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## Class and Civil Rights: How and Why did Class Affect African American Women's Involvement in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement?

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Authors	Lineback, Sarah (Sally)
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# **Class and Civil Rights: How and Why did Class Affect African American Women's Involvement in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement?**

**Sally Lineback**

## Introduction

*It comes a time when you don't think about social lines. It's a people. It's a black struggle. And it didn't matter if you were way up there or you were way down there, you were still black. And it affected you. It hit you. When they talked like that to them, you know they talk that way to all of us.*  
- Erma Lee Laws<sup>1</sup>

*Middle class peoples was somewhat in their own little cocoon...So, they left the, what they would call the underdogs out there to get their bone the best way they could.*  
- Everlena Yarbrough<sup>2</sup>

The quotation from Erma Lee Laws, a middle class civil rights activist in Memphis, represents a traditional view that many people hold about the civil rights movement. Many perceive the movement as a unified force of African Americans striving toward a common goal of equality. The story of a united movement leaves, however, many voices unheard and many stories untold. This interpretation ignores both the different goals activists had for the movement and the many various strategies they used in order to achieve those goals. The quotation from Everlena Yarbrough, a working class activist in Memphis, introduces an opposing view. She suggests the black middle class left the working class to fight their own civil rights battle. In this interpretation, the community seems divided and the classes within African American society seem to be at odds with one another.

The resolution does not lie in one or the other extreme. Women in the Memphis civil rights movement were neither largely divided by their opposition to people of

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author, Memphis, TN, 12, July, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author, Memphis, TN, 17 July 2006.

different social classes, nor were they completely united with others with whom they had little interaction. The activities women chose were not selected at random. The position one occupied in society determined the types of discrimination one faced and the tactics one employed when fighting that discrimination. African American women's scholar Belinda Robnett explained that people's varying social locations and personal identities influenced the ways in which they acted politically within the movement, and even whether they chose to act at all.<sup>3</sup> An aspect of social location is social class, a category that civil rights scholars usually ignore. In Memphis, social class played a large role in determining the types of civil rights activities that women performed. By piecing together various aspects of previous historians' work, rethinking their conclusions, and then using primary source information, one can discover what was underlying the differences in activism. Discovering motivations behind class differences is just as important as recognizing them in the first place.

The Memphis area provides a rich resource for a case study of women's involvement in the movement, as Memphis women participated in nearly every activity that took place. In Memphis during the civil rights era, all African American women experienced racial discrimination. However, their social class dictated, in part, the type and manner of that discrimination. The discrimination they faced, in turn, influenced the type of activities they became involved in in the movement. The women who used various methods to effect change were not necessarily opposed to one another. Rather, women's social location simply dictated what women hoped to achieve through their involvement.

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<sup>3</sup>Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15-16.

Class-specific discrimination united women within their class and influenced the kinds of activism they employed. Many middle class Memphis women, like Maxine Smith, who attempted to integrate the state university, sought greater access to educational opportunity with their involvement in the movement. Because many middle class women were independent from the white economic structure, they chose direct action methods for change both through various organizations and through their own activities. The techniques of boycotting and picketing represent a unique case in the Mississippi Delta for the middle class. Both middle and working class women were involved in voter registration, as increased voting power would strengthen the ability of the black population to change a variety of discriminatory practices in Memphis. Working class women, who faced severe discrimination in the workplace, used techniques that would ameliorate their working conditions. Several women, such as Everlena Yarbrough, became union activists in order to achieve their working class goals.

### **Class in African American Society**

As a result of the historical suppression of black economic enterprises, the economic and social stratification of African American society in the 1960s was very different from that of white society. This left the majority of African Americans poor. Thus, class in African American culture was not defined by financial means, but by occupation and education. Those who toiled with their hands and had a high school education or less were working class. Those who had more education and worked in occupations such as teaching and insurance could be considered middle class. There were some elites, and these people were the heads of large black companies or well-established lawyers and doctors.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, an African American women's historian, analyzes the social relationships in African American society. According to Higginbotham, the history of the master/slave relationship caused the construction of race to shape class. Because they did not even own their own bodies, slaves were the poorest members of society. After emancipation, consequently, the majority of African-Americans in the South occupied the lowest socio-economic class. To Southern whites, the word "black" was indistinguishable from the word "poor."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the social construction of class within the African American community must be studied separately from the idea of class in white society, especially during the civil rights era.

During the 1920s and into the post-World War II era, many African Americans moved from rural areas in the south to urban centers, looking for better opportunities. Memphis was no exception. Many of these individuals, who started their lives as sharecroppers, ended up working in low-wage factory jobs in order to make ends meet.<sup>5</sup> Michael Honey noted that 80 percent of the unskilled factory workers in Memphis were African Americans. More African American women labored as domestics in white homes than in any other occupation, and the remaining sector of the low-wage workers toiled at other service jobs such as waiting tables and cleaning hotels. Honey noted that "this black-as-servants model, a component of the plantation mentality, influenced the attitudes of white employers and workers well into the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> African American residents of Memphis echoed the "black-as-servants model" when describing the best jobs that an African American could hold. The residents stated, almost unanimously, that

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<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "The Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17 (1992), 259-261.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle*, (University of California Press; Berkeley, 1999), 46.

when looking for a job in the wage economy, an African American could be considered lucky serving as a bellhop in a hotel or being a porter on the railroads.<sup>7</sup> These workers were dependent upon their white employers for their paychecks, and because of this historic “plantation mentality,” the wages were kept exceedingly low. These workers comprised the working class.

Though most African Americans worked long hours for low wages, there was a growing middle class in black society, granting a few African Americans somewhat higher status.<sup>8</sup> This higher status was based on better occupations and more education than the working class. These people also did not work with their hands every day for a living. The growing black population in many cities, as in Memphis, created an opportunity for black professionals to serve these new black communities as doctors, preachers, teachers, morticians, and businessmen who were separate from the white community.<sup>9</sup> As journalist Lawrence Otis Graham points out, these black professionals emerged as a result of the segregated African American community within the city.<sup>10</sup> Although some of these professionals did very well financially, there were those who held middle class occupations, but did not make significantly more money than their working class peers. For example, a few African American women held such middle class jobs as teachers and journalists.<sup>11</sup> They were members of the middle class because they were not low-skilled wage-earners in the service industries who worked with their

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author; Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author; Interview with Mrs. Rebecca Williams and Mrs. Eugenia Danner by Selma Lewis & Marjean Kremer, Selma Lewis Collection, Box 3, Folder 11, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, 19 May 1978.

<sup>8</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1978), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, (Harper Collins Publishers: New York, 1999), 272.

<sup>11</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 86.

hands. Their jobs required education after high school graduation. According to many interviewees, teaching school was the highest occupation to which a woman could aspire,<sup>12</sup> even though they received a meager salary (one teacher earned \$127 a month at her first job in the late 1950s),<sup>13</sup> and were economically dependent on the all-white school board and superintendent.<sup>14</sup>

A few middle class women were independent from the white power structure in Memphis altogether. Many of these women had husbands who worked as doctors or ministers serving an African American clientele. Maxine Smith, for example, who worked as executive secretary of the Memphis NAACP for more than 30 years, was married to a dentist. A few women who provided services to African Americans owned their own businesses. After graduating from high school, Alma Morris, a lifetime civil rights advocate, attended barber school before setting up her own barber shop. Her husband also worked for one of the black insurance companies in town and was likewise free from the white economic structure. Alzada Clark, a longtime union activist, mentioned that those who held power in the black community were those who were either educated or economically independent, and, many times, were both.<sup>15</sup> Thus, being middle class in Memphis during the civil rights era did not necessarily mean being economically advantaged. Sometimes it meant holding a socially respectable job, such as teaching. Many times, it simply meant having the freedom to make one's choices without the fear of economic retaliation by whites.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mrs. Susie Peebles Hightower by Ron Waler, Oral History Collection, Box 26, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, 14 Sept., 1976.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Frances hooks by the author, Memphis, TN, 6 July, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

<sup>15</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 269.

