

# The Socialists Who Made the March on Washington

HAROLD MEYERSON | AUGUST 23, 2013

The story of the radicals behind—and in front of—the demonstration that changed America



AP Photo, File

## The Team Assembles

“I n 1956, when I was a student at Brooklyn College, Mike Harrington told Tom [Kahn, another Brooklyn College student] and me to go up to this office in Manhattan, on 57th Street, to work with Bayard Rustin,” Rachelle Horowitz remembers. Harrington (who was to author *The Other America*, which sparked the War on Poverty), Horowitz, and Kahn were all members of the Young People’s Socialist League, a democratic socialist organization of no more than several hundred members nationally. Rustin, their elder, boasted a longer left pedigree: a brief sojourn in the Communist Party in the ’30s, then—repudiating the Communists and affiliating himself with the Socialist Party—working for socialist A.J. Muste’s Fellowship of Reconciliation; founding the Congress of Racial Equality with fellow socialist James Farmer in 1942; doing time in Leavenworth during World War II for protesting the segregation of the armed forces; traveling to India to study nonviolent civil disobedience with the Gandhi-ites; and endeavoring to integrate interstate bus travel in the South a decade before the Freedom Rides began (for which, during one trip, he was badly beaten). When Harrington suggested that Horowitz and Kahn go help out Rustin, whom they’d not met before, he was organizing a national support network for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which had begun just a few weeks earlier.

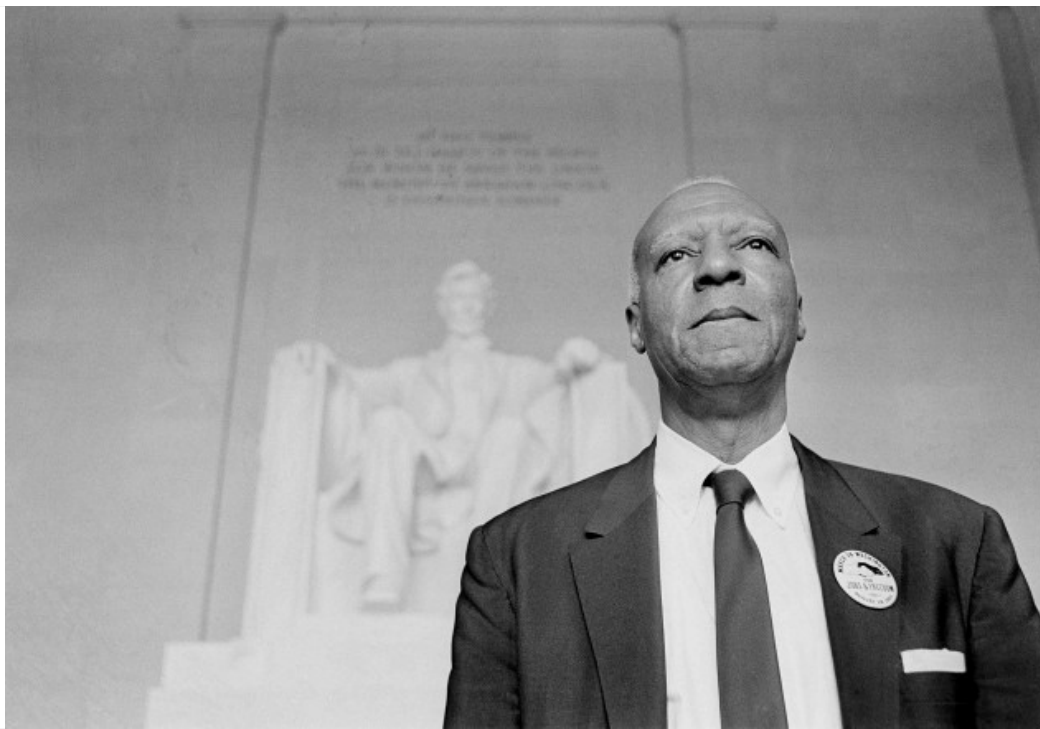
This was the genesis of the network of democratic socialists who seven years later were to conceive, organize, and set the themes for the March on Washington.

