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A. Philip Randolph and Boston's African-American Railroad Worker

by
James R. Green and
Robert C. Hayden

On October 8, 1988, a group of retired Pullman car porters and dining car waiters gathered in Boston's Back Bay Station for the unveiling of a larger-than-life statue of A. Philip Randolph. During the 1920s and 1930s, Randolph was a pioneering black labor leader who led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. He came to be considered the "father of the modern civil rights movement" as a result of his efforts to desegregate World War II defense jobs and the military services. Randolph's importance as a militant leader is highlighted by a quote inscribed on the base of the statue which reads, in part: "Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted."

The contributions of former railroad workers to the railroad industry and to the black community were acknowledged at the unveiling ceremony by a number of speakers, including State Representative Byron Rushing who was instrumental in securing funding from the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) for the

...any understanding of the evolution of black urban politics must consider Randolph's enormous influence.

statue of Randolph by artist Tina Allen.

There are few statues of public figures in Boston as impressive as Allen's interpretation of Randolph. There are, in fact, no other statues of labor or civil rights leaders anywhere in the city. Attempts to convince city officials to erect a statue of William Monroe Trotter have been unsuccessful. The Randolph statue is unique, therefore, not only as art, but as an inspirational public monument for present and future generations. As Representative Rushing remarked at the unveiling, "We are turning this space into more than a waiting room—we are turning this space into an education room. . . ."¹

As an extension of the Randolph statue project, we were asked by the MBTA Construction Department to conduct an oral history project of black railroad workers and to work with designers and architects to produce panels of text and photographs in the Back Bay Station highlighting the history, experiences, and accomplishments of blacks in the railroad industry and in the



Robert C. Hayden (left) and James R. Green at unveiling of railroad worker panels at Back Bay Station.

community. Thirty-one men and one woman were interviewed for the project. The transcriptions of those interviews have been placed in the Healey Library archives of the University of Massachusetts at Boston. On February 27, 1991, the panels were unveiled in a ceremony at Back Bay Station attended by Governor William Weld, Secretary of Transportation Richard Taylor, and Representative Rushing, again an influential force in helping to secure funding from the MBTA.²

The interviews contain insights into several important yet neglected areas of African-American history. Although Boston's black community has been the subject of many fine historical studies, its working-class population has not been extensively researched. Our interviews reveal a great deal about the working lives of black railroad workers, their living conditions on long road trips, and their family and community roles. The interviews contain a powerful statement about the black work ethic, highlighting the sense of style and craft the porters and waiters brought to the railroads as well as how they dealt with race discrimination on the job and in the cities they visited.³

Trade Unionism and the Black Worker

The interviews also illuminate a previously neglected area of experience: the meaning of trade unionism to black workers, not only in material terms, but in wider political terms, as well. Our interviews complement the recent historical scholarship on Randolph and the Brotherhood which includes a monograph, a documentary film, a microfilmed edition of the union's papers, and two important biographies of Randolph.⁴ While this work has vastly expanded our knowledge of Randolph and the Brotherhood, the meaning of trade unionism to rank-and-file porters has not been fully examined.

In the texts available on the history of Boston's African-American community, there is little information on the small group of black workers who belonged to unions before the Depression, including porters, musicians, and members of the Colored Waiters Alliance. An even larger number of workers in the late 1930s and 1940s joined all-black unions on the railroads, worked as tunnel diggers in the "sand hog" union affiliated with

the Laborers' International Union of America, or became active in the militant new unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).⁵ Their history has also been largely neglected.

The interviews we recorded begin to fill in this gap. They include valuable comments about trade union experience from men like George Walker of Marlboro, Massachusetts. He recalled that "when I went to work for the Pullman Company in 1924 working on the Boston-Chicago overnight train—the Wolverine—every other person you came into contact with on the railroad was organized."⁶ The other unions, like most that were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), excluded workers of color *de facto or de jure*.⁷ This pattern of discrimination was so pervasive that historians, until recently, have paid little attention to those exceptional unions in which blacks organized themselves or in which blacks were seen by whites as "indispensable allies" and included fully as union members.⁸

In Walker's interview, one of the most valuable in the collection, he recalls his experiences in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters: "When I first started we had no organization," Walker remembers. "And a year later we started to organize. But if the company found out you were joining the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, they'd fire you. The union started in 1925. I joined it in '25."⁹ Walker kept his job and went on to fulfill a long career.¹⁰ When he retired after several decades of faithful service, Walker received a citation from the Brotherhood which reads: "In the judgement of the officers and members of our great movement, you have fought a good fight, kept the faith, and finished your course in the employment of your craft . . . as a good porter, with trade union distinction . . ." The citation appears on one of the Back Bay Station panels along with a photograph of the late George Walker as a porter.

