

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION, AND THE 1978 MEMPHIS FIRE AND POLICE STRIKES

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1978, police officers and firefighters in Memphis, Tennessee walked off their jobs ostensibly over a salary dispute. While economics did indeed play a crucial role in the ultimate decision to strike, the walkouts were more the result of a sense of frustration among police officers and firefighters owing to their perception that the city administration had little respect for them and their unions. This paper discusses the events leading up to the 1978 Memphis fire and police strikes, the formation of unions in the Memphis police and fire departments, the political obstacles these municipal unions had to overcome, and how these strikes altered the relationship between the City of Memphis and all of its employee unions.

The unionization of Memphis police and firefighters occurred not simply as part of a local or national trend, but came about due to specific grievances, controlled by local politics, influenced by national events. The 1978 strikes arose due to a breakdown in communication between a city administration that had little experience in dealing with unions, and its police officers and firefighters who had become more professional throughout the twentieth century and demanded recognition as such. Over the long term, the lessons learned from the strikes brought about a more stable relationship between the City of Memphis and its municipal employees.

On August 16, 1978, thousands of Elvis Presley fans flocked to Memphis in commemoration of the first anniversary of the death of a rock-and-roll legend. Visitors arrived from not only across the United States, but from around the globe. Pilgrims from Australia, Great Britain, and Japan joined the American faithful standing in seemingly never-ending lines in the stifling Memphis heat to pay tribute to a man who, for many, defined a generation.

But these fans did not form the only lines on the Memphis streets. Memphis police officers and firefighters carrying picket signs marched on sidewalks throughout the city. National Guardsmen carrying M-16 rifles, wearing fatigues, steel helmets, and flak jackets formed rings around government buildings and patrolled city streets. Curfews limited nighttime activities for everyone except people working in certain vital jobs. Only six weeks earlier, it seemed as though the city would succumb to arsonists as striking firefighters watched their supervisors struggle to control fires in vacant buildings that burned uncontrolled and illuminated the night sky. Not since the sanitation strike of 1968 had Memphians experienced such disruption in their daily lives. Even though the

1968 garbage strike had culminated in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and rioting in parts of Memphis, the city's labor trouble in 1978 was, in some ways, more disruptive since it affected all areas of the city.

Memphis was not the only city in the nation to experience labor troubles with its fire and police departments in the summer of 1978. Nashville and Knoxville police staged slowdowns. Police in Cullman, Alabama walked off their jobs in July, and Cleveland police struck in August. Firefighters in Louisville and Chattanooga threatened strikes unless city governments met their demands. All around the country, municipal employee unions were taking their cues from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the anti-war protests of the 1970s to become more militant in their dealings with their employers. These job actions, while not without precedent, represented a radical departure from traditional labor unrest. Few believed that unions representing governmental, middle-class, majority-white employee groups would engage in such widespread, sometimes-violent strikes. During the summer of 1978, the strikes by Memphis firefighters and police officers represented not only a means for addressing economic concerns, but a method to vent years of anger and frustration.

Scholars of southern history and southern labor history have generally neglected the process of unionization and union activity among white, middle-class workers.¹ Historians have traditionally focused their studies on groups such as mill workers, mine workers, skilled and unskilled black unions, and tenant farmers' unions. Members of municipal employee unions such as the Memphis Police Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1784 were by no stretch of the imagination the downtrodden workers represented in traditional studies. Just as in other histories of southern labor, however, the formation of these municipal employee unions highlights the interaction of government, business, culture, inequities of power, and politics.

Theories attempting to explain the apparent low number of unions and union members in the South abound. Some have blamed the paternalism of southern managers who provided for all of their workers' needs. Others have cited the individualism of southern workers, right-to-work laws, or politicians who sought to provide a stable business environment in an attempt to lure northern industry. Recent studies, however, have refuted many of these conclusions. Industrial unions representing groups such as mill workers, miners, and factory workers flourished in many parts of the South. Craft unions of skilled laborers exerted powerful political influence in some southern cities. Even though southern workers as a whole may not have unionized at the same rate as workers in the rest of the country, the fact remains that they did indeed organize, and did so with varying degrees of success. Memphis police officers and firefighters were no different.²

The organization of the Memphis Police Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1784, however, represents a story of labor in the South that does easily lend itself to comparison with other stories of southern labor. Memphis police officers and firefighters did not work for a large corporation, mill, or industrialist, but rather a municipal government and the citizens of Memphis. When they sought to unionize, they not only had to win recognition from the city government, but also they

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

had to win the support of the public that would ultimately bear the cost of any economic benefits obtained by the unions or any job action undertaken by the unions. Likewise, those who sought to unionize Memphis police officers and firefighters were not working in local isolation, but rather represented a part of a movement to unionize police and fire departments all across the United States. Even though the southern political and legal environment strongly affected the movement to organize Memphis police officers and firefighters, the unionization of Memphis's protective employees is as much a national labor story as it is a southern labor story.