Even though African Americans had occupations or status that separated them from their working class peers, they still occupied a different social location than did middle class whites. Lawrance Otis Graham, whose parents and grandparents grew up in Memphis, stated that “many times my relatives reminded me that divisions between local blacks and whites were based on race and not on class. Even the wealthiest of them had little or no interaction with whites.”<sup>16</sup> They were also not accorded privileges that whites took for granted. This theme resonated with women who can be considered the “upper crust” of African American society. Frances Dancy Hooks, who taught school and married into a prominent Memphis family, and whose husband served as a minister, lawyer, and judge in the Memphis community, reported feeling uncomfortable when a white man, whom she now considers a friend, invited her over for dinner. She stated that, “I had never had an association with whites in the South. And I could not see myself going to this man’s house,” even though “my mother...taught us proper,” teaching them the correct places for silverware and proper table manners. Even though Hooks occupied a high rung on the social ladder within the black community, the black and white communities remained so segregated in the civil rights era that they had little interaction. Although the African American community in the South was less economically diverse than the white community in 1960s, a distinctive class structure did exist that affected their relationships with each other and their opinions of themselves.

### **Theories of the Intersection of Race and Class**

Scholars disagree about which category is more important in understanding African American society: race or class. Three different scholars of African American

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<sup>16</sup> Graham, 278.

culture have three very different ideas regarding this topic. William Julius Wilson, in his 1978 book titled *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, espoused the view that class was more important, saying that African Americans had many opportunities for advancement. They were only present, however, for those who were already educated or skilled enough to fill the labor demand. Those who held low-paying jobs were trapped in these jobs without the education or the resources to better their situation. In Wilson's view, those who have opportunities, get more, and those who have none will never get any, regardless of their race. Hence, he argues that class is more important than race; it seems to be binding, creating an ever-widening rift between those who have opportunities and those who do not.<sup>17</sup> What Wilson failed to emphasize in his analysis, however, is that because of their race, significantly more African Americans than whites held low-wage, low-skill jobs. He acknowledges this fact, but does not emphasize its importance. Because more black people were poor, race was a defining characteristic of a given class. White employees with the same entry-level skills as their African American peers could expect to more easily navigate the upward mobility of the social ladder. While the white ladder was vertical, the black social ladder for working class individuals seemed to be horizontal.

Michael Dawson's book, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* takes the position that race is more important in African American political decision-making than is class. He states that, "the perceived economic domination of blacks by whites became intertwined with a sense of political domination as well." This domination of blacks by whites became the most important factor in black political

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<sup>17</sup> Wilson, 16.

decision making.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when he analyzes the importance of class, he evaluates the class differences between the white community and the black community, and not within the black community itself. According to Dawson, class distinctions within the African American community did exist, but they simply were not as important as the factor of race.<sup>19</sup> He states that “until at least the late 1960s, individual African Americans’ life chances were overdetermined by the ascriptive feature of race. Because being black did much to determine one’s place in the world,” it simply made more sense and was more effective for African Americans to decide as a whole what was best for the entire group.<sup>20</sup> In other words, African Americans were limited most by their color, and thus race became the most important determinate for making political decisions.

While this interpretation is more accurate for the 1960s than is Wilson’s, it oversimplifies the question of how decision making occurs in the African American community. Dawson’s analysis makes it seem like the majority in the community subscribed to the same world views and political ideals all the time. If Dawson’s theory is applied to the civil rights movement, one would expect to see a unified movement with little variation in the strategies for change. Clearly, this was not the case, as civil rights organizations had varying methods for achieving their goals. For example, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) used a decentralized leadership that employed confrontational tactics more often than did the hierarchical structure of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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<sup>18</sup>Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1994), 55.

<sup>19</sup>Dawson, 47.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 57.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham would agree with Dawson to a certain extent. She would add, however, that it is impossible to separate race from class. The historically linked nature of these two social constructions is the point that Dawson misses. While Higginbotham states that race is *the* defining characteristic of African American life, she analyzes the complex and overlapping relationship between race and class. Because race shaped class in the plantation system of the South, economic activities of blacks were limited by their race. She concludes that race has a “totalizing effect in obscuring class and gender.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, African-Americans were black, whether they were rich or poor, male or female. Most were, however, economically disadvantaged, which shaped the self-identification of African Americans as a disadvantaged group.

Higginbotham also outlines how gender manifests itself within the African American community. The construction of gender was formed and colored by the concept of race. Because of their treatment in the slave system of the South, black women had no rights to their own bodies, and thus, the idea of women as paragons of virtue and morality, a white ideal, could not apply to slave women. Whites could rape them, breed them, and work them without their consent, and slave women could do nothing to stop it. Black women were simply workers; they could never be considered “ladies” as white women could.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even the description of their gender and femininity was masked by the color of their skin. The relationships between race, class, or gender, are so entangled that one cannot be more important than another. What it means to be poor, to a working class African American, is different from what it means to be poor, to a working class

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<sup>21</sup> Higginbotham, 255.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 258-260.

white. Higginbotham's analysis is the most complex framework for understanding race and class relations and is the most complete.

African American women in the civil rights era had to deal with the limitations of race, class, and gender in southern society. As Michael Honey notes, "By excluding black men from decent jobs and holding their wages below subsistence levels, segregation forced black women into the waged economy, at even lower wages, in order to support their families."<sup>23</sup> Gender discrimination itself played a role in deciding what jobs were available to African American women. And when women did get jobs, they were often paid less than their male co-workers, making black women some of the lowest paid employees in the work force. The rising middle class of African Americans included doctors and lawyers, but those positions were not readily filled by even white women, much less black women. Thus, African American women in the civil rights era were limited by the intertwined relationships of their race, class, and gender.

### **Class-Based Nature of Discrimination**

Participants in the civil rights movement were frequently motivated to activism by events that they encountered in their personal, everyday lives. The nature of these events varied depending on their gender and social class and motivated them to act in different ways. As Belinda Robnett states,

"In the civil rights movement, the signifier was race, but race . . . has many meanings, and the construction of its meaning into an objective political discourse does not translate into a static political identity shared by all. Rather, its final manifestation is an overlap between one's personal identity and the cultivated political identity of the movement."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Robnett, 16.

In other words, because personal identity is shaped by a person's status and location within society's structure, it serves as the foundation through which a person grounds his or her involvement.

