pay ranging from \$1.65 to \$1.85 an hour for labourers and \$2.10 for truck drivers.[3] The attitude of city officials was demeaning, telling employees that going on strike was unnecessary and illegal. Besides, sanitation workers were lectured, the benevolent white city fathers took care of them anyway. However a critical mass of sanitation workers, with strong support from the community, had become sick and tired of the city's plantation mentality that saw them as nothing more than misbehaving children.

Striking workers countered by carrying signs proclaiming “I Am a Man.” It was not simply small economic gains and improved workplace conditions motivating Memphis sanitation men to organize collective labour action. Rather it was a call to change the racist social and economic conditions black folks endured in Memphis. These conditions had fundamentally not changed since the time of slavery. The new society was breaking out of the old order where white supremacy had ruled virtually unchecked.

At this historical moment of labour struggle by Memphis sanitation workers, national leaders in AFSCME viewed their actions as troublesome. When initially informed of the walkout, AFSCME’s field service director P.J. Ciampa privately stated, “I need a strike in Memphis like I need a hole in the head.” He also chewed out T.O. Jones for helping start an illegal strike, though eventually promised support from the national office.[4] This was yet another example in American labour history where the autonomous creative capacities of working folks reached far beyond the capacities of union bureaucrats to envision struggle towards fundamental change in workplace social relations. Support remained strong in the Memphis community with national attention and aid from the civil rights establishment arriving later. This proved both a blessing and a curse, especially when Martin Luther King Jr. publicly took up the cause of sanitation workers by late March. His notoriety brought great national attention and resources from the progressive establishment and media, while simultaneously boxing out more radical sanitation workers and Black Power community groups that fell outside the civil rights establishment’s reformist vision.

This showed prominently in a community march that King participated in. Police violently attacked some marchers and they fought back, smashing up property in downtown Memphis in the ensuing clash. King was appalled that these marchers did not follow his strict philosophy of nonviolence. However, some strikers and community members felt his intervention was opportunist and aloof from strategies and goals agreed among folks in Memphis. King’s actions and attitudes were a telltale sign of how relations between the civil rights establishment, supported by many labour bureaucrats in 1968, and rank-and-file workers as well as community groups would operate in future labour struggles. When King returned a few weeks later to lead another strike and was assassinated before he could do so, nearly all of liberal official society nationwide stood with the Memphis sanitation workers. Mayor Loeb and city officials conceded to striker demands. It appeared King’s martyrdom in service of the black working folks of Memphis would be unquestioned for generations to come.

However this would not be the case. Some of the same black leaders in the civil rights establishment who had sought to aid sanitation workers against racist Memphis city officials, would just nine years later be in the same position as Henry Loeb. By then they were willing to use the same strikebreaking tactics he had employed in his attempt to crush the 1968 strike. This complex relationship of class and race at the dawn of the era of black mayors and city officials, in their fight to contain the aspirations of community and workers self-management, comes into focus when we examine the 1977 Atlanta strike.

Atlanta Strike of 1977

The sanitation workers strike of 1977 was a culmination of frustrating and contradictory relations with a new generation of ruling elites. Pivotal was the relationship between city workers, represented by AFSCME Local 1644, and Mayor Maynard Jackson. This relationship began in 1970 when sanitation workers struck for union recognition, higher wages, and change in the unequal social relations between city management and rank-and-file employees. Their demands mirrored those of striking sanitation workers in Memphis just two years earlier. Atlanta’s white mayor, Sam Massell, battled back by firing workers and using prisoners from city jails for garbage removal.[5] Jackson, then vice-mayor and a former

lawyer with the National Labour Relations Board (NLRB), publicly chastised Massell's hard line tactics, supporting those on strike and calling their wages "a disgrace before God."^[6] This endeared Jackson to city workers, progressive whites, and many folks in the black community who helped elect him mayor in 1973. However it was Jackson who, by March 1977, became a "disgrace before God" in the eyes of those same city sanitation workers he supported in 1970, and who got out the vote for him two years later.

This contradiction showed Jackson's success in preempting popular black support for the 1977 strike by municipal sanitation workers, nearly all of whom were black and who were easily the lowest-paid workers on the city government's payroll. Jackson short-circuited union and worker attempts to build community support for the strike by portraying it as a racial attack by a white-led AFSCME on his administration. This, even though most of its local union leaders were black and had struck against the initial wishes of many whites in the union's national leadership.^[7] This relationship helped form the foundations of social relations between largely black-run city government and everyday black folks they governed. This was the logical outcome of civil rights and Black Power struggles for self-government, for these movements at their philosophical core sought a seat at the table of representative democracy, rather than turning that table over in favor of a democracy from below. For many everyday black folks Maynard Jackson represented Black Power, and they believed his rise to power meant the city's social and economic patronage circles would trickle down to them.

