



A LABOR EDUCATION WORKSHOP MANUAL

Nonviolent Direct Action

in the Tradition of Dr. James M. Lawson Jr.

This manual is a working tool for the Memphis & West Tennessee labor and faith communities under the conditions of 2026: federal task-force deployment, militarized policing, ICE activity in our neighborhoods, and growing pressure on the right to assemble. It is not a theory book. It is a Lawson workshop in your hands. Read it. Hold the workshop. Print it again. Hand it out at the next meeting.

Dr. Lawson taught that "the methods of nonviolence are not cowardice but the highest expression of courage." He led the sanitation workers of Memphis in 1968. He buried his friend Dr. King here. He went home to his eternal reward in 2024. The work he handed us did not retire with him.

DR. JAMES MORRIS LAWSON JR. (1928 - 2024)

Methodist minister. Conscientious objector. Trainer to the Nashville sit-in movement. Architect of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. Strategist for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The teacher Dr. King called "the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world." Pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church, Memphis. Pastor of Holman United Methodist Church, Los Angeles. Professor of nonviolent direct action, Vanderbilt University and UCLA. Mentor to generations. He is gone. His method remains.

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The Six Principles of Nonviolence

Dr. Lawson and Dr. King taught these as the moral architecture of all nonviolent direct action. They are not optional. They are not metaphor. If a person rejects the principles, they may still march - but they should not lead, and they should not be deputized as a marshal.

1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.

It is not passive. It is not the weapon of cowards. Lawson said the willingness to bear violence without returning it requires more courage than throwing the first punch. The first lesson of the workshop is that this is harder than violence, not easier.

2. The Beloved Community is the framework for the future.

We act not to defeat our opponents but to redeem them and ourselves. The end goal of every direct action is reconciliation, not victory. When the federal task force leaves Memphis, we will still live next to the officers who served on it. Plan accordingly.

3. Attack forces of evil, not persons doing evil.

Separate the system from the person. The system that ordered the occupation is the target. The deputy on the corner is a person. Address him as a person, even when he refuses to address you as one.

4. Accept suffering without retaliation for the sake of the cause.

This is the hardest principle and the one that wins every campaign. Suffering, freely accepted, has redemptive power. The Memphis sanitation workers of 1968 absorbed billy clubs and tear gas without striking back, and they won. The choice to absorb suffering is what makes the action nonviolent - not the absence of conflict.

5. Avoid internal violence of the spirit as well as external violence.

Refuse to hate. Refuse to demean. Refuse to feed the resentment that rots an organizer from the inside out. Lawson said the discipline of the heart is the harder discipline. Test it daily in the workshop and in your own kitchen.

6. The universe is on the side of justice.

A moral certainty without which the work cannot be sustained. Lawson preached this as theology - the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice not because history is fair but because God's people bend it. Atheist organizers in this room can substitute 'the long memory of the working class' for 'God.' The principle holds.

TRAINER'S NOTE - 25 MINUTES

Read each principle aloud. Pause. Ask one participant to explain it in their own words. Do not move on until they can. The principles must be owned in the body of the room, not just nodded at.

The Six Steps of Nonviolent Action

Lawson and King's operational playbook. Every successful campaign in the Civil Rights Movement followed these six steps in order. Skipping a step does not save time - it loses the campaign.

1. Information Gathering

Investigate the issue. Read the contracts. Pull the public records. Talk to the workers affected. Talk to the workers NOT affected. Map the decision-makers and the chain of command. The most successful campaigns spend more time here than anywhere else.

2. Education

Teach the community what you have learned. Mass meetings, leaflets, social media, sermons from the pulpit, articles in the local press. Nobody will join a campaign they do not understand. The Lawson workshop itself is part of this step.

3. Personal Commitment

Prayer, meditation, centering. Each participant decides, alone, whether they can hold the discipline. If they cannot, they say so without shame. The campaign needs marchers, marshals, runners, legal observers, jail support, kitchen volunteers, and writers. Not every committed person belongs on the front line.

