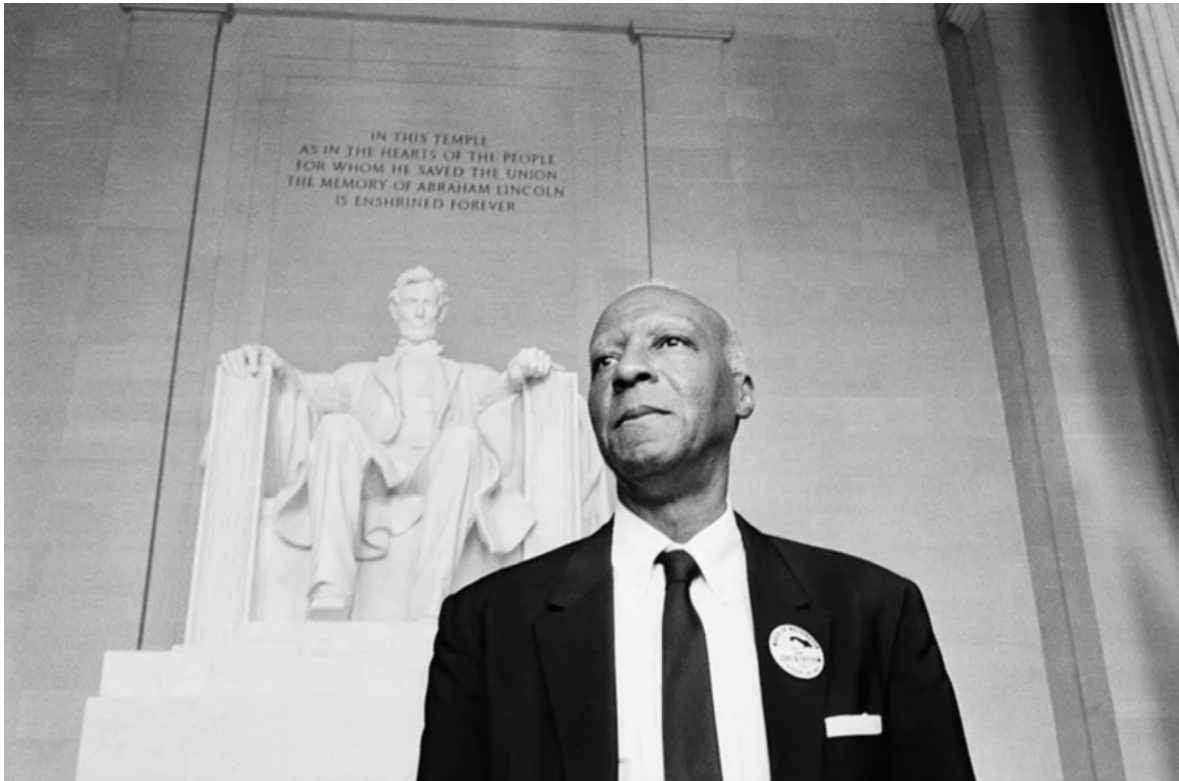


## You Should Know More About A. Philip Randolph, One of America's Greatest Socialists

As the Left attempts to chart a new course in the wake of the Bernie Sanders campaign, there's no better time to learn from America's most underrated socialist, labor leader, and civil rights legend, A. Philip Randolph.



A. Philip Randolph. (Getty Images)

Paul Prescod gave a YouTube lecture on the life and politics of A. Philip Randolph for the *Jacobin* “Stay at Home” series on Monday. You can view the [archived video here](#).

The name A. Philip Randolph usually conjures up the image of an elder statesman of the Civil Rights Movement establishment. Even for some on the Left, he's considered a moderate figure in black politics. Historians often reference his name in contrast to supposedly more revolutionary figures like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael. This mistaken perception partly stems from the increasingly ahistorical way black politics is discussed today. In fact, Randolph was one of the most consistently radical figures in black politics and one of the greatest socialists of the twentieth century. His work made an impact on almost every major development in black politics from the 1920s to the 1970s.

Randolph commanded such overwhelming respect from black activists of all stripes that even Malcolm X had to say, “All civil rights leaders are confused, but Randolph is less confused than the rest.” His theoretical and organizational contributions are

more relevant to the challenges democratic socialists face today than those of other civil rights leaders discussed more often.

