

BLACK PASTORS  
AND LEADERS:  
*Memphis, 1819-1972*

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Reverend James M. Lawson Jr.  
and the Garbage Strike

Just when Memphis clergymen were finally able to take some measure of satisfaction in their desegregation efforts, a young black minister moved into the city complaining that little real progress had been made. Reverend James M. Lawson Jr. dismissed the small sit-ins, court cases, and scattered picketing as "timid" and "almost useless policies," and charged that the leaders in Memphis had neither eliminated white racism nor established black equality, and would have to adopt the massive confrontation politics of the SCLC if they were ever to unify their community and force white accommodation.

Lawson had been born in Ohio in 1928, the son of a militant United Methodist minister and a proud black woman from Jamaica. His father, who inclined toward Old Testament ideas about justice and had once worn a .38-caliber pistol on his hip while pastoring in the South, had organized NAACP and Urban League chapters in northern towns where none had existed.

Young Lawson was thus brought up not to turn the other cheek but to be a man and fight back when he had to. Indeed, when the school boys wanted a fight to size up the new preacher's kid, the elder Lawson sent his reluctant son out and ordered him to put up his fists.<sup>1</sup>

James Lawson Jr. went on to continue his father's campaign against racial injustice, though he turned from physical force to the weapons of non-violence. From his reading of the New Testament, Young Lawson could not reconcile violence with Christianity a problem he confronted in high school debates over the merits of "Compulsory Universal Military Training" and "War with Russia." The very bright and articulate Ohio debater had also made an emotional commitment to Christ and His kingdom, becoming a local Methodist preacher in 1947, the year he graduated from high school. Lawson's pacifism was reinforced at his predominantly white Baldwin-Wallace College where faculty members, including a few who had been conscientious objectors during World War II, sponsored an active chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the oldest pacifist organization in America. As a Negro, Lawson was also responsive to A. Philip Randolph's injunction that blacks refuse to cooperate with the draft until the armed forces ended their policies of racial segregation. Then A. J. Muste, the well-known pacifist, came to speak at Baldwin-Wallace. After earlier careers, first as a Congregational minister and then as a labor leader, Muste had become executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Muste denounced America's cold war policies and then explained that the FOR advocated not passive resignation to war and injustice, but aggressive action to force confrontations and discussions; and he urged his young listeners to refuse to cooperate with the system

1. James M. Lawson Jr. interviews, Memphis Search for Meaning Committee files (Mississippi Valley Collection, Brister Library, Memphis State University).

by refusing to register and going to jail if it came to that, instead of avoiding the draft by obtaining a C.O. classification.<sup>2</sup>

Lawson later remembered how Muste handled a violent heckler easily and gently, and besides, he made excellent sense.<sup>3</sup> Indeed the young minister was so profoundly impressed by Muste's philosophy of nonviolence that he joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Lawson reasoned that nonviolent resistance was the most effective means of correcting human injustices, and the church the most effective vehicle for conveying this message. Once it was shown that Muste's secular ideas might as easily have come from Jesus of Nazareth, congregations would develop a passionate concern with the life of the world and the welfare of their neighbors.

As a Methodist pastor, Lawson could easily have been granted a ministerial deferment from his draft board, but he refused to cooperate with the system, and in 1951 he was sentenced to three years in jail for violating the Selective Service Act. Lawson served thirteen months in prison before he was paroled, and the Methodist Board of Missions sent him to India. He would have preferred a mission in Africa but none was available and so Lawson remained director of athletics and campus minister at Hislop College in Nagpur for three years. He was still in India when the civil rights movement began in the American South, and remembered years later his exuberance when he read of the Montgomery bus boycott. He had long dreamed of the day when southern blacks would refuse to cooperate with the racist system, and it looked as if that day had finally come.

Upon his return to the United States in 1956, Lawson began work for a theological degree at the Oberlin school of religion, but before he had completed his course of study, the southern

2. Interview with Reverend Lawson, 13 February 1973.

3. Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 110.

school desegregation crisis of 1957 and a dinner discussion with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. turned him from the theological scholarship to direct involvement in the nonviolent struggle for southern desegregation. Lawson had lost patience with developing the idea of nonviolence in the abstract, and wanted to put the concept to use against southern racism.