4. Negotiation

Direct conversation with the opponent. Make the demand specific, the timeline specific, the consequence of refusal specific. Memphis 1968: pay raise, dues check-off, union recognition. Three demands. Each measurable. Each refused by the city - which gave the campaign its moral standing to escalate.

5. Direct Action

Only if negotiation fails. Sit-ins, marches, boycotts, freedom rides, strikes, civil disobedience, mass nonviolent confrontation. Always the LAST tool, never the first. Used precisely. Disciplined. Announced publicly. Photographed. Sustained until the opponent comes back to the negotiation table.

6. Reconciliation

After the action, the relationship with the opponent must be intentionally rebuilt. This is the step most movements skip and the step Lawson said matters most. A win that leaves a permanently embittered opponent has only set up the next conflict.

Self-Discipline and the Acceptance of Suffering

The interior work. Without this, the rest of the workshop fails the first time a deputy reaches for the baton.

Lawson taught that nonviolent action is not the absence of force. It is the conscious decision to absorb force without returning it. That decision must be made BEFORE the moment of confrontation, in this room, on this floor, with these people. Not in the street with the cameras rolling.

Three exercises to be done in every workshop

- **Exercise 1 - The Verbal Onslaught.** Sit in a chair in the middle of the room. Two trainers stand over you and shout, curse, threaten - using the actual language deputies and federal officers use. Hold eye contact. Do not respond. Do not stand. Hold for two minutes. Debrief.
- **Exercise 2 - The Line Break.** Link arms with the person to your left and right. A third trainer approaches and physically tries to break the line - pulling, pushing, prying. Hold the line without striking back. If you go to the ground, go limp. Do not curl into a defensive ball that can be read as a fighting posture. Debrief.
- **Exercise 3 - The Arrest Position.** Lie face-down on the floor. Hands clasped behind your back. Eyes closed. Trainer kneels on your shoulder blades with their full body weight for thirty seconds. Hold breath control. Speak only your name, the words 'I am not resisting,' and your lawyer's number. Practice this until it is muscle memory.

Three internal disciplines to be practiced daily

These are Lawson's actual disciplines, not invented for this manual:

- **Discipline of the tongue.** Refuse to engage in petty quarrels in your own household.
- **Discipline of the eye.** Refuse to consume entertainment that glorifies revenge.
- **Discipline of the heart.** Refuse to cultivate hatred even of those who hate you.

Role-Play Drills: Scenarios for 2026 Memphis

Every workshop runs at least three of these scenarios. The drill is the workshop. Reading principles without drilling them is a sermon, not a training.

Scenario A - The Traffic Stop with a Federal Officer

A federal task force officer in unmarked clothing pulls over a passenger van of campaign volunteers. He demands to know where you are going. Practice: the driver provides license/registration only, says nothing else, and asks 'am I free to go?' until answered. Passengers do not speak. Phones record. No one consents to a search. Practice this twice with role reversal.

Scenario B - The ICE Encounter at a Workplace

ICE agents arrive at a UFCW-represented grocery store. The workers do not know if they have a judicial warrant or an administrative one. Practice: the union steward identifies herself, demands to see the warrant, reads the signature line (judicial warrants are signed by a judge; administrative are not), and instructs co-workers to remain silent and not flee. Practice in English and Spanish.

Scenario C - The Sit-In at the County Mayor's Office

Twelve participants enter the building, take seats in the reception area, refuse to leave until a meeting is granted. Practice: pre-action briefing, designated press contact, designated legal observer waiting outside, designated arrest buddy system, the choice to go limp or walk out under arrest, jail support phone tree activation.

Scenario D - The March Confronted by Mounted Police

A permitted march of 200 turns the corner and finds a line of mounted officers blocking the route. The march leader has 30 seconds to decide: stop, kneel, sit, or reroute. Practice the command - one voice, repeated, calm - that turns 200 people without scattering them. Practice the kneel. Practice the rise.