He held firm to a deep conviction that separating racial and economic justice was not only impossible, but damaging to the goal of improving society. Through relentless determination and organizational brilliance, Randolph used the labor movement as the anchor for a broader struggle to include all workers in a democratic-socialist agenda. As the Civil Rights Movement began to achieve its most immediate legislative aims, he foresaw that the deep problems black working people faced could not be solved without a complete transformation of society.

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## Harlem Stomping Grounds

Asa Philip Randolph was born in 1889 in Crescent City, Florida to an African Methodist Episcopal Church preacher. His father, James Randolph, saw the church as a militant social institution for black people. Steeped in the political militancy of Reconstruction, he transmitted a lot of this sentiment to his son. In short, Randolph grew up with a sense of political possibility and racial pride.

In 1905, Randolph read W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and was confronted with an issue that would recur throughout his political life. He was valedictorian of his class and shaping up to be something of an intellectual. Despite coming from a working-class family, he could see himself as possibly being part of the "talented tenth" that Du Bois claimed would help the race progress. This forced Randolph to consider the role of the black middle class in the struggle for civil rights. His family didn't have the means to send him to college, however, and the route of the intellectual was closed off to him. Being a great orator with a booming baritone voice, his other passion was acting. In 1911, he set off for Harlem to try to make a career for himself on the stage. While his acting career didn't get very far, Randolph began to take a deeper interest in politics and worked out the perspective that would guide him for most of his life.

This was the era in Harlem where one could find soapbox speakers of all political stripes on street corners. The socialist movement was enjoying a brief moment of ascendancy as Randolph took classes at City College and read about socialism. In Marxism Randolph felt he found an explanation for what caused the intense competition between working people of different races, and the resulting racial violence that flowed from this competition.

It was during these early years that Randolph developed the belief that black workers have to organize into trade unions and whenever possible unite with white workers. Believing it was his job to make this potential a reality, he threw himself into organizing.

Randolph wasn't very good at keeping a job and failed at a few early attempts to organize black workers. He was able to live this kind of Bohemian lifestyle because his wife, Lucille Green, subsidized his existence. Green, an associate of Madam C. J. Walker, owned a successful beauty parlor. It was also through her that Randolph met

Chandler Owen. Owen's aggressive and irreverent outlook was the perfect complement to Randolph's more reserved demeanor.

Randolph and Owen joined the Socialist Party in 1916 and developed a reputation as a radical soapbox orator. Together, the two (known as Lenin and Trotsky throughout Harlem) then started *The Messenger* magazine, which for a time was the most radical black political magazine in the country.

*The Messenger* sought to give more substance to the vague militancy of the "New Negro." Randolph and Owen used the magazine to direct this energy toward socialism and black working-class organization. They also tried to cultivate an antiwar sentiment among the black masses, encouraging them to resist the World War I draft. This agitation got them in trouble with the State Department, which labeled Randolph "the most dangerous Negro in America." Randolph and Owen were arrested while addressing a mass meeting in Cleveland, but luckily were let off by a judge who could not believe such intelligent writing could come from black people. He blamed white socialist agitators instead.

In the articles from *The Messenger*, Randolph consistently tried to connect the different forms of racial discrimination to the capitalist need for cheap labor and phenomena like unemployment. He also took a provocative aim at black professionals. Ruthlessly criticizing W. E. B. Du Bois for backing World War I, Randolph called him a "parlor socialist whom no one in the streets could recognize as a radical."

Randolph felt that as a whole this "talented tenth" was a conservative force, more interested in maintaining its special status than narrowing the gap between them and the black masses. He explained, "I didn't feel there was the necessary racial and social and economic militancy of the Talented Tenth to give strength and force to the liberation of the black masses. The Tenth represented little more than a mere revolt against discrimination. They had no fighting force in them. So where real radicalism was concerned, they were like window dressing."

## **Garveyism and Socialism**

In the 1920s, Randolph had his first major confrontation with black nationalism, in the form of Marcus Garvey. Randolph actually introduced Garvey to the soapbox scene, though they clearly had different political viewpoints. However, the relationship quickly became a bitter personal rivalry.