One specific area of discrimination seems to resonate across all class lines with African American women in Memphis. Whether they were wealthy or poor, black people still had to sit at the back of the bus. Everlena Yarbrough, a working class union activist, remembered, "that was 1960...15 seats was in the front and we couldn't sit on one of them...And when you go to the back, everybody that was black was sitting on top of each other but the seats in front, there was nobody in them...that was craziness."<sup>25</sup> The humiliation of being crammed into the back of the bus while empty seats mocked her struck a chord with Yarbrough. She knew that this was a "social injustice." Another working class woman and union activist, Ida Leachman, called the division between the whites and the blacks on buses the "black curtain."<sup>26</sup> The degradation of riding in the back of the bus was not confined to the lower classes. Erma Lee Laws, a teacher as well as a writer for the *Tri-State Defender*, a black newspaper in Memphis, recalls "It was really awful. White people would go back as far as they could. And you were not supposed to sit in front of them. And they would be way back, I mean, nowhere for you to sit."<sup>27</sup> Not only did Laws suffer from the segregation that kept her in the back of the bus, but she suffered from the spite of whites who would sit farther back just because they could. The language that these women used emphasizes that this was not simply an inconvenience, but it was a social construction meant to humiliate those who had to sit behind this "black curtain."

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

<sup>26</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 337.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

Though there were many shared instances of discrimination that both middle and working class women shared, at other times, the form of discrimination depended upon the woman's class. Middle and upper class women many times reported degradation in public venues or in social settings. In one woman's account of a childhood memory, she stated "listen . . . as a girl, going along, you couldn't walk on the street...a good-looking girl, a nice-looking girl . . . we [were] upper-class...you couldn't go along unless a white man" started to be indecent towards them.<sup>28</sup> When reading between the lines, one can see that she could understand how a white man would treat a poor black girl, who was not "nice-looking," the way she had been treated, but she expected that white men would at least understand and respect her class, if not her race. This incident fits into Robnett's observation that "the signifier was race," as the girls were certainly targeted for discrimination by the color of their skin. The prejudice that this woman experienced was, however, still shaped by their class. Because she was upper class, this woman felt exempt from such treatment.

Another example from the childhood of a middle class woman illustrates the same reported indignities. As a nine-year-old girl in Memphis, Maxine Smith experienced the same lack of respect that the previous woman encountered. When her father was ill, she would visit him in the hospital. When she referred to her father as "Mr.," "the clerk said 'You don't refer to niggers as Mr. around white folk.'" Smith says she's "been mad ever since." Smith knew, even as a child, that she had experienced an injustice. She stated that "lack of use of courtesy titles . . . nobody seems to realize the importance of this. It may

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Harriet Braithwaite, by Selma Lewis & Marjean Kremer, Memphis, TN, Selma Lewis Collection, Box 2, Folder 3, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library. July 18, 1978.

seem like a little thing but it's a degrading type of thing."<sup>29</sup> Erma Laws also mentioned the failure to use courtesy titles. She noted that white people, "the first time they ever saw you" would "right off the bat" call a black person who was older by his or her first name. The white newspapers likewise failed to use courtesy titles in their descriptions of African Americans while they would always use them for whites.<sup>30</sup> The use of courtesy titles is a social construction. The failure to use a courtesy title is a social injustice.

While middle class women faced discrimination in the social arena, they also faced opposition in employment. Teachers, who were considered middle class, still had to answer to a white power structure when obtaining employment. Frances Hooks described the situation that she and her sister encountered after graduating from Fisk and Howard, respectively. A white woman was in charge of hiring black teachers for the school system, and when Hooks and her sisters tried to get jobs, the white woman would not hire them. The woman said that they "didn't need to work—where we lived and where we had gone to school. We just didn't fit her perception of...what black people were supposed to be like." Apparently, the colleges Hooks and her sister had attended were too prestigious—the sisters would not need to work because they could simply afford to be homemakers. A white woman who had gone to a prestigious school would not have encountered the same obstacles to acquire a teaching position. Southern whites saw this class distinction in Frances Hooks, but used it against her, keeping her obtaining a job.

Because she could not get a job in the city, Hooks taught in county schools for a number of years before her husband's white friends "got me on in the city" so that she

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Bill Thomas and Joan Beifuss, Memphis, TN, Sanitation Strike Collection, Container 24, Folder 216, Mississippi Valley Collections University of Memphis Library, June 13, 1968.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

would not have to drive thirty miles to and from work every day. Although she had gotten the job, “Mr. Stimbert [white superintendent of the school system]...said, ‘Politics might get you on, but politics cannot keep you on.’ That’s the kind of prejudice that existed.”<sup>31</sup> The superintendent threatened her because she was black. He basically told her to be careful in her job or it could just as easily be taken away. One wrong move and she could be out of a job. Middle class women faced discrimination in both the social arena and their employment opportunities.

Working class women faced types of discrimination that their middle class peers did not. Because so many working class individuals came from rural areas, they had seen a rural discrimination in the plantation system of the South. Along with countless other Memphians, Everlena Yarbrough grew up as a sharecropper in the Mississippi Delta. When she was still school-aged, the plantation owner would come by her mother’s house to make sure that she and her siblings stayed home from school in order to chop and pick cotton. As a consequence, she would sometimes attend school only one and a half months out of the year. One year, “we worked all the year and at the end of the year, there was no settlement for the work that we had done that year. And we really didn’t move to Memphis, my mother and I, we fled from the Delta.” Tired and frustrated with the sharecropping system, Yarbrough decided to work in a Memphis factory in order to have a better life for herself and for her two children.<sup>32</sup>

When Yarbrough worked in Memphis, however, she saw some of the same conditions in the factories there that she had just left in the Mississippi Delta. She worked for Trojan Luggage. In that plant, the black women operated the heavy sewing machinery

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Frances Hooks by the author.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

on large assembly lines in stifling heat while white women sat in the “sewing room,” which consisted of regular sewing machines and was air-conditioned. The jobs in the sewing room paid higher wages. The heavy machinery on the assembly line moved so fast that “you could get your arm broken off,” and many women were injured as a result. The positions that African American workers held exposed them to dangerous conditions and lower wages that the white women did not have to face.<sup>33</sup> African American women faced discrimination in the workplace every day. This was not only social injustice. This type of discrimination threatened the very livelihood and source of income upon which they and their families desperately depended.

Ida Leachman, a married mother of one, experienced the same type of discrimination when she applied for a week-long leave of absence from her job at the United Uniform Company to go a church conference. She remembers, “They claimed they weren’t giving leaves. Well, I left anyway. And I got suspended. But, when I came back, then I found out that they had granted some Greek women a month leave to go to Greece to visit their home.” Leachman fully understood that she was discriminated against because of the color of her skin. The fact that she was not given time off when she asked is relatively insignificant unless compared with the way the Greek women were treated. She also recalled, “They wanted me to constantly sew, whereas she [a white woman] would go take breaks and stuff. You know, of course I had a problem with that.”<sup>34</sup> Leachman encountered discrimination in the factory because that was a location in which she spent a great deal of time.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Ida Leachman by the author, Memphis, TN. 5 July 2006.

Many other women could report similar stories dealing with prejudiced supervisors and practices in their white-owned factories. Sally Turner, who worked at Farber Brothers factory, stated that the “struggle was [that] we didn’t have a water fountain. No water fountain in 1965. We had a bucket. One of them country buckets that I already done left in Mississippi.”<sup>35</sup> Turner worked hard for a living and expected to be treated fairly. In Memphis, however, she felt that she encountered the same type of racism that she had left in Mississippi. Hazel McGhee, who labored in a Memphis laundry, also experienced degradation in her workplace environment. She remembered that “They wanted to, I guess, drive you, that you hadn’t worked enough. They talked to you . . . like you was their child.”<sup>36</sup> McGhee also understood that she was treated unfairly because of her race and class. In all of these working class women’s experiences, a middle or upper class woman would not have dealt with the same discrimination. Because they experienced different forms of discrimination, middle and working class women responded to racism in different ways in their activism.