Lawson dropped out of Oberlin in the winter 1957-58, discussed his plans with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and was offered a position as southern secretary for FOR. The organization, long an advocate of integration, instructed Lawson to open an office in Nashville for spreading the message of nonviolent resistance among southern blacks. Lawson would join Reverend Glenn Smiley, a white Methodist from Texas, and Reverend Ralph Abernathy from the Montgomery bus boycott, to hold nonviolent seminars and workshops at black colleges and churches in eight southern states. The team distributed a comic book, *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*; and as a main text, they used Richard B. Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence*, a study of Gandhi's methods for giving the nonviolent man the moral initiative and destroying the self-confidence of his violent opponent. The Gregg study had been revised specially for Negroes in the South, with a new chapter on the Montgomery movement and an introduction by Martin Luther King. With these materials, Lawson's team spread the word that instead of waiting for the system to improve or waiting for divine intervention, blacks must get themselves together and nonviolently force the changes they wanted.<sup>4</sup>

After devoting the spring of 1958 to FOR organizing, Lawson enrolled in Vanderbilt Divinity School, and continued his missionary work part-time. On Tuesday nights, Lawson led integrated discussion groups of fifteen or twenty students from Fisk.

4. William Robert Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Westbright and Talley, 1968), 65-66; *Commercial Appeal*, 9 April 1969; Lawson interviews.

American Baptist Theological Seminary, and Vanderbilt, the topics being Jesus Christ, Gandhi, and nonviolent methods of fighting segregation. Lawson argued that the legal, middle-class NAACP procedures had been too slow, and that they needed to organize some dramatic activity which would move things faster. Lawson's group began their first sit-ins two months before the lunch counter protest in Greensboro, North Carolina, which is generally credited with touching off the southern sit-in movement. In November of 1959 Lawson and four or five from his discussion group began to go into downtown Nashville, testing the segregated lunch counters and engaging managers in a dialogue about the discriminatory policy. These small sit-ins, which never disrupted business and were ended whenever management turned hostile, continued into December and were then suspended for Christmas and semester examinations. Before the sit-ins were resumed on a larger scale, four Greensboro students received national publicity which credited them with starting the sit-in movement on 1 February 1960.

The Nashville group returned to the lunch counters on February 13, with a hundred students from Fisk, Tennessee A. & I., and the American Baptist Theological Seminary, hitting Woolworth, Kress, and McClellan during the Saturday noon rush hour. All seats were occupied, management shut down the counters, and the sit-in was called off without incident. The following Saturday more than two hundred participated in the sit-ins which again shut down lunch counters and drove merchants to ask the mayor for police arrests to end any further demonstrations. On the following Saturday, February 27, Lawson's group, aware of a changed sentiment at city hall, had prepared for the worst. A special battle plan divided the 500 volunteers into small groups ready to replace each shift as it was arrested. Lawson's nonviolent army provided models of politeness as they took seats at downtown lunch counters, but their presence was enough to provoke physical assaults by enraged white customers. As local police moved in and arrested the demonstrators, other students took

their places until eighty had been arrested, the police could take no more into custody, and management closed the stores. With this, attention had at last been called to segregated facilities in downtown Nashville and a confrontation over segregation followed.<sup>5</sup>

On Monday morning Mayor Ben West met concerned black ministers of Nashville in the First Baptist Church, seeking to defend his Saturday arrests as an impartial enforcement of the law. Mayor West explained that after downtown merchants had requested that blacks stop sitting at lunch counters, and the students had refused to move, arrest had been the only alternative. But an angry Jim Lawson blasted the mayor, accusing him of using the law as "a gimmick" for oppressing people. "To prevent oppression," Lawson said, "we are not afraid to suffer arrest." Mayor West retorted, "you want to start a blood bath."