Garvey's program called for the eventual return of all black people to Africa to create their own empire, and the building of black businesses. This was fused with a militant racial and cultural pride that captured the imaginations of millions of black people. The broader social context made it more likely that Garvey's movement would become bigger than Randolph's.

Intense racial conflict over jobs and housing ensued immediately after the war. The Red Summer of 1919 saw a wave of race riots and lynchings across the country. There were no signs that black workers would be accepted in the labor movement, and socialism did not seem like a real prospect. Reflecting on this years later Randolph said, "What you needed to follow Garvey was a leap of imagination, but socialism and

trade unionism called for rigorous social struggle — hard work and programs — and few people wanted to think about that. Against the emotional power of Garveyism, what I was preaching didn't stand a chance.”

Randolph saw Garvey as a charlatan, thinking his program was unrealistic and lacked class content. Randolph started a “Garvey Must Go” campaign when it was revealed Garvey held a secret meeting with the Ku Klux Klan, and he published bitter polemics against black nationalism in *The Messenger*. Things escalated to the point where Randolph received a severed human hand in the mail.

The campaign against the Garvey movement was instructive for Randolph. He saw that despite the incredible enthusiasm and organization it generated, the black nationalist movement petered out and was not viable.

However, Randolph also seemed out of step with the times. Postwar repression had decimated the socialist left and by 1925 *The Messenger* had severely declined. Not one of the unions or organizations Randolph created had survived.

## **Randolph and the Porters**

In a stroke of luck, Randolph was approached by a Pullman car porter who read *The Messenger* and wanted Randolph to help car porters organize. These porters worked for the Pullman Company on luxury dining train cars, tending to the needs of white customers. It was considered one of the better jobs black people could get, but it came at a demeaning price. Porters had to scramble for tips and passengers called all of them “George” (after the company owner, George Pullman). Their monthly wages started at \$72.50, but required around four hundred hours of labor a month.

The Pullman Company was so powerful it was hard to imagine black workers could ever organize. For Randolph, this was a chance to prove that labor unionism could be a way for black workers to advance and win not just greater economic security, but a modicum of respect and dignity.

Randolph founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) in 1925 and spent twelve long years fighting the company for recognition. Pullman used three main weapons against the BSCP: worker spies, layoffs, and anti-union elements within black institutions. The spies were so effective the union often had to operate in secret. All the important forces within black life seemed to be on the side of the bosses — the dean of Howard University came out publicly against “Negro unionism,” most black churches wouldn't let speakers from the porters' union use their platform, and black newspapers denounced the organizing effort.

After the initial enthusiasm and growth, the Great Depression seemed to wipe out any chances of the union's success. The BSCP went from a membership of 7,000 in 1928 to just 771 in 1932, and the workers that stayed loyal made enormous economic and personal sacrifices to do so. Union stalwarts endured hardships like torn-apart families, evictions, and having to pawn off precious possessions. Even Randolph often couldn't afford the train fare to his next city, and the union would have to pass the hat to pay for his ticket. It was common to see Randolph speaking at meetings in tattered clothes and wearing shoes without soles.

However, pro-labor New Deal legislation reenergized the labor movement, including

the porters. It also made a lasting impression on Randolph about the opportunities that could be opened up by government action. When the election between the company union and the BSCP finally took place, the Brotherhood won by a margin of seven thousand votes. In a last-ditch effort, the Pullman Company sent Randolph a six-figure check in exchange for giving up on the fight. Randolph, of course, refused the offer. In August 1937, exactly twelve years after the union was formed, they negotiated an agreement that reduced the work month from 400 hours to 240 and almost doubled the porter's wages. The effort proved that forming unions was the most viable way for black working people to advance. Randolph did the impossible, and overnight he became the country's most important black union leader and political figure.

## **The March on Washington Movement**

Randolph began to use his union in innovative ways. He saw the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as the home base of operations for building a broader political movement. Everything he did was anchored in this base and leveraged its resources. As Randolph stated, "Without the porters, I couldn't have carried on the fight for fair employment, or the fight against racial discrimination in the armed forces." There's no better example of this dynamic than the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). As the country transitioned to a war economy in preparation for World War II, Randolph had two things on his mind: making sure black workers attained good employment in the defense industries, and desegregating the armed forces. Black workers were caught in a bind. They could not get hired without training, but the government and unions were not providing it to them. Randolph saw an opportunity here, and he started with his home base.