Scenario E - The Provocateur in the Crowd

A person inside your march starts breaking windows, throwing bottles, or chanting violent slogans. They may be a sincere rage participant or a paid provocateur - it does not matter. Practice: marshals isolate the person, the march continues around them, the press contact immediately issues a statement naming the action as outside the discipline of the march.

Scenario F - The Jail Visit

Half the workshop is in jail. The other half is at the precinct trying to confirm names, charges, bail amounts, and lawyer contact. Practice the script: 'I am calling to confirm an arrest. Last name spelled... First name... Date of birth... What is the charge? What is the bail amount? What is the lawyer-call schedule?'

Federal Task Force, ICE, and Militarized Police

What is different in 2026 from what Dr. Lawson trained in 1960: the armed force facing a movement is now often federalized, often masked, often unaccountable to local elected officials, and often using civilian clothing or unmarked vehicles. The principles do not change. The drills must.

Rights every Memphis participant carries with them

- **5th Amendment.** The right to remain silent. Speak your name and your lawyer's number only. Refuse all other questions until counsel is present. This applies to federal officers, ICE agents, and local police equally.
- **4th Amendment.** The right to refuse consent to a search. 'I do not consent to a search' said clearly, calmly, on camera, three times. They may search anyway. The consent matters in court.
- **1st Amendment / Tenn. Code.** The right to record. Memphis is a one-party-consent state. You may record any officer in any public space. Phone visible. Audio on. Time stamp. Geotag if safe.
- **Terry standard.** The right to ask 'am I being detained?' If no, walk away. If yes, you have the right to know the reason. Repeat the question until answered.

ICE-specific protocols (English and Spanish)

- **At the door:** 'I do not consent to your entry. Show me a warrant signed by a federal judge.' / 'No autorizo su entrada. Muestreme una orden firmada por un juez federal.'
- **Critical distinction.** Administrative warrants (ICE Form I-200) are NOT judicial warrants. They do not authorize entry into a home or non-public workplace area without consent.
- **Hotline:** Carry the Memphis ICE Rapid Response hotline number with you at all times. Call before during and after any encounter. (Hotline number in Appendix B.)

Mass Arrest, Jail Support, and Legal Observers

Lawson trained 200 people for the Nashville sit-ins and had jail support waiting before the first arrest. The arrest is not the end of the action. It is the middle of it.

Before action - the legal observer team

- **Visible:** Identifiable vests (orange or green) marked LEGAL OBSERVER.
- **Equipped:** Spiral notebook + pen + phone. Photo / video record of every officer interaction. Names from badge numbers when visible.
- **Positioned:** Position at the back and edges of any march or sit-in - NOT in the action itself. Observer does not participate.
- **Trained by:** National Lawyers Guild Memphis chapter, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the ACLU of Tennessee will provide trained observers on request with 72-hour notice.

During arrest - the participant's discipline

- **Three statements only.** State your name. State 'I am exercising my right to remain silent.' State 'I want my lawyer.' Stop talking.
- **Physical compliance.** Do not resist arrest. Do not flinch. Hands visible. Move slowly. Comply with physical instructions, refuse verbal interrogations.
- **The number on the arm.** Memorize your jail-support hotline number. Have it written on your forearm in permanent marker before the action begins. Phones WILL be confiscated.

After arrest - the jail-support team

- **Phone tree:** Confirm location, charges, bail, lawyer schedule within 60 minutes of the arrest report.
- **Bail:** Bail funds raised in advance. Memphis Community Bail Fund and the Just City Bail Fund both serve Shelby County. Do not wait until people are inside to raise the money.
- **The pickup:** Welcome released arrestees at the jail door with food, water, a charged phone, and a ride. The release is the first hour of their reconciliation - treat it as sacred.

