



AMERICAN LIVES

A. Philip Randolph
A Life Fighting for Equality

Section 2

"[African Americans] have reached the limit of their endurance when it comes to going into another Jim Crow Army to fight another war for democracy—a democracy they have never gotten."—A. Philip Randolph, testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 1948

For many decades, A. Philip Randolph (1889–1979) worked to achieve equal rights for African Americans. His work began before World War I and did not end until the 1970s. His efforts had a profound effect on government policy.

Randolph was born and educated in Florida. After graduating from high school, he left home for New York City. He promised to return the next summer—but he never did. He took college courses that gave him a radical point of view. In 1917, he began a journal called *The Messenger*. He used it to denounce labor unions for refusing to aid African-American workers in their attempts to organize. He also campaigned against African Americans joining the army during World War I. Because of that stand, he was arrested, but he was soon released.

In the 1920s, Randolph continued speaking out. In 1925 he founded and became head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). This union was formed by African Americans who worked as porters and maids on trains with sleeping cars. The Pullman Company, which employed them, refused to recognize the union. It fired workers who joined the union and threatened others not to join. Randolph tried to organize support for the union on the outside and spoke to inspire members. It took many years, but with the New Deal, the union had a chance. The Roosevelt administration passed laws that gave greater power to unions. In 1935, Pullman finally recognized the union. That same year Randolph won another victory. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) welcomed the Brotherhood as a member union. Two years later, Randolph and Pullman agreed to a new contract that raised workers' pay, cut their hours, and guaranteed money for overtime work.

Randolph's next major success came in 1941. In the early years of World War II, there was much debate about whether the United States should enter the war. Randolph loudly insisted that African Americans should not participate as long as racism continued at home. He organized the March on

Washington Movement and promised to lead thousands of blacks in a massive protest against the lack of equal rights. President Roosevelt feared that Nazi Germany would use such a protest for propaganda that would embarrass the United States. He tried to convince Randolph to call off the march, but Randolph refused. Finally, the president issued Executive Order 8802, stopping companies and unions that worked with the government from discriminating against blacks. He also set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate any cases of discrimination. Randolph then agreed to cancel the march.

A few years later, he put similar pressure on President Truman. Truman issued an order in 1948 to end segregation in the armed forces.

Throughout the 1950s, Randolph continued to work for African-American rights both within the labor movement and in the country at large. As the civil rights movement picked up steam in the 1950s and early 1960s, Randolph stepped forward. In 1963, he was named as the chief organizer of the massive march on Washington of August 28. He joined other leaders in meeting with President Kennedy to push him toward laws that would guarantee equal rights. The march helped create a climate of popular support that encouraged Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Randolph retired as head of the BSCP in 1968 but remained active in the civil rights movement until his death at age 90.

Questions

1. What did Randolph mean, in the quote at the top of the page, by a "Jim Crow Army"?
2. How did the New Deal help Randolph's fight on behalf of the Brotherhood?
3. Some African-American leaders criticized Randolph for canceling the 1941 march. Do you think he was right to do so? Explain.