### **Class-Based Strategies of Activism**

In the racist and paternalistic culture of the South, all African Americans could report grievances to the ways in which they were treated. The specific discrimination they faced influenced the types of activities in which people became involved. Because much of the discrimination of the middle class was in social and educational areas, these were the main areas of middle class women’s activism. Being middle class sometimes, however, made middle class women bolder in their activism, taking nontraditional

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<sup>35</sup> qtd. in Laurie Green, “A Struggle of the Mind: Black Working-Class Women’s Organizing in Memphis and the Mississippi Delta, 1960s to 1990s,” in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance*, ed. by Marguerite R Waller and Jennifer Rycenga, (Garland Publishers, Inc.: New York, 2000) 403.405.

<sup>36</sup> qtd. in Green, “A Struggle of the mind,” 405.

avenues to achieve change. Both middle and working classes became involved in voter registration, as the process of voting could change many facets of African American life. Working class women focused mainly on discrimination that they faced in their workplace environments.

***Traditional middle class activism***

Middle and upper class African Americans comprised one group devoted to social change. They maintained the overall goal of social justice, and used different avenues to achieve change than did working class individuals. The middle class, according to William Julius Wilson, effected change in such a manner that was “disciplined and sustained,” filing official complaints through the NAACP with the judicial system as their main method of attack. The meaning of civil rights to this advantaged social class was basic integration of facilities and the right to vote.<sup>37</sup> Jack M. Bloom expands this argument, explaining why the middle class had a conservative approach. Many African Americans had a vested interest in the system that had given them the opportunity to have a relatively more advantaged social standing than their working class peers.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, they did not want to overthrow the system, they simply wanted to amend it.

Throughout the South, middle class women used changes in education as one of the main methods for civil rights activism. Though working classes certainly cared about education for themselves and for their children, many times they did not have the time to spend on protesting desegregated schools that middle class women did. As Laurie Green points out, many working class women were not active in the desegregation campaigns

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<sup>37</sup> Wilson, 18, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, & the Civil Rights Movement*. (Indiana University Press: Indianapolis, 1987), 171.

because of the obligations that they had to their families and their full-time jobs.<sup>39</sup> As Everlena Yarbrough explained, she certainly wanted the best education for her children, but as the breadwinner in the family, if she stopped working to go to the school, there was “no bread coming into the house.”<sup>40</sup> Education can be considered a middle class agenda not because only middle class wanted better education for their children, but because middle class women were usually the ones who had the time to spend fighting the educational system.

Mary Fair Burks, a middle-class woman in Montgomery, Alabama founded an organization to prompt other middle class African American women to strive for social change. Burks was a middle-class black woman who wanted to appeal to other middle-class women. She founded Women’s Political Council (WPC), a group of middle-class women in Montgomery devoted to racial justice. Though they were devoted to racial change, their agenda seemed middle-class. One of their main activities was teaching high school students about democracy.<sup>41</sup> Teaching high school students is middle class, as many African Americans in the working class were already laboring in the factories and never finished high school. Only those who are in high school can learn about democracy in this way and only those who know about the workings of democracy can teach it.

Another example is the activism of Daisy Bates. Bates had a membership with the NAACP and owned a black newspaper in Little Rock that wrote accusatory stories of the Arkansas judicial system. Owning her own business puts Bates in the middle class, although not financially independent from the white power structure, as she depended on

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<sup>39</sup> Laurie Green, “A Struggle of the Mind,” 403.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Fair Burks, “Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott,” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965*, ed. by Vicki L Crawford, et al., (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1990), 78.

white businesses for advertisements. Bates's leadership in the community and outspoken nature allowed her to respond when crisis struck Little Rock. When integration finally began in Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, Bates organized the manner in which the nine black students would enter the school to keep them safe from the white mobs and the National Guard. She was one of the key players in promoting desegregation and ensuring that the nine students who first integrated the school remained unharmed.<sup>42</sup> Though Bates was certainly outspoken, her goal of desegregating schools reflects her middle class status. Equal educational opportunities helped those who were able to attend high school. Serving as her own boss, Bates had the time and energy to spend organizing an educational integration campaign, time that a working class woman could not have afforded to spend.

Likewise, in Memphis, the civil rights activities of many middle class women reflect their social standing. In 1957 two African-American women attempted to integrate Memphis State University.<sup>43</sup> Both were highly educated. Maxine Smith had obtained a Master's degree from Middlebury and Laurie Sugarmon had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Wellesley.<sup>44</sup> While Smith stated that Sugarmon really was interested in furthering her education, she herself just "always liked to be a part of something different." Thus, their application to Memphis State can be seen as activism in its own right. Smith and Sugarmon did not apply to Memphis State under the auspices of any organization, but of their own volition.<sup>45</sup> Because they both had young children, they could not travel outside

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<sup>42</sup> Robnett, 77-83.

<sup>43</sup> Alex Wilson, "Two young Mothers Tackle Bias at MSC," *Tri-State Defender* (Memphis, TN), 8 June 1957.

<sup>44</sup> Laurie Sugarmon is now known as Dr. Miriam DeCosta Willis. Memphis State University is now known as the University of Memphis.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Bill Thomas and Joan Beifuss.

Memphis to attend a graduate program at a black state school.<sup>46</sup> When they were rejected on the basis that they were not qualified, their actions became well-known in the community. Applying to graduate school certainly represented middle class goals. Smith stated that she believes that this action “was my grand entrée to this freedom movement.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, Smith, who became a lifelong civil rights activist and executive secretary for the Memphis branch of the NAACP for over thirty years, was first spurred to action by the middle class goal of gaining admission into a graduate school program.

Frances Hooks, in partnership with a white man, Jed Dreifus, began a program to help mentor students in Carver High School, an all-black school. During the Sanitation Strikes in 1968, Hooks and Dreifus began to talk about what they could do to calm the chaos in Memphis. They came up with the Volunteer Placement Program. In the words of Frances Hooks, the program paired white adults with the “graduating high school students [from Carver High School]. Not feed them, not clothe them. But help them learn to relate to someone other than the guy on the corner.” Jed Dreifus stated that the original goal of the program was to recruit volunteers to “get [the students] ready for the next step of their lives.” The relationships that the students and volunteers formed helped the students to see white people as individuals. In describing an interaction between a student and his mentor, she stated, “It meant so much—he didn’t see him as a white man that he would hate or want to hurt, he saw him as someone who could be his friend.” Hooks’s response to the tumultuous times of the sanitation strikes was to focus on personal relationships between a black student and a white adult. Hooks used her position as a guidance counselor and teacher to further the education of her students as well as to

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<sup>46</sup> Alex Wilson.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Bill Thomas and Joan Beifuss.

help them form relationships with someone who was different from them. If these people of different races could meet one-on-one, it could begin to change racist attitudes and improve race relations with attitudinal, rather than institutional, change.<sup>48</sup>

Following the sanitation strikes, Maxine Smith and the NAACP began to fight social injustice in other areas of education. Smith organized the Black Mondays, a program endorsed by the NAACP to encourage black students to stay out of school on certain Mondays to protest the exclusion of African Americans from positions on the school board.<sup>49</sup> Though many black students and parents participated in the boycott, including those from working class backgrounds,<sup>50</sup> a middle class woman whose focus was on education had organized the Black Mondays to further goals in education. According to retired teacher Erma Lee Laws, she and other African American teachers also participated in the boycott. Days where both students and teachers participated in the boycotts were called “Super Black Mondays.” Teachers who boycotted risked losing their jobs. Though not all teachers participated, a number of them did in order to make gains in desegregating the school system by obtaining representation on the school board.<sup>51</sup> Desegregation in schools and representation in public office are both goals that the middle class, through the organization of the NAACP, had long fought for in the city of Memphis.

