

Labor Day, African Americans Moves for Equity and A. Philip Randolph



Labor Day is a holiday of parades, picnics, and rest — but for African Americans, it has always carried a deeper charge. It is a reminder of the long, unfinished struggle to turn labor into dignity, and dignity into justice.

The holiday itself emerged from the labor movement of the late 1800s. The first Labor Day parade was held in New York City on September 5, 1882, and the day became a federal holiday in 1894. It was meant to honor workers, yet Black workers often found themselves standing outside the circle of recognition, essential to the nation's labor force but denied full respect on the job and in the unions meant to protect them.

That contradiction set the stage for one of the great figures in American labor history: A. Philip Randolph. Born on April 15, 1889, in Crescent City, Florida, Randolph came of age in a country that promised freedom but delivered segregation and exploitation. In Harlem in the 1910s, he and Chandler Owen launched **The Messenger**, using journalism as a weapon against racism and economic injustice. Randolph understood early that the fight for wages, hours, and working conditions was inseparable from the fight for Black freedom.

His most famous battle began in 1925, when Black Pullman porters asked him to lead their organizing drive. On August 25, 1925, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was formed in New York City. The porters were the hidden workforce of a glamorous industry: they carried luggage, made beds, shined shoes, and endured long hours, low pay, and humiliating treatment — including being called “George” instead of their names. Randolph gave them something more powerful than sympathy: strategy, discipline, and a national voice.

The fight was brutal and slow. The Pullman Company resisted, and the porters faced fear, surveillance, and retaliation. But Randolph did not break. In 1935, the Brotherhood won AFL affiliation, and in 1937 Pullman finally recognized the union and granted a contract that improved wages and hours. It was a victory for Black labor and a warning to America that Black workers would no longer remain silent in the shadows.

Randolph's struggle expanded far beyond the railroads. In 1941, he threatened a mass march on Washington to protest discrimination in defense hiring. The pressure worked. On June 25, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination in defense

industries. Randolph had forced the nation to confront its own hypocrisy: democracy abroad could not coexist with racism at home.

He returned to the national stage in 1963 as a chief architect of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, proving that civil rights without economic justice was incomplete. The same man who fought for porters in sleeping cars helped shape the moral thunder of the civil rights era.

So when Labor Day comes, A. Philip Randolph gives the holiday its sharpest meaning. It is about recognition — of the Black porters, workers, organizers, and dreamers who turned labor into a demand for equity. It is not only a celebration of work. It is a remembrance of the Black workers who built, served, carried, cleaned, and organized; of the leaders who dared to demand equality; and of the unfinished promise that every worker deserves dignity.

In 1925, Randolph helped organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first major Black-led labor union, giving Black workers a national platform in a labor movement that often shut them out.

On Labor Day, the nation pauses to honor workers — but for Black America, the day carries a deeper weight. It is not just about rest after labor; it is about the long fight to be paid, protected, and respected for labor that built the country.

That story reaches back to the post–Civil War era, when many Black Americans entered the workforce only to find that freedom did not mean fairness. They were hired for the hardest jobs, paid the least, and often denied the right to organize. One of the most important fronts in that

struggle was the railroad sleeper car — the gleaming symbol of American travel powered by Black labor behind the scenes.

Into that world came A. Philip Randolph, born in 1889, a man with a sharp mind and a fearless voice. By the 1910s, he was already fighting through words, coediting *The Messenger* with Chandler Owen and demanding justice for Black workers. Then, in 1925, the sleeping car porters called on him. They needed more than sympathy; they needed strategy, discipline, and courage. Randolph answered.

On August 25, 1925, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was formed in New York. It was a historic act: Black workers organizing themselves in an era when many unions excluded them. The Pullman Company resisted. The struggle dragged on for years. Porters faced surveillance, intimidation, and the constant risk of losing their jobs. But Randolph did not fold. He understood that labor rights and racial justice were one battle, not two.

By 1935, the Brotherhood had won AFL affiliation. By 1937, Pullman finally recognized the union and granted a contract that improved wages and hours. It was not the end, but it was proof that organized Black labor could move a giant company.

Then came the next thunderclap. In 1941, Randolph threatened a mass march on Washington to protest discrimination in defense hiring. The pressure worked. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941, barring discrimination in defense industries. Randolph had forced the nation to confront the contradiction between democracy abroad and racism at home.

He would do it again in 1963, standing as one of the key architects of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom — the same day Martin Luther King Jr. gave the “I Have a Dream” speech. Randolph’s vision never changed: a fair America had to include fair work.

So Labor Day, seen through Randolph’s life, becomes more than a holiday. It becomes a memorial to Black workers who labored in the shadows, organized in the dark, and forced the light to come.

