

# *Introduction to James M. Lawson's Talks, Dialogues, and Interviews*

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Today we confront some of the gravest challenges in human history. People all over the world calling for democratic freedom, self-determination, and planetary survival are challenging systems of violence and oppression. Can we do more? Can we be more effective? Can we bring about radical change without increasing violence? James M. Lawson, one of the great teachers of nonviolence, says yes. According to him, life's "cruelty systems" can be overcome by "a force more powerful." Nonviolence, he says, provides the greatest power to transform human relations for the better, if we know how to use it.<sup>1</sup>

Many people do not understand nonviolence, even though people following its principles and practices have built many successful movements: nonviolence has helped to bring down racial apartheid, end military and police violence, close prisons, and overthrow dictatorships. This book distills Lawson's classic teachings on how to use the principles, history, and practice of nonviolence to pragmatically organize for change. His insights remain

fresh because they are relevant to today's movements for democracy, human rights, and liberation.

Many people do not know Lawson's story, but they should. James M. Lawson Jr. is an African American Methodist clergyman and a descendent of slaves and escaped slaves, of abolitionists and freedom fighters. Born in 1928 in the American Midwest, he was raised in a family guided by love, soul, and spirit. As a young person, he followed the teachings of Jesus and the Black Social Gospel of uplift for the poor and oppressed. In college, he met A. J. Muste and Bayard Rustin, advocates of nonviolence. They introduced him to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1948 after leading a mass movement that overthrew British colonialism in India. Gandhi established nonviolent direct action as a source of power for oppressed people.<sup>2</sup>

Lawson began to engage in what Gandhi called "experiments with truth." As a teenager, Lawson had refused to accede to segregation in public places. In college, instead of accepting his student deferment, he turned in his draft card to protest the Korean War and military conscription and spent thirteen months in federal prison for draft resistance. Upon release, he went to India and learned firsthand about Gandhi's theory and practice of nonviolence. He then traveled through Africa to witness anti-imperialist movements freeing countries from European colonialism.

In February 1957, as a graduate student in theology at Oberlin College, Lawson met the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had just finished leading a year of boycotts and marches, spending time in jail and suffering death threats and a bombing of his home, to successfully overturn bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. King had the experience of using nonviolence in a mass movement, while Lawson deeply understood the history and theory of nonvio-

lence. They instantly recognized their common goal: to replicate the success in Montgomery in using nonviolent struggle to overthrow segregation throughout the South. King urged Lawson to join the Black freedom movement, saying “Don’t wait; come now.”<sup>3</sup>

From 1957 until King’s death in 1968, Lawson and King worked together in a broad framework that went far beyond civil rights to demands for a moral and social revolution. Lawson moved to Nashville, Tennessee, representing the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and led workshops on nonviolent philosophy and practice across the South. In cooperation with the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) affiliate, Lawson launched workshops on nonviolent techniques in selected Black Nashville churches. In 1960, intensive role-playing and discussions among Lawson, John Lewis, C. T. Vivian, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, and others in the Nashville student movement helped to launch sit-ins at lunch counters, to spark mass marches, and to fill the jails in an attempt to desegregate downtown Nashville. This cadre joined with freedom riders suffering horrific violence but drawing in federal support to overturn segregation in transportation. They helped form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Guided by Ella Baker and supported by Lawson, King, and the SCLC, nonviolent organizers continued to challenge white supremacy and segregation in campaign after campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Nonviolence provides a form of moral coercion against one’s opposition. But Lawson points out that practicing nonviolence is a harsh discipline, one that requires a willingness to suffer without striking back. Implicit in this is the concept of love in action. King called it agape love, meaning not romantic love or love for family, but love for humankind. In a section called “Pilgrimage to



Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., March 1, 1960. Photograph by Paul Schleicher for the *Nashville Banner*. Nashville Public Library, Special Collections.

Nonviolence” in King’s first book, *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (1958), he wrote that nonviolence seeks results without seeking to humiliate or punish one’s opponent and directs its coercive power of mass protest and nonviolent resistance “against forces of evil rather than against persons.” King and Lawson believed nonviolent action could restore a sense of wholeness to broken communities. “The end is redemption and reconciliation,” King wrote. But that can only occur by changing the conditions of life for the better and moving on to new steps toward justice. King and Lawson believed nonviolent struggle could create a “beloved community” that affirms the equal rights and worth of all people.<sup>5</sup>