In most of the South, the NAACP and middle class activists sought changes similar to the educational goals of the previously mentioned women. Many times, their

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Frances Hooks by the author; Phone Interview with Jed Dreifus by the author, 18 July 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Interview Maxine Smith Interview by Elizabeth Gritter Interview, Memphis, TN, Oral History Collection, Box 61, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, 26 July 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Ida Leachman by the author.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

activism did not move beyond this realm. In Mississippi, for example, the NAACP worked for moderate change, holding smaller voter registration drives instead of the massive ones held by SNCC and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality). They disagreed with the direct action campaigns of SNCC which promoted confrontational protests.<sup>52</sup> Because they represented the older, wealthier, and more conservative ranks of African American society, Jack Bloom's argument that many middle class African Americans sought to amend the system rather than overthrowing it holds true for much of the South.<sup>53</sup> If Memphis middle class women had used only these traditional middle class outlets for activism, it would hold true for Memphis as well. Some of this can be seen in comments made by African Americans in Memphis. Some felt that Memphis had done well in desegregation efforts and that race relations were peaceful.<sup>54</sup> Gladys Carpenter, a participant in the marches during the sanitation strikes, noted that in Memphis "we had very good race relations" prior to the sanitation strikes.<sup>55</sup> Token desegregation and the quiet settlement of downtown integration had given Memphis the illusion that great progress had been made in race relations.<sup>56</sup> Frances Hooks pointed out that some elite blacks in Memphis wanted to separate themselves from the struggle altogether, as many

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<sup>52</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 117-118.

<sup>53</sup> Bloom, 171.

<sup>54</sup> Mike Miller, "Russians read of Memphis; Its 'Peaceful Desegregation,'" *Press-Scimitar* (Memphis, TN), 19 Dec 1963, Newspaper Clippings File in Maxine Smith Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Galdys Carpenter by David Yellin and Joan Beifuss, Sanitation Strike Collection, Container 20, Folder 32, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis Library, September 11, 1968.

<sup>56</sup> "When Negroes Get the Vote IV: Memphis, Taste of Victory," *The Boston Globe*, Newspaper Clippings January in Maxine Smith Collection, 12 May 1965.

of them “were older so they were secure in their homes.”<sup>57</sup> Those who faced less discrimination sometimes accepted slow changes in Memphis.

### *Non-traditional Middle Class Activism*

While the officers of the NAACP in Memphis came from the middle and upper classes, the organization was the most active large scale civil rights organization in the city. According to Alzada Clark, a union activist in Memphis in the civil rights era who was described by one of her peers as the “queen of female [union] organizers in the South,”<sup>58</sup> “the NAACP was the focal point of the civil rights movement in this city, we didn’t have CORE or SNCC or anything else, because we had sophisticated leadership with college degrees in Memphis. You had to have degrees to have power here.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, in Memphis, the NAACP was *the* organization through which to obtain social justice. The NAACP in Memphis was, therefore, an avenue that effected change in a variety of different ways.

When interviewed, many activists echoed the theme that economic independence from the white power structure was an important precursor to involvement in civil rights. While those who were not economically independent could be involved in the struggle, those who were independent had more freedom in their activism. Alzada Clark mentioned that those who held power in Memphis were economically independent, having their own businesses, serving as ministers, or serving as staff members of the NAACP.<sup>60</sup> Alma Morris also reiterated this point. She stated that “when you picket and go to jail, you have to almost be independent ‘cause you wouldn’t be there long. Most of

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Frances Hooks by the author.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

<sup>59</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 269.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

us who were doing this had our own businesses...if you didn't, you weren't going to be there long...I thank God that...I was my own boss."<sup>61</sup> Being free from economic reprisal fueled activism in many middle class people in Memphis, rather than prevented it. The middle class in Memphis was involved in activities that many southern branches of the NAACP might have considered too liberal or too confrontational, such as supporting sit-in movements and organizing massive voter registration campaigns. Thus Jack Bloom's argument that middle class African Americans wanted to simply amend society and not overthrow it, does not necessarily ring true for the city of Memphis.<sup>62</sup> While many women worked in education and with traditional activism, some women went much further.

When students from Memphis's LeMoyne and Owen Colleges launched sit-ins at lunch counters and the public library on March 17 and 18, 1960, they followed the wave of student sit-ins that had swept the country.<sup>63</sup> While Memphis was not a unique site for student sit-ins, it was unique in the Mississippi Delta region because many older, middle class African Americans supported and rallied behind the students. In other areas of the Delta, older African Americans who were members of the NAACP did not agree with the confrontational tactics that sitting-in required. Historian John Dittmer makes the point that not only did the large middle class in Jackson, Mississippi disagree with the direct action sit-in tactics, but they also felt threatened by them. In Jackson, a real struggle between two separate ideologies of civil rights action arose, one led by a relatively conservative NAACP and the other led by the young, decentralized leadership of SNCC.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Charlie and Alma Morris by the author. Memphis, TN, 7 July 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Bloom, 171.

<sup>63</sup> Civil rights scrapbook in Maxine Smith Collection, Box 3, folder 1, n.d.

The Jackson NAACP simply “was never comfortable with massive civil disobedience.”<sup>64</sup> For Memphis, the opposite seemed to be true. For an entire year and a half, the NAACP and many, but not all, members of the Memphis middle class put on a massive civil disobedience campaign.<sup>65</sup>

Just two days after the sit-ins began, the Memphis branch of the NAACP pledged its “all-out” support. The leaders of the black community also decided to launch the “stay away from downtown” campaign to protest the arrests of students involved in sitting-in. This campaign discouraged people from making unnecessary purchases at downtown merchants.<sup>66</sup> Middle class activists Charlie and Alma Morris were present at every stage of this movement, sitting-in, boycotting, and picketing outside of downtown stores. They were middle-aged, but instead of preventing them from direct action involvement, their age and independent status served as a catalyst for their involvement.<sup>67</sup> The sit-in and “stay-away-from-downtown” movements lasted eighteen months, involving sit-ins downtown as well as other public venues. According to Maxine Smith and her husband, the sit-in and stay away from downtown movements caused 500 arrests as well as a 41% drop in sales to downtown merchants.<sup>68</sup> Negotiations with the merchants brought about “token desegregation” to many public places, and the sit-ins stopped.<sup>69</sup> The nonviolent nature of the movement and the negotiations that took place out of the public eye gave the illusion to many onlookers that Memphis had created a progressive atmosphere with excellent race relations.<sup>70</sup> Many middle class women believed, however, that the token

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<sup>64</sup> Dittmer, 117-118, 165

<sup>65</sup> Civil rights scrapbook in Maxine Smith Collection, box 3, folder 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Charlie and Alma Morris by the author.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Elizabeth Gritter, 9 October 2000.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “When Negroes Get the Vote.”

desegregation did not go far enough, and continued to become involved in direct action campaigns that were fueled by their independence from white economic retaliation.