The union leader got the idea to march ten thousand black people on Washington, DC while on a train ride with his top lieutenant, Milton Webster. The infrastructure of the union was used to promote the march.

Randolph conducted a vigorous tour of BSCP locals to get members involved. Porters spread the word wherever they traveled on their trains. This was partly a game of strategic bluffing. No one really knew how many people they could get, but the point was to at least make the government believe it could happen. Randolph knew no president was going to want a mass march just as the country entered a major war. It was a bold plan, and there was no precedent for it. This was not a movement predicated on the direction of middle-class leaders, or the mobilizing of intellectuals. This movement directly organized and mobilized working-class black America. Randolph and the BSCP campaigned in bars, barbershops, and wherever black people actually lived and worked.

The momentum drew in the mainstream civil rights organizations that didn't want to be outflanked, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League. Still, it was mostly the porters that funded its activities. Mass rallies of thousands were held in major cities, and people even began to speculate whether a hundred thousand people would go to the march.

Lester Granger of the National Urban League said, "It was Randolph's immense prestige among all classes of Negroes that made this idea something more than a

pretentious notion.” Most importantly, the government saw this was a real threat that they couldn’t ignore. Randolph was brought into the White House to negotiate with Franklin D. Roosevelt, who pleaded with him to consider the violence that could ensue. Randolph held firm and asserted that he couldn’t call off the march without an executive order.

Roosevelt blinked and issued Executive Order 0082 that created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to prevent discrimination of black workers in the defense industries. Randolph pulled off a stunning, if partial, victory. The FEPC wasn’t well-funded or -staffed, and no gains were made on desegregating the military. Randolph’s decision to call off the march angered some, including Bayard Rustin, who was then part of the youth wing of the MOWM.

The March on Washington Movement was kept as an organization to police the executive order, utilizing tactics that foreshadowed what would be seen on a larger scale during the 1950s and 1960s. Unsurprisingly, the MOWM was most active in the cities with the strongest BSCP chapters.

In St. Louis, for example, the organization had weekly meetings that turned out several hundred. They led a silent march of five hundred people around the US Cartridge Company complex. That same day, the company raised black workers’ wages and hired seventy-two black women. They planned sit-ins and other kinds of civil disobedience for employers that weren’t hiring black workers.

The MOWM reached its peak in the summer of 1942. In June, Randolph staged a rally at Madison Square Garden attended by eighteen thousand. This was a five-hour spectacle that included big-name speakers, music, and political skits. Randolph was escorted in by twenty porters in uniform playing the union’s theme song, and received a long standing ovation. Nothing of its kind had been seen since the rallies of Marcus Garvey.

Historian David Welky described the scene: “Around eighteen thousand African Americans streamed downtown in their Sunday best. Women wearing festive hats and men in solemn ties jammed buses and subway trains . . . Sixty blocks uptown, Harlem’s street culture fell silent out of respect for Randolph’s audacity.”

## **Civil Rights Anchor**

Randolph would continue to act as an anchor for various civil rights initiatives. He didn’t forget about the demand to desegregate the armed forces and soon found another opportunity to pursue this. As President Truman was gearing the country up for the Korean War, he was also approaching an election in 1948 where black votes would be crucial. Randolph advocated that blacks refuse the draft if the army remained Jim Crow, and led pickets at the 1948 Democratic National Convention to drive the point home.

This was a very popular stance among black people, as a poll of young black men in Harlem found that 71 percent favored a civil disobedience campaign against the draft. Yet again, a US president saw that Randolph’s threat was credible. Truman would eventually issue Executive Order 9981 calling for the armed services to be desegregated.

Both the fair employment and armed services campaigns were successful because they were based around concrete issues that were widely felt, and were timed for strategic effect. They, crucially, weren't efforts waged against an abstract thing called racism or white supremacy.

The BSCP would continue to play the role of facilitator during the Civil Rights Movement. When Rosa Parks was arrested the first call she made was to E. D. Nixon, the president of the BSCP chapter in Montgomery. He proceeded to organize the beginnings of the bus boycott, with the union providing the necessary funds and meeting space. Nixon recounted that he could not have played that role in the movement without the guidance of Randolph.