The Brotherhood also gave them a living wage, which, though not a wage equal to that of white workers, nonetheless provided a steady income that made them some of the best breadwinners in the black community. "Working on the trains was what helped me educate my family,"¹¹ said Bennie Bullock of Mattapan who credits Randolph and the Brotherhood with allowing him to send three children through college and on to professional careers. Other porters tell the same story.

By World War II, the Brotherhood had cut back the horribly long hours porters toiled and had increased their wages dramatically. When workers like George Walker first joined the union in the mid-1920s, porters earned only \$67.00 per month (for 240 hours!). But, in the union's first contract with the Pullman Company in 1937, wages were increased to \$89.50 per month and by the end of World War II, porters were earning \$175.00 per week, not including tips. So, in the 1940s a union porter's job became a very desirable occupation in the black community.

The interviews offer a few interesting comments on

A. Philip Randolph who turned railroad job segregation into a base for organizing the most powerful all-black working-class organization in America after Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. To Randolph, the Brotherhood's work was class conscious as well as race conscious. He chose to work within the American Federation of Labor, even though many of its affiliates actively excluded black workers, most notably the other railroad brotherhoods. This controversial position, along with his unpopular decision to call off the 1928 Pullman porter strike at the suggestion of the AFL president, led to sharp criticism of Randolph's politics and his brand of nationalism.¹²

The Leadership of Randolph

The workers who spoke to us about Randolph praised him as a courageous labor and civil rights leader. They reminded us that during the late 1930s and 1940s, Randolph was the most important black political leader in the United States with a large following in the growing ranks of African-American blue-collar workers. They also reminded us that any understanding of the evolution of black urban politics must consider Randolph's enor-

Randolph's politics derived from an earlier form of black radicalism – a race-conscious form of socialism.

mous influence. Like William Monroe Trotter, he was a man of action who believed in civil disobedience and other forms of direct confrontation. He was also a socialist who parted company with many civil rights leaders in emphasizing the power of the black working class and in seeking out alliances with the white working class.

With one exception, the workers we interviewed did not seem to share Randolph's explicitly socialist views. They were, however, part of a body of political opinion in the black community that was at odds with Booker T. Washington's brand of self-help; and it was Randolph who was most articulate in expressing this political belief. As employees oppressed by Pullman's paternalism, the porters were drawn much more to Randolph's militancy and independence, and even to his insistence on seeking alliances with organized white workers, than they were to Washington's strategy of seeking alliances with paternalist white employers like Pullman.

Most porters in Boston were moderate or even conservative in their political views. Some were undoubtedly Republicans who eventually followed the South End political activists Silas "Shag" Taylor and his brother Balcolm Taylor into the Democratic party in the 1930s. George Walker explained in his interview that "'Shag' Taylor had more to do with organizing us than anyone else," adding that "A lot of porters used to go to the back room of his [Lincoln] drug store on Tremont Street. He was one of the people who got us interested in A. Philip

Randolph.” Walker explained, “See, everybody says A. Philip Randolph started to organize us. Well, he didn’t start to organize us. We got him. Most of the organizing was done by the porters themselves.”¹³ This fascinating insight suggests that Randolph, who was not as skilled an organizer as he was a speaker, played only a small role in the Boston porters’ grassroots organizing efforts.

Black Empowerment: The Case of Local 370

Our research was not limited to those who joined the Brotherhood and followed Randolph. One of the real discoveries involves the role of another group of neglected black union workers—the dining car waiters. Their union, Dining Car Waiters Local 370, is little known and certainly deserves further study, both locally and nationally. Affiliated with the Hotel and Restaurant Workers, it claimed many more Boston members than the Brotherhood. The dining car waiters fought for union recognition in the decade after the Brotherhood won its first contract from Pullman in 1937. “When I started working on the Colonial to Washington in the 1930s we made \$13.00 a week,” said dining car waiter Altamont Bolt. “Everything changed after World War II. When I came back out of the service in 1945, we had a union, Local 370, and they fought for us very well. When I left the railroad I was making a hundred and a quarter a week. That was *very good money* to me! *Very good money.*”¹⁴ When he left the railroad a little later in the 1950s Winston Prescod said in his interview, “the highest paid waiters in the world were railroad waiters.”¹⁵

The Dining Car Waiters union was led by George Johnson and Willard Chandler, two of our most informa-

Randolph’s union was an embodiment of black power in action, but his overall political strategy sought alliances with the organized white working class.

tive interviewees. They initiated the effort in the late 1950s to desegregate the cafeteria cars which were staffed exclusively with white waitresses. Chandler, now a well-known chef with a restaurant near the Back Bay Station, recalls how the union helped make him a leader. “I graduated from Cambridge Rindge and Latin in 1937 (the year of the great Brotherhood victory over Pullman) and when I’d been with the union for about four years, I went to Suffolk Law School. They told me . . . I knew more than the teacher about labor law. When I became head of the union . . . I had to do all of the negotiating and the court hearings myself. I learned this by doing it. And I became an expert on it.”¹⁶