When Memphis sanitation workers walked out on a wildcat strike in February, 1968, members of all levels of the African American community united behind them in their struggle to obtain decent wages and better working conditions. The men who were out striking had no wages coming in to their families and the black community gave time, money, food, and energy in order to keep the strike going.<sup>71</sup> Many people who gave support to the sanitation workers had little interaction with them in their daily lives. Reverend Benjamin Hooks mentioned that sororities and fraternities became involved even though they were “ordinarily not involved at the level of...the sanitation men trying to achieve justice.”<sup>72</sup> Hooks acknowledged the different social status between the sorority and fraternity members and the striking workers but came to the conclusion that the differences did not matter. Erma Lee Laws likewise noted that

You know, they had children, wives, and they were suffering...because they weren't making any money at all. And then the idea that you weren't even going to get that and you didn't have anywhere else to get a job. So naturally...that went across all lines. It comes a time when you don't think about social lines. It's a people. It's a black struggle. And it didn't matter if you were way up there or you were way down there, you were still black. And it affected you. It hit you. When they talked like that to them, you know they talk that way to all of us.<sup>73</sup>

Because the sanitation strikes galvanized all levels of the African American community, people did whatever they could in order to support the strikers.

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Reverend Ben Hooks by David Yellin and Bill Thomas, Sanitation Strike Collection, Container 22, Folder 123, 25 June 1968.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

The daily marching that took place during the sanitation strikes was a vital activity that rallied community support. In the Delta, marching was too controversial for many middle class women. In Memphis, women of all backgrounds marched, picketed, and sat-in at stores downtown protesting the treatment of the sanitation workers by the city council and the mayor. Erma Lee Laws, Maxine Smith, Alma Morris, and Everlena Yarbrough all marched downtown supporting the workers and their families.<sup>74</sup> Being a teacher, Laws subjected herself to reprisals from the school board for her involvement.<sup>75</sup> Smith and Morris both marched and protested and were even taken to jail for their activities.<sup>76</sup> Although they faced consequences for their courageous actions, these two women were independent of economic reprisal by whites and thus were able to act more freely in their civil rights endeavors. Most of the direct action that took place in the Delta was done by student groups and by younger organizations such as SNCC. For some middle class women in Memphis, the sanitation strikes offered another opportunity for middle class women to pursue nontraditional forms of civil rights activism.

***Voter Registration: Middle and Working Classes***

Nearly all civil rights organizations used registration drives as a strategy for their civil rights campaigns. Voting certain candidates into office could bring about change in all areas of African American life. Thus, women of all classes were involved. In the deep South, SNCC and CORE held the largest registration drives, while the NAACP used a more modest, conservative approach.<sup>77</sup> Once again, Memphis was a unique case in this

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Bill Thomas and Joan Beifuss; Interview with Alma and Charlie Morris by the author; Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author; Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by author.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Bill Thomas and Joan Beifuss; Interview with Alma and Charlie Morris by the author.

<sup>77</sup> Dittmer, 165.

respect. Because the Memphis NAACP served as the main civil rights organization, the NAACP used more drastic techniques, mirroring those of SNCC and CORE rather than conservative neighboring branches to the South. The history of African American voters in Memphis was also unique. At the time of the first registration drive in 1957, 10,000 black people were already registered to vote.<sup>78</sup> Although this number represented a small percentage of the total black population, it reflected the fact that in Memphis, African Americans were familiar with the voting process and whites were familiar with African Americans in the process as well. In much of the South, those who registered to vote were subject to severe physical and economic retaliation. Such retaliation did not occur in Memphis because the Crump machine ruled the city's politics for the first half of the twentieth century. Political Boss E.H. Crump left a "legacy" of waiving poll taxes and assisting in the registration of those who would vote for his machine candidates.<sup>79</sup> Thus, although African American voters did not have perfect freedom in their election choices, many were at least familiar with the political process, serving as a solid foundation on which to build future registration drives. The combined factors of the NAACP as the main civil rights organization and of community familiarity with African American voters influenced the ability of the NAACP and the black middle class to conduct massive registration campaigns, where in many places in the South, this was not the case.

In June of 1957, the black community in Memphis kicked off a Voter Registration Drive. Both partisan and non-partisan organizations participated in the organization and implementation of the drive. Two of the most active organizations were the NAACP and the Shelby County Democratic Club, which was the black Democratic organization in

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Elizabeth Gitter, 9 Oct 2000.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

town. At the kick-off celebration for the campaign, a local black leader “called upon local Negro professional people to shoulder more of the responsibilities in helping their race uplift themselves.” He stated that the black community had “a right to expect leadership from our doctors, teachers, ministers, and others.”<sup>80</sup> The language of racial uplift also reveals motivations behind the middle class’s deep involvement with this campaign. Many felt that if the word about registering to vote spread to the working class neighborhoods, the wage workers would register en masse.

During the long campaign, Maxine Smith coordinated the NAACP’s efforts for voter registration. In each precinct, the NAACP and the SCDC had “go-to” members of the community who coordinated efforts within their precinct. These neighborhood leaders would go door-to-door, spreading the word about registration and facilitating registration efforts. While much of the work consisted of grassroots mobilizing, the structure already existed in the African American community that facilitated the process. As Maxine Smith stated, “We knocked on doors. We went through churches, We went, but the precincts gave us the neighborhood structure...Churches were given a program. Greek letter organizations were a group. Everybody was given a goal and a program.”<sup>81</sup> The NAACP and the SCDC used every possible organization to get more African Americans registered to vote. Canvassing the neighborhoods brought together people of all classes because African Americans tended to live in the same neighborhoods regardless of the social class. The leaders of the precincts and the neighborhoods, both working and middle class, proved essential links between the NAACP’s efforts and the drive’s success.

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<sup>80</sup> “Four Honored as Vote Registration Drive Gets Underway,” *Tri-State Defender*, 8 June 1957.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Elizabeth Gritter, 9 Oct, 2000.

The activism of Alma and Charlie Morris was and still is inextricably linked. Together, the Morrises served as the point people to get their neighbors registered in their North Memphis neighborhood. Both of their occupations helped facilitate their involvement. Being her “own boss” meant that Mrs. Morris could make her own schedule and being an insurance agent aided Mr. Morris’s canvassing techniques. When he would “contact people door-to-door to sell insurance to them,” he would also talk to them “telling them the importance of becoming...first class citizens and things they had to do in order to do so” and one of these things was registering to vote. They went to the election commission to get voter applications and would set up registration drives in their community in order to get people registered. Because their neighbors trusted and looked up to them as leaders in their local community, the Morrises were able to register people who might not otherwise have registered. They did not have to work to establish rapport with their black neighbors because, as a barber and an insurance agent in their neighborhood, they already held the community’s respect.<sup>82</sup>

Other women who headed the precincts and led neighborhood-level and block-level campaigns echoed that their location within the community helped them register people to vote. When asked if she had a hard time getting blacks registered, Johnnie Mae Peters, a woman who worked as a school crossing guard, remembered, “I didn’t have any problem because I lived in this community and this is where I did most of my voter registration in the community. We were knocking on doors and working on streets.”<sup>83</sup> She was not an outsider coming in to get people registered, she was a person whom her peers knew and trusted. When she canvassed the neighborhoods, people registered. Lillie

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Charlie and Alma Morris by the author.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Johnnie Mae Peters by Elizabeth Griiter, Oral History Collection, 29 June 2004.

