

A SALUTE TO Asa Philip Randolph

Dear Reader: April 15 was an important date, not just because it's tax day, I submit to you that the day is equally important for another reason. It is A. Philip Randolph's birthday. One might ask, who is he? Or why should we care about him? The entire article will answer that question.

For us he has a particular significance because of his relationship to one of the sites located in the Pullman National Monument. The reason for that is virtually every story that was written before and since the designation about the monument, there a general reference to the term Black labor or revisionist history writers make a point of singling out the Pullman Porters, who without Randolph's leadership would not even be a topic of conversation.

The National A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum that has been telling the Black labor history exclusively, at the monument that honors Randolph, was almost never mentioned by name.

America's political, economic and social landscape is dotted with trees bearing fruit from A. Philip Randolph's vision; courage; genius; and pragmatic leadership. We decided to tell those who don't know the name A. Philip Randolph, who he was and why he is important to you. On the national

stage, that leadership began with his defiant formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), --the first Black labor union chartered in America and the first to win a collective bargaining agreement with a major U.S. corporation, the powerful Pullman Company. The success of that effort was the first step on a journey filled with the genius of his strategic leadership, the impacts of which are felt in the Black community to this day. Yet many, unfortunately, do not know that they are the direct beneficiaries of his advocacy.

The founding of the BSCP was pivotal in helping Blacks to understand his philosophy:

That we must be masters of our own economic fate. From the 1940s until the late 1960s, Black railroad employees were the foundation of a gradually expanding Black middle class. Randolph's footprints are still visible in his early support of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Montgomery

Bus Boycott, decisive actions which ultimately led to the 1963 March on Washington, although that is largely unknown or appreciated.

John Hope Franklin, a preeminent American historian, paid tribute to Randolph's genius when he declared, "A. Philip Randolph "stands at the pinnacle of leadership, performing tasks that certainly no one, not even Martin Luther King, could do. (These were) tasks that involved putting coalitions together, challenging the government, making demands and standing firm until those demands were acceded to."

Among the more exceptional were Randolph's bold challenges thrown at three United States presidents-- Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941, Harry Truman in 1949 and John F. Kennedy, in 1963. The result of those challenges, delivered major Civil Rights legislation in employment; education; housing; and voting rights and continue to underscore his fascinating legacy.

Randolph at Carnegie Hall in New York City, called him “truly the Dean of Negro leaders and noted that he played a crucial role in gaining recognition of African Americans in labor organizations.” Randolph, King said at the 1959 tribute, “devoted his life to the achievement of both racial and economic equality,” King praised Randolph’s refusal “to sell his race for a mess of pottage” and credited him for “never being afraid to challenge unjust state power or speak out against the power structure.”

Randolph’s decision to send Bayard Rustin, his field marshal, to Montgomery to instruct Dr. King in direct, but non-violent social action, was directly responsible for the long, but successful, victory over the bus company and the city’s political and economic leadership.

In dispatching Rustin to shepherd young King, Randolph again displayed the discerning eyes that seldom failed to identify gifted, social justice agents. In doing so, Randolph also became the first nationally prominent civil rights leader or clergyman to invest funds and resources in the unknown minister, who had not yet earned a Ph. D or won a Nobel Peace Prize.

The breakthrough in Montgomery proved a harbinger of more major civil rights successes in the Deep South. It also set the stage for the 1963 March on Washington, on which Randolph had set his sights in early 1941. In that pivotal year, he audaciously challenged Roosevelt, who was extremely popular among African Americans. By threatening to lead “125,000 marching blacks” on the nation’s capital, which would have

