

# Interfaith Worker Justice



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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Renewing the Vision of Dr. King's Final Campaign Religious Leaders Gather in Memphis to Announce the Formation of Worker Justice Committee on 40th Anniversary of MLK's Death

(Chicago) On April 3rd in Memphis, religious leaders from across the country stood in unity with waste workers—from 1968 and 2008—to demand that [Waste Management, Inc.](#) and other waste companies make immediate and substantive improvements in worker safety. The interfaith clerics announced the formation of a major new body, the **National Committee for Sanitation Worker Justice** (NCSWJ), on the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination in Memphis—where he had gone, in what would be [his final campaign](#), to show his support for that city's striking sanitation workers.

The interfaith leaders announced the formation of the committee at a press conference Thursday, April 3rd, symbolically held at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. The day after King's 1968 murder, a group of ministers, priests and rabbis held their own memorial service for the slain civil rights leader before marching to City Hall to demand that Memphis's mayor resolve the 53-day strike. The new committee was established by the Chicago-based organization [Interfaith Worker Justice](#) (IWJ).

The body's 11 members (eight of whom were on hand for the event) represent a diverse array of racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds — African American, Latino, and white; Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim. Across these divides, they stand solidly together in their commitment to Dr. King's [vision of economic justice](#) — the vision that brought him to Memphis in April of 1968.

The committee came together in response to the findings of the investigative report [In Harm's Way](#), issued by the **National Commission of Inquiry into the Worker Health and Safety Crisis in the Solid Waste Industry**. The report shows that waste workers

still face very real threats to their health on a daily basis, threats that have caused an average of **more than 80 deaths a year** in the industry.

Co-chairing the body are [Rev. Nelson Johnson](#), Director of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina (and Co-President of Interfaith Worker Justice's Board of Directors), and [Rev. James Lawson](#), a veteran civil rights activist whom Dr. King, on the eve of his assassination, called "**the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world.**"

"Forty years ago Dr. King joined with the sanitation workers of Memphis to insist on human dignity and economic justice," says **Rev. Johnson**. "The 40th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination ought to serve as a clarion call to faith leaders and people of good will all over the nation to join together to complete the unfinished work for which Dr. King courageously gave his life."

"Today's plantation capitalism is as rapacious and cruel as it was in the sanitation strike 40 years ago, which I chaired," reflects **Rev. Lawson**. "It is past time for this most religious country, this most religious people, to repudiate the economics of the plantation. Jesus insisted that without justice you miss the meaning of the Torah and the prophets."

With the formation of the NCSWJ, religious leaders from across the country are serving notice to waste companies like Waste Management, Inc. that they will fight to end the dangerous conditions that imperil workers. The family of deceased WMI mechanic Raul Figueroa from West Palm Beach, Florida joined NCSWJ, three of the 1968 strikers, safety advocates, and representatives from the **International Brotherhood of Teamsters** at the event to show their support for the goals of the committee.

Figueroa was the victim of a gruesome accident on January 3, 2008 when a hydraulic truck arm malfunctioned, pinning him against the cab and severing his body in half. "We hope that through our joint and continuous efforts with the Teamsters and the NCSWJ we can finally bring about regulations in this industry," said Alina Miranda, Figueroa's widow. "We hope that Waste Management finally realizes that their employees are not just numbers, but human beings, and as such they pay attention to their basic needs, needs such as parts, tools or safety equipment that could be the difference between life and death."

Members of the NCSWJ include:

- **Rev. Raphael Allen**, Senior Pastor of Greater Turner Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Atlanta
- **Hussam Ayloush**, Executive Director of the Southern California Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)
- **Rev. Yvonne Delk**, Founding Director of the Center for African American Theological Studies in Chicago

- **Father Richard Estrada**, Associate Pastor at La Placita/Our Lady Queen of Angels, the oldest church in Los Angeles
- **Rev. Darryl Ingram**, Executive Director of the Christian Education Department of the AME Church
- **Rev. William Jarvis Johnson**, Co-Pastor of New Prospect Family Praise and Worship Center in Washington, D.C. and the senior clergy organizer for [Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice](#) (CLUE)
- **Rabbi Robert Marx**, Founder of the [Jewish Council on Urban Affairs](#).
- **Rev. Frank Raines III**, Director of Labor Relations for the National Baptist Convention and Pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Detroit
- **Rev. Paul Sherry**, Campaign Coordinator of [Let Justice Roll](#) and former President of the United Church of Christ
- **Dr. Melissa Snarr**, [Professor of Ethics and Society](#) at Vanderbilt University

*More complete profiles of the committee's members available at [http://www.iwj.org/materials/documents/NCSWJbios\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.iwj.org/materials/documents/NCSWJbios_2_.pdf).*

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