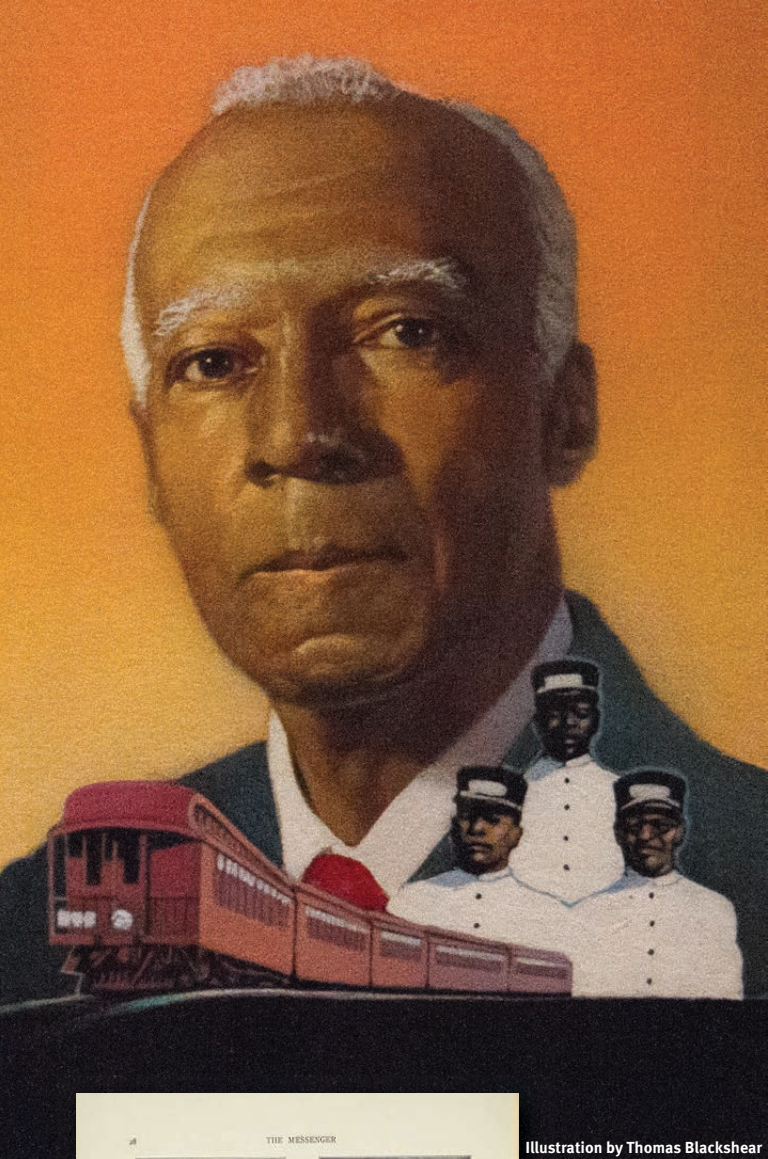




A. Philip Randolph

Union organizer or civil rights leader? A. Philip Randolph became both because he understood that the two causes were closely linked.

Randolph worked to ensure that as union workers demanded their fair share of what they helped to produce, Black workers also got their fair share. He went on to become the key organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, at which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his legendary “I Have a Dream” speech.

Born on April 15, 1889, in Crescent City, FL, Asa Philip Randolph was the son of a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and a seamstress. When Randolph was a toddler, his parents moved the family to Jacksonville, FL, which was home to an established African American community.

Though they faced the horrors of segregation and hatred in the South of that era—Randolph remembered his mother sitting at home with a shotgun in her lap while his father, pistol tucked under his coat, went to prevent a mob from lynching a Black man in the local jail—the family provided a safe place to live and a good education for Randolph.

With his older brother James, Randolph attended Cookman Institute in East Jacksonville, the state’s only academic high school for African Americans at the time. Randolph enjoyed literature, drama, public speaking, baseball and choir, and he was valedictorian of the 1907 graduating class.

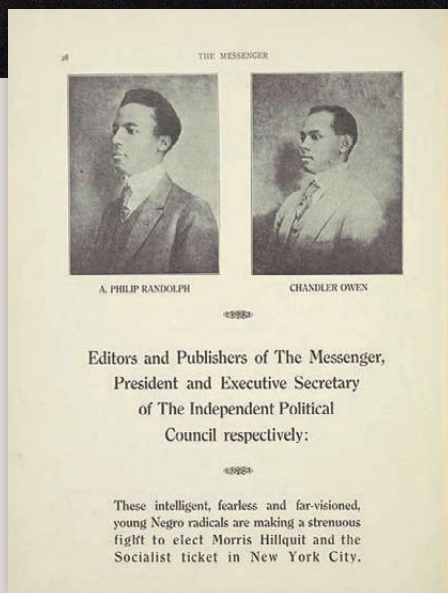
He set his sights on an acting career and moved to New York City in 1911, but his family didn’t approve, and his career faltered. But he discovered social activism in New York. It began when he read W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, a book that convinced him that the struggle for social equality would be his calling, which led to his developing his socialist political philosophy.