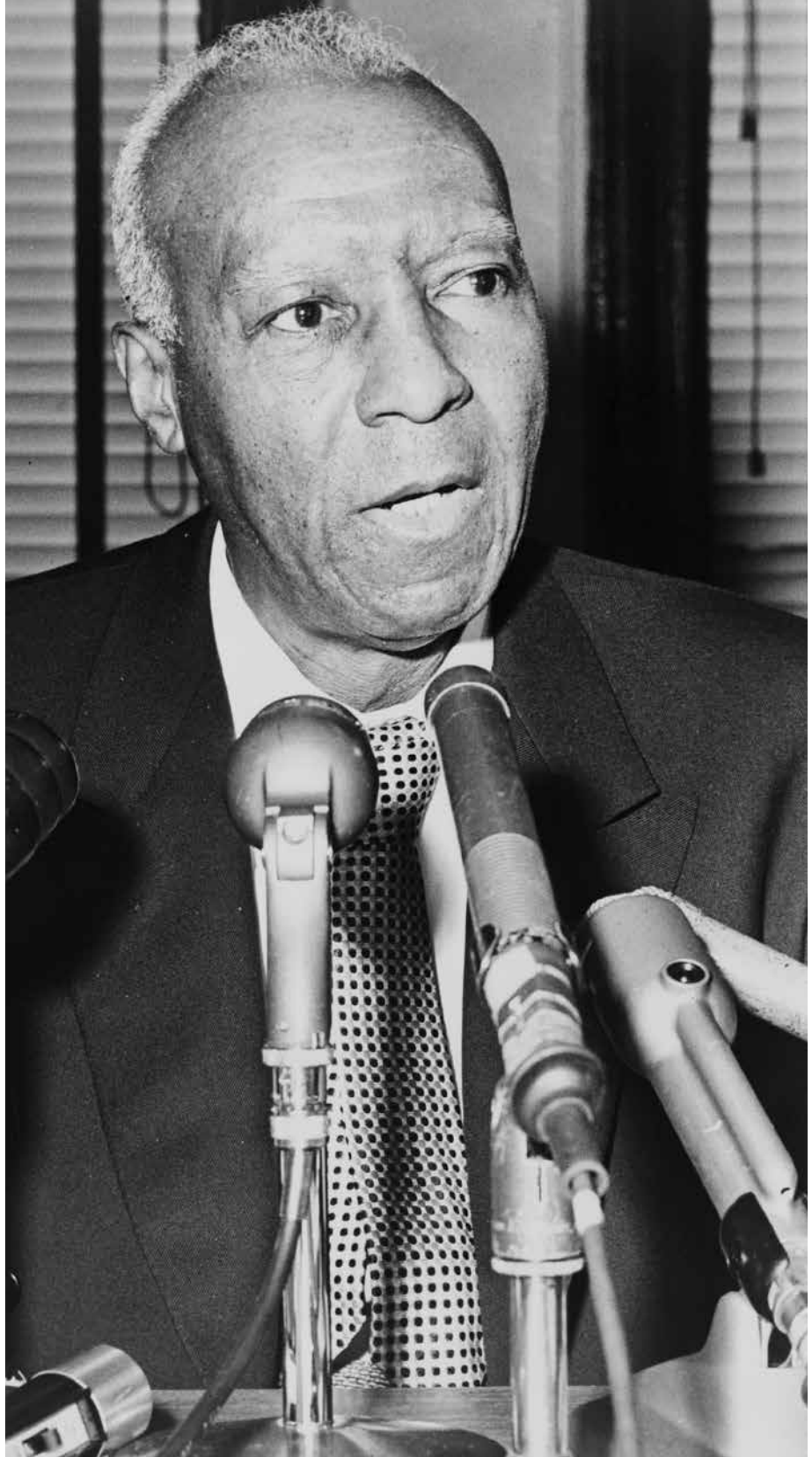


Photo Courtesy of Library of Congress

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thoroughly embarrassed Roosevelt, the wily Randolph cornered him into signing the first presidential executive order, 8802, to mandate government employment for African Americans in dire need of decent wages and benefits.

