

Created: 2018-04-04

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Context: "This Week in 1968" email campaign for MLK50

Collection: Memphis World newspaper

As we revisit the pivotal early months of 1968, we are privileged to be able to consult the *Memphis World*, a Black newspaper published in Memphis and available through the Rhodes digital archives. Every week, we'll share the issue of the *Memphis World* from 50 years ago as it documented a city, nation and globe in transition. Not only does it give us a glimpse into the history that produced the Sanitation Strike and brought Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to our city, but it demonstrates that these world-changing moments were part of much longer and broader contexts. As we reckon with the #MLK50 moment and beyond, the *Memphis World* offers us a critical resource.

April 6, 1968

On April 6th, the *Memphis World* paid tribute to a tragic loss in Memphis that rattled the local Movement and cast a spotlight on the continuing tensions surrounding the Sanitation Strike and the fissures it exposed. In coverage that captured both anger and sadness, the *Memphis World* demanded justice for the victim of violence and pledged that his death would not be in vain.

This story sounds familiar, but the person memorialized in this issue was not Martin Luther King. Although this issue's publication date was two days after Dr. King's assassination, it went to press before the catastrophic events of April 4th. But the *World's* coverage of the death of Larry Payne at the hands of Memphis police during the turbulent Beale Street march that dissolved into chaos. Shot by officers who claimed he was a looter, Payne was a junior in high school, the kind of student who may have been spotlighted by the *World* in their coverage of the accomplishments of Memphis's Black youth. Witnesses – including the policeman who fired the fatal shots – testified that Payne's hands were up when he was killed. Despite this, no police were indicted for Payne's death. The anger over his killing (which the *World* describes through details of his funeral service) not only captured the anger over police conduct during the Sanitation Strike but the broader discontent over law enforcement that had been chronicled in the *World* throughout 1968. As indicated in their coverage, Payne's death also symbolized the urgency felt among the Memphis activist community to find a solution to the Strike following the tumult of the Beale Street march. Also feeling the pressure was Martin Luther King, who vowed to return to Memphis to lead a new campaign and to help bring the striking workers – and the broader community – closer to justice.