King and Lawson rejected the characterization of nonviolence as passive. They followed Gandhi’s call for organized, active, nonviolent resistance, not only to “physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit,” as King wrote.<sup>6</sup> He emphasized that nonviolence is not sinless because it does not always succeed and it requires its adherents to suffer. He called it a lesser evil, compared to doing nothing or contributing to self-reinforcing cycles of violence. King and Lawson recognized that most people would take up the discipline of nonviolence only as a pragmatic tactic to achieve change, while relatively few would adopt it as a spiritual framework and way of life. Their moral grounding in Social Gospel Christianity also included a secular humanist morality that many people could adopt.<sup>7</sup>

Rev. Lawson emphasizes the pragmatic side of nonviolence. African Americans in the South often had to protect their families and themselves by force against attacks by the Ku Klux Klan and racist vigilantes. The right to self-defense, however, is different from using violence in a mass movement in the streets. Lawson and King emphasized that, on principle, people seeking a nonviolent

world should follow nonviolent means. Equally important, Lawson said, attempting to use violence to bring about change in the United States would be self-defeating: “Nonviolent discipline is necessary because you cannot beat the enemy with the enemy’s theories and practices. You cannot do it. We do not have the power to beat the CIA or the National Guard or the American military.” In a dialogue with the radical antiracist, feminist scholar and activist Angela Davis about movement building, Lawson stressed the pragmatic importance of unity of purpose and mass organization: “We have to find ways to create a new power, and the new power is the power of people who get engaged and are willing to work on developing a plan and a strategy . . . that enables us to work as a people to make change.”<sup>8</sup>

The mass media described people like Lawson, King, Lewis, and others, as civil rights leaders, but they could be better described as revolutionaries of nonviolence. Lawson says, “A nonviolent person has made a major decision and a major analysis about violence” that requires resistance to and overturning of all forms of violence, systemic and individual. Lawson seeks a “radical overturning of the systems that hurt and cripple people,” through an “aggressive engagement to apply a style of life tempered in love.”<sup>9</sup> He argues that nonviolence provides our most effective strategy to change society and describes violence as a failure because it does not solve basic problems, and instead inflicts bitterness, brokenness, and more violence.

Both Lawson and King offered sharp critiques of American capitalism, based on its history of genocide against Native peoples, racial slavery of Africans, the oppression of women, racial apartheid, and labor systems that devalue the life and labor of working people. As early as 1958, King wrote that “the inseparable twin of racial injus-

tice was economic injustice”; in 1962, he put it more strongly: “There are three major social evils . . . the evil of war, the evil of economic injustice, and the evil of racial injustice.” Scholars often refer to the intersection of these systemic evils as racial capitalism. Lawson has his own term. He draws upon what Black people in Memphis called the “plantation mentality” of whites who treated Black people like servants, and he calls America’s economy “plantation capitalism”—with those at the top of the system viewing the world as their plantation, while exploiting workers and the poor. Based on their opposition to violence in all its forms, King and Lawson were economic radicals.<sup>10</sup>

In 1962, Lawson became the minister of Centenary Methodist Episcopal Church in Memphis, while continuing as a volunteer with SCLC to hold nonviolence workshops supporting voting rights and direct-action campaigns in Mississippi and battlegrounds like Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. This period was what King called the first phase of the freedom movement, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But these gains merely secured citizenship rights of Black and Brown people and women that should have been theirs to begin with. Dr. King went further, calling for a “radical revolution of values” and a reordering of priorities to defeat what he called the triple evils of systemic racism, economic inequality, and militarism and the Vietnam war. Rev. Lawson too was strongly antiwar and traveled on a diplomatic mission to Vietnam on King’s behalf, as they both continued to press forward in what King described as the most radical phase of the freedom movement.<sup>11</sup>

In 1968, King and Lawson joined forces to apply nonviolent direct action to uplift America’s working class and poor. King had



Rev. Lawson with striking Memphis sanitation workers, 1968. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis Libraries.

been traveling nonstop, organizing the multiracial Poor People's Campaign. He wanted to take three thousand people to encamp themselves in Washington DC and demand that Congress and the nation shift priorities from spending money for war to investing in housing, healthcare, income, education, and jobs. Lawson asked King to come to Memphis to support a strike by thirteen hundred Black male sanitation workers demanding union rights, a living wage, and safe, decent working conditions. That epochal strike created what Lawson calls a "threshold moment" linking union organizing and the Black freedom movement. On March 18, although exhausted from nonstop travel, King appeared at a mass rally in Memphis, declaring, "All labor has dignity." He called for a



general strike to win union rights and dignity for workers and to open up new demands for economic justice.<sup>12</sup>

On March 28, things went awry. The pages of a Memphis newspaper showed a photo of Lawson and King at a press conference that day in Memphis. King looks grim and weary, and there is frustration and dread on their faces. Lawson, chair of the strike support's strategy committee, along with King and others, had led a mass march during which a few people, most likely including police agents, broke windows and looted stores. That break in march discipline gave the Memphis police an excuse to gas and beat people, leading to the hospitalization of scores of marchers, the police shooting death of sixteen-year-old Larry Payne, and occupation of the city by National Guard troops.