In the minds of the new black officials and perhaps the majority of working folks in the black community, the actions of striking sanitation workers threatened what they believed was Black Power finally achieved. The perceived gains for the black community would not be uprooted by class struggle under the watch of black officials and their supporters. This relationship continues today in Atlanta, where black officials receive wide support among folks of various class and ethnic backgrounds throughout the city.

The 1977 strike occurred in two separate waves. The first played out during four weeks in January and February. It began with sanitation men wildcatting when they were told to report to work in cold weather conditions. The city and union had agreed employees did not have to work if the temperature was below 25 degrees, which it was on the 18th and 19th of January. City bosses ignored this agreement and docked employee pay. Already upset their demands for higher wages were falling on deaf ears, many sanitation workers walked off the job for a week in February when city officials refused to reinstate pay.^[8] Jackson and city officials refused to give in, demanding employees return to work or face termination. The move caused the ranks to waiver, with the majority of AFSCME Local 1644 staying on the job. A solidarity strike among waterworks employees also failed to materialize. The city agreed to pay only half the wages docked. AFSCME local organizer Leamon Hood said the strike was not so much about the pay as "the principle of someone sitting in a warm office and telling you to go out in cold weather when you couldn't even get the ice off the cans."^[9] It was the idea that sanitation workers should manage their workplace of their own accord, free of bosses sitting in the warm offices of city hall.

Another theme evident was that bosses failed to follow agreed upon work stipulations, and held it against workers when they dare follow the rules. This demonstrated the contempt city bosses had towards any terms of the contract or any other agreements favorable to working folks, showing how tenuous labour-management contracts really are. Won through the struggle and self-activity of workers, not dreamt from the minds of labour bureaucrats, contracts that supposedly govern workplace social conditions are never set in stone. Their gains must constantly be guarded by working folks against bosses who would assume they never existed in the first place. The strikes of January and February would serve as a prelude to events occurring some weeks later.

Bitter and emboldened by their experience in January and February, sanitation workers and AFSCME Local 1644 continued pressing the Jackson administration for fifty-cent-per-hour wage increases to a salary averaging \$7,000 annually. This amount was below the national poverty line. Jackson refused, claiming raises would put the city budget into deficit. With Jackson up for reelection and seeking to shore up support among white business elites and middle classes, he did not want to be the first mayor since 1937 to take the city to the bank.[10] Jackson claimed he felt sanitation workers deserved wage increases, but the city's economic bottom line was obviously more important. AFSCME countered with full-page ads in the New York Times and Atlanta Constitution lambasting Jackson, claiming city budgets showed multi-million dollar surpluses that easily could cover wage increases for sanitation workers.[11] The line in the sand was clearly drawn, as it was clear Jackson, though claiming he "felt their pain," would not acquiesce to sanitation worker demands.

The second strike began on March 28 and was fully supported by the over 1,300 rank-and-file workers of Local 1644. The strike was organized by local union figures like Leamon Hood, with support from national AFSCME offices through its president Jerry Wurf. A national ad campaign against Jackson and the city's policies began with the union calling out his administration on cronyism. Locally, strikers staged pickets and direct actions, unfurling a banner during a nationally televised Atlanta Braves baseball game that read "Maynard's Word is Garbage." Later, some strikers dumped trash on the steps of city hall against Jackson's strike-busting tactics.[12] The rank-and-file appeared united, in it for the long haul, and ready for whatever city bosses could dish out. Jackson served striking workers pink slips, giving until April 1st for employees to return to work. Those individuals who stayed out after that date were fired. Sanitation workers were shocked that a man, who in 1970 supported them against scabbing tactics by then mayor Sam Massell, resorted to and carried out mass firings. They could understand Henry Loeb and Sam Massell doing that to black workers, but not Jackson, seen as one of their own. The difference was in 1977 Jackson, unlike Loeb and Massell, had broad community support. He built a coalition between the old white business and civic elite and the black ruling elite forged from the civil rights establishment. The new coalition proved very powerful in marshalling all of Atlanta official society and its supporters, among everyday working folks, against the strike effort.

