

# A. Philip Randolph



The words and deeds of A. Philip Randolph show us the unyielding strength of his life-long struggle for full human rights for the Blacks and all the disinherited of the nation. In his cry for freedom and justice, Mr. Randolph is echoing the fury of all the enslaved. They are fighting for their freedom, with the kind of desperate strength that only deep wounds can call forth. With none of his words, however, does Mr. Randolph turn aside the help of others. But these comrades-in-arms must share the vision that has led Mr. Randolph through his long years of search for equal human rights. From the day of his arrival in Harlem in 1911, Mr. Randolph had been in the thick of the struggle for freedom for Black Americans.

The civil rights revolution, which began in the 1950's, was a result of his efforts and the work of men like himself. Even when he had become an "elder statesmen" his passion for justice remained as youthful and vigorous as ever. He still planned and organized such activities as the 1957 prayer pilgrimage for the civil rights bill, the 1958 and 1959 marches for school integration and the 1963 March on Washington. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 are all the fruits of the seed he and his co-workers sowed many years before. A. Philip Randolph has always called for jobs and money as being the passports to human rights. At the same time, he did not let himself be led astray by the impractical economic promises of a man like Marcus Garvey, who called for a "return to Africa" back in the 1920's. As a man living in the bread-and-butter world, Mr. Randolph knew that a good weekly paycheck had to be won first. Then, after the children were fed, a better fight could be waged for dignity and self-pride.

With this always in mind, Mr. Randolph traveled throughout the nation just before World War II, in 1940 and 1941. His mission was to unite Blacks against the discrimination, which shut them out of well-paying jobs in the factories. Although many Whites and even Blacks knocked his

efforts in the beginning his message caught fire. All over the United States committees of Blacks were forming to "March on Washington" in protest. Influential people tried to turn Mr. Randolph away from his goal, but he remained strong and steadfast. Finally, recognizing that Mr. Randolph could not be swayed, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an order, six months before Pearl Harbor, in June 1941, which called for an end to discrimination in defense plant jobs. Here was the beginning of "fair employment practices" This, the first "March on Washington," never had to be held. The most powerful leader in the world, the President of the United States, had yielded to the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. From this start have come all of the many laws trying to guarantee a fair and equal chance to all Blacks looking for jobs about seven years later, in July of 1948, Mr. Randolph again moved to fight discrimination. This time, it was against segregation and Jim Crow in the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Once more, the power of his persuasion and the justice of his complaints swayed another President of the United States, Harry S Truman. President Truman signed an order commanding that there would be an end to this kind of discrimination not only in the armed forces, but also in federal civil service jobs. In 1963, another high point in Mr. Randolph's struggle for equality for oppressed people was reached when he headed the famous "March on Washington," in which more than 250,000 Americans joined together under the slogan of "Jobs and Freedom." Still relentlessly pressing for full economic freedom, Mr. Randolph then presented, in 1966, the Freedom Budget to the nation. This called for the spending of \$185 billion over ten years by the U.S. government to fight against poverty, "The labor movement traditionally has been the only haven for the dispossessed, the despised, the neglected, the downtrodden and the poor." So spoke A. Philip Randolph from the convention floor of the AFL-CIO....And so believed A. Philip Randolph all his life long. It was this belief that sustained his spirit through the long, long, bitter years when he was the voice crying in the wilderness. It was this belief that enabled him to go on with the uphill fight for racial equality and opportunity for all Americans.