The interaction of three entities – government, its labor force of police officers and firefighters, and the citizens of Memphis – instead of merely two as in the typical labor-management dispute, differentiates Memphis municipal unions, and most other government unions, from private-sector unions. Throughout the twentieth century, labor and Memphis city administrators looked frequently to the community, through its business, labor, and civic leaders, to arbitrate disputes arising in the government workplace. Memphis's community leaders often intervened whenever tensions between the city administration and city employees threatened to upset the economic and social stability of the city.

Both city administrators and municipal labor leaders knew that community support was crucial to their cause. With the Memphis political climate and, arguably, a public that largely distrusted unions, those who sought to organize Memphis's police and fire departments faced many obstacles in convincing much of the community that municipal employee unions would not pose a threat to good government. The southern middle class has always been generally conservative and skilled. Southern middle-class values have traditionally associated unionism with rabble-rousing, civil rights protests, and communists. During the 1920s and 1930s, unions had a bad reputation associated with radical politics, social movements, and labor activism among the unskilled poor. Labor movements often had left-wing leadership; many radicals, and sometimes communists, led the organizations. Most white municipal workers even themselves were generally conservative and supported the status quo.³

Attempts to unionize government workers faced even more hurdles. Most government employees were, and are, white-collar, professionally minded, and have job security unmatched in the private sector. Even though the concept had not been widely tested, some court cases had previously ruled strikes by government employees illegal. Also, strikes by civil servants would most probably elicit little public sympathy. While one can debate whether firefighters and police officers truly represent a white-collar work force, there can be no doubt that these groups view themselves as professionals in a position of public trust. Another hurdle remained in the unionization of police officers; the officers who considered forming unions were sometimes members of departments that had sometimes used violent means to suppress union activity and break strikes. Unionization, to some of these officers, was tantamount to joining the enemy. Even with these cultural, political, and legal obstacles, however, Memphis's firefighters and police officers struggled to form unions throughout most of the twentieth century.⁴

Economic historian Ray Marshall, wrote, "there is evidence that of all the influences on union growth in the South, the most significant are economic."⁵ It is evident, however, that working conditions played an equal, if not superior, role in the formation of the unions in the Memphis fire and police departments. It was only when economic concerns joined with a sense of frustration and a perceived lack of respect from the city that these unions came into being. Economic concerns along with a growing sense of powerlessness finally trumped the cultural, social, or political factors that had previously given Memphis police officers and firefighters pause. The eventual unionization of Memphis police officers and firefighters reflected a reaction to a specific grievance, but within the context of both local politics and national events.

William Regensburger, in his study of unionism in the South, argues that when southerners finally unionized, "southern values of individualism, family, home, personal honor, independence, and violence were blended into an explosive mixture of working class militancy."⁶ Even though Regensburger made his statement in reference to southern industrial workers during the 1930s, it could also apply to Memphis police and firefighters. Once these groups formed their unions, they pursued their agenda with radical fervor. When police officers and firefighters struck against the City of Memphis in 1978, IAFF Local 1784 had only been in existence for seven years, and the MPA only five, and their youth almost certainly diminished their chances for success. The short existence of both unions had not allowed enough time for police and firefighters to cultivate the strong public support needed to win a high-profile labor dispute and the political know-how necessary to challenge successfully a strong city government that had traditionally set labor policy by executive order. To achieve their publicly stated goals was nearly impossible from the start.

The strikes of 1978 arose from the usual disputes between labor and management, seemingly with neither side open to compromise. Unlike most strikes in private industry, however, the public stood to be the ultimate loser while its protective workers walked the picket lines. As the dispute devolved into an apparently unworkable stalemate, the business community of Memphis interjected itself into the strikes. The strikes and the ensuing curfews hurt business not only on a daily basis, but threatened the already tarnished image of Memphis around the nation. Business became the mediator in which all parties could place their trust to bring about a fair and equitable settlement. The agreement negotiated by business and civic leaders allowed both the city administration and the unions to settle the dispute while saving face.

The formation of the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1784 and the Memphis Police Association in the 1970s was not the result of a single organization drive, but rather represented over fifty years of unionization efforts by Memphis public employees. On several occasions in the early decades of the twentieth century, firefighters and police officers banded together in attempts to raise salaries and improve working conditions. Their efforts mixed a few successes with many failures, and never directly led to any permanent municipal unions. These successes and failures were not simply due to legal barriers or the lack of political savvy on the part of organizers, although both played

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

a part. They also seemed to fluctuate inversely with the political fortunes of the Boss of Memphis, Edward Hull Crump.

