

A. Philip Randolph

Randolph, A. Philip



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Description:

As editor of the *Messenger*, a socialist magazine, and leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first predominantly black labor union in the United States, A. Philip Randolph helped lay the foundation for the success of the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s. This photo was taken around 1911.

Asa Philip Randolph was born into poverty in Baldwin, Florida, on April 15, 1889. His mother Elizabeth was 17 years old when Randolph, her second child, was born. She had grown up with her siblings in a shack and married the new preacher in town, James Randolph, at 13. He was eight years her senior.

Neither parent had more than a few years of formal schooling, but James Randolph had educated himself and become an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, a denomination founded in the 1780s by freed slave and early abolitionist Richard Allen. The AME church's heritage of abolitionism and racial dignity always filled Rev. Randolph with pride, which he instilled in his sons. The town of Baldwin, Florida, was his first preaching assignment. Rev. Randolph's churches, even in Jacksonville, were tiny storefronts, and his congregants were poor but full of love for their preacher and his family.

Asa and his older brother James grew up in Jacksonville. Home life was strict, happy, and very religious. As one niece recalled, "You couldn't eat a thing in that house without praying first" (Anderson 1974: p. 37). Rev. Randolph had high expectations for his two

boys, though he wasn't a strict disciplinarian like their mother. Fortunately there was a private, tuition-free high school for blacks in Jacksonville, the Cookman Institute. It was funded by Northern whites and was the only African-American high school in the city. Asa and his brother James entered in 1903. James excelled in math and Latin; Asa excelled in literature and sports and came to love theater and drama.

James Randolph's race consciousness affected his two sons: after public transportation in Jacksonville became segregated in the early 1900s, he insisted that they walk everywhere. When the public libraries became segregated, he forbade his children to study there. The brothers also had to become familiar with the writings of the abolitionists, which Asa Randolph cited later on as a major influence on his life. However, Randolph and his older brother rejected their father's religion and belief in a loving God, which seemed in contradiction to life's harsh realities. Nonetheless, years later as a union organizer, Randolph always started his meetings off with a prayer.

Since there was no money for college and free public universities in the South would not accept African Americans, Randolph began working full time after graduating from high school in 1907. A Jacksonville insurance company hired him to collect premiums from its black customers, but he soon got tired of that. Thus, he began a restless period of moving from job to job. His reason for changing jobs so often was simply that they weren't worth keeping. "Is it only white men who can be bookkeepers and supervisors? Are we only good for sweeping floors and washing windows?" (Anderson 1974: p. 66). He began taking pride in the number of jobs he quit.

Civil rights were far from Randolph's mind in 1911, when he became fed up with Jacksonville. With high hopes of embarking on a stage career, he moved to New York City, where competition for acting jobs was fierce. He acted in amateur plays in black churches until one day he was offered a part in a major Broadway production. Pleased and proud, he wrote his parents in Florida about the offer. To his dismay, they were appalled at his becoming an actor, which to them was synonymous with a life of sin. Although Randolph was already in his mid-twenties, self-supporting, and in love with the theater, he made the painful decision to decline the manager's offer rather than alienate or lie to his parents.

He no longer had a good reason to stay in New York. But Randolph felt that African Americans could make a better life in the North, so he decided to remain. His acting experience in high school and amateur productions had taught him literature, especially Shakespeare, and he developed strong public speaking skills. His beautifully modulated voice would be an important tool that he would use later to win adherents to the civil rights cause.

Once Randolph decided to settle in New York, he joined a church club in Harlem for the purpose of making friends. One day at a club function, he learned that it was possible to go to college in New York for free—thanks to funding from the municipal government. Getting a college education, always a remote dream, now seemed within reach. He immediately enrolled as a night student at City College of New York (CCNY). Eventually, his brother James joined him, with the same purpose of getting a college degree.

Randolph never finished CCNY, but he became a Socialist through his college experience. In one of his courses, he studied the history of the European working class and the theories of socialism. Randolph was deeply impressed by the rationality of Socialist beliefs. Unlike any religion, socialism explained why poverty existed in the world, and quite unlike any religion, it insisted that, by means of organized action, poverty could be wiped off the face of the earth.