The segregationists naturally directed their hostility to the outside agitator from Ohio, and his Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had planned the protests ahead of time. "God forbid," the local Nashville *Banner* editorialized, "that the Divinity School or any other unit of Vanderbilt University should become the spawning ground for anarchy or the haven of scoundrels and disturbers of the peace who abuse the privileges of student enrollment afforded in good faith and conscience by a great university."<sup>6</sup> There was no hope for peaceful race relations, the *Banner* contended, so long as Vanderbilt gave Lawson sanctuary. Since the publisher of the *Banner* held a position on the Vanderbilt board of trustees, it was no surprise when University Chancellor Harvie Branscomb insisted that Lawson desist from his

controversial activities; and when Lawson refused to compromise his principles of civil disobedience, he was promptly dismissed from the University. Ironically this very action brought even greater pressure on Nashville segregationists, for the dismissal so angered the faculty of the Divinity School that the dean and fourteen of the sixteen professors resigned to protest the expulsion of a good student who had merely followed the dictates of his conscience. When the Lawson incident began to receive national attention, the adverse publicity compounded local pressures enough to force the University to rescind its action and make the business community accept desegregation.<sup>7</sup> Now Lawson had concrete proof of the efficacy of nonviolent confrontation.

It was during the Nashville crisis that Lawson helped organize a new direct action group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for the purpose of extending direct nonviolent confrontation throughout the South.<sup>8</sup> When the founding convention of SNCC met in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the spring of 1960,<sup>9</sup> Lawson delivered the opening speech to the two hundred delegates. He championed the sit-in movement as the only way of exposing the white segregationists' sin of racial pride and successfully breaking down racial barriers. Unlike the NAACP, the Negro church, and interracial agencies, which were cautious and thus largely ineffectual, the sit-in movement told white folk: "Get moving. The pace of social change is too slow."<sup>9</sup> Lawson guided the convention to a statement of purpose reflecting the principles of nonviolent direct action:

7. J. Robert Nelson, "Vanderbilt's Time of Testing," *Christian Century* LXXVIII (10 August 1960), 921-925; see also items on 16, 23 March, 13 April, 15, 29 June 1960.

8. Paul Good, "Odyssey of a Man—And a Movement," *New York Times Magazine* (25 June 1967), 44; Irving Howe, "The First Generation of SNCC," *Dissent* XIV (July 1967), 461-462.

9. Francis L. Broderick and August Meier (eds.), *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), 274-281.

5. Interview with Reverend Lawson, 15 February 1973; Woodrow Geier, "Sit-ins Prod a Community," *Christian Century* LXXVII (30 March 1960), 379-382; Nashville *Tennessean*, (28 February 1960); *New York Times* (March 1960); David Halberstam, "A Good City Cone Ugly," *The Reporter* XXIII (31 March 1960), 18.

6. Nashville *Banner*, 2 March 1960.

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of non-violence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Non-violence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity; justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice becomes actual possibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Lawson's role in conceiving SNCC, he did not assume the leadership of the new organization as some had expected but decided to complete the work for his theological degree. Boston University honored all of his earlier academic credits and granted him a bachelor of theology after only a summer's residence. Returning South, Lawson accepted a pastorate of Scott Methodist Church in Shelbyville, Tennessee, where for two years he served his congregation and supervised the

10. *Ibid.*, 273-274.

construction of their new church edifice. Then in 1962 his bishop promoted him to a much larger urban church in Memphis, a city which by now had grown to more than half a million residents.

Cenotary Methodist Church in Memphis dated back to 1866, when Reverend L. Hawkins, a white northern Methodist pastor, had gathered a black congregation and built them a church and free school.<sup>11</sup> Though Cenotary received a black minister the following year, it retained its affiliation with the white northern Methodist Church and continued as one of the more intellectual Negro churches in Memphis. Over the years the membership grew to more than six hundred; and while the congregation included welfare recipients as well as black professionals, the services were middle-class with dignified hymns and no "amen corner." Indeed, Lawson found the congregation somewhat too "ingrown and comfortable;" but they were not unwilling to support his civil rights activism in Memphis.<sup>12</sup>