The conditions that made this new coalition of elites possible have their roots in the Civil Rights and Black Power struggles. These movements for black liberation had many figures and tendencies advocating for reformist strategies, hoping to secure relative freedoms from a benevolent state and a seat at its table while suppressing movements edging towards self-government by black folks in communities and workplaces. The liberal civil rights agenda sought a more humane state and the election of leaders, black and white alike, who were not openly racist and could sympathize with the plight of working people. Some aspiring political elites even came from humble backgrounds themselves, having personally felt the harsh realities of white supremacy in America. Figures and organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and even among Black Power organizations like the Black Panther Party (BPP) and Congress of African Peoples (CAP) were instrumental in normalizing the participation of black folks in governance from the local to the national level.[13]

Though their struggles advanced liberation and self-governance for black folks (and all peoples for that matter) they ultimately ended in a reconstruction of liberal representative democracy. This new framework ultimately constituted, at its best, a progressive gloss over the state and institutions continuing to deny everyday folks governance of judicial, military,

economic, and social affairs. This new progressive governance, including individuals from groups historically oppressed based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, today receives support, although at times unevenly and inconsistently, from both conservative and liberal groups and individuals in civic, political, and corporate realms.

This rainbow coalition of corporate managers and political ruling elites is now the normative mode of governance in an American society understood as multicultural. Only from this can one understand contemporary racist and imperialist policies against people of color, at home and abroad, being legislated by women of color in government, or how corporations managed by individuals from historically oppressed groups can treat their employees, some who are from their same background, like dirt. This explains how elites in business and government, no matter what their ethnic or racial background, gender or sexual orientation for that matter, have so much contempt for the working classes of their own background or identity. We also see this dynamic playing out between union bureaucrats and rank-and-file workers.

In America, this multiculturalism is subordinate to the legacy of white supremacy, not because White men put guns to the heads of men and women of color aspiring elites, rather because the latter freely accept their new power knowing it rests fundamentally upon social inequalities. White supremacy in the United States today depends on representatives from historically oppressed groups to assist in its orchestration of social, economic, political, judicial, and military affairs. Atlanta politics and society in 1977 clearly shows these ideas and systems taking shape.

The actions of Maynard Jackson and black official society against mostly black sanitation workers makes sense when one views multiculturalism as such a veneer, covering fundamental social, political, and economic inequalities. Many Atlantans (black, white, conservative, progressive, male, female) accepted Jackson and other new black officials with little debate. This is also true among “radical” community activists, for the new black official politics were judged on criteria apparently inconsistent with the principled political ideas they normally defended. This translated, for some, to new simplified standards qualifying black officials and aspirants to such status as racially authentic, anti-racist or progressive. In turn the new class of black officials made gestures toward community “radicals” and their immediate, non-threatening initiatives (for example, adopting an honorific street name or issuing a proclamation to acknowledge African Liberation Day, or appointing an activist to a commission or a job).

This was an unacknowledged concession to the ascendancy of the new black political elite, amounting to a de facto agreement. They would not challenge the new elite’s power in exchange for occasional symbolic nods of recognition in a perverse pageantry of legitimization through dependence. This orientation both reflected and reinforced radical forces’ increasing marginalization in the black community.[14] This made it easy for officials like Jackson to proclaim that their election to office signaled the final victory for Black Power, while conflating power now wielded by black political elites as the achievement of self-government for all in the black community.

The litmus test of anti-racism and authenticity remains shallow for black officials because their racial and ethnic backgrounds, in the opinions of many, automatically give them passing marks. The fact that black officials even exist, especially back in 1977, remains a source of pride and celebration among everyday folks, even if they disagree with many policies these officials pursue. This was understandable for a time, since black people had been denied power on any level for so long. In Jackson’s case, he was widely celebrated in the black community as fighting for more contracts and jobs for blacks in the construction of Atlanta’s airport, renamed Hartsfield-Jackson airport shortly after his death in 2003. So when black

sanitation workers challenged Jackson for better wages and workplace conditions, attempting to change unequal economic social relations in the city, it constituted a real threat to his power. In turn, ordinary folks also saw it as an attack on the black community at-large. This was not merely a struggle to rename a park or street after a heroic radical labour or black liberation figure, of which Atlanta is famous for doing. Rather it was a fundamental challenge to the power that black officials wielded against ordinary people in their workplaces and communities. This challenge was met with swift reprisal.