All Socialists agreed that poverty was caused by the exploitation of the poor by rich people who owned property. Economic competition among social classes in general was at the root of all problems, according to the Socialists. They said that the poor needed to stop competing with each other, join forces, and form trade unions (which the rich feared) to demand better working conditions. In this way, trade unionism would begin to eliminate poverty. Socialists in Europe and America were divided, however, on whether or not private ownership—from factories to one's own home—should be done away with altogether. Extreme Socialists, often called Communists, believed that all property should be owned in common by everyone.

Randolph believed that racism, along with many other problems, was a result of economic competition. In fact, Ida B. Wells, who was not a Socialist, had come close to this view when she theorized that the common factor in most lynchings of blacks was economic competition. She cited her personal experience with her close friend, storeowner Tom Moss, who was brutally lynched by white storeowners because he was competing with them.

Clearly, Randolph believed, God had no role in bringing about the Socialist utopia, when there would be neither rich nor poor. This was a much different view of religion than that which Randolph had been taught as a child. It was up to class-conscious men and women to make the dream real some day, by educating and organizing masses of working-class people. Randolph quit school and joined the Socialist Party of America in order to do just that. Socialism became his new religion. Shortly after conversion, however, he married Lucille Green, a widow six years his senior, in 1914. After graduating from Howard University in Washington, D.C., Lucille became the very successful owner of a beauty parlor in Harlem. Randolph reasoned that the time had not yet arrived for a classless society in which no one owned property. Thus, he saw no contradiction in marrying a woman who owned her own business. Freed from personal financial worry, he threw himself body and soul into spreading the Socialist gospel.

For many years, he and his close friend Chandler Owen mounted soapboxes every day on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street in Harlem to proclaim the virtues of socialism and trade unionism. Because they were such good speakers, they always attracted an interested audience, including journalists of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, a newspaper that contributed money to Randolph's idealistic ventures. One day in 1916, Randolph introduced the fiery Jamaican Marcus Garvey to his listeners. He watched with awe as the crowd took to Garvey and ruefully admitted that against "Against the emotional power of Garveyism, what I was preaching didn't stand a chance" (Anderson 1974: p. 137). In time, Randolph came to dislike Garvey's "back to Africa" message, along with the colorful uniforms and bands that followed Garvey everywhere he spoke.

Moreover, Garvey didn't want to change the system and saw nothing wrong with wealth and property. Nonetheless, in a few years several million African Americans had flocked to Garvey.

Not for a moment did Randolph's faith in socialism falter. He opposed the U.S. government and all governments that he viewed contemptuously as being run by wealthy politicians who followed the orders of rich capitalists. After the United States entered World War I in 1917, Randolph took to the streets, protesting the "capitalist war," and began writing antiwar pamphlets. The government soon labeled him one of the "most dangerous Negroes" in America.

Like millions of other people, Randolph witnessed the Communist revolution in Russia in November 1917, which at the time promised the masses of Russian peasants, who had been little more than slaves for centuries, a better life. Idealistic Socialists in Europe and America expected the revolution to spread to their own countries. When Garvey's movement collapsed in 1923, Randolph felt vindicated. It seemed to prove that only profound economic and social changes in the current system would bring African Americans and poor white workers justice.

This was the message that Randolph preached in issue after issue of his radical black magazine *The Messenger*. Launched in 1917, it never attracted a large audience, but it drained all of Randolph's energy and financial resources. Nevertheless, the Justice Department in Washington took note of this "most able and most dangerous of all Negro publications" (Anderson 1974: p. 82). The government tried to shut it down, but failed. Randolph's magazine caught the eye of several railroad porters, who sent a representative, Ashley Totten, to ask Randolph to organize a union for them. Totten approached Randolph in June 1925, but at first Randolph refused. First of all, he wasn't a porter; second, he didn't believe that a black union could succeed against staunch white opposition backed up by wealth and power. In fact, between 1917 and 1923, he and Chandler Owen had tried and failed at least a half dozen times to start up black trade unions in Harlem.