Lawson joined the local NAACP and urged the leaders to adopt massive confrontation politics; but to his dismay, only two NAACP board members—attorney A. W. Willis and banker Jesse Turner—were ready to move in this direction. The Memphis clergy might admire Lawson's brilliance and his northern accent, but most were not ready for the kind of direct mass action that was to take place in the Birmingham SCLC campaign the next year. So Lawson joined Martin Luther King in Alabama that spring as an SCLC staff member and conducted training sessions for the volunteers who joined the nonviolent crusade. It was Lawson who drafted the pledge card which every volunteer signed before marching for the movement.<sup>13</sup> Lawson returned home exuberant after the desegregation victory in Birmingham, and impatient to implement direct action tactics in Memphis. In his Sunday

11. Memphis *Post*, 4 January, 10 July 1867.

12. Lawson interviews.

13. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 63-64.

sermon "Why Are Demonstrations Essential?" Lawson denounced local black leadership's slavish dependence on negotiation. "We cannot change 350 years of social evil by negotiating only," he said. "We need a revolution in America—a revolution of the inner man," a revolution which would have to begin with the process of sensitizing white Memphians. Human nature so resisted change, Lawson said, that only the shock of boycotts and demonstrations would have any impact. These tactics, he was quick to assure his congregation, were wholly within the Christian and American traditions. "Demonstrations are very old," he explained. "Moses used them by placing blood on the door of the chosen ones; Jeremiah used them by wearing wooden and iron yokes while marching through the street; Jesus Christ used them as well as earlier Americans—Thomas Paine and the participants in the Boston Tea Party."<sup>14</sup>

Lawson told his Methodist congregation that Memphis could not be allowed to satisfy itself with its token desegregation. Why, even within their own denomination, Negroes were turned away from the city's Methodist Hospital by its white administrators. When Lawson had complained of this policy to white Methodist ministers, they denied having any knowledge of it. "It is not that they didn't know," Lawson charged; "they just didn't care."<sup>15</sup> Nor did the white school board care. Most blacks still attended segregated high schools so overcrowded that double shifts were required to accommodate them; and whites went to school a full day in less crowded, lily-white class-rooms. Demonstrations could stop this kind of discrimination, Lawson insisted; and to make his point, he organized a protest movement against the city school system. First he led an official NAACP delegation to the board to demand integration as a means of eliminating split shifts in black high schools; then he mobilized almost six hundred supporters to picket the downtown real estate office of the school board presi-

14. *Tri-State Defender*, 3 August 1963.

15. *Memphis World*, 3 August 1963.

dent. "March with joy," he cried to his people, "every stride we take is a stride towards freedom."<sup>16</sup>

Desegregation remained a major concern for Lawson; it was a cause for which he would take to the streets whenever whites seemed particularly slow to move towards a non-discriminatory system. But the problems of poverty began to take up more and more of his time, as he accepted the chairmanship of Memphis Area Project—South, an arm of the federal war on poverty.<sup>17</sup> MAP—South sought to raise the standard of living in an inner-city area where 35,000 black residents were in economic distress. With an annual budget of \$190,000, and a staff of twelve full-time and fifty part-time workers, Lawson found jobs for the unemployed, protested housing code violations of landlords, and informed the people about available health and welfare services. Teenagers were hired to paint and repair homes owned by the elderly poor. Residents were organized into block clubs to discuss their problems and the need for uniting blacks to pressure local government into providing a fair share of city jobs.<sup>18</sup>

White critics accused Lawson of being an agitator, of searching for the issue which would produce a confrontation crisis and significant movement towards elimination of poverty and racism. And they say he found his issue on 12 February 1968 when 1,300 Memphis garbage collectors went out on strike, seeking equitable pay and recognition of their union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. Reverend Lawson could use the strike to unite the local black community which had just been badly split by a mayoral election in which more than half the black community had repudiated A. W. Willis, a black candi-

16. *Tri-State Defender*, 7 September 1963; token desegregation had begun in the fall of 1961 with thirteen first graders attending four white schools.

17. Lawson also took an active stand against the Vietnam war, traveling to Indochina with a FOR team in 1965 and participating in the very few Memphis peace marches, *Memphis World*, 26 June 1965; *Tri-State Defender*, 30 April 1966.

18. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 11 September 1967.

date from Lawson's congregation, and thrown their support to the white incumbent who failed to win reelection anyway. A black community reunited around garbage collectors could confront the white power structure and produce a crisis. This conspiracy theory, however, is amusing to Reverend Lawson who originally thought the strike would be quickly settled. Rather than being a tactician who sought problems to exploit, Lawson said, he simply responded to human need. When asked to help the striking workers, he raised money for them and prayed for them, but did not go to the union meetings.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately Mayor Henry Loeb condemned the strike as illegal and threatened to fire the men if they did not return to work by February 15. With his segregationist record, the inflexible mayor had no black support to lose and never really tried to resolve the prolonged labor dispute which turned into a civil rights struggle as the black community became aware of the racial aspects of the strike, thanks to Mayor Loeb and the indiscriminate use of the chemical Mace by the police. On February 23, when a police car crowded a line of protesting sanitation workers, strikers grabbed the bumper and rocked the car. Police officers jumped out and turned their spray cans on every black in sight, innocent by-standers, ministers, and garbage collectors alike; and in so doing they converted moderates to radicals. Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, for one, testified that the Mace "nearly destroyed in two minutes my self-discipline and a belief in nonviolence that I have preached for 30 years."<sup>20</sup>

Angry dergymen called an emergency meeting of the Inter-denominational Ministers' Alliance, the one organization which included all Negro denominations. The range of political opinion

represented at this meeting, and the extent to which the clergy were united in support of some protest, can be gauged by the participation of Elder Blair T. Hunt, one of the city's oldest and most conservative black ministers. In contrast to James Lawson, Hunt has been born in 1887 into a light-skinned, upper-class family of Memphis building contractors and public office holders. Brought up in the Beale Street Baptist Church, his earliest heroes had been preachers, and his future ambition the ministry. After attending Atlanta Baptist College, however, Hunt was diverted for awhile from his early goal of entering the church. Returning home in 1913, as one of the few black Memphians with a real academic preparation, Hunt took a public school teaching position, and within the course of the next two decades worked his way up to the top of the local black educational system, becoming principal of Booker T. Washington High School in 1932.<sup>21</sup>

When Hunt's early interest in the ministry revived, he began serving as assistant pastor for Reverend T. O. Fuller's First Baptist Church. Then in 1921, when the black executives of Mississippi Life, a new insurance company in the city, organized their own Christian Church, fellow Baptist dergymen T. O. Fuller and Sutton E. Griggs advised Hunt to accept the call from these Disciples of Christ; since it was just a part-time minister's position, he would still be able to remain in the public schools. On this advice, Hunt left his Baptist faith to become Elder of the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, a church whose flock of insurance executives made it the wealthiest congregation per capita in black Memphis.

When Hunt asked the white adviser for Negro congregations to instruct him in the doctrines of his new church, he was told, "you don't need any book but the Bible." The theological differences between the Christian and the Baptist churches were minimal. The founder, Alexander Campbell, had organized the Dis-

19. Interview with Reverend Lawson, 15 February 1973; Jim Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 486-487; Press-Seminar, 12, 14 February 1968.

20. Norman Pearlsone, "Garbage Strike Piles up 'Negro Unity,'" *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 1968.

21. Interview with Elder Blair T. Hunt, 8 April 1969.

ciples of Christ a century before in West Virginia, in an effort to reclaim primitive Christianity from the mire of theological distortion. He returned to a literal reading of the Bible, and interpreted the New Testament in the manner of the Baptist Church, emphasizing the Lord's Supper and baptism by immersion.