Memphis in the early twentieth century had a steadfast reputation as an anti-union town. Crump set the tone of hostility toward unions that might threaten his absolute control of municipal payrolls and scare away industry. Crump offered efficiency, quality city services, cheap tax rates, and the stability of one-man rule, earning him and his political machine the support of manufacturers. Ford and Firestone built plants in Memphis not only because of the tax rates and the city's reputation for low wages, but also because of Crump's promise that the plants would remain non-union.⁷

If private-industry unions met such overt hostility from local government, then public-employee unions had absolutely no chance of survival. In 1917, firemen⁸ organized the City Firemen's Union of Memphis, Tennessee, one of the first such unions in the United States. Even though Crump men ran city hall, the administration allowed the organization to exist since it seemed generally harmless and the Boss had more political worries than an insignificant union might bring. The following year the firemen associated themselves with the International Association of Fire Fighters, and made several successful demands for changes in working conditions. In 1920, confident in their past victories, they pressed for a pay raise, but this time, despite the pleas of Memphis business leaders, the administration balked. Hoping to press the issue to a critical point, on July 13 all but thirty of the city's 263 firemen presented their resignations to fire commissioner John Edgar. The city administration, however, did not react as the firemen had hoped. The Memphis Fire Department soon began hiring replacements, while volunteers supplied by the local business community manned the hoses and equipment. The first union for Memphis firemen lasted only three years.⁹

Despite the setback in 1920, the IAFF did not abandon its attempts to bring a successful union to the Memphis Fire Department. In 1933 an IAFF official attempted to organize another local chapter in Memphis, but with staunch opposition from city hall the official left town with nothing to show for his efforts. Still, by January 1936, several members of the department obtained a charter as Local 459 of the IAFF. The timing could not have been worse for the firemen; Crump and his organization were at the peak of their power. When word of the union reached the Crump-machine fire commissioner Clifford Davis, he immediately dismissed six firemen identified as charter members of the union and nine more the following day. Davis told the press "because of their efforts to disorganize the Memphis Fire Department...they are today discharged." Not only did these firefighters lose their jobs, they also found themselves blacklisted from any possibility of future city employment. More than thirty years would pass before there were any further serious efforts to organize the Memphis Fire Department.¹⁰

The Memphis Fire Department was not the only city agency to face occasional labor trouble. In 1943, two-thirds of the Memphis police force walked off the job to protest the suspensions of two of their fellow officers. They used the occasion to demand improved working conditions including a civil service law that would preclude political activity by city employees, two days off per month, and a pay increase. Mayor Walter Chandler was sympathetic to their concerns and did convince Crump and the city com-

ESSAYS IN ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS HISTORY (2004)

mission to provide some additional benefits. When some of the officers complained that the city could do more, police commissioner Joe Boyle told a gathering of his men that if any of them felt they could not support their families on a city salary, he would ask the War Labor Board to release the officer from their list of essential workers. The officer would then be subject to the draft.¹¹

In 1948, two hundred police officers marched on City Hall to protest the firing of two detectives, and again ask for more money and to demand the civil-service protection that the administration had promised in 1943. James J. Pleasants, the Crump-anointed mayor, ejected the two attorneys accompanying the group from his office, and called the officers' actions of meeting and marching on his office a strike against the city government. After several months of negotiations the city did provide a small pay increase and implement a civil-service bill, but one without a ban on political activity, leaving Crump with the ability to compel civil servants to campaign for his organization. In the first half of the twentieth century, Memphis police officers did have more success in dealing with the city administration than did firemen, but officers were also careful to avoid any activity that might give the hint of union activity. They had seen all too clearly the fate of those who did otherwise.¹²

The modern era of municipal-employee unions in Memphis began in the 1960s when the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees organized local sanitation workers. In February 1968 Memphis sanitation workers began a sixty-five-day strike that culminated with the assassination of Martin Luther King on April 4. With the bad national publicity, the city quickly settled the strike that same month. Following the success of the sanitation strike, AFSCME began organizing workers from other city departments. With pressure from AFSCME supported by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and with a string of federal court cases affirming the rights of city employees to unionize, on March 4, 1969 the city council finally passed a resolution affirming the rights of all city employees to organize and bargain. The efforts by the majority-black AFSCME finally opened the doors for unionization among all of Memphis's municipal employees. Although AFSCME organized nearly all unskilled city workers into the Local, the mainly white fire and police departments remained without union representation.¹³

Even though Memphis city employees had gained the right to union representation, the prospect of joining such an organization apparently did not appeal to most firemen and police officers. When in the past members of the Memphis fire and police departments had joined together to seek better working conditions, they did so in response to a specific grievance, not simply because a few men had taken a notion to challenge city leaders. In 1969 there was no such unifying issue. Nonetheless, some Memphis firefighters saw that union representation for their department was only a matter of time. They again obtained a charter from the IAFF, but now with the designation Local 1784, and began a high-profile campaign buying advertising space in Memphis newspapers declaring

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

MEMPHIS FIRE FIGHTERS ARE SICK AND TIRED OF THE 72-HOUR WORK WEEK. . . THAT'S WHY THEY'RE JOINING THE UNION.