Handsome, stylish, and dynamic (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee founder Stokely Carmichael said Rustin seemed to be wearing a cape even when he wasn't), Rustin "blew our mind" when she and Kahn met him, Horowitz recalls. Theirs was hardly a unique response. Carmichael's reaction upon first encountering Rustin, he wrote decades later, was to think: "This man was a radical activist, an intellectual, *and a strategist*. That's what I want to be when I grow up."

"We wanted to change America and here were these people who were doing it," says Horowitz, who in later years became the political director of the American Federation of Teachers. The group Rustin had assembled to assist the boycott and its leader—the Montgomery minister Martin Luther King Jr., still in his mid-twenties—was called In Friendship. Also in the office when Kahn and Horowitz reported for duty were Ella Baker, a veteran civil-rights activist who'd belonged to a splinter anti-Stalinist communist grouplet (the Lovestoneites) in the '30s, and Stanley Levison, a successful businessman who'd left the Communist Party some years earlier. A young Bob Moses, who later at great personal danger was to head up voter registration drives in Jim Crow Mississippi, also showed up to volunteer. The immediate task at hand was putting together a rally at Madison Square Garden that would raise funds and demonstrate national support for the bus boycott. Rustin had already gone South to help King conceptualize and put in motion the first of the fledgling civil-rights movement's mass nonviolent civil-disobedience campaigns as part of the boycott. A year later, Baker was to become the key organizer for the group of black clergy that King would assemble and lead, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). Levison was to become, with Rustin, one of King's chief counselors.

Rustin, working both with and for the unchallenged leader of the civil-rights movement, the venerable A. Philip Randolph, became the central figure in taking that movement national. For Rustin and Randolph, as for King, Baker, Levison, Harrington, Horowitz, and Kahn, the challenge confronting African Americans was always two-fold: to tear down the legal edifice of segregation that imperiled and degraded Southern blacks, and to remake the American economy into a more egalitarian social democracy under which—and only under which—black Americans could actually prosper.

## **Seeds of the March**



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**R**andolph had been at this work longer than anybody else. In the 1910s, he founded and co-edited *The Messenger*, a Harlem-based socialist newspaper. It was the heyday of American socialism; under the leadership of the gaunt and tireless Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist Party had become, as it was never to be again, the political vehicle for hundreds of thousands of urban and rural workers. Randolph, like Debs, was sentenced to prison for his opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I. Unlike Debs, who served more than two years behind bars, Randolph drew a term that lasted just a few days. In the 1920s, a number of Pullman car porters asked him to head up their efforts to build a union. It was as thankless a task as could be imagined—white workers’ efforts to form unions in the Twenties were suppressed, and black workers’ efforts were suppressed even more brutally—but in 1937, after the Supreme Court upheld the National Labor Relations Act, the Randolph-led Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters compelled Pullman to sign a contract that gave its members both job security and a raise.

A hero not just in Harlem but throughout black America, Randolph headed up the new Negro National Congress, an organization of socialists, communists, and liberals—until 1939, when the communists prevailed upon Congress to back the Hitler-Stalin pact (wherein the USSR temporarily abandoned its opposition to Nazi Germany and joined it in carving up Poland). Randolph condemned the pact and the communists and quit the organization. He remained, however, a totemic figure in African American circles. As the nation began to gear up for World War II, he saw an opportunity to advance the legal and economic status of blacks. By late 1940, the nation’s burgeoning aircraft factories were employing fully 100,000 workers, but only 300 of them were black. President Roosevelt, Randolph realized, could remedy this situation by an executive order, and so, in January of 1941, he conceived the idea of a march on Washington. Fully 100,000 blacks would come to Washington, he said, for a rally at the Lincoln Memorial. They would demand the desegregation of both defense work and the armed forces themselves, and the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to enforce the desegregation of the defense industry. “We loyal Negro-American citizens demand the right to work and fight for our country,” Randolph proclaimed. His never-very-affluent union put up seed money for the march, and as the scheduled date for the action, July 1, drew near, the march was greeted with great enthusiasm in the black press and throughout the black communities in Northeastern and Midwestern cities.

