

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 786

By Towns

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of Robert Walker.

WHEREAS, it is with a profound sense of loss and shattered humanity that the members of this General Assembly reflect upon the death of Robert Walker, one of the two African-American sanitation workers who were crushed to death by a malfunctioning city garbage truck, as they tried to escape the pounding rain, during the Memphis Black Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968; and

WHEREAS, the Memphis strike began over the mistreatment of twenty-two African-American sanitation workers who reported for work on January 31, 1968, and were sent home without pay when it began raining, while white employees were paid for the full day; and

WHEREAS, these two incidents epitomized the African-American workers' longstanding grievances; forty percent of the workers qualified for welfare to supplement their poverty-level salaries, and they had almost no health care benefits, pensions, or vacations; and

WHEREAS, forced to work in filthy conditions, these employees were called degrading names by their supervisors and arbitrarily sent home without pay for minor infractions that were overlooked when committed by white workers; and

WHEREAS, on February 12, 1968, 1,300 black sanitation workers walked off their jobs, demanding that the city recognize their union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and negotiate to resolve their grievances, including inadequate pay; and

WHEREAS, while garbage piled up, community support for the strikers grew steadily, and violence against strikers and union supporters increased, the city council backed the mayor in steadfastly refusing to recognize the union; and

WHEREAS, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was then invited to Memphis by local labor and religious leaders to re-energize the movement and calm tensions; Dr. King called for a citywide march in a speech that triggered national media attention and catalyzed the rest of the labor movement to expand its support for the strikers; and

WHEREAS, undeterred by local police brutality, Dr. King led 300 sanitation workers and supporters in a peaceful and silent march to City Hall on March 29, escorted by military vehicles and dozens of Guardsmen; and

WHEREAS, on April 3 in Memphis, Dr. King delivered what would be his last speech, calling on city officials to negotiate a compromise solution to the strike; and

WHEREAS, the next afternoon, as he stood on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel, Dr. King was shot and killed by an escaped convict; and

WHEREAS, the violence of Dr. Martin Luther King's death did what the nonviolence of his methods could not: The strike was settled; President Johnson ordered federal troops to Memphis and instructed the Department of Labor to mediate the conflict and settle the strike; and

WHEREAS, on April 16, union leaders and city officials reached an agreement, and the city council passed a resolution recognizing the union; and

WHEREAS, the new contract for sanitation workers included a grievance procedure, and staggered wage increases; members of AFSCME Local 1733 approved the agreement unanimously and ended their strike; and

WHEREAS, while Mr. Walker's death was indeed a heartbreaking and senseless sacrifice to bigotry and inhumanity that foretold an even greater national tragedy in Dr. King's death a few months later, we can take some solace in knowing that his death was not totally in vain; and

WHEREAS, because of the courage and perseverance of his fellow sanitation workers, who were inspired by Mr. Walker's worthy example and his grieving family, labor conditions were improved, and these African-American men were treated as men for the first time and paid

a living wage; perhaps most importantly, they fought for and earned the right to stand up for themselves as workers and as African Americans; and

WHEREAS, Dr. King has reminded us that "The time is always right to do what is right." Robert Walker gave his life defending what was right, and his memory should be revered by his fellow Tennesseans; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED TENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of Robert Walker, reflecting with sorrow on the ultimate sacrifice he made while supporting decent wages and working conditions for his fellow sanitation workers and equality for his fellow man.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.