Most firefighters, however, were not "sick and tired" enough to join the IAFF. The seventy-two-hour week had been a part of the fireman's job for decades. The issue simply was not strong enough to inspire firefighters to rush out and join. In July 1969, only five months after the City of Memphis recognized the right of municipal unions to exist, the IAFF suspended Local 1784 for failure to submit dues. Local 1784 simply withered away due to a lack of interest.¹⁴

By 1971 the situation changed dramatically. Economic pressures, combined with a management system that many firemen considered unfair, led Memphis firefighters to revive Local 1784. As the result of a private study dubbed the "Frye Report," the Memphis City Council gave police patrol officers a \$1,056 annual raise while giving fire privates only \$624, breaking the pay parity that had traditionally accompanied the two jobs. City council members justified their actions stating that policemen faced more constant hazards in their jobs than did firemen. The pay break, however, may have had as much to do with the intractability of fire chief Eddie Hamilton, an old-line Crump man, as with job considerations. As a result of the Frye Report, Memphis firemen finally organized a permanent union to protect their interests.¹⁵

Memphis police officers organized their union only after several failed attempts. In 1967 a small group of officers finally tired of working conditions around the department, particularly the actions of a supervisor whom they described as a "nitpicky tyrant." This group arranged mass meetings of Memphis police officers - the first since 1948 - and even obtained a charter for the Memphis Police Association. But the events of 1968 overshadowed the organizing effort, and, along with some improvements with management, the unionization effort faded away.

In the summer of 1969, another group of officers obtained a union charter and initiated an organizational drive. During this drive, most officers never really showed much interest in organizing a union, prompting a national officer of the International Brotherhood of Police Officers to come to Memphis in an effort to give the drive momentum. When the national official attempted to meet with management, however, police chief Henry Lux refused stating, "I do not believe a police agency is the proper place for a union." This second unionization effort met the same fate as the first. Just like Memphis firefighters, the city's police officers needed a galvanizing event to lead them to successful unionization.

Then in 1972, retired Marine Corps general Jay W. Hubbard became the first civilian director of police services in Memphis. Hubbard soon tried to implement a military style of discipline and appearance in the department causing nearly unanimous opposition from the rank and file. On February 8, 1973 officers from bureau of identification along with several officers from the uniformed patrol division announced the formation of the Memphis Police Association. Hubbard reacted by saying "all I know is that their intention is to request collective bargaining...I don't intend to recognize any bargaining

agent unless ordered to do so by competent authorities.” Mayor Wyeth Chandler termed the organizational efforts “incredible.” Temporary MPA president Jack Carlisle emphasized, however, “we are not talking about a union. We are talking about an association.” But the officers’ attorney, Russell X. Thompson told reporters, “they [the MPA] definitely intend to seek recognition as a bargaining agent.” Perhaps fearful of public reaction he added, “they don’t want to be identified with that [union] tag.” On June 4, with the 1969 city council resolution forcing his hand, Mayor Chandler officially recognized the Memphis Police Association as the bargaining agent for the Memphis Police Department.¹⁶

IAFF Local 1784 negotiated its first contract within months of its successful organization, while police officers could not complete their first negotiations for more than a year after the city officially recognized the MPA. The first contracts provided union members with perhaps better wage increases than they originally expected, but negotiations were most successful in establishing employee rights in such areas as disciplinary procedures and seniority preference. As the tight economy of the 1970s came to bear on the city and city employees, however, contract negotiations became ever more contentious.¹⁷

After the first contracts, Memphis firefighters and police officers gradually became more radical in their dealings with the city. During the 1975 negotiations, IAFF members voted more than two-to-one to reject a city contract offer and to strike if the administration did not meet union demands.¹⁸ In 1976 the city presented the MPA an offer for a ridiculously low \$15-per-month raise for city patrol officers. While Memphis chief administrative officer Henry Evans admitted that the \$15 figure was not realistic, he succeeded in setting a hostile tone for the remainder of that year’s contract negotiations. For the first time, the Memphis Police Association threatened to strike, but finally settled on a six-percent raise.¹⁹ When contract negotiations rolled around in 1977, with a city-budget deficit looming, the prospects for a pay increase not only seemed unlikely, but for the first time both the IAFF and the MPA faced the threat of layoffs. Union officials admitted the possibility of some type of job action, but denied that a strike was even under discussion. In mid-July, however, both unions narrowly ratified the same city offer they had previously rejected and avoided a walkout. Shortly after police officers and firefighters finally accepted the 1977 agreement, city administrators managed to find additional funds in the city budget and later provided non-union commanding officers in both the police and fire departments additional pay raises. It seemed as though the city was not experiencing a fiscal crisis after all. The unions felt betrayed.²⁰