But Totten didn't give up. Randolph seemed like the perfect man to lead the porters: Because he wasn't one of them, the company couldn't threaten to fire him. Moreover, he was an eloquent speaker on behalf of black unions, a powerful presence, and even had a publication that could be used for the cause. As Totten summed it up, "No one in Harlem had a deeper understanding ... or a greater concern for the problems of the black working man" (Anderson 1974: p. 108).

In time, Totten prevailed. Randolph's brother had been a porter for awhile. Randolph knew that the Pullman Company, which had instituted the first luxury sleeping cars, or "Pullmans," after the Civil War, hired only blacks as porters. The company counted on the docility of the newly freed slaves, who were hardly in a position to fight for their rights. Hence, their wages were shockingly low and their hours long; the porters were expected to pay for their own uniforms, meals, and shoe polish (shoe polishing was mandatory). They weren't even paid for arriving early on the job (a company

requirement) to prepare for their long train journey. They were never addressed respectfully, which antagonized some of the better educated porters like Randolph's brother.

Randolph's task was a difficult one. The Pullman Company was extremely rich, influential, and inclined to fire any porter who made trouble. Moreover, the thousands of sleeping-car porters were scattered from coast to coast, and to reach them in an era when few people had telephones and few blacks had even radios would be a challenge. Even if every porter were contacted, the porters were poor, and membership dues for a union wouldn't be very popular or plentiful. Finally, even if Randolph could establish a successful union, the Pullman Company was not likely to sit down at the bargaining table with Randolph or treat the union with any respect.

Nonetheless, on August 25, 1925, Randolph officially established the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, with himself as president and the only officer in the union who didn't work for the Pullman Company. This was fortunate, since eventually all the other officers lost their jobs, and thousands of Pullman porters in the years ahead were fired for joining the Brotherhood. Although meetings were held in secret as often as possible, word reached the Pullman Company, which hired spies to be the company's eyes and ears. To make matters worse, most African-American churches and newspapers spoke against "Negro unionism." "Any Sunday you went to church the preachers touched on the Brotherhood. Their slogan was 'Don't rock the boat, don't bite the hand that feeds you,' " recalled one organizer (Anderson 1974: p. 184).

Ironically, white supporters of the Brotherhood were more numerous than blacks. White newspapers in the North wrote flattering accounts of Randolph and his able leadership. Meanwhile, Randolph used his connections with white Socialists and liberals on behalf of the Brotherhood, with the result that in 1925, a liberal white organization, the Garland Fund, donated \$10,000 to the Brotherhood. In those days, that was a huge sum of money. It allowed Randolph to conduct a nationwide membership drive. Randolph consequently spent the better part of the next few years away from his tiny New York headquarters, traveling around the country, establishing local Brotherhoods, and raising the morale of porters through his inspiring speeches. Only a year after the Brotherhood's founding, the union had branches in 16 major U.S. cities from coast to coast. Randolph became tremendously popular among the porters and was in demand as a speaker, "the best orator I'd ever heard, bar none" remarked one overawed local organizer from California (Anderson 1974: p. 176).

Randolph's strategy of nationwide recruitment of porters, however, led to swift retaliation on the part of the Pullman Company, which in one day alone fired 30 porters in St. Louis for suspected union activity. The company even tried to get Randolph's picture taken in a compromising situation, by bribing women to entice him into their hotel rooms, or by disguising a spy as a policeman who would "arrest" him for some alleged offense, with a photographer standing conveniently nearby. Desperate to stop him, the company's attempt at a smear campaign against Randolph never succeeded. Pullman was much more effective at using spies to learn which employees were union

members. Recalled one organizer: "If a porter had a fuss with his wife in the morning, the company knew about it in the afternoon" (Anderson 1974: p. 179).

Randolph tried repeatedly to get the company to recognize him as the legitimate spokesperson of the porters and to bring Pullman to the negotiating table. Even though Congress had passed the Railway Labor Act in 1926, which gave all railroad workers the right to form an independent trade union, Pullman ignored the Act and the Brotherhood. Randolph filed a complaint with the Railway Labor Board, but Pullman's lawyers argued that there was no proof that the majority of porters recognized the Brotherhood as their union. In fact, Pullman defiantly organized its own company union and coerced the porters into joining it with the threat that they would be fired if they didn't. Of course, this was illegal, but the Brotherhood did not have the funds to wage a long, drawn-out legal battle against the company.

