

Philip Randolph was a labor organizer who aimed to end employment discrimination early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his leadership helped set the stage for the Civil Rights movement. He is referenced in many social work textbooks on the history of social policy and the profession because of his trailblazing influence (my students in 742 saw him referenced in their readings this week): in the 1940s he advocated for the racial integration in the military, he was a principal organizer of the March on Washington in 1963, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Johnson the following year. Decades earlier before he was on the national stage, however, he was organizing the country's first Black labor union. This was a period in his career when he was learning about the power of organizing, even when the possibility of success likely seemed unattainable at times.

The Pullman Company was the largest employer of African Americans in the early 1900s,<sup>1</sup> but Black porters—workers aboard trains who attended to the needs of passengers—were also among the most exploited workers in America. Randolph's success was helping them unionize so that, through collective bargaining, they could fight for fair wages, shorter work hours, and better working conditions.

His success was revolutionary. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was the first labor organization led by African Americans to receive a charter in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and his strategic organizing, which combined direct action with negotiation, set a template for Civil Rights-era social justice movements.

For modern social workers, Randolph's legacy is a powerful reminder of the importance of advocacy and collective action. His ability to organize and his radical defiance serves as a blueprint for confronting systemic inequalities. Social workers today can draw inspiration from his persistence, strategic planning, and unyielding commitment to justice. We can also learn from Randolph's conviction that labor rights and civil rights are closely tied, even while his approach to labor organizing transcended mere economic concerns, encompassing a broader fight for dignity and equality.

Social workers today are committed to change, but the obstacles—persistent inequality, structural racism, political polarization—can seem daunting. We need to know what Randolph learned: the power of collective action.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://guides.loc.gov/this-month-in-business-history/august/brotherhood-of-sleeping-car-porters>