As a part-time pastor who held a full-time job as a public school principal, Hunt felt obliged to grease the political machine of E. H. Crump, his secular employer. It was easy to rationalize that if Boss Crump opposed civil rights, and he did, at least he wanted the blacks to have decent health, housing, and recreational facilities; and Hunt tried to do what he could for his race by working with Mr. Crump as the Boss's champion and major spokesman in the black community. Mr. Crump had made funds available to improve the physical plant of Booker T. Washington High School, and when the city bought his school stadium new lights, Elder Hunt was overcome with gratitude: "Million of years ago," he declared at the dedication ceremony, "the Lord looked down and found this earth wrapped in darkness and he said let there be light and there was light. Our city fathers looked down on this stadium and found it wrapped in darkness and they said let there be light, and now we have these new lights and we thank them." Elder Hunt even went so far as to urge that Crump be nominated for the vice-presidency of the United States. "Thousands of Memphis Negroes will be happy," he wrote Senator K. D. McKellar in 1940, "if you'll use your influence in having Mr. E. H. Crump's name presented for Vice President. Please do so."<sup>22</sup> A combination of realism and basic Christian pessimism about the chances for worldly progress enabled Elder Hunt to accommodate a political machine which denied his race equality. His eloquent sermons urged his congregation to set their thoughts on the joy of knowing Jesus, to prepare for the future, and to wait for God to change the white man. Even if blacks had

22. *Press-Scimitar*, 2 December 1939; William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 279.

fewer material goods than their white neighbors in Memphis, there were blessings enough for all of God's children. Hunt preached a healing, soothing ministry and led his people calmly through the racism of the Crump era.

Elder Hunt had been saying "yes" to white power for so long, that Memphians thought him incapable of ever saying "no"; but his friends knew that when James Lawson urged the black ministry of Memphis to defy Mayor Loeb, Hunt would be ready to go along. As Hunt later explained, the black churches must be flexible enough to adapt to the changing social climate. The churches might be morale builders, he said, "but just to sit in church and shout and sing will not make one a Christian any more than sitting in a chicken house will make one a chicken." Even Biblical literalism had lost its usefulness and now would have to be discarded: "Literalism with respect to the Bible is also a hindrance to the church. When it comes in conflict with common sense and the spirit of Jesus and the prophets, then literalism should be subdued."<sup>23</sup>

So it was that both the elderly one-time accommodators and the angry young militants joined in the Ministers Alliance and voted unanimously to pressure the white establishment by calling an economic boycott. The targets were to be downtown stores and the two daily Scripps-Howard newspapers which had given the strike a bad press. The boycott was announced on Sunday morning from the pulpit of most of the city's black churches. Pastors also used their sermons to compare the strikers with the Old Testament prophets who had crusaded against injustice, took up special collections for the workers, and asked their congregations to join them in daily marches to downtown Memphis. In the days that followed, the ministers led long processions down Main

23. In the early 1950s Elder Hunt began to print his sermons weekly in the *Memphis World*; see 22 January 1952, 14 April and 6 June 1953 for especially eloquent examples; for his later rejection of literalism see Art Gilliam, "How Does Racism Affect Religion," *Commercial Appeal*, 12 January 1970.



Street during business hours to dramatize and strengthen the boycott. Workers, ministers, and community people filled nightly prayer meetings in the churches to capacity, and in less than a week raised \$13,000 for the strikers. Meanwhile downtown sales dropped by thirty-five percent. As Reverend H. Ralph Jackson observed: "The Negro community is more united than it was during the sit-ins of the early 1960s." "And garbage is only the beginning," added Reverend Ezekiel Bell. "We are going to get more and better jobs from the city and the downtown merchants. And those businesses that are patronized by blacks alone are going to be owned and managed by blacks."<sup>24</sup>

After Mayor Loeb secured a court injunction, prohibiting union officials from participating in strike activities, the clergy were called upon to direct the action and voice the strikers' demands. Their Sunday sermons, pep-talks, and protests before the city council all carried the same message: race was the key issue in the strike and violence was almost certain if the strikers did not win at least a partial victory.<sup>25</sup> In fact, violence had already surfaced in the dispute, in the form of isolated but ominous incidents of fire bombings, bottle throwing, and trash fires, which were reported almost nightly.

Reverend Lawson, who assumed the role of number one spokesman, brought in prominent civil rights leaders to help give the Memphis strike a national image. After all, Lawson said, "this is a significant turn in the civil rights movement and a new chapter in labor history. Never before had a union been backed by a whole community like this."<sup>26</sup> Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin spoke to a huge rally of 9,000 on the evening of March 14, and then on the eighteenth Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to an even larger rally. The spirit of the crowd, which was more enthusiastic

24. *Commercial Appeal*, 25, 26 February 1968; *New York Times*, 26 February 1968; *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 1968.

