NEA honors Baxter Leach and the Surviving Members of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike with prestigious human and civil rights award

HOUSTON—Baxter Leach and the surviving members of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike received the César Chavez Acción y Compromiso Human and Civil Rights Award for their historic and courageous battle for the dignity of workers that caught the attention and support of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Baxter Leach and the surviving members of the sanitation strike are truly history makers that have influenced this nation in profound ways,” said Lily Eskelsen García, NEA president. “Their courage and willingness to fight for their own dignity have been instrumental in the rights that workers have even to this day. We are thrilled to celebrate them and the immense impact they made on workers in America.”

Leach moved to Memphis in 1960 in pursuit of better economic opportunities. He secured a job with the city’s Public Works Department with hopes of earning a living wage and safe working conditions. However, the conditions for African American laborers at the department were abhorrent. There were poor hygienic facilities, unscheduled lunch hours, and not enough breaks for the backbreaking manual labor being completed.

When two of Leach’s colleagues were tragically crushed to death on the back of a truck, Leach and his coworkers were driven to enact change. Understanding that this was a major injustice, Leach took a risk and helped organize a strike and demonstrations that drew national attention to the workers in Memphis.

The strike in Memphis gained steam, so much, in fact, that it garnered the attention of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and he began to speak out about and advocate for the movement started by Leach and the sanitation strikers. Heartbreakingly enough, this movement would be the last that Dr. King would ever stand for, as his life was taken in Memphis on April 4th, 1968.

Despite this tragedy, Leach and the strikers did not curtail their efforts, and succeeded in securing a settlement that included union recognition and wage increases on April 16th, 1968. This strike encapsulates how Leach dedicated his life to advocating for workers’ rights in Memphis, and helped a new generation of labor leaders strategize, mobilize, and create support from their community to strengthen their movement.

“I was honored to meet a number of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike workers during the 50th anniversary of the strike last year,” says Tennessee Education Association President Beth Brown. “I have been humbled to be in the presence of men and women who have--and still are--working for a better future. On behalf of Tennessee educators, I want to thank the sanitation strike workers for standing up in the face of such adversity and advancing the important fight for workers’ rights and dignity. We will carry your legacy forward as we continue to the fight for equity and quality public education for all Tennessee children.”

Leach and the members of the Memphis Sanitation Strike leave a legacy of improving the dignity of work. Every American worker who punches a time card, earns a pension and health benefits, and literally survives their workday, owes a debt of gratitude to these activists who took a risk and changed the country in the process.
Baxter Leach was one out of 12 outstanding social justice heroes honored at NEA’s 2019 NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards, which took place on July 3, in Houston, Texas. Click on link to view video tribute of Baxter Leach and the surviving members of the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike.

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