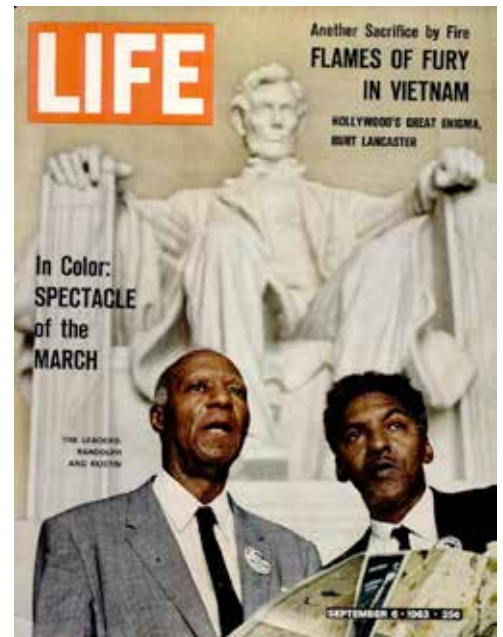
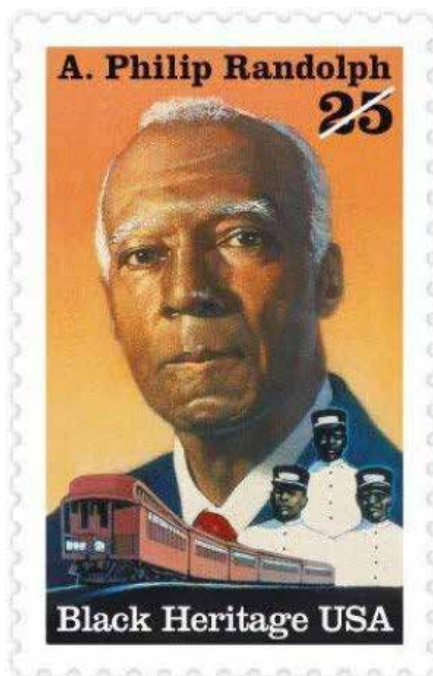
Roosevelt's reluctant action forced producers of material for World War II to hire African Americans. The second executive order 8902, signed in 1948, by a politically besieged Truman with an urgent need for black voters, broke down the doors of the segregated military service and opened new pathways to upward mobility. Fifteen years later, an aging Randolph outfoxed the five other men who comprised the "Big Six" of African American leaders, none of whom believed that a march on Washington for jobs and justice was feasible or would be a success.

But Randolph, sensing that the moment to stage the largest civil rights march in American history had come, told Rustin to call Dr. King, who was then traveling in Africa. "Tell Martin that if he agrees to deliver the keynote speech at the march, the other leaders will agree to support it and we will be able to build it," Randolph said. President John F. Kennedy, like the chief executives before him, Roosevelt and Truman, appealed to Randolph to cancel the march. This time, he would not. Dr. King consented to keynote the event, and, months later, electrified 250,000 marchers with his signature "I have a Dream" speech.

In the next year, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, which capped Randolph's four decades of relentless leadership. As so appropriately expressed by Congressman John

Lewis, "If he (Randolph) had been born in another period, maybe of another color, he probably would have been President. In another land, he probably would have been, maybe, Prime Minister...But in a real sense, he was head of the building of a new nation, of a better America."

But sadly, Randolph still lacks appropriate recognition. There is a bust of him in Union Station in Washington D.C., and the A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum, in Chicago, the nation's only museum that bears his name, located in the National Parks Service, Pullman National Monument District but is not operated by the parks service. Therefore, essentially what that means is that the 21-year-old museum in Chicago is doing what it has been doing since its inception 21 years ago finding creative ways to secure the required resources to continue honoring and celebrating Black history under the umbrella of tourism. www.pullmanportermuseum.com



The hard hitting reality that Randolph's name is unknown to the vast majority of Americans, including educated blacks, was recently driven home at the museum. A group of 50 bright and enthusiastic African American students from one of the nation's leading universities became tearful when they were gently introduced to Randolph's genius, struggle, sacrificed and strategic leadership. "We never knew about this history, we are just finding out about it on this visit."

This article in article ran in newspapers around the country honoring Mr. Randolph's birthday, including the Chicago Crusader. For that we are grateful. We thought it appropriate to include it in this inaugural issue of this publication.