It also caused considerable alarm in the White House. The president invited Randolph to meet with him and turned on the fabled Roosevelt charm. “Phil, what year was your class at Harvard?” Roosevelt asked. Randolph, whose manner and erudition left the impression that Harvard had merely been a way station en route to Oxford, had actually never been to college at all. When Roosevelt told Randolph that the march might disrupt the nation’s (still completely segregated) capital and asked him to call it off, Randolph cordially replied that the hopes of black America were too high to call off the march. No, he continued, the march would go on.

One week before the march was to take place, Roosevelt caved. He issued an executive order desegregating factories working on defense contracts, and established a Fair Employment Practices Commission to enforce the order. Roosevelt chose not to mandate the desegregation of the armed forces, but Randolph knew a victory when he saw one and called off the march.

He revived the idea in 1948, demanding the desegregation of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. This time it was Harry Truman who invited Randolph to the White House and asked him to stop the march nonsense. Again, Randolph declined. Again, an American president (this time, in need of urban black votes in the upcoming election) blinked: Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces, and Randolph again canceled the march.

## The Emancipation March for Jobs



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**B**y the time John F. Kennedy arrived in the White House, the number of blacks in Northern cities had grown substantially—not least as a consequence of Randolph’s success in winning the desegregation of defense plants. But the Great Migration from the South was accompanied by a transformation of rural poverty into urban poverty; black rates of urban unemployment and underemployment remained high, and African Americans’ entry into more remunerative jobs encountered all manner of obstacles. Michael Harrington noted the declining number of African Americans in manufacturing jobs in the early '60s and feared that the growing automation of production would further marginalize black workers. The solution required not just powerful civil-rights legislation at the national level but also a governmental commitment to providing full employment. In his 1962 volume on poverty in the United States, *The Other America*, Harrington wrote:

“If all the discriminatory laws in the United States were immediately repealed, race would still remain as one of the most pressing moral and political problems in the nation. Negroes and other minorities are not simply victims of a series of iniquitous statutes. The American economy, the American society, the American unconscious are all racist. If all the laws were framed to provide equal opportunity, a majority of the Negroes would not be able to take full advantage of the change. There would still be a vast, silent, automatic system directed against men and women of color.”

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Harrington’s perspective—that black equality required not just the abolition of Jim Crow but massive structural changes to the economy—wasn’t his alone. It was also that of the circle of socialists—including Randolph, Rustin, Baker, Horowitz, Kahn, the aging socialist leader Norman Thomas, and, from afar, King—in which he moved. An organization that Randolph chaired, the Negro American Labor Council, began discussing what action it could take to address the plight of urban black workers in 1961. Rustin started taking soundings for some kind of national demonstration in 1962, and in December of that year, he and Randolph began talking about a march on Washington. Randolph asked Rustin to write a prospectus

for such a march, and with Kahn and Norman Hill, an African American socialist activist, he co-authored a paper calling for an “Emancipation March for Jobs” that he presented to Randolph in January 1963 (the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation). The proposal called for bringing 100,000 demonstrators to Washington for a two-day mobilization: the first day, lobbying Congress and the administration; the second day, staging a rally at the Lincoln Memorial. The march to the rally would circle the White House, just as a Rustin-organized march for a civil-rights platform had encircled the Los Angeles Sports Arena when it hosted the 1960 Democratic National Convention. (Harrington had been the on-the-ground organizer for that action.) The demands of the marchers at the proposed Washington action would focus on legislation banning racial discrimination in employment and the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Commission to enforce it (Roosevelt’s FEPC order had expired at the end of World War II), a doubling of the minimum wage, and a federal commitment to job creation.

Ultimately, of course, the march for jobs became a “March for Jobs and Freedom,” the official name of the iconic event that would come to be known as the March on Washington. Randolph and Rustin had both long argued that the civil-rights movement could only succeed if it were raised to a national level, that only federal power could overcome the laws and customs of such apartheid states as Mississippi and Alabama. To that end, Rustin had organized three mini-marches on Washington in the late '50s: The first, called the Prayer Pilgrimage, brought roughly 25,000 to Washington to mark the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to hear King deliver a powerful speech in which he closed with the demand, “Give us the ballot!” The second and third were marches in support of school integration, as efforts to desegregate schools in Little Rock and other Southern cities were met with white violence. “Bayard said, ‘We’re going to keep marching and marching and marching until somebody pays attention,’” Horowitz recalls. “The usual suspects” behind these marches, she says, were Randolph, Rustin, and King. “They were a training ground for the movement,” she adds, noting that Ezell Blair, one of the four students who initiated the lunch-counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960, had joined her and Kahn in working on these D.C. actions.