Jones Wheeler, who lived in the projects, reiterated the same type of work that she did as the head of a ward for the SCDC. She knocked on doors and motivated people to register. An important point that Wheeler made was that the individuals who were running for office lived in the same neighborhoods as those whom the SCDC was attempting to register. Wheeler advocated an effective form of leadership in getting people registered. She stated that “most times I think everyone had influence over five to ten people. Some may say three but I say five to ten. When you talk to that five to ten, tell them to talk to their friends and relatives, then keep it going like a chain.”<sup>84</sup> Her style was very grassroots, as was the style of the entire campaign. The voter registration drive was not conducted on a hierarchical scale, but on a dialectical one, with many classes of people and many levels of coordination taking place.

Though men certainly participated in the voter registration drive that took place, Johnnie Mae Peters, Lillie Jones Wheeler, and Maxine Smith all mentioned that there were far more women involved than men. Historian Charles Payne also noted this trend when analyzing women’s roles in the movement.<sup>85</sup> Though he did not come to any conclusions as to why this trend occurred, it is safe to say that women’s involvement in Memphis’s voter registration drive followed this larger trend. Maxine Smith noted that “As usual, we were the mass in the background...The mass, somehow I got to be one of the boys. We were the work force.”<sup>86</sup> When answering why she thought this was the case, she responded that it was because the men were at work. However, that cannot be the final answer when dealing with working women like Peters and Wheeler, as they

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, (University of California Press: Berkley, 1995), 276.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Maxine Smith by Elizabeth Gritter, 26 July 2005

managed both to be involved in the registration campaigns and to hold regular jobs. Wheeler gave another explanation for the over-involvement of women. She said, “It’s just like housework. You know, they don’t think they should play a role in housework. They didn’t in those days.”<sup>87</sup> That could be part of the case, as much of the work that went on was driving people to and from registration areas and coordinating babysitting efforts for families while they went to register.<sup>88</sup> The activism that voter registration involved could be seen as “social housekeeping,” which was an extension of a woman’s traditional role in the home to a role in the broader community. It was women’s work to do the kind of housekeeping for the community that they did in the home. Both explanations probably are true in different cases, but regardless of the reasoning behind it, Memphis’s registration activities follow a larger trend in the civil rights movement.

Registering voters represented an activity in the Memphis movement where both middle and working class strove toward a common goal. The middle class organization of the NAACP needed to give direction to the campaign and to coordinate efforts, and the middle and working classes gave the campaign its grassroots momentum. The activities of the two classes are so intertwined here that it is hard to point out where the activities of one social class ends and another begins.

### ***Working Class Activism***

Though lifting the barriers to voter registration and opening the doors for social integration were certainly important goals in the civil rights movement, they were not enough for many working class women. Even if African Americans could ride in the front of the bus, even if they could visit the lunch counters, many working class African

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Lillie Jones Wheeler by Elizabeth Gtitter, Oral History Collection, 28 June 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Americans still could not afford to provide a decent life for their families unless they attacked the daily discrimination of employment. William Julius Wilson and Laurie Green both argue that the 1964 Civil Rights Bill did not quell the voices of the working class African Americans. In the words of Laurie Green, “Rather than signaling an end to the problem of freedom, the formal sanctioning of equal rights provoked them [the working class] to address issues left unresolved, including everyday discriminatory practices and racial attitudes.”<sup>89</sup> Black factory workers still faced segregated jobs, jobs that were considered a black person’s work, too dirty or demeaning for their white peers to share.<sup>90</sup> Challenging this system through the courts did not seem like the most fruitful avenue for these workers. As Everlena Yarbrough put it bluntly, “middle class peoples was somewhat in their own little cocoon...So, they left the...underdogs out there to get their bone the best way they could.”<sup>91</sup> And that is exactly what Everlena Yarbrough and many of her working class peers did. Instead of living with discriminatory conditions, they set out to fight them head on.

Until recently, historians of labor rights and civil rights have not begun to explore the connections between the two movements. Michael Honey explains, in his book, *Organizing Memphis Workers*, that the two cannot be understood in isolation of each other. He states that “in an atmosphere of pervasive repression, struggles for civil rights, civil liberties, and labor rights became inextricably intertwined. Without the right to organize, neither African Americans nor workers as a group could change their conditions, and that right could not be gained without seriously undermining the

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<sup>89</sup> Laurie B. Green, “Race, Gender, and Labor in the 1960s Memphis: ‘I Am a Man’ and the Meaning of Freedom,” *Journal of Urban History*, 30 (March 2004), 470; Wilson, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 105-106.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

segregation system.”<sup>92</sup> The connection between the two movements must be understood in order to analyze the influence that each had on the other. Members of the African American working class were oppressed not only because of their working class status but also because of the color of their skin.

When interviewed, one union activist whole-heartedly stated that civil rights and union rights were fighting for the same goal, while another activist remained adamant that the two are separate ideas. Everlena Yarbrough stated that both civil rights and union rights worked for “the betterment of mankind.” She also affirmed Honey’s view that they are “inextricably intertwined,” saying that the two go “hand-in-hand” and “one can’t go without the other.”<sup>93</sup> Ida Leachman, on the other hand, stated that union rights “only apply to the worker,” while “civil rights apply to everybody.” While she did acknowledge that a “racial aspect” of discrimination did exist, she clarified that the two were separate. However, she understood that discrimination occurred because of her race when being denied a leave of absence, and it was this prejudice that partly moved her to join the union in the first place. On her father’s side, she is related to Ida B. Wells, an outspoken activist around the turn of the century in Memphis who denounced lynchings and fought for African American rights. When asked if she thought that she and Ida B. Wells strove for the same goals, she said yes, which means that she understood implicitly the racial motivations behind her actions. Leachman and Yarbrough wanted rights for all workers, not simply African Americans, but they also saw the discrimination that black workers faced because of their race.

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<sup>92</sup> Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*, (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1993), 7-8.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

Numerous working class individuals and groups wrote to the NAACP requesting investigation of and legal action for discriminatory practices in the places of employment. Women, from nurses to workers in the RCA factory, requested the help of the NAACP.<sup>94</sup> Following years of complaints to the NAACP, on January 9, 1968, about a month before the beginning of the sanitation workers' strike, the licensed practical nurses (LPNs) at John Gaston City Hospital wrote a letter to the NAACP outlining discriminatory practices in the hospital. Most of the LPNs were black, while all of the registered nurses (RNs) were white.<sup>95</sup> The women complained that the director required them to complete two additional courses, pharmacology and modern math, which were not mandated by the state. The LPNs had to pay a \$50 entry fee and pass the courses in order to keep their jobs. Many of them had been working for over ten years and had not taken a class since their original training and, consequently, felt they were doomed to fail. The hospital did not make the same requirements for the RNs. The LPNs believed they had been discriminated against because of their race.<sup>96</sup> Because the city failed to negotiate, the unionized LPNs of John Gaston Hospital walked off their jobs.

The women of John Gaston Hospital understood the discrimination they experienced. They saw the connection between the prejudice they faced in their jobs and their own ability to put food on their families' tables at night. They outlined that "because some of us are heads of our families" they could not afford the added monetary and time costs the course would take.<sup>97</sup> This wording fits well into Honey's argument that many working class women "understood how the trajectory of their work lives was tied to the

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<sup>94</sup> See examples in Box I of the Maxine Smith Collection.

