

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2007

Commentary: Denied a King Day Holiday, the Smithfield Workers Among the Ones He'd Be Fighting For Today

By Gregory Kane

Did you get the day off Monday to celebrate the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday? Consider yourself lucky.

Workers at the Smithfield Packing Plant in Tar Heel, N.C. didn't get the holiday. They had to take a free day -- or what Smithfield calls an "attendance credit" if they wanted to celebrate Martin Luther King Day.

The dispute over Smithfield's not making King Day an official company holiday sparked the latest in a series of confrontations the company has had with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which has been struggling for nearly a decade to unionize workers at the Tar Heel plant.

Some pro-union workers threatened to walk off the job Monday in protest of Smithfield's policy. Union organizers say some 400 did. Smithfield officials, perhaps not unexpectedly, put the figure somewhat lower, around 100 to 150. Smithfield officials said that figure is about average for how many workers miss a particular shift. As for the King holiday, Smithfield spokesman Dennis Pittman said last week that "(Monday) will be treated like any other day as far as we're concerned."

Pittman emphasized that Smithfield does indeed feel that King was a great American. The company sponsors a Martin Luther King prayer breakfast every year. "We were one of the major sponsors of it this year and will be again next year," he said.

Pittman added that Smithfield workers have eight holidays: New Year's Day, Easter Monday, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and two days at Christmas. He said workers voted on substituting Easter Monday for the King holiday and cast their ballots by a five to one margin in support of keeping Easter Monday, to



Bridget Johnson holds a portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. prior to the start of Denver's "Marade" in honor the civil rights leader on Monday. Workers at the Smithfield Packing Plant in Tar Heel, N.C. didn't get the holiday, notes BAW columnist Gregory Kane. They had to take a free day -- or what Smithfield calls an "attendance credit" if they wanted to celebrate Martin Luther King Day, Kane writes. (AP)

which Smithfield worker Keith Ludlum replied, according to news reports, “You shouldn’t be asked to choose between Jesus and King. Both changed the world.”

You have to wonder why Smithfield honchos don’t simply take one of the two Christmas holidays and make that the King holiday. Pittman may be sincere when he said that Smithfield officials think King is a “great man.” But they’re probably thinking of his civil rights work. The folks who run Smithfield know where King was when he died, and they know what he was doing there. And they don’t want to call attention to THAT King by having a holiday for him. That’s why when the third Monday in January rolls around, Smithfield’s owners treat it “like any other day.”

King was in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968. He had come to support striking sanitation workers. And let’s be clear about one thing: King didn’t have to go to Memphis. The major civil rights victories of the 1960s -- the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act -- were behind him. King could have rightfully said his work was done and taken a comfy job as the president of one of the many historically black colleges or universities across the land that would have been glad to have him.

Instead, King went to Memphis not to desegregate anything or in response to some racist violence perpetrated by a group like the Ku Klux Klan.

No, it was strictly a class issue that brought King to Memphis in April of 1968. During the last year of his life, King had added class issues and the war in Vietnam to his list of things he thought needed changing in America. In fact, he preached his sermon against the Vietnam War -- in which he called the American government “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today” -- exactly a year to the day before he was assassinated.

King went to Memphis to stand up for the dignity of low-paid, low-skilled sanitation workers and to tell the world that they deserved to be treated with the same dignity and respect as any other workers. Were he alive today, he’d be saying the same thing about the low-paid, low-skilled workers at Smithfield’s Tar Heel meat packing plant.

UFCW has charged Smithfield with “abusing” workers at the Tar Heel plant. Pittman has denied the charge, but UFCW workers have some documentation on their side. A federal judge, federal mediators and a Human Rights Watch report say pretty much the same thing: Smithfield abused, threatened, physically assaulted and illegally fired workers at the Tar Heel plant.

Those are the kind of workers King wouldn’t have hesitated to stand up for. Those are the very workers who deserve to celebrate the holiday named for him.