

# Unions Choose Hallowed Ground for King Observance

**R**ev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was 39 years old when he was felled by a sniper's bullet while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, TN. Four decades later, the event remains a touchstone for a nation still grappling with his life and legacy.

This year, the 40th anniversary of his death, Memphis will be the site of the AFL-CIO's 2008 Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Observance. Hundreds of civil rights and labor leaders will travel to Memphis for a week of reflection, education and community service.

Rev. King traveled to Memphis in April 1968 to sup-

port a sanitation workers' strike by members of Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Among the reasons for the strike was the city's practice of sending African-American sanitation workers home without pay during inclement weather, a condition of employment white sanitation workers did not face.

The work stoppage gained national attention earlier that year when police in Memphis assaulted a downtown march organized by local ministers in support of the strike. The use of force at close range on religious leaders outraged the community and hardened the bond between labor and civil rights forces.

## Death Threats

Tensions escalated as weeks passed and city officials refused to bargain with the workers, claiming unions by city employees were

illegal. Rev. King's advisors counseled against his going to Memphis, concerned that the situation was too volatile.

Despite warnings, death threats and a bomb scare that delayed his April 3rd flight from Chicago to Memphis, King insisted.

King was gunned down on April 4, 1968, a day after he delivered his "I've been to the mountaintop" speech. Aides remarked that the speech had a foreboding quality they had not heard previously during his 13 years as a civil rights leader.

The 2008 Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Observance will commemorate the humble birth, extraordinary life and tragic assassination of the man who, 40 years after his death, continues to inspire Americans of every age, color and creed.

AP/Wide World Photo



*In his final public appearance on April 3, 1968, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at the Mason Temple in Memphis, TN.*



AP/Wide World Photo

*The balcony outside Room 306 of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, TN, where Rev. King was assassinated forty years ago.*