25. *Commercial Appeal*, 12 March 1968.

26. *New York Times*, 18 March 1968.

than any King had seen in recent months, led him to commit himself more to their struggle than he had at first intended. King declared that black Memphians ought to have a one day general strike, and the audience went wild. "You arrange a march for that day," he shouted, "and I'll come back to Memphis to lead it."<sup>27</sup> "Friday!" they shouted.

"Friday!" he agreed. But by Friday sixteen inches of snow blocked the streets and the event was rescheduled for the twenty-eighth.

In attempting to reschedule the march, the ministers were disturbed by the local black power group, the Invaders, who argued that if the demonstration were to have any effect, then violence was absolutely necessary. "Man," one Invader said, "if you expect honkies to get the message, you got to break some windows."<sup>28</sup> The churchmen insisted that King's march be peaceful: "You can join the rest of us in a nonviolent march," the ministers said, "or you can boycott it." But when the demonstration began on the morning of the twenty-eighth, the Invaders were there, mingling among the 5,000 peaceful marchers, equipped with heavy sticks. Beale Street people, shoplifters and pickpockets who had been unable to practice their trade because of the absence of crowds in the downtown area, were also there, gathered in groups along the sidewalks and they apparently shattered the first store windows as the march approached. Young militants left the line of march on Beale Street to join the window breaking and looting which turned the demonstration into a riot. Police responded with tear gas and force. One black youth was killed, sixty injured, three hundred arrested, and King's ability to lead his people in a nonviolent demonstration now was questioned by every white journalist in America. Since King was then organizing a poor people's march on Washington, he felt compelled to reestablish his nonviolent reputation in

27. Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 493.

28. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

Not accurate  
Ezekiel Bell & Ezekiel Bell

Memphis; and it was while preparing for a second Memphis march that he was shot down by an assassin's bullet.

However tragically, and at whatever cost, the strike, the demonstrations, and King's death produced the confrontations between white and black which Lawson believed, were needed to end white racism. In the days following King's assassination, Lawson set about to harvest the potential of white concern. When 9,000 Memphians gathered at Crump Stadium for a symbolic demonstration that "Memphis Cares," Reverend Lawson used the occasion to further prick the consciences of white Memphians. Questioning white sincerity, Lawson warned that if whites had come only so that they could say "I was there and all is well," their attempt at a facile expiation of sin and guilt was all in vain. If they were sorry only that the assassination had happened in Memphis and soiled the reputation of the "City of Good Abode," then their presence, their gesture of brotherhood, meant absolutely nothing at all. "How could anyone have a good feeling about Memphis when one of America's finest sons was shot down in her streets?" Lawson asked. "Memphis will be known for a long time as the place where Martin Luther King was crucified. Yes, crucified. We have witnessed a crucifixion here in Memphis." True repentance for the assassination of King, Lawson warned, could never be demonstrated by sorrow. Memphis could show true repentance only by "a determination to work for transformations, real change, a move from racism to genuine brotherhood."<sup>29</sup>

To get white Memphians to take concrete action to end racial injustice, Lawson kept the pressure on the white leadership which had already capitulated to the demands of the garbage workers. He and his organization, Community on the Move for Equality, demanded satisfaction in long-standing complaints. Black leaders initiated talks with the city council on police brutality, and they

29. *New York Times*, 8 April 1968.

met with the Chamber of Commerce to discuss unemployment. With the united support of the black community, Lawson could now threaten to boycott those white business firms which refused to alter their hiring practices. "We have the troops now," Lawson warned, "to move systematically from industry to industry."<sup>30</sup>

But if, in the following months, Reverend Lawson saw progress, he found it was hard to eliminate injustice. "Memphis is still essentially a town racist in mood, looking to the past and still excluding consideration of the black and the poor," was Lawson's estimate a year after the King assassination. "The plantation theory of government for the most part still dominates. We have made small beginnings in terms of black and white people waking up and trying to remake the city into a humane place."<sup>31</sup>

30. *Ibid.*, 21 April 1968.

31. *Tennessee Defender*, 17 May 1969.

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