

# **A Grateful Tribute To A. Philip Randolph, Who Came So Far by Faith**

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## **A Labor Day Salute to A. Philip Randolph**

On each Labor Day across the United States, historians, political pundits and a wide variety of commentators offer long, sonorous tributes to the men they herald as the nation's greatest union leaders.

Samuel Gompers, Eugene Debs, George Meany and Walter Reuther are usually chief among them. Almost always, however, A. Phillip Randolph's name is missing from the hallowed pantheon of celebrated labor leaders.

Yet Randolph, a titan among them, who was equipped with a lion's heart, St. Augustine's spirit and soul, Hannibal's generalship and the political and strategic genius to out fox two of the nation's most distinguished presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman, typically receives little, if any commendations, even on Labor Day.

Randolph, the primary organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, unlike the celebrated union leaders, all of them white, was forced to fight two protracted battles--at once--against the powerful Pullman Company and the American Federation of Labor (AF of L), without resources.

Instead, he lacked strong, public endorsements from a broad coalition of nationally united black clergy, academics and the intelligentsia.

In 1925, the year Randolph accepted the challenge to shepherd the union's national organizing effort by a delegation of porters in Harlem, American blacks were just 60 years removed from chattel slavery.

Much worse, a tidal wave of political and social debasement swept over black America in 1896, when the Supreme Court's Plessey vs., Ferguson decision legalized segregation, a milder form of enslavement. The stage for the court's ignoble decision was set with the demise of Reconstruction, in 1876, and, in 1883, when the justices nullified the Civil Rights Act Congress adopted in 1875.

Booker T. Washington played a public role in the disenfranchisement when he famously declared, in 1895, at the Atlanta Exposition, that blacks would quietly accept menial labor and, essentially, a master-slave relationship in the political arena, rather than continue the long challenge to the "southern way of life. The nation's blacks had not elected, selected, appointed, anointed or consecrated Washington to speak for them or negotiate on their behalf.

That was irrelevant to the southern elites and corporate chiefs above the Mason Dixon Line, who eagerly embraced his wildly applauded surrender that day.

Washington's capitulation did not appease the Klu Klux Klan, which continued to lynch blacks at its previous pace. As a response an angry W.E.B. Dubois and other activists in the Niagara Movement, many of them white, formed the NAACP in 1909.

In 1916, Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association began a Pan Africanist-based "return to Africa" campaign, which ultimately drew a reported four million members worldwide.

After establishing the "Black Star Line" and other noted enterprises, however, Garvey, was hounded by J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau of Investigation (BOI).

On or before, August 25, 1925, Randolph, after first declining to lead the porters, agreed to launch what proved to be a long, protracted war against twin enemies: The Pullman Company and "racism in the house of labor."

Garvey, after a show trial, was subsequently imprisoned the following November and would serve two years of a seven-year sentence before President Calvin Coolidge ordered his release.

Against the backdrop of Garvey's defeat, Randolph and his leadership ability emerged, unannounced and without national fanfare.

With Milton Webster in Chicago, Ashley Totten in New York and C.L. Dellums in Oakland--but no funds, office staff, organizational budget, telephone or national chapters to rely upon as strategic outposts, Randolph stood tall and strong against every weapon thrown at him by the Pullman Company and its massive, corporate juggernaut.

The challenges to their success were daunting: Porters seen or heard sympathizing with Randolph's organizing efforts were summarily fired. The instant terminations doubled as intimidation tactics and clear, direct warnings to freeze the porters into impotence and apathy.

Randolph, armed mostly with fervent faith and abiding hope, never wavered in his mission as he crossed the nation organizing the porters. The porters, knowing Randolph had no funds to travel by train, slipped him aboard the overnight luxury liners so he could schedule on-going membership drives and speaking engagements to build the union.

Undeterred and high in zeal, although his wardrobe consisted of a suit, two pair of pants, two pair of socks and a pair of shoes, Randolph and his small band of leaders finally forced the AF of L to the table and wrested an all important charter.

That momentous victory, on August 25, 1935, marked the first time in American history that blacks had elbowed their way to the power banquet exclusively hosted for whites. Without the charter, the porters had lacked federal recognition. Without that official recognition, the porters would not have had a seat at the table where union-won wages, pensions and benefits were decided.

Two years later, in 1937, (exactly 75 years ago) the porters, under Randolph, became the first black inspired, led and organized union to win collective bargaining rights from the Pullman Company or any other major American corporation.

Although wages and benefits for the porters dramatically increased from \$810 annually in 1926 and a choice between serving 400 hours and month or 11,000 miles year, which was essentially no choice, Randolph did not rest on his laurels.

In 1941, he threatened President Roosevelt with a massive demonstration in the Nation's Capital, comprised of 125,000 marching blacks, if he refused to provide lucrative war employment for all black Americans. Roosevelt, faced with Randolph's quiet, but no nonsense leadership, relented and signed Executive Order 8802, which opened the doors for millions of blacks in shipyards, munitions plants and factories producing war-related items.

In 1948, Randolph issued his second such threat to invade Washington with 125,00 black protesters, this time to President Truman. Randolph knew that the historically segregated Armed Forces were a major barrier to black advancement and thus had to be broken.

Truman, never having forgotten Randolph's successful threat issued only seven years before, in 1941--and needing the black vote against South Carolinian Strom Thurmond and his Dixiecrat Party and an energized Thomas Dewey, the Republican presidential candidate, gave in quietly, like Roosevelt before him, and signed Executive Order 9981..

No other labor leader in the nation's history, before or since then, has ever out-witted two presidents and check-mated them into signing, not one, but Two executive orders!

In early 1963, an aging but restless Randolph plotted one more major coup. This time his major ally was his trusted lieutenant, the brilliant author, lecturer, singer, peace activist and socialist theorist, Bayard Rustin.

Randolph had chosen Rustin in the early 1940s, when the young conscientious objector was a nationally respected leader in the War Resisters movement.

Ever alert to recruit, aid and abet, principled young leaders, Randolph, in 1955, sent Rustin to Montgomery, Alabama, to shore up young Martin Luther King's leadership skills with the fundamental elements of non-violent, civil disobedience. Within weeks, King had absorbed the techniques and sharpened the weapon he would ultimately employ to defeat the entrenched enemies of racism and discrimination.

In early 1963, Randolph, longing for a final victory in the Nation's Capital, convened a meeting in New York City at the Commodore Hotel, where the other five of the "Big Six" black leaders heard his appeal for a massive "March on Washington for Peace, Freedom and Jobs."

Having already secured a commitment from King to be the keynote speaker, Randolph asked the five leaders for their support and resources.

All of them asked Randolph to chair its leadership, which he gladly consented to do, if and only if, they would accept Rustin as the March's official organizer and chief architect.

And so, Randolph, the master labor strategist and tactician, saw his name stamped on the most dramatic and compelling civil rights March in the nation's history. Comprised of 250,000 strong, black and white men and women together, it became a reality, through his vision, determination and reliance on the spiritual and ethical forces which, in the darkest days of his leadership, inspired and drove him on behalf of the poor and suffering.

The historic March, a reverential symbol of enduring progressive social and economic change, also bore the fruit for decades to come : Passage of the greatest civil rights legislation in America's history, in particular, the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

For all this and much more, accomplished largely behind the scenes, no tributes or salutes to Randolph, his life, accomplishments and memory can found for far too long.

Rest in peace until we see you in the flesh, Brother Randolph, our brother, friend, leader and uncompromising spiritual guide.