The story of Randolph the labor leader is the story of many beginnings, a tale of many defeats and many victories. Even in defeat he sowed the seed that afterwards blossomed and bore fruit- for Black workers and White workers alike. By the early 1920's, Mr. Randolph could look back upon "a career of glorious failures," as one writer put it. He had run for Assembly twice and Comptroller once and lost each time. As far as organizing Blacks went, he had been at it from his first days in Harlem, but had little to show for his efforts. He began to come into his own when a group of Pullman porters came to him for help. The porters wanted the right to bargain for better wages and improvements in working conditions. They wanted a chance to run their own affairs. After a number of secret meetings, the organization of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was announced at Elks Hall on August 25, 1925. But it was going to be a long and tough fight to get the powerful Pullman Company to sit down and bargain with the workers. It took all of 12 years. The odds against the newly born union were huge. The company used all of its strength in attacking Mr. Randolph, calling him a Bolshevik and accusing him of being a hustler out for a fast buck. Pullman fired union members. It tried to put fear into the men by threatening them with tougher assignments, fewer assignments, or no work at all. The law also failed the Brotherhood. Mediation failed, so did arbitration. And when the men prepared for a

strike as a last resort, the company recruited strikebreakers and private police. At the last moment, the strike was called off.

The leadership of the union decided that the Brotherhood was simply not strong enough to win at that time. Now began the struggle to keep the organization together without funds, without much support from the outside, and in the midst of a depression. Mr. Randolph would travel to Chicago on Brotherhood business and have only a one-way train ticket in his pocket. But somehow he survived and his message with him wherever he went, Mr. Randolph had one important sermon for the porters. They were Black men who were being called upon to prove that "Black men are able to measure up." And the men never forgot that message and in the end it won for them. By 1935, not only had the Brotherhood survived, but also it had won an election supervised, by the National Mediation Board. The same year, the American Federation of Labor reversed its previous position and voted to grant an international charter to the Brotherhood. It took two more years of negotiations but finally the Pullman Company signed a contract. This was more than a victory for better wages and working conditions. As one scholar wrote "A small band of brothers—Black— had stood together and won against a corporation that had said it would never sit down and negotiate with porters."

In 1936, A. Philip Randolph was drafted presidency of a new organization called the National Negro Congress. The NNC was made up of a number of groups, which planned to build a Black mass movement, by working with and through trade unions. Although the NNC was successful in a number of organization drives led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), when Mr. Randolph realized he had come under Communist control, he quit. He was attacked by the Communists as a traitor because he refused to support a stand against aid to the enemies of Hitler at the time of the Nazi-Soviet Russia pact. But when the Germans turned around and invaded Russia, he was again attacked by the Communist, this time for refusing to help the Soviet Union. Throughout the hard years of struggle to obtain dignity and decent treatment for porters, Mr. Randolph forgot that there were other workers that also needed help. As one observer wrote "He became a familiar and lonely figure on the floor of AFL-CIO conventions" to his role as champion of the underdog. He was conscience of organized labor in seeking to get the trade union to set its own house in order and to remove the last remnants of racial discrimination from ranks of the AFL-CIO. He spoke for all other dispossessed, Mexicans Americans, Indians, Puerto Ricans, and poor Whites alike. He helped to draft "the strongest statement of labor's position on our rights ever to come before a convention of the AFL-CIO. This resolution put organized labor in "a front line role in the civil rights revolution."

A. Philip Randolph's chosen home is the labor movement—which he believes is the real home of all working men. In 1955 he became a vice-president of the AFL-CIO's Executive Council and in 1959 he helped to found the Negro American Labor Council. The NALC's job is to present Black workers' demands to the labor movement and to do what Mr. Randolph has always tried to do— keep the Black people and organized labor together and working for common goals. A. Philip Randolph, the labor leader, is also a dreamer of dreams. He has tried to put flesh and bones on his dreams by working for a labor movement that would be free of all prejudice and which would play a key role in changing society for the better. It is that dream that has made A. Philip Randolph one of the giants of the American labor movement. At the heart of A. Philip

Randolph's vision as a socialist is his belief that a decent and well-paying job is the first step towards social and political freedom. Therefore, while he supported the needs of Blacks as Blacks, Mr. Randolph also maintained that those who are poor, or earn little money whether they are Black or White have basic interests in common, and that they should join together. As a socialist, Mr. Randolph believes that workers and their labor unions are the key forces in any political effort to redistribute society's wealth more justly. Mr. Randolph has continuously advised Black people to develop political alliances with other labor groups, liberal and civil rights groups—to fight for common aims.