The events of April 4, 1977 are telling in the struggle between working folks and those who saw them as unruly individuals to be managed from above. On the ninth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr., both striking workers and city officials used his memory to justify their actions. In a rally for strikers, Rev. John Bell invoked King's memory and assassination nine years to the day in Memphis. They reminded folks that he came to the aid of striking sanitation workers. Bell believed King's spirit would lead the striking garbage men to victory. The crowd cheered, though with trepidation as they knew hundreds of men were lining up for their jobs at that very moment as Jackson had fired them just three days earlier.[15]

At city hall there was a very different scene. Jackson called a press conference announcing that strikers would permanently be replaced with new hires beginning that very day. Jackson told the press his decision to fire striking workers was one of the most difficult decisions he had ever made. That comment proved quite empty, for he then reminded the press his actions enjoyed broad city support, from groups such as the Atlanta Business League, Chamber of Commerce, as well as from the Urban League, SCLC, the Atlanta Baptist Ministers Union, and the Citywide League of Neighborhoods among others. This show of unity among the "good ole boys" of the white business and civic community with new black officials and longtime civil rights establishment groups was really a first for Atlanta, showing a maturation of a new political and economic ruling elite.

The city's major newspapers the Atlanta Constitution and the black-owned Atlanta Daily World both publicly supported Jackson's firing of workers. It seemed all of Atlanta, black and white alike, were against the strike.[16] But the real kick to the stomach of the workers came later in the press conference when Martin Luther King, Sr. spoke. He strongly supported the firings saying, "If you do everything you can [for the union] and don't get satisfaction... then fire the hell out of them." When asked if his support of Jackson's tactics meant he endorsed strikebreaking, King responded, "We don't like the word 'break' the strike." [17] But that indeed was going on just as "Daddy King" spoke. Strikers did not take the strike busting tactics lightly, and fought with scabs at numerous hiring locations in the city.

But the writing was on the wall, for the AFSCME bureaucracy, itself nothing more than a loyal opposition to the Jackson regime, could not help the rank-and-file win popular support. The union also could not ideologically defeat the city bosses for Jackson had already painted them as run by greedy, white Northerners bent on driving the city bankrupt while making the city's first black mayor look bad in the process. Civic pride among everyday black folks was a major reason they rallied around their mayor, protecting him against a perceived outside threat. This spelled doom for black sanitation workers seeking broad popular support.

By mid-April, morale among strikers was faltering. Many reapplied for their old jobs, forced into the humiliating position of standing in line with scabs. A few rallies were still held, with one on April 12th seeing garbage dumped on the steps of city hall, resulting in the arrests of a number of protesters. Picket lines continued to thin out that week, to the point where only 300 of the original thousand-plus workers stayed out. Though small in numbers, they continued to

rally. Community support did exist in tiny numbers, even including a few prominent figures from the civil rights era. One was CORE co-founder James Farmer who served as director of the Coalition of American Public Employees at the time. Farmer had supported Jackson, but was perplexed by his tactics.[18] Another was Rev. James Lawson, a community leader in the 1968 Memphis strike. He compared Jackson to Henry Loeb. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionist (CBTU) also supported the sanitation workers, chastising Jackson for using “Black workers as political pawns in his efforts to please a middle class black political constituency and satisfy the black establishment.”[19]

Despite their support, the strike folded on April 16th as nearly half the original striking workers were rehired. Nearly all those from Local 1644 who went out were rehired by year’s end, though some at lower hourly rates. Jackson and the new coalition of black and white political and business elites had won. Jackson’s popularity soared amongst the many Atlanta residents, carrying him to re-election. AFSCME and organized labour in Atlanta took a major blow, as the preeminence of the black middle and upper classes in city politics took hold at the cost of the self-managing aspirations of working folks, of all backgrounds, in Atlanta.

Conclusion

Atlanta and other major U.S. cities like Detroit and Washington D.C., where black officials are in the majority, have entrenched a system of ethnic patronage that is fundamentally wrought under the weight of white supremacy. This system rewards elites of all ethnic backgrounds who preside over city councils, chambers of commerce, civic organizations, and union bureaucracies at the expense of everyday working folks. In majority black cities like Atlanta, it is black officials, in concert with the network of white business and civic elites, who see to it their social and economic plans for the city go forward with little or no challenge. When individuals or groups, like city sanitation workers did in 1977 Atlanta, struggle against those who would see them as little more than spoiled, misbehaving children asking for more than what little the bosses think they are worth, then all of official society works to shut them down.

In Memphis, sanitation workers were able to flip the table over on white supremacist social relations at work and in the community for a time. This was not the case in Atlanta, where just seven years earlier sanitation workers were supported by black civil rights establishment figures as upholding the legacy of Memphis sanitation workers in their workplace and community struggle against white supremacy. And yet those same establishment figures, now hailed as mayors, councilpersons, civic and union leaders, portrayed the self-activity of these Atlanta sanitation workers as a threat to the fabric of the community, endangering the gains of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that made black officialdom a reality in the heart of Jim Crow. Figures like Maynard Jackson, Martin Luther King Sr., Andrew Young, and today’s officials like Shirley Franklin in Atlanta, Ray Nagin in New Orleans, Kwame Kilpatrick in Detroit, and countless others in official society at local, state, and federal levels continue to deny working folks a true voice in managing their workplaces and neighborhoods. This is done in the name of preserving supposed progressive governance, and continues receiving tacit to direct support from many working folks.