As the business manager of Local 370, Chandler tried to protect members who had suffered the kinds of discrimination all black workers faced. Chico Holmes explained in an interview that the local gave him more power. If a white boss wanted to replace him with a crony he would be “in trouble with the union.” Chandler

could get him his job back with back pay. “Old Chandler was skillful . . .,” Holmes remembered. “He could push one of them cats into a corner and make him sweat.”¹⁷

The African-American railroad worker interviews in the Healey Library reveal a variety of experiences that led to empowerment: the personal empowerment of a black worker like Chico Holmes who had support from the union in standing up to a discriminatory boss, or a labor leader like Willard Chandler whose advocacy for black workers led to self-education and civil rights accomplishments.

From Local Activism to National Politics

In some ways, of course, this kind of personal empowerment was also political. Porters active in the Brotherhood also became civil rights leaders. They were the cadre who made a national movement out of Randolph’s threat to march on Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1941 to force President Roosevelt to issue an order to desegregate defense industry jobs. The most famous example is that of E. D. Nixon who led the Brotherhood activities in Montgomery, Alabama, and later, as head of the Montgomery NAACP chapter, worked with Rosa Parks and others to organize the Montgomery bus boycott.¹⁸

There is also evidence of similar, though less dramatic, civil rights activity in our interviews. The leaders of the Dining Car Waiters Union in Boston made important efforts to desegregate railroad jobs. Willard Chandler brought one of the first cases involving black workers to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination and helped desegregate one group of all-white railroad jobs. Lewis Wade, a Pullman car porter and Brotherhood member who was inspired by A. Philip Randolph’s efforts to desegregate defense jobs and the military in the 1940s, tells this story:

We used to eat at places designated for porters. I remember one time when I was “running to Washington.” I went to a place not far from the station where the porters used to eat breakfast. President Truman had just signed a bill that said nowhere in the city of Washington could there be any discrimination. So I went in there one morning and sat down at the bar where they served breakfast. And the fellow said, “You can’t sit there.” I says, “Why not?” He said, “We don’t allow colored people to sit there.” I told him about Truman’s bill about this kind of discrimination and that raised quite a ruckus with all the porters in there. Anyway, after that we ate at the counter.¹⁹

Other interviewees speak of being moved by the 1963 march on Washington organized by Randolph and his associate Bayard Rustin. One of the marchers from Boston was Philip O. Baker, a Pullman car cleaner. As he recalled: “I was in Washington and my family was there too on the day that A. Philip Randolph . . . created

that march for jobs. We spent a day there listening to everything that went on. We were with so many different people of so many different cultures. It's just one of those things you were proud to have been a part of. The man was a pioneer. More like him would make it a better world for us."²⁰

Interviewees like Baker remind us of what Randolph meant to African Americans as a working-class and civil rights leader. He was, of course, overshadowed by Dr. Martin Luther King whose *I Have a Dream* speech eclipsed Randolph's own great address to the 200,000 at the Lincoln Memorial. And later in the 1960s Randolph's leadership was sharply criticized by a more militant generation of black activists. For example, Randolph's willingness to work for so many years within the AFL-CIO when many of its affiliates openly discriminated against blacks made little sense to an angry new generation of activists.

Our interviews remind us that Randolph's politics derived from an earlier form of black radicalism—a race-conscious form of socialism. Randolph's union was an embodiment of black power in action, but his overall political strategy sought alliances with the organized white working class. His radicalism was tempered by the need to deal with powerful white-dominated institutions like the AFL-CIO and the Democratic party. He never apologized for his pragmatism and explained that his politics determined the fate of thousands of black workers whose families depended on the effectiveness of the Brotherhood as an economic and political organization.

We believe our interviews help put Randolph's work in the context of ordinary workers' lives. They certainly affirm the importance of Randolph as an economic and political leader, as a civil rights pioneer who richly deserves the acknowledgement of a statue erected in his honor at Boston's Back Bay Station. But these interviews also show that Randolph's movement was composed of rank-and-file workers of many political persuasions, people who also deserve recognition—recognition they now receive in the six historical panels that lead to the Randolph statue in Back Bay Station.

Notes

¹Peter J. Howe, "Recalling a Civil Rights Pioneer," *Boston Globe*, 9 October 1988, 33.

²Matthew Brelis, "Back Bay Station Pays Tribute to a Man and a Time," *Boston Globe*, 28 February 1991, 32. We have prepared a pamphlet about the panels featuring many of the photographs from the Back Bay project. "Knights of the Rail: A. Philip Randolph and Boston's African-American Railroad Worker" is available from RCH Associates, P.O. Box 5453, Boston, MA 02102.

³The richest body of information in the interviews concerns the porters' occupational life and culture of solidarity. For an