In 1914, Randolph married Lucille E. Green, a Howard University graduate and owner of a hair salon catering to elite African American women in New York. She shared his socialist politics and earned enough money to support them both.

Randolph tested his speaking skills at one of Harlem’s first “soapbox corners” at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue, where speakers would preach to the people on the sidewalk.

In 1917, William White, president of the Headwaiters and Sidewaiters Society of Greater New York, asked Randolph and his friend and ally Chandler Owen to help edit a monthly magazine for the society, *Hotel Messenger*. With the “Hotel” soon dropped from the masthead, *The Messenger* would become an influential magazine among Black readers nationwide.

The Messenger established Randolph and Owen as leading figures in civil rights and socialist circles. When the United States entered World War I, they went on a nationwide anti-war speaking tour in 1918 that almost got them arrested.



Top: A painting of A. Philip Randolph and the Pullman porters

Above: Randolph and Chandler Owen in *The Messenger*

A. Philip Randolph and other civil rights leaders walk through Congress during the March on Washington in 1963.



In 1925, a group of Pullman porters approached Randolph and asked him to lead their newly formed labor organization, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). The Pullman porters were attendants on Pullman train sleeping cars, and they were all Black. Randolph took the job. Randolph wasn't a Pullman employee, so the company couldn't fire him for his activism.

Randolph led a decade-long campaign to organize the Pullman porters and win union certification. After several failures and the near bankruptcy of the union at the outset of the Great Depression—the union office's electricity and telephone service were cut in 1933 for non-payment—Randolph finally won certification of the BSCP as the exclusive collective-bargaining agent of the Pullman porters in 1935. It was “the first victory of Negro workers over a great industrial corporation,” Randolph said. A change in federal law the previous year banning “company” unions that weren't independent of the employer helped clear the way for BSCP's certification. The American Federal of Labor (the precursor to today's AFL-CIO) accepted BSCP as a member the same year.

Randolph's activism moved beyond BSCP as his prestige grew, and he employed the power of protest. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to issue an executive order banning discrimination against Black workers in the defense industry, Randolph called for “10,000 loyal Negro American citizens” to march on Washington, DC. The support for his idea surprised him—soon, his call for action went from 10,000 marchers to 100,000. Just the threat of the march moved Roosevelt to act. He issued the executive order on June 25, 1941, six days before the planned march was to occur. The order declared that “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” Roosevelt created a Fair Employment Practices Commission to enforce it.

After World War II, Randolph demanded that the government integrate the armed forces, especially because there was a peacetime draft in place. He founded the League for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation and urged young men, both Black and white, to “refuse to cooperate with a Jim Crow conscription service.” Randolph's call to action pushed President Harry Truman to act,

just as it had with Roosevelt. Truman feared widespread civil disobedience and the loss of the Black vote in his 1948 reelection bid. On July 26, 1948, he signed an order to end racial discrimination in the military.

Randolph was elected a vice president of the newly merged AFL-CIO in 1955. He used his position to push for desegregation and for respect for civil rights inside the labor movement as well as outside.

Randolph had demonstrated the power of mass protest and civil disobedience, and it had a strong influence on the emerging generation of civil rights leaders, who asked him to act as chairman of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at which King spoke. Randolph also spoke at the march, telling the world what it represented:

We are not a pressure group, we are not an organization or a group of organizations, we are not a mob. We are the advanced guard of a massive, moral revolution for jobs and freedom. This revolution reverberates throughout the land touching every city, every town, every village where black men are segregated, oppressed and exploited. But this civil rights revolution is not confined to the Negro, nor is it confined to civil rights, for our white allies know that they cannot be free while we are not.

President Lyndon B. Johnson presented Randolph with the Presidential Medal of Freedom the following year.

After he retired as president of the BSCP in 1968, Randolph co-founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute to promote trade unionism in the Black community. He continued to serve as an AFL-CIO vice president until 1974. Randolph died in New York City on May 16, 1979.

A statue of Randolph stands as a memorial in Washington, DC's Union Station, a tribute to his railroad roots and a nod to the many participants in the 1963 March on Washington who came to the city by rail. Another statue of Randolph was erected at Newark, NJ's Penn Station last year.

Randolph often reminded the world that freedom required struggle:

Freedom is never granted: It is won. Justice is never given: It is exacted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed of all lands and races. **PR**