The police riot disrupted King's planned Poor People's Campaign and forced him to return to Memphis to lead another march. On April 3, Lawson accompanied King to his room at the Lorraine Motel to plan their next action. Lawson introduced King that night at Mason Temple, where King gave his last, electrifying speech, vowing that "We, as a people, will get to the promised land." He was assassinated the next day, on Good Friday. Lawson called it a "crucifixion event." The workers went on to win their strike, but the victory came at great cost. Despite losses and hardships, Lawson says, the challenge remains: to endure and to take the movement for a better world further than it has ever gone before.<sup>13</sup>

After Dr. King's untimely death, Rev. Lawson continued to apply nonviolence in difficult, pragmatic movements for change. In 1974, he was called to be the minister of Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, where he not only pastored one of the city's largest predominantly Black congregations, but continued to speak, teach, and organize. While unions have declined in most of the



Rev. Lawson (front row, third from left), AFSCME President Jerry Wurf (third from right), May Reuther (second from right), and UAW President Walter Reuther (far right) march in memory of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis on April 8, 1968, shortly after his assassination. Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

United States, they have blossomed in Los Angeles. In the history of America's Black freedom movement leaders, Lawson stands out for his continuing efforts to apply nonviolence to labor struggles. Love and solidarity became twin themes in Los Angeles as immigrants, Black and Brown service workers, teachers, undocumented workers, and others organized and won union rights. Rev. Lawson also supported feminism and gay rights and worked to end American military interventions in Central America and the Middle East, domestic violence, police brutality, mass incarceration, environmental devastation, and other forms of violence. After retiring as a pastor at Holman, he has continued to teach the philosophy and

practice of nonviolent struggle at colleges and in communities and through the James Lawson Institute and other institutes promoting nonviolence throughout the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Rev. Lawson calls for an international nonviolent movement to overcome the forces of violence. In his eulogy for Congressman John Lewis on July 30, 2020, he challenged the United States to live up to Lewis's dream of a beloved community: "We need the Congress and the President to work unfalteringly on behalf of every boy and every girl so that every baby born on these shores will have access to the tree of life. That's the only way to honor John Robert Lewis. No other way." Lawson spent time in Parchman Prison in Mississippi and once spent Christmas in the Memphis City Jail; he has been maced and shot at, and repeatedly threatened and arrested. As a young man, he didn't expect to live to age forty. Instead, he went on into his nineties in Los Angeles, where he was arrested for civil disobedience more often than anywhere else. As of this writing, he continues on with his Gandhian "experiments in truth," using nonviolence to continually challenge violence in all its forms.<sup>15</sup>

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The following talks and dialogues by Rev. Lawson link his prophetic gospel of social justice to his pragmatic practice of nonviolent direct action. He interprets nonviolence not as passive but as "an aggressive engagement in seeking to apply a style of life tempered by love."<sup>16</sup> He provides a practical how-to manual on effective ways to organize, find allies, win strategic gains, and, step by step, build a transformative sense of community. He calls today for a massive nonviolent movement to out-organize the forces of systemic racism and violence.

In chapter 1, taken from Kent Wong's interview for this book with Rev. Lawson on August 18, 2020, he highlights the urgency of adopting the revolutionary philosophy, tactics, and strategy of non-violence in the wake of the struggles against racial oppression and police violence and to expand democracy and voting rights in the epic year of 2020. He calls on us to remember our history of progressive social change movements in order to make real the democratic principles in the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the preamble to the American Constitution—that all of us are created equal and endowed with the “unalienable rights” of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” How do we secure those rights? That is the question he addresses throughout this book.

In chapter 2, “Understanding Violence and Nonviolence,” Lawson defines violence and nonviolence as opposite methods to bring about change but shows how nonviolence is more powerful. He reminds us of our long nonviolent traditions and focuses on how nonviolent organizing in the South from roughly 1954 to 1973 broke the back of legal segregation. The key thing, he says, is to “begin where you are.” But to do that, you need a philosophy and a method. He goes on to address that philosophy and method. Chapters 2 through 5 come from an exceptional series of talks I edited that Rev. Lawson gave in 2008 at the University of Washington, Tacoma, supported by the Harry Bridges Center for Labor Studies and the Graduate School of the University of Washington, as well as his talk at a labor history conference, and from personal interviews and interviews for the film *Love and Solidarity: Rev. James Lawson and Nonviolence in the Search for Workers' Rights*.<sup>17</sup>

In chapter 3, “Steps of a Nonviolent Protest or Movement,” Lawson insists that holding a demonstration is not enough. A suc-