But if the initial focus of the 1963 march was primarily the plight of blacks in the North, that’s partly because the civil-rights struggle in the South that winter lacked a high-profile, ongoing campaign. In the spring, however, King and the SCLC began a mass campaign demanding the desegregation of public facilities in Birmingham, Alabama. Bull Connor, the aptly named county sheriff, turned fire hoses and attack dogs loose on the demonstrators, including a large number of school children, a spectacle broadcast on the then-new nightly television network newscasts. King, Rustin, and Randolph quickly decided to expand the purview of the march to Southern civil rights as well as Northern economic rights. The murder soon thereafter of Medgar Evers, the NAACP’s Mississippi director, made the new Southern emphasis even more prominent.

Randolph publicly announced the march in the last week of March, at which point he had the support chiefly of such black union leaders as Cleveland Robinson and such heavily black (and left) unions as the Packinghouse Workers. The more establishment black organizations—the NAACP and the Urban League in particular—responded coolly to his announcement, casting a cold eye on both its social democratic message and the confrontational way that message would be delivered. Roy Wilkins, who headed the NAACP, asked Randolph to forget the march and focus instead on a mass lobbying effort. But as the events in Birmingham riveted the nation’s attention, momentum for the march built. King’s SCLC joined the Negro American Labor Council as a co-sponsor. On June 11, Kennedy went on national television to announce he was sending a civil-rights bill to Congress that focused almost exclusively on the desegregation of public facilities. In early July, both the NAACP and the Urban League endorsed the march, soon to be joined by the United Auto Workers, the American Jewish Congress, and other mainstream liberal groups. Rustin issued a public call that listed the rally’s demands, and to the initial list of economic items, he gave increased emphasis the federal enforcement of voting rights and added the enactment of Kennedy’s civil-rights bill.

Nonetheless, like Roosevelt and Truman before him, Kennedy sought to dissuade the civil-rights leaders from going ahead with the march. Invited once again to the Oval Office, this time in the company of his fellow civil-rights leaders, Randolph was the one who told the president no. The march would go forward.

## **Trading Militance for Numbers**



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**W**ith the march an inevitability, the administration decided if it couldn't lick it, it would join it—or at least, try to make it less confrontational. March permits were issued on the condition that there would be no circling of the White House. “Boy, did they know how to pressure us,” says Horowitz, who was by then working as the March’s transportation coordinator.

As the list of sponsors and the projections of the number of marchers grew, and as the White House gave the march its wary, guarded blessing, Randolph and Rustin were compelled to diminish the militance of the protest. The two-day event was scaled back to one. The mass lobbying gave way to lobbying just by the leaders of the sponsor organizations. “Bayard always knew we would have to trade in militance for numbers,” Norman Hill recalled. Wilkins and Whitney Young, the head of the Urban League, were opposed to having any civil-disobedience part of the march or rally, so such plans were dropped as well.

Still, Horowitz says, the increasing establishment imprimatur that the march had won had its rewards: On the early morning of the march, at Rustin’s suggestion, New York City Mayor Robert Wagner ordered the subways to start running on their rush-hour schedules at 4 a.m. so that demonstrators could catch their early buses and trains. New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered his toll-booth operators to provide demonstrators setting out for D.C. with maps showing where they could park in Washington.

As he had in 1941, Randolph initially envisioned a march of roughly 100,000 participants. Through the efforts of supportive unions, churches, and civil-rights groups, and the drum-banging of black and liberal media, the buzz around the march grew steadily louder. Horowitz, in charge of coordinating the transportation to and from Washington, calculated on the eve of the action that 67,000 people would come to the capital on chartered trains or buses. That number didn’t include those who came by regular commercial trains or buses, or those who drove or just showed up from somewhere in metropolitan Washington. The media pegged the crowd at 200,000, and both the rally and the entertainment preceding it were carried live on all the networks.