Meanwhile, the Garland Fund's \$10,000 was depleted. Randolph could easily have raised more funds from liberal white supporters, but he decided not to. Randolph had come to the conclusion that in the long run, it was in the best interests of the union not to rely on the help of whites: "This is one fight Negroes must win on their own" (Anderson 1974: p. 207).

The Brotherhood's dwindling finances, coupled with Pullman's harsh, retaliatory tactics against porters who openly supported the fledgling union, spelled disaster. Many porters began to feel that after three years of existence, the Brotherhood was ending in failure. Neither higher wages, shorter hours, nor better working conditions—Randolph's key promises at the Brotherhood's founding meeting in August 1925—had come about. The porters even stopped reading *The Messenger*, which folded in 1928. To make matters worse, in 1929, the United States was plunged into the Great Depression, the worst economic crisis in its history, which would last nearly a decade. Bad economic times threatened to finish off what little was left of the Brotherhood. Porters were even more afraid than ever of losing their jobs. Consequently, membership declined from a high of 7,000 in 1925 to only 771 in 1932.

One by one, the branch offices closed down. Almost no membership dues came in from the Brotherhood, and Randolph's wife's hairdressing business had collapsed; thus, he went around in worn out clothing and shoes. A sympathetic colleague said of him: "He used to love his blue serge suit, which was the best thing he had, but he wore it so long that it began to shine like a looking glass" (Anderson 1974: p. 214). Yet, when the mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia, offered him a full-time job in city government, Randolph politely refused. He explained to the perplexed mayor that he would never give up on the Brotherhood.

In short, Randolph remained an optimist in those dark days. He was still immensely popular with the porters, who did not blame him for failing. Meanwhile, Randolph tried to raise money and morale for the Brotherhood by organizing fundraising picnics, boat rides, and baseball games.

In the worst days of the depression, the tide was in fact beginning to turn for the beleaguered Brotherhood. In November 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president. Henceforth the government would play an active role in pulling America out of the Great Depression by instituting FDR's "New Deal." The New Deal was a series of acts and programs designed to put people back to work. One of the first acts of the new administration was putting teeth into the 1926 Railway Labor Act. Section 7a of a new National Industrial Relations Act (1933) specifically granted the right of any employee to join a labor union of his or her choice. Under no circumstances could an employee "be required as a condition of employment to join any company union" (Anderson 1974: p. 217). In effect, Section 7a forced the Pullman Company to give the porters a choice—to join the company union or the Brotherhood. If they chose the latter, the company could no longer fire them. By mid-1933, less than a year after the Brotherhood's worst year, more than 8,000 porters suddenly joined the Brotherhood. Branch offices were reopened. In the summer of 1935, the Pullman Company reluctantly recognized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as the legitimate union for the porters. The company reluctantly sat down with Randolph at the bargaining table. After long, drawn out, and sometimes stormy meetings, the Brotherhood, the first successful black labor union in U.S. history, triumphantly concluded an agreement with the Pullman Company on August 25, 1937 (ironically, the Brotherhood's birthday) that gave the porters more pay and shorter hours. Shortly afterward, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) accepted the Brotherhood as a fullfledged member. Almost overnight, Randolph became the most prominent black spokesperson in the country.

As far as the war-weary Randolph was concerned, he had just begun. "Without the porters, I couldn't have carried out the fight for fair employment, or the fight against discrimination in the armed forces" (Anderson 1974: p. 227). At this time, in India, Mohandas Gandhi was teaching a whole generation of civil rights leaders how to fight—and win—against overwhelming odds. Gandhi's tactics of mass civil disobedience, moral persuasion, and noncooperation had not yet been tried in the United States. Randolph was fascinated by Gandhi and his moral strategy, called ahimsa, which means "nonharming."

