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Memphis World, 1968 March 23rd

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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.

March 23, 1968

The issue dated March 23rd is unsurprisingly headlined by rising activities and tensions surrounding the Sanitation Strike. This week finds continuing resistance from striking workers and their allies, including a growing boycott of downtown businesses and the as well as growing anger from Black councilmembers, who voice their opposition to the recalcitrance of Mayor Henry Loeb and their support for the rights of striking workers to form a union and collectively bargain. Led by local activists like Maxine Smith and national organizers like Rev. James Lawson, the Sanitation Strikers continued their battle in a context of increasing opposition from the Loeb government. One of the key constituencies in this struggle were Memphis's Black college students, and the *Memphis World* – as in every issue – devotes significant attention to the accomplishments and activities of students at Le-Moyne College and elsewhere. Beyond discussions of athletic contests and academic achievements, items in this issue discuss the work of fifteen LeMoyne students at a "Freedom City" in Greenville, Mississippi, one of many such encampments designed to promote voter registration and education during the Movement, as well as the launching of business outreach and teacher-training programs at the college. Whether actively involved in the Movement or more generally demonstrating their brilliance in an often-hostile environment, the work of Memphis' Black college students was both fuel for political campaigns and a symbol of why they were necessary.

It seems fitting that LeMoyne students, and other young Black people in Memphis, receive more attention in the *Memphis World's* local coverage than national leaders, even the person who was soon to become the most associated with the Sanitation Strike. As indicated by a small mention at the bottom of the headline story, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis the previous Monday for his first address in Memphis. He called for a one-day general strike in Memphis, an act that signaled Dr. King's continued radicalism and increasing focus on economic inequity. This issue, which King saw as directly related to the other aims of the Civil Rights Movement, grew dominant for King as he and the organization he led, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, planned the national Poor People's Campaign. In a small item on the bottom of page 6, likely syndicated from a national wire service, the paper announces a national King speaking tour to build support for this nationwide movement, which would climax in a

march and demonstration in Washington, D.C., to force the federal government to increase funding for anti-poverty programs. Condemning the inequities of capitalism and the U.S. government's growing commitment to the Vietnam War, King hoped to force the federal government to increase funding for anti-poverty programs and force a national reckoning with the experiences of poor Americans and the larger question of wealth distribution. Although not initially part of his plans to build the Poor People's Campaign, King came to Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers because he recognized in their struggle (and the larger contexts that surrounded it) the very injustice that motivated the Campaign and fueled his larger career. Although not yet a feature in the *Memphis World*, this small item signals King's arrival and the tumultuous events that followed.