Randolph continued to tirelessly fight racial discrimination inside the American Federation of Labor (AFL), despite the seemingly hopeless obstacles. Repeatedly, Randolph introduced resolutions to abolish segregated locals at AFL conventions. Repeatedly, he was ignored and resisted. The BSCP did not wield much power or influence within the federation, but he was a consistent moral voice on the issue of racial discrimination.

In many ways, his tenacity laid the basis for the support the AFL-CIO would later give to the Civil Rights Movement. Randolph created the Negro American Labor Council as a pressure group for black workers within the labor movement. He never wanted to form a separate black federation, for he believed the best way to fight racism was from within the same house of labor as white workers.

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was in many ways the fulfillment of a long-held dream of Randolph's. Although Bayard Rustin was the main logistical organizer, it could not have come together without Randolph. The labor influence on the demonstration was clear in the demands for full employment, raising the minimum wage, and a permanent FEPC. Only Randolph had the respect and prestige to navigate the egos and rivalries of the various civil rights leaders. His deep relationships within the labor movement secured crucial funding and logistical support.

The march was not only designed to pressure the federal government on the Civil Rights Act. For Randolph, the mobilization also signaled a pivot toward a new stage in the movement. He saw that as the legal pillars of Jim Crow were struck down, the movement had to take on broader social and economic goals. Ironically, he agreed with Black Power activists that claimed the Civil Rights Movement in the South could not deal with the problems black people were facing in northern ghettos.

Randolph believed there were structural changes in the economy creating a crisis situation for black people in urban areas. Therefore, the struggle could not just be about civil rights, it had to be tied in with problems of political economy. He was especially attuned to the effects automation would have on black workers disproportionately locked in unskilled jobs. He stressed, "These problems will not be solved simply by changing the racial attitudes of whites. They are fundamentally economic problems which are caused by the nature of the system in which we live."

## **The Radical or Moderate?**

In the mid-1960s Randolph and Rustin put forward the Freedom Budget as a vision of the next stage of the movement. It was a comprehensive program of full employment, housing, raising the minimum wage, national health care, and upgrading Social Security. The plan represented nothing less than a radical transformation of the country, and was the inverse of more conservative efforts toward “local community control.” Sadly, the Vietnam War and other political factors prevented the Freedom Budget from being enacted.

Ironically, Randolph was accused of being too moderate during the period he was promoting the Freedom Budget. The Black Power movement is usually understood as being the more radical alternative at this time — but this interpretation of the ideological battles of the time isn’t borne out by the evidence.

For example, the 1967 Black Power conference in Newark produced a program that included the establishment of neighborhood credit unions, “buy black” campaigns, the creation of black nonprofits, and cooperative enterprises. The Freedom Budget, on the other hand, aimed at a far more transformative redistribution of wealth and resources. The Black Power agenda largely emphasized measures to empower a burgeoning black business and political class, while Randolph’s program sought to build working-class power.

While the idea of “community control” gained ground among black militants during the 1960s, Randolph viewed the emphasis as too parochial and easily manipulated by conservatives. After all, his political career featured constant battles with Southern reactionaries who used the “states’ rights” argument as a way to block any progress on civil rights. Also, Randolph strongly believed that the large-scale problems black people faced could only be solved at the federal level. Despite these differences, he always defended the right of black nationalists to express their views and believed they succeeded in giving the country a greater sense of urgency about the issue of race.

Randolph spent the last years of his life supporting various initiatives of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, including the push to increase building trades apprenticeship programs for youth of color. Though the political terrain was moving away from his vision, he still spoke at occasional lectures and honorary dinners. He died in his Manhattan apartment on May 16, 1979 at the age of ninety.

Today, the political vision of A. Philip Randolph remains urgent and relevant. Unions represent a thin line between financial stability and despair for millions of workers. The structural issues of health care, housing, and education continue to negatively impact black people disproportionately. Yet the Bernie Sanders campaign demonstrated it’s possible to build a working-class coalition on these very same issues.

A politics that doesn’t proceed along these broadly democratic-socialist lines won’t have much to offer the majority of black Americans. In the years to come, we should look back on Randolph’s political and organizational genius for lessons about how we can advance the fight for economic and racial justice.

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