<sup>95</sup> LPNs require about a year of training and cannot dispense medications, start IVs, etc. RNs complete about three years of training and do have the authority to dispense medications and start IVs.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from the John Gaston LPNs, Maxine Smith Collection, Box IV Folder 22, 9 Jan 1968.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

fate of their children . . . the wages of these women all supported their families and . . . both race and gender discrimination severely limited their opportunities.”<sup>98</sup> John Gaston Hospital left them with no other opportunities. They went on strike, demanding an increase in pay and fair promotions, along with the elimination of the course requirements.<sup>99</sup> Because of the specific discrimination they faced, the John Gaston LPNs responded in a specific way. They might not have had time to march with Dr. King in the sanitation strikes, but they did fight the discriminatory practices of their employer, as their economic fate lay in their employer’s hands.

Alzada Clark, a working class woman who worked in the Memphis Dinette company saw the horrible conditions that she and the other black workers had to face daily. She stated that “the supervisor didn’t want you to talk or go to the bathroom, and we never had breaks.”<sup>100</sup> Because her job exposed her to “the kind of conditions . . . that no human being should” have to endure, she was motivated to ameliorate the conditions for herself and her co-workers. When her future husband, LeRoy Clark, came into her factory on an assignment from United Furniture Workers in 1950 to organize the workers, she first became interested in unions. That same year, she began to work for the union, doing grassroots organizing, moving “around among the people, and ask[ing] people to come to the [union] meeting.”<sup>101</sup>

In 1967, United Furniture Workers hired her as an organizer in Mississippi, and, many times, she would go door-to-door, persuading workers to join the union. Alzada Clark went into some of the most dangerous areas of the Delta, including Canton,

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<sup>98</sup> Michael Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle*, (University of California Press; Berkeley, 1999), 120.

<sup>99</sup> Maxine Smith, undated release, Maxine Smith Collection, Box IV Folder 22.

<sup>100</sup> Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 262.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-263

Mississippi, where she was arrested and where just a few years earlier, massive white resistance to the civil rights movement had taken place.<sup>102</sup> Clark risked her life in order to help workers obtain rights in an area of the country where African Americans were brutally suppressed. Because of her status as a working class woman, she established rapport with the workers she organized. The factory exposed Clark to conditions that made her sensitive to all workers' conditions.

Everlena Yarbrough likewise persuaded many workers to better their conditions. When interviewing her, it became apparent that this woman simply exudes a warm but firm nature that draws others close to her, a quality that aids her organizing abilities greatly. Before she even got a job in Memphis, she spread the word to other sharecroppers on her plantation to get jobs in the city and take advantage of greater opportunities in Memphis. When she got a job with Trojan Luggage in 1968, she owned a car and drove many of the women she worked with from rural Arkansas into Memphis every day to work. At only twenty-four years old, Yarbrough "galvanized" the workers to follow her to a better life in Memphis, and when she got to Memphis, her activism did not stop there.<sup>103</sup>

Trojan Luggage had already organized under United Furniture Workers, and when she had been working there about three weeks, older women in the factory "removed the steward that they had had in place there...and they immediately elected me to become their spokesperson there in the workplace." She remembered that the women simply saw something in her and knew that she would fight for their rights. When asked about her motivation, she stated, "I saw a great need for that, to bring [people] together so

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 275-277

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

we could move and do things and have some of the things in life that we desired to have for our families and put a decent meal on the table... My goal was to give other young women a better view of life.” Yarbrough, too, echoes Honey’s theme of the connection between working class women and their ability to care for their families. Yarbrough did not see this as simply a goal for herself, but for all working class women. In her organizing, she was able to organize factories that, without her intervention would have otherwise kept believing the propaganda the management espoused. She used a very grassroots style, using two younger women to draw “a diagram of everyone in the work place. And they could tell me, who this person was, who that person was, who she talked to.” By focusing on the layout and personal relationships of the workers and going door-to-door to bring them into the union, Yarbrough accomplished her goal of giving “women a better view of life.” Yarbrough’s history as a sharecropper and factory worker fueled her activism in union organizing.<sup>104</sup>

Ida Leachman joined union organizing in 1978 when the factory where she worked, United Uniform Company, finally voted in the union. Known for her outspoken nature, her co-workers appointed her as their steward. Leachman, when explaining why she worked in the union instead of other venues for social change, she stated that “it gave me the opportunity to represent people. So many people cannot speak for themselves... sometimes they don’t know what to say.”<sup>105</sup> Although she spoke her mind, Leachman understood that not all people had that ability, and she knew from experience that voicing opinions against the management could cost a worker her job. She did not want people to be taken in by the anti-union campaigns that the management communicated to the

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Everlena Yarbrough by the author.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Ida Leachman by the author.

workers. A union “is the only organization that the law says the employer *must* recognize and deal with. NAACP and all of them—none of them—out of all of the organizations,” only unions must be recognized. Using this language, Leachman persuaded other workers join unions and has negotiated contracts on their behalf. Because she worked in discriminatory conditions, she understands the conditions workers encounter, and maintains that she never signs a contract under conditions that she herself would not accept.

Because she was a worker, other workers trust her. She understood the conditions under which her co-workers toiled and her co-workers, in turn, trusted her. Her working class status shaped and facilitated her union organizing. The daily job discrimination working class women faced threatened not only their jobs but also their economic viability. Thus, when deciding to become active in the civil rights movement, they employed an activity that would directly affect the working conditions that they suffered.

### **Conclusion**

In Memphis during the civil rights era, class distinctions existed within the African American community. Classes developed as a result of the historic reality of slavery and the plantation system in the South, making the class structure of black society different from that of mainstream white society. However, when black women in Memphis faced discrimination, the form that the discrimination took depended, in part, on their social class. Although all women objected to the treatment they received on city buses, the class-specific discrimination that they faced determined what they hoped to gain from their involvement in the movement.

Many middle class women, facing social and educational discrimination, fought for better educational opportunities. Maxine Smith was denied access to Memphis State and, in turn, focused on gaining representation on the school board as one of her methods for change. Smith was also independent from the white power structure, which fueled her activism in other, more radical, realms. In some areas of the Memphis movement, middle class women participated in activities that were not traditionally middle class. The plight of the sanitation workers especially galvanized the black community to fight for change in ways that had previously been ignored. As Erma Lee Laws stated, “When they talked like that to them, you know they talk that way to all of us,”<sup>106</sup> and when they faced that discrimination, they moved with direct action protests, an action rarely taken by middle class individuals in the Delta.

Early in the movement, both the middle and the working classes saw the treatment that they received at the hand of the white power structure. Registering more individuals to vote for reasonable and progressive candidates could fight a variety of society’s ills. Thus, women of all classes worked in this stage of the movement. For many African Americans, simply electing qualified candidates would not significantly affect their condition. Working class African Americans faced discrimination in their working environments that kept their wages low and their financial livelihoods fragile. Thus, women like Everlena Yarbrough organized unions protesting workplace discrimination.

Class-specific discrimination motivated women to change society in ways that would positively affect their lives. The activities of the working and middle classes were not in opposition to one another. Rather, their activities were complementary. The variety of activities that took place brought about changes in all areas of life for black

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Erma Lee Laws by the author.

Memphians. Without this variety, the goal and scope of the civil rights movement would have been severely limited.