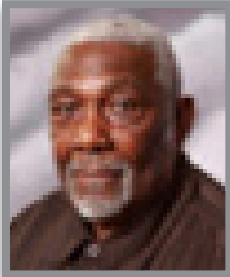


# Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

## ◆ Baxter Leach and the Surviving Members of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike ◆

### César Chávez Acción y Compromiso Human and Civil Rights Awards



1968... the most tumultuous year of America's most tumultuous decade.

A seemingly simple labor dispute in a mid-sized Southern city would seem a small moment during a monumental time, but due to the courageous efforts of Baxter Leach and the Memphis Sanitation Workers, it changed the course of history.

Born into a family of eleven just outside Greenwood, Mississippi, Baxter Leach was no stranger to hard work. Toiling as a sharecropper at the age of fourteen for five dollars a day, he understood early on the importance of fair compensation.

Moving to Memphis in 1960 to pursue better economic opportunities, he got a job with the city's Public Works Department, with the hope of earning a living wage with regulated working conditions. He quickly discovered that for African Americans, the line between collecting trash on urban streets and work in the cotton fields was horrifically thin.

Poor hygienic facilities for workers, unscheduled lunch hours, back-breaking hoisting of garbage cans without adequate breaks... these conditions were the rule. Union negotiations fell on deaf ears, with the city paying the workers not more than a dollar an hour. When two of his colleagues were crushed to death on the back of a truck, Leach took to the front lines, risking reprisals to organize a strike and demonstrations that drew nationwide attention; attention eventually paid by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Leach's basic human desire to improve the quality of life for his family and comrades became a movement when the acclaimed Civil Rights icon lent his voice and support in keeping with his mandate to eradicate poverty in an affluent nation. Little did Leach, or anyone, realize that this event, the sanitation strike, would be the last stand of our most influential humanitarian leader; cut down on the fateful fourth of April in this city.

But Dr. King's dream of improving the lives of working men and women didn't die that day. Baxter Leach kept it alive. He dedicated his life to being an advocate for workers' rights in Memphis, and helped a new generation of labor leaders strategize, mobilize, and gain much needed support from the community to insure their voices were heard. The strike ended on April 16th, 1968, with a settlement that included union recognition and wage increases.

Well into retirement, and 50 years after the assassination of Dr. King, Mr. Leach is still doing his part on the front lines.

Every American who punches a time card, earns a pension and health benefits, can support their families, and literally survives the reality of their work day owes a debt of gratitude to Baxter Leach and the surviving members of the Memphis Sanitation Strike. Their rallying cry of dignity, "I Am a Man", echoes to this day.