The 1977 strike demonstrates that, no matter the background of city bosses, working folks take a back seat to the social and economic interests of ruling and aspiring progressive elites. With few people and groups willing to challenge the power of today’s supposedly progressive overseers, the proud tradition of battle against white supremacy and workers self-management in places like Memphis, Atlanta, and throughout America during the Civil Rights and Black Power era seems like a fleeting memory.

This scenario continues to this day in Atlanta, where labour struggles by unionized and non-unionized workers in majority black workplaces must battle black corporate and government bosses. A good example is the organizing by rail and bus operators for Atlanta's public transit system (MARTA) in 2005. They sought better pay and benefits, and more control of workplace conditions. Their demands were blocked at every turn by MARTA's board, consisting predominantly of black corporate and civic figures, even some with ties to the old civil rights establishment that played a hand in crushing the 1977 strike. MARTA workers were eventually forced to accept a largely unfavorable contract, handed down by a judge, which saw many health benefits and workplace control sacrificed for a very modest raise.

Time will tell when everyday folks will finally be able to completely break through, tearing off the progressive veneer used by today's coalitions of ruling elites to cover over the fundamental social, racial, and economy inequalities they carry on.

*Originally published in New Beginnings, A Journal of Independant Labour
Republished with permission of author.*

<http://nbjournal.org/>

Notes

[1]See Godshalk, David Fort. *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2005; Burns, Rebecca. *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the Atlanta 1906 Race Riot*. Cincinnati: Emmis Books, 2006; and Bauerlein, Mark. *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001.

[2]At the River I Stand. Dir. David Appleby. DVD. 1993. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2004. 56min.; Beifuss, Joan Turner. *At the River I Stand*. Memphis: St. Luke's Press, 1990; Green, Laurie B. "Battling the Plantation Mentality: From the Civil Rights Act to the Sanitation Strike." In *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, 251-287; Honey, Michael K. *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

[3]Beifuss, Joan Turner. *At the River I Stand*. 40.

[4]Ibid, 25.

[5]"City Employees in Atlanta Vow to Escalate Strike." *New York Times* (22 March 1970): 29.

[6]"1,400 Striking City Employees In Atlanta Discharged by Mayor" *New York Times* (21 March 1970): 20, and McCartin, Joseph A. "Fire the Hell Out of Them": Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s." *Labour: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2.3 (2005): 70.

[7]Reed, Jr., Adolph. "The Jug and Its Contents." In *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 5. See also Reed's "Why Is There No Black Political Movement?" In *Class Notes*. New York: The New Press, 2000. 3-9.

[8]Bell, Chuck and Jay Lawrence. "City Workers Take Day Off." *Atlanta Constitution* (8 February 1977): 10-C, and Lawrence, Jay and Valerie Price. "Garbage Workers on Strike." *Atlanta Constitution* (9 February 1977): 1-A, 1-F.

[9]Lawrence, Jay. "Garbage Workers Back; Question Is, Who Won What?" *Atlanta Constitution* (15 February 1977): 8-B.

[10]Matthews, Tom and Vern E. Smith. "Atlanta: The Strikebreaker." Newsweek (25 April 1977): 29.

[11]"The Mayor and the \$28 Million. A Mystery Story." Atlanta Constitution (8 April 1977), and New York Times (27 March 1977).

[12]McCartin, 85, and Martin, Lyn. "Protestors Dump Trash At City Hall." Atlanta Constitution (13 April 1977): 1-A, 10-A.

[13]Numerous books document the history of radical community and national groups being normalized into positions of governance. See Komozi Woodard's *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics about CAP in Newark*.

[14]Reed, Jr., Adolph. "The Jug and Its Contents." In *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*. 8-9.

[15]McCartin, 67.

[16]"Fire the Strikers." Atlanta Constitution (30 March 1977): 4-A, and Atlanta Daily World (4, 7 April 1977).

[17]Lawrence, Jay. "City Strikers Clash With Job Applicants." Atlanta Constitution (5 April 1977): 2-A, and "Strike is Criticized by Dr. King's Father." New York Times (5 April 1977): 5.

[18]Matthews, Tom and Vern E. Smith, Newsweek (25 April 1977): 29.

[19]McCartin, 86.