Negotiations for the 1978 police and fire contracts proceeded with little attention from local media. The June 17 edition of the *Commercial Appeal* merely reported that talks were “ongoing,” and quoted city personnel director Joe Sabbatini describing progress as “satisfactory.” Wanting to undo some of the ill will generated by the 1977 contract, the city had presented one of the best economic packages ever to its employee unions, representing a nearly seventeen-percent wage increase over the life of the agreement.²¹

Despite the seemingly generous offer by the city, negotiations slowed to a crawl. Then after years of threats and posturing, the dam finally broke. Years of frustrations

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

aggravated by the apparent double-cross during the 1977 talks brought the unimaginable to Memphis. On July 1, 1978 Memphis firefighters walked off their jobs after voting unanimously to strike. By noon there were six reports of vandalism at fire stations around the city, and by dusk fires began burning uncontrolled as fire calls went unanswered. National Guard troops poured into the city. A fire that began in a vacant house soon spread to the nearby Vance Avenue Branch library, the first library open to black Memphians and widely known as "the Negro outlet," completely destroying the building and its contents. Flames ravaged Overton Square in Midtown decimating a major portion of the popular nightspot. Between 7:00 a.m. on July 1 and 7:00 a.m. on July 2, the fire department handled 225 calls, including twelve major blazes and twenty false alarms. Fires also damaged five school buildings. There were more fires reported during the first twenty-four hours of the IAFF strike than were reported during the same period after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968.

For two more nights, Memphis remained under nighttime curfew until the administration obtained a back-to-work order against striking firefighters. By 7:00 a.m. on Tuesday, July 4, Memphis again had protection from fifty-one, fully manned fire stations. The seventy-two-hour walkout saw over four hundred fires, most of which officials attributed to arson, vandalism against the property of both striking and non-striking firemen, and over eleven hundred additional federal and state employees trying to keep some semblance of order in the city. But just because the strike came to a halt did not mean an end to the summer's labor trouble.²²

The IAFF and MPA continued negotiations throughout the month of July with few breakthroughs. The unions sought to put pressure on the city collectively, although they perceived each other more as competitors than allies. Firefighters sought to regain the pay parity with police officers they had lost in 1971, while the MPA could not allow firemen to receive a bigger pay increase than its members. After several weeks of contentious talks, negotiators for both unions agreed to tentative pacts that basically resembled the city's previous offers. The rank-and-file membership of both unions, however, had become more radical during the long summer of negotiations. MPA members rejected the city proposal by a nine-to-one margin and IAFF members split over ratification. Both sides dug their trenches deeper with the unions demanding "advisory" arbitration, which they hoped would bring an economic windfall, while the city council strongly backed the administration.²³

Negotiations between the city and the two unions continued for the next several weeks. Both sides pleaded their cases to the public through the media, presentations to the city council, and even a televised debate between the mayor and the MPA president David Baker. As talks finally reached a stalemate, MPA officials took one last city counterproposal to its membership in the late evening of August 10. Police officers again rejected the offer, this time by a 528-266 margin. By midnight picket lines appeared around the police headquarters building. The MPA was on strike.

Chandler learned many valuable lessons in the July firefighters' strike and wasted no time in declaring a curfew and calling in National Guard troops. In addition, the mayor

immediately sought an injunction to force striking police officers back to work, but did not receive the signed decree until the next day. MPA Board members, under orders from the courts, urged the striking officers to return to work, but the rank and file refused and the strike continued. The next day Chandler declared that he would fire all strikers for violating the chancery court injunction.²⁴

Then on August 14, firefighters staged a wildcat strike and joined MPA members on the picket lines. There was still bad blood between the firefighters and the police unions as a result of the July strike when police officers arrested several striking IAFF members, but with all of the city's protective employees on strike the MPA and Local 1784 hoped to force the city into a settlement. With the labor situation so tense and with tremendous political and public pressure, Chandler had no recourse but to request federal mediation just as the unions had requested.²⁵

Mediation, however, did not produce the windfall the unions had sought. Several days of talks brought about no new major changes to the proposals that had been on the table since June. With public outrage over the strikes increasing, the leadership of both unions also realized that if they did not settle soon, the city might weaken its previous offer, or even worse, terminate striking workers and withdraw recognition of the MPA and IAFF Local 1784. Even while facing such a dilemma, neither union wanted to be the first to settle. Both were afraid the other might receive an additional benefit if one held out longer than the other. Also, after a long season of negotiations, union leaders and the city administration had little trust for the other. Remembering the 1977 negotiations, neither union would believe the city had no more money for raises. The administration also had political concerns. With the 1979 city elections in sight, officials needed to settle the strike quickly while appearing not to capitulate to blackmail.

Just as with labor troubles in the fire and police departments earlier in the twentieth century, the Memphis business and labor community helped bring about a successful solution, allowing both the unions and the administration to save face. A committee of business and union leaders whom both the MPA and firefighters respected and trusted told MPA and IAFF negotiators that the city's offer was indeed fair and insisted there would be no replay of 1977. With those assurances, the MPA settled first, followed in a few hours by the firefighters. Four days after the start of mediated talks, both unions agreed to what had essentially been the city offer before the summer strikes began, but the settlement also included a fact-finding committee to evaluate the adequacy of the 7.5 percent raise slated for October 1979. Police and firefighters returned to their jobs on August 19.²⁶

On October 31, 1979 the much-touted fact-finding committee in which the unions had placed so much faith presented a report to the city council that made no recommendation regarding the adequacy of the second-year raise called for by the contract. The 7.5-percent increase took effect as scheduled with no changes. With the failure of the fact-finding committee to make any recommendation, the verdict became final; the strike gained no additional economic benefits for the MPA or the IAFF.²⁷

The worst blow to unionism by Memphis city employees, however, came almost a year earlier in the form of a citywide referendum held on November 7, 1978. At their

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

September 6 meeting, less than three weeks after firefighters and police officers returned to their jobs, the city council drafted an amendment to the city charter mandating that any city worker who participated in a job action against the city would be immediately fired with loss of seniority and benefits, and that neither the mayor nor the city council would have the power to override the employee's dismissal. The voters passed the resolution overwhelmingly, with more than sixty-four percent of the city's voters condoning the change. With their most powerful tool now taken away, the age of radical city-employee unionism was over in Memphis, not only for Memphis police and firefighters but also for AFSCME, which had originally opened the door for city-employee unions.²⁸

In most ways, the Memphis Police Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1784 lost in the strikes of 1978. Their fate was almost pre-ordained for a number of reasons. First, neither union was able to gain widespread public sympathy for the strike. Members of both unions misread public sentiment. They believed the widespread support they usually received from the much of the community would translate into support for their cause and end the strikes in their favor. In a telephone poll taken by a local newspaper during the strikes, forty-three percent of Memphians said they supported the unions in their action against the city. But while many sympathized with the officers' and firefighters' economic plight, the public at large could not support a strike by their most trusted employees. Acts of violence by strikers galvanized public sympathy against the strike and led many to view once-respected civil servants as mere criminals. Even other unions in private-sector Memphis did not rise up to support striking officers and firemen. Although some expressed sympathy to their cause, none staged sympathy strikes or slowdowns. One union official still upset about police actions at a strike earlier in the year declared, "we've never had cooperation with [MPA president David] Baker in the past."

Support for the unions was particularly strong in the Memphis's black community. That support, most likely, was grounded in the fact that black Memphians represented the labor stronghold of the city, rather than any particular affection for striking police officers and firefighters. Sixty-three percent of black Memphians supported the MPA while sixty-eight percent supported IAFF Local 1784. Only twenty-seven percent of white Memphians supported the police, however, and thirty-one percent supported the firefighters.²⁹ But even in the black community where union support had traditionally been highest, the unions could not find the strong level of support they needed to win their strikes. Even though the MPA and IAFF Local 1784 won the backing of Memphis's black community, that support did not turn into action. Black Memphians offered words of encouragement and moral support, but they never mobilized that support. When the MPA and IAFF Local 1784 struck against the city, both unions appealed to AFSCME and its primarily black membership for backing and possibly a sympathy strike. AFSCME president James Smith and his membership promised to provide moral support, but insisted they would not consider a strike since they had previously settled their contract with the city. When the Memphis Education Association struck against the Board of Education just two months after the August police and fire strikes, however,

AFSCME took a different posture. AFSCME threatened both a strike and an economic boycott in support of the striking teachers and their executive board, which had been jailed for contempt of court for ignoring a back-to-work order. Generally, black Memphians had never viewed police and firefighters as friends and the strike did nothing to alter their opinion.

The Memphis police and fire strikes carried few, if any, racial overtones, but the paucity of black Memphis police officers and firefighters in 1978 may have moderated the potential support of Memphis's black community. At the time of the strike, the workforce of the Memphis Police Department was only sixteen percent black and the fire department four percent black, while the black population of Memphis approached fifty percent. At the time of the MEA walkout, forty-nine percent of Memphis teachers were black. The *Tri-State Defender*, the weekly black-owned newspaper in Memphis, gave very little coverage to the fire and police strikes, but extensive space to the MEA strike. The articles reporting the police and fire strikes, however, did not address the actual dispute between the city and the unions, but rather the hardships that the curfews were imposing on black-owned business. Although the City of Memphis was working to correct the racial disparity in the police and fire department workforce, the history of discrimination in hiring at the fire and police departments may have actually worked in the favor of the city during these strikes.³⁰

Secondly, the city government and long-established conservative politicians held too much power for the unions to overcome in such a short period of time. The unions did not have the economic, political, or economic resources to overcome all the obstacles standing against a successful job action.

Finally, and just as important as the other factors, was the inherent conservatism of a large number of the strikers themselves. Economic and quality-of-life issues led the MPA and IAFF to adopt the tactics of the radical trade unions, but cultural and political considerations along with the realities of the late-1970s economy pushed their memberships back to middle ground. The unions' leadership also realized that continued struggle outside certain limits would mean the death of their organizations and ultimately hurt their members. As an example, the IAFF and MPA offered little resistance to the city charter amendment outlawing strikes. Today the Memphis Police Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1784 function as associations by attempting to influence legislative bodies through lobbying rather than as unions that try to enhance their position through collective bargaining.³¹

The unions, however, achieved some of their objectives. Firefighters and police officers now have much better working conditions and are freed from much of the political pressure that could adversely affect their careers. The city administration now realizes all of the city's unions are here to stay and that good labor relations are key to the fiscal and political stability of the city. Responding to a Syracuse University study that criticized Memphis's contract impasse procedure as being inefficient and essentially too employee friendly, city chief administrative officer commented, "we all know the constraints, but that's a public policy."³²

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

The strikes of 1978 were the last municipal employee strikes in Memphis history. The militancy exhibited by the Memphis Police Association and IAFF Local 1784 during the summer of 1978 pushed the limits of their support, both inside and outside their unions. Combined with outside political and public pressures, the weakening of support forced both unions toward a more centrist position that reduced the possibility of alienating the public, and ensured the survival of the unions they had worked so hard to build. The walkouts proved to the city administration that uncompromising, hard-line stances with its employees were counterproductive and ultimately harmful to the public it represents. The community itself, however, ensured that they would no longer suffer the consequences of a municipal labor dispute by passing at the polls a strict no-strike ordinance. The strikes hurt Memphis economically in the short term but eventually brought about a more stable and mature relationship between city government and all of its municipal employee unions. Unfortunately for the citizens of Memphis, it took an ugly and costly strike to achieve that result.

Despite the gains made in the twentieth century, at least as far as municipal-employee unions are concerned, the continuity of labor relations in Memphis remains. Politicians and governments still hold the upper hand in governmental employee relations. Municipal unions can really only hope to gain ground through the goodwill of others.

Notes

1. While the Memphis Police Association and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 1784 were by no means exclusively white in 1978, the overwhelming majority of each union's membership was indeed white at the time.

2. For an overview of some of the debates regarding labor and unions in the South, see Bryant Simon, "Rethinking Why There Are So Few Unions in the South," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* (81) Summer 1997, 465-484; Robert H. Zeiger, "Southern Textiles: Toward a New Historiographical Synthesis - Introduction," and Clifford M. Kuhn, "Labor and Politics in the New South Era: Introduction," in *Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 3-8, 141-145; and Robert H. Zeiger, "Introduction: Is Southern Labor History Exceptional?" in *Southern Labor in Transition: 1940-1995*, ed. Robert H. Zeiger (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 1-13.

3. Michael Goldfield, "The Failure of Operation Dixie: A Critical Turning Point in American Political Development," in Fink and Reed, *Race, Class, and Community*, 169-171, 176-177, 179.

4. Goldfield, "The Failure of Operation Dixie," 185.

5. F. Ray Marshall, "The Development of Organized Labor," *Monthly Labor Review* 91 (March 1968): 67.

6. William Regensberger, "Worker Insurgency and Southern Working-Class Combativeness: Miners, Sailors, and the Emergence of Industrial Unionism in the South," in *Insurgent Workers: Studies in the Origins of Industrial Unionism*, ed. Maurice Zeitlin (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, 1987), 71.

7. Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 47-48; David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers, 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 55.

8. The word "firemen" is used throughout this essay since Memphis did not employ female firefighters until the 1980s. Memphis hired its first female police officers in the 1960s.

9. City Firemen's Union of Memphis, Tenn. Local No. 39 to Mr. W. A. Smith, Secty IA of FF Wash-

ESSAYS IN ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS HISTORY (2004)

ington, D.C., IAFF Local 1784 Collection, IAFF Local 1784 offices, Memphis; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 1 February 1936; Virginia Emerson Lewis, "Fifty Years of Politics in Memphis" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1955), 111; David Ziskind, *One Thousand Strikes of Government Employees* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 61; *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 20 May 1920; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 16-18 July 1920, 20 July 1920, 31 January 1936.

10. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 31 January 1936, 3 February 1936, 13 February 1936; Geo. L. Richardson to Mr. R. S. McCann, President, Tenn. Federation of Labor, IAFF Local 1784 Collection; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 47-49.

11. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 14-24 October 1943.

12. Honey, *Southern Labor*, 76; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 7-15 November 1948, 18 November 1948; *Private Acts of the State of Tennessee* (1949), c. 129.