Randolph was increasingly disturbed that so few African Americans were benefiting from the economic recovery that was occurring under President Roosevelt's New Deal. Moreover, African Americans composed 16 percent of all military enlistments; yet all of them were sent to segregated army and navy units, where they worked at menial tasks. A year before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Federal Security Agency published the alarming fact that "Over 500,000 Negroes who should be utilized in war production are now idle because of the discriminatory hiring practices of war industries" (Anderson 1974: p. 242). On January 15, 1941, Randolph wrote a press release calling on the defense industries of America and the federal government to halt their racist hiring practices. A meeting with President Roosevelt followed, but it turned out to be fruitless, since the president was not yet ready to challenge the status quo.

One day in early 1941, Randolph happened to mention to his close friend and fellow Brotherhood officer Milton Webster, "I think we ought to get 10,000 Negroes and march down Pennsylvania Avenue asking for jobs in defense plants and integration of the

armed forces" (Pfeffer: 1990: p. 47). When he mentioned this idea to his other friends in the Brotherhood, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Urban League, it caught like wildfire.

By March 1, 1941, more than \$50,000 had materialized for the "March on Washington," as the project came to be known. Randolph was now calling for 100,000 African Americans to march on Washington, an unheard of and potentially dangerous gathering of blacks in the heavily segregated capital.

The thought of such a protest taking place in front of the White House upset President Roosevelt. He sent his wife Eleanor to reason with Randolph and even promised that he would write to all the defense plants to persuade them that it was their patriotic duty to hire African Americans. But Randolph sent the sympathetic Eleanor back to the White House empty handed. He demanded nothing less than an executive order; only then would he call off the march. The beleaguered President gave in gracefully. Appointing a committee of five, he instructed them to work out an executive order. On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, which required the defense industries and all federal government agencies to cease discrimination in hiring "because of race, creed, color, or national origin" (Anderson 1974: p. 259). The newly established Fair Employment Practices Committee would enforce the order.

The lesson of the March on Washington (which Randolph duly called off) was not lost on him and his followers. For the first time in American history, the federal government had been pressured into action because of the threat of mass protest. It was the same tactic that Gandhi had used in India, and it worked. Randolph publicly acknowledged his indebtedness to the great Indian leader and dropped his membership in the Socialist Party, which he had not been active in for years.

The armed forces remained segregated throughout World War II, but Randolph, who supported the war effort, was biding his time. In 1947, when President Harry Truman issued a call for a peacetime draft, Randolph was ready. He had established the League for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation, which threatened a mass rally of 100,000 in the streets of Washington, D.C. Members of this league also picketed the National Democratic Convention in Philadelphia, with Randolph carrying a sign reading "Prison is better than army Jim Crow service" (Anderson 1974: p. 280). The result was another Executive Order 9981 (signed July 26, 1948) that ended nearly a century of segregation in the armed forces. Once again, the threatened march was called off. Only a few years later, the Supreme Court would strike down segregation in public schools.

By that time, Asa Philip Randolph was in his sixties and had a serious heart condition. He began to devote more of his energies and spare time (he was still president of the Brotherhood) to the NAACP, making room for a younger generation of civil rights leaders.

At age 79, Randolph was mugged and robbed outside of his apartment in Harlem by three young black men. He bore no malice toward them, but the incident broke his heart as well as his health. He lived his remaining years alone (by then he was a widower), honored and loved by many. On May 16, 1979, at age 90, he died of heart failure in New York City.

As one friend remembered him, "He was a good man, a spiritual man" (Anderson 1974: p. 20) even though Randolph was never religious. But throughout his life, he cared deeply about the poor and the exploited. Randolph's greatness lay in his willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of others: "I consider the fight for the Negro masses the greatest service I can render to my people, and the fight alone is my complete compensation" (Anderson 1974: p. 151). He disdained personal wealth and comfort in order to do what had never been done before: organize a viable, black union in an era in which even white workers found it difficult to improve their working conditions and wages. When the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters succeeded in 1935, Randolph did not rest on his laurels but continued his struggle for civil rights for African Americans, to the point of pressuring presidents of the United States to act on behalf of oppressed blacks. Randolph's tactics not only succeeded in ending segregation in the military and the defense industry; it also paved the way for the civil rights leaders who would succeed him.

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