Mr. Randolph has never abandoned those principles that have given his outlook qualities of depth and honor. He is a firm believer in both integration and non-violence. As an integrationist he opposed the "Back-to-Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey in the 1920's, as he has opposed the separatist beliefs of the "Black Power" advocates of today. At the same time, Mr. Randolph has rejected violence as a tactic of struggle, on both moral and practical grounds. A. Philip Randolph has not seen the problem of Black people in America as the problem of one isolated group. He views the condition of American Blacks as the symptom of a larger social illness, an illness which is caused by an unfair distribution of power, wealth, and resources. For the socialist ideals on which his political wisdom is built, Mr. Randolph looked to the giants of American socialism—Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas. The agent for spreading Mr. Randolph's socialism was a magazine called the MESSENGER, founded in 1917, "the only magazine of scientific radicalism in the world published by Negroes." He co-edited the magazine with Chandler Owen, a fellow socialist who came to be Mr. Randolph's closest friend. Though both men were well aware that many unions and many socialists discriminated, they continued in their conviction that only through the organization of the workers into unions could society be changed. Mr. Randolph and Mr. Owen outlined the purpose of their socialist publication in an early editorial, saying: "The history of the labor movement in America proves that the employing classes recognize no race lines, They will exploit a White man as readily as a Black man . . . they will exploit any race or class in order to make profits. "The combination of Black and White workers will be a powerful lesson to the capitalists of the solidarity of labor. It will show that labor, Black and White, is conscious of its interests and power. This will prove that unions are not based upon race lines, but upon class lines. This will serve to convert a class of workers, which has been used by the capitalist class to defeat organized labor, into an ardent, class conscious, intelligent, militant group."

Though Mr. Randolph was an integrationist, he believed that organizations which had come into existence to wage the Black and working class struggle ought to be headed by the leaders from those groups. He disagreed with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People leader W.E.B. DuBois' claim that a "talented tenth" of the race would pave the way for its entry into society. The gap between Mr. Randolph and Mr. DuBois widened when, during World War 1, Mr. DuBois called on Blacks to "close ranks," put aside their grievances, and support the war. Mr. Randolph was definitely opposed to the war. He believed that the American idea of "making the world safe for democracy" was outright falsity, and "a tremendous offense to the intelligence of the Blacks because at that time the Blacks were being lynched and denied the right to vote, in the South especially, and were the victims of segregation and discrimination all over the nation." The MESSENGER repeatedly stressed the anti-war stand of its editor's and, as a result, the

U.S. Justice Department kept a close watch on Mr. Randolph and Mr. Owen. Finally, they were jailed in Cleveland on charges of treason. They managed to get out under the custody of Seymour Stedman, a socialist lawyer, and they promptly continued their public protest against the war. World War I ended just one day before Mr. Randolph was scheduled to leave for war himself as a new draftee.

As a socialist associated with radical, leftwing causes. Mr. Randolph was subject to pressures from other radical groups, including the Communists. When a split struck the Socialist Party in 1919, over the question of whether or not to support the Bolsheviks in their leadership of the Russian Revolution, Mr. Randolph and Mr. Owen stayed with the non-Communist faction of the party. When the Communists began to concern themselves with the issue of Blacks in the labor movement, Mr. Randolph had already begun his organization of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The Communists were so jealous of Mr. Randolph's effort they took pains to prevent mentioning him in their publications. A. Philip Randolph's positions whether, an attitude toward labor unions, an anti-war stand or a political position with an aim of economic change has consistently reflected his socialist ideas. He has always believed in a movement based on the workers as the main force, and has always been committed to the idea that a democratic redistribution of wealth is the first step toward greater freedom for all people, Black as well as White.

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