



A convoy of refuse trucks lines the parade route as a reminder that Dr. King's presence in Memphis, TN on the day he was assassinated was to support the city's striking sanitation workers.

Dr. King's Legacy Alive In Houston

At first glance, Houston, TX, might seem a surprising choice for the AFL-CIO's annual commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A second look, however, reveals the permanent place in civil rights history this city achieved the moment it became the destination of tens of thousands of African-Americans displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Of all the displaced Gulf Coast residents, more sought shelter in Houston than in any other U.S. city. The exodus from New Orleans and the indifference of federal officials in restoring that city are a bitter epitaph to the greatest natural

disaster in U.S. history.

Speaking about the Bush administration's response to the plight of Katrina's victims, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka recalled the words of Thomas Jefferson; "I tremble for my country when I contemplate that God is just."

More than 17 months after the hurricane struck, tens of thousands of former Gulf Coast residents are still unable to return, with many poor and working class neighborhoods without electrical power, drinking water or basic services.

Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA) spoke for many Gulf Coast residents recently

when he charged the federal government with "a policy of ethnic cleansing by inaction" for its failure to rebuild less affluent neighborhoods.

In addition to workshops and speakers who railed against the government's treatment of Katrina's victims, the labor and civil rights activists gathered in Houston rolled up their sleeves, donned boots and gloves and set to work restoring a park and several other sites in that city's working-class neighborhoods.

One neighborhood park on Houston's south side was transformed by volunteers from more than a dozen unions who shoveled, raked,

painted and polished until the park looked like the urban oasis it was originally intended to be.

“We can’t right every wrong, and we can’t rebuild every city park, but we can sure make a difference when we put our minds and our backs to it,” said IAM Executive Assistant Diane Babineaux, who was joined by IAM members from as far away as St. Louis, MO and Chicago, IL for the community service activities.

In the nearly four decades since Dr. King’s death, his legacy has rested mainly in the hands of his widow, Coretta Scott King, who led the drive to establish King’s birthday as a national holiday.

This year’s commemorative ceremonies are the first since her death on Jan. 31 at age 78 after suffering a stroke five months earlier.

“Her accomplishments after his death deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as Dr. King’s,” said IAM President Tom Buffenbarger.



Assistant Director of Legislative and Political Action Hasan Solomon, center, and Southern Territory GLR Paul Morris, right, joined forces with other union members to rebuild benches and tables at a city park in Houston.

“And until the day she died, her sublime dignity reminded us of what we had lost as a nation.”

The activities in Houston were among hundreds across the country where millions paid tribute to the civil rights leader who was assassinated on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, TN. Dr. King, who would be 78 this year if he lived, had traveled to Memphis to lead a protest march in support of that city’s striking sanitation workers.

Bone chilling temperatures and a wind driven rain were not enough to dampen the spirits of the several thousand union members who marched or the spectators who cheered at this year’s AFL-CIO parade in Houston.

The IAM contingent was well represented with a visible and vocal cross section of IAM members including airline, rail and aerospace workers.

No group in the parade, however, was louder or more symbolic than the convoy of city garbage trucks that moved through the parade with air horns blaring. The cacophony that filled the air was a fitting tribute to the man whose quiet eloquence still commands our attention and echoes through the ages.

Area IAM members, including a large contingent of Continental Flight Attendants from Local 2339H, braved cold and rainy weather to join the parade honoring Dr. King.