Action Day Protocol and the Debrief

The day-of script. Print this. Laminate it. Hand one to every marshal at sunrise.

T-minus 24 hours

- Confirm legal observer team, jail support team, bail fund, press contact, medics, food/water runners.
- Final scenario walk-through with marshals.
- Send the participant briefing email + the hotline number text.

Morning of - one hour before

- Marshals arrive 60 minutes early. Vests on. Radios checked. Hotline numbers on forearms.
- Group prayer / centering circle. Lawson called this 'putting on the breastplate.' It is not optional.
- Final reminder of the discipline: NO ALCOHOL, NO WEAPONS (not even a pocketknife), NO DRUG-IMPAIRED PARTICIPANTS, NO PROVOCATEURS HANDLED BY ANYONE BUT MARSHALS.

During the action

- One voice gives one command at a time. Marshals echo it. The march moves on the marshal's cadence, not the loudest individual's.
- Media liaison is the only person who speaks to the press. Everyone else points the reporter to the liaison.
- Legal observers stay back. Medics stay back. Press liaisons rotate to the front edge as needed.

After the action - the debrief (same day, same room)

- **The facts.** What was the demand? What was the response?
- **The discipline.** Did the discipline hold? Where did it slip?
- **The bodies.** Who was arrested? Are they accounted for? Who needs care?
- **The continuation.** What is the next step? When is the next meeting?
- **The close.** Closing reading - from the Lawson pledge or a passage from Dr. King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'
 - chosen by the convener.

Appendix A - The Lawson Pledge of Nonviolence

Adapted from the pledge card carried by Nashville sit-in participants in 1960. Recite it aloud at the close of every workshop. Every marcher who goes to the action signs a copy. The signed pledge is the bond of discipline.

I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF -

1. To meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus, Gandhi, and Dr. King.
2. To remember always that the nonviolent movement seeks justice and reconciliation - not victory.
3. To walk and talk in the manner of love; for God is love.
4. To pray daily to be used by God in order that all people might be free.
5. To sacrifice personal wishes that all people might be free.
6. To observe with both friend and enemy the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. To perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. To refrain from violence of fist, tongue, and heart.
9. To strive to be in good physical and spiritual health.
10. To follow the directions of the movement and of the captain of a demonstration.

Signed: _____ *Date:* _____

Appendix B - Memphis Resources & Hotlines

ICE Rapid Response (Memphis)

Comunidades Unidas en Una Voz / Latino Memphis - call when ICE is sighted in a workplace or neighborhood.

(901) 366-5882 - Latino Memphis

National Lawyers Guild Memphis

Trained legal observers, jail support, and pro bono representation for arrested protesters.

nlg.org/chapter/memphis

ACLU of Tennessee

Civil rights litigation, know-your-rights training, federal task force documentation.

(615) 320-7142 - aclu-tn.org

Memphis Community Bail Fund

Bail fund covering Shelby County Jail releases. Coordinate before any planned mass action.

memphisbailoutfund.com

Just City Memphis

Bail relief, advocacy, post-release support.

justcity.org

WIN - Workers Interfaith Network

Faith-labor coalition. Workshop hosting, clergy-led negotiation support, wage theft assistance.

workersinterfaith.org

Jobs With Justice Memphis (in formation)

Coalition home for solidarity actions across union and community lines.

Contact through WIN until standalone chapter is reseeded.

Memphis & West TN Central Labor Council

AFL-CIO regional council. Endorsement, sponsorship, and turnout support for labor-led actions.

Kevin Bradshaw, President - (901) 603-8296

Labor Education Online Assistant

24/7 question-answering on rights, arrests, ICE encounters, in English and Spanish.

laboreducation.org

Memphis Police Internal Affairs (incident filing)

File a formal complaint after the action when warranted. Demand a written case number.

(901) 636-3470

"We who in engaging in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive." - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., echoing the teaching of Dr. James M. Lawson Jr., from Birmingham Jail, 1963.