King’s speech, of course, was the part of the rally that immediately became history, and rightly so. But neither he nor the other speakers focused exclusively on the kind of racial discrimination that Kennedy’s bill would outlaw. A look at the signs that the marchers carried, or a reading of the speeches they heard, makes clear that the need to create a more just economy was a central theme as well. “Yes, we want public accommodations open to all citizens,” Randolph proclaimed in the speech that opened the rally, “but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them.” Two days later, he made this argument even more pointedly at a post-march conference convened by the Socialist Party. “The white sharecroppers of the South have full civil rights,” he said, “but live in the bleakest poverty.”

## What the Socialists Did—and What They Couldn’t Do



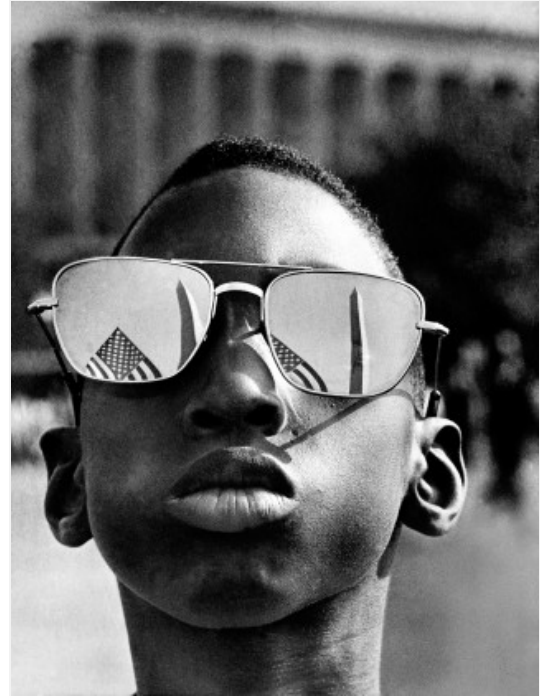
Jenny Warburg

**O**f the many reasons why socialism never became a major political tendency in the United States, as it did in Europe, is that working people—more precisely, white working men—gained the franchise here during the Jacksonian era, well before socialism had developed into a mass movement in Europe or America or anyplace else. In Europe, by contrast, it was chiefly the agitation of socialist parties in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that led to the creation of universal manhood, and in some places womanhood, suffrage. Socialists brought ordinary Europeans the vote, which powerfully legitimated socialism for tens of millions of Europeans.



No equivalent legitimation happened in America. While there had been socialist movements and sects throughout the 19th century, the American Socialist Party wasn't founded until 1901. That party, the Communist Party, and their various offshoots attracted thousands of activists during the 20th century, and their most enduring and significant achievement was to have seeded and helped form the movement for civil rights that led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which went beyond Kennedy's initial proposal to also ban racial discrimination in employment) and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. But despite their central role in the movement that led to the extension of the franchise to Southern blacks, American socialists experienced no gains for their movement equivalent to those their European counterparts had won. While Randolph, Rustin, and King were all democratic socialists, as were many of their colleagues and lieutenants, they did not march for civil rights under a socialist banner. To have done so would have been to make the attainment of civil rights all the more difficult. Nonetheless, the power of their economic perspective has been felt in black America from their time until this day. For decades, the proposed budgets of the Congressional Black Caucus spelled out what was essentially a vision of a social democratic American economy.

That vision, of course, was not realized. Accommodations were desegregated, but just as Randolph and his associates feared, the number of Americans who could afford to use them—who could afford college and medical care, to cite just two institutions that are legally open to all regardless of race and nonetheless beyond the reach of millions of Americans—remains well below any decent standard. Capitalism devoid of social democracy, the socialist planners of the march believed, would never produce the broadly shared prosperity that was needed if blacks and other racial minorities were to win more equal economic opportunities. Fifty years after the March on Washington, those socialists' presentiments have been tragically borne out.



*For further reading on the march and the socialist left, see two new books: The March on Washington by William P. Jones, and A Freedom Budget for All Americans by Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates. In addition to biographies of Randolph and Rustin, another valuable source is Michael Harrington's 1973 volume, Fragments of the Century.*

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