13. Cornell Christian, "The Memphis Sanitation Strike: Blood and Strife Brought Dignity for City Workers," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 28 February 1993, A1, A14-15; J. Edwin Stanfield, *In Memphis: More Than a Garbage Strike* (Atlanta: Southern Region Council, 1968), 2; *The Public Employee*, February 1968; *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 20 February 1969; *Minute Book, Council of City of Memphis*, Book 3, November 19, 1968 to March 7, 1969; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 4, 5 March 1969. For pertinent court cases, see *McLaughlin v. Tilendis*, 398 F.2d 287 (7th Cir. 1968); *AFSCME v. Woodward*, 406 F.2d 137 (8th Cir. 1969); *IAFF v. City of Charlotte*, 296 F. Supp. 1068 (D. W. NC., 1969).

14. Thomas Malone, interview by author, 14 September 2001, manuscript, in possession of author; Note from the desk of Frank C. Holloman, no date, in IAFF Local 1784 Collection; *International Fire Fighter*, July 1971, 16; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 18-19 June 1968; "Application for Certificate as a Local to the International Association of Fire Fighters, AFL-CIO-CLC," 10 July 1968, IAFF Local 1784 collection; IAFF to R. L. Ross, 31 July 1969, in IAFF Local 1784 Collection.

15. *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 20 April 1971; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 21 April 1971, 9 July 1978; *Minute Book, Council of City of Memphis*, Book 11, 27 April 1971 to 19 July 1971; *International Fire Fighter*, July 1971, 4-5; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 17 June 1971.

16. Joe Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," in *Memphis Police Department, Memphis Police Association: A Look at Their Past, A View of Their Present, A Glimpse into Their Future*, Memphis Police Department and Memphis Police Association (Marceline: Walsworth, 1988), 162-163; Menno Duerksen, "Police Story: From Politics to Unionism," in *Memphis Press Scimitar* 29 July 1978, 1,3; Menno Duerksen, "Many 'Bright Faces' Fade From Police Ranks As System's Reality Sinks In," in *Memphis Press Scimitar* 1 August 1978, 1,6; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 9 February 1973; Henry Evans, interview by author, 1 October 2001, tape recording, in possession of author.

17. Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 18-19; *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 1 September 1971.

18. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 23 April 1975.

19. Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 175-176; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 27 May 1976.

20. Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 177; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 7, 15 July 1978.

21. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 17 June 1978, 9 July 1978; Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 18-20.

22. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 2-4, 9 July 1978; *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 1-4 July 1978; *Memphis Tri-State Defender*, 8 July 1978.

23. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 14-16, 18, 21 July 1978.

24. Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 32-36; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 11-14 August 1978; *Memphis Press Scimitar* 11-12 August 1978; *New York Times*, 10 August 1978; *Washington Post*, 13 August 1978; *City of Memphis v. International Conference of Police Associations et. al.*, 84831-2 (Chancery Court of Shelby County, Tennessee, 1978).

25. *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 14-16 August 1978; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 15-16 August 1978.

26. *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 17 August 1978; *Memphis Commercial Appeal* 17-18 August 1978; Lewis Donelson III, interview by author, 1 October 2001, tape recording, in possession of author; Evans interview;

ECONOMICS, GRIEVANCES, PROTECTIVE-EMPLOYEE UNIONIZATION

MPA vice president Dwight Smith, interview by author, 29 September 2001, transcript, in possession of author.

27. Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 38.

28. Walk, "A History of the Memphis Police Association," 36; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 7 September 1978, 8 November 1978; "Shelby County General Election Audited Results Report," 20 November 1978, 234-238; *Code of Ordinances, City of Memphis, Tennessee* (1967 & rev.), sec. 2-370; *Charter and Related Laws, City of Memphis, Tennessee*, (1967, rev. March 1997), supp. no. 42, HRA-11.

29. Joseph Adler and others, "Public Sector Labor Relations in Memphis, Tennessee" (Memphis: Public Employment Relations Services, Memphis State University, 1980), 15.

30. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 18 October 1978; Memphis Police Department, "Personnel Statistics, 1971-1981"; Memphis Fire Department, *Memphis Fire Department, 1975*, (Memphis: Memphis Fire Department, 1975); Memphis Division of Fire Services, "Annual Report, Fiscal 1975-1976," 29; *Memphis Tri-State Defender*, 26 August 1978, 14 October 1978, 21 October 1978.

31. These definitions of "union" and "association" are taken from Maurice B. Better, "Recent Unionism Among the Unskilled in the South: The Retail and Wholesale Trades and Public Service Workers," in *Southern Workers and their Unions, 1880-1975*, ed. Merle Reed, Leslie S. Hough, and Gary M. Fink (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 183.

32. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 1 February 2000; [Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene], "Memphis," *Governing*, February 2000, 71.

