

FAST FOOD WORKERS: RECLAIMING MLK'S LEGACY BY STRIKING

I had realized NYC's fast food workers were striking today, in what may end up being the biggest fast food worker strike. And I always mark the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's assassination, since the tragedy came just a week after I was born.

But I just copped onto the link between the two.

As Sarah Jaffe notes, the strikers not only picked the day for the anniversary, but also met with some of the Memphis Sanitation workers who were striking 45 years ago.

Today is the second citywide day of strikes in New York's fast food industry. On November 29, 2012, some 200 workers at McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, KFC, Taco Bell, and Domino's Pizza locations across multiple boroughs struck in what Jonathan Westin, executive director of NYCC, called "their coming out party." Before that, Westin explained, the workers had been organizing behind the scenes, keeping their plans quiet. Now, he said, even in the face of intimidation from their bosses, the workers have been able to grow their movement.

"We'll have double the number of strikers, four or five hundred workers on strike, and double the locations too," Westin said. "We will have several stores where it will not just be minority strikes like it was last time, we will have the majority of workers at several stores out on strikes, making it hard for them to do business on this day."

The date, April 4, holds special meaning

for the workers and many of their supporters in the community. It is the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in Memphis, Tennessee. King was in Memphis to support the strike of the city's sanitation workers, whose "I Am a Man" signs made clear that their labor struggle was part of the larger civil rights fight. Last week, two of those strikers, Alvin Turner and Baxter Leach, met with some of the fast food workers to share advice and inspiration. [my emphasis]

As Ned Resnikoff writes, the plight of the workers are similar: wages so low that it requires welfare support to survive.

Fast food workers and Memphis sanitation workers have had "similar struggles," said Chad Tall, a strike leader and Taco Bell employee. "The thing that set [the sanitation workers] apart from everyone else is they made a decision to change it."

Tall is part of a group of fast food workers who met with two surviving members of the 1968 strike in late March. "That's what they told us," he said. "Make the decision, then do it."

Fast food workers are in a similar position to sanitation workers in 1968, said labor and civil rights historian Michael K. Honey, author of a book about the Memphis sanitation strike.

"In the case of sanitation workers, 40% of them were actually getting welfare benefits while they were working full-time jobs because they were so poorly paid," he told MSNBC. Today, the fast food industry provides an annual mean wage of \$18,600, lower than any other industry in the United States.

Fast food unionization is a nascent movement, fighting a lot of structural challenges. But the recent paid work day legislation in NYC made clear, it's a fight that is a no-brainer, even for outsiders.

Plus, if the mobbed fast food restaurants I saw on my recent drive through very poor rural areas are any indication, it's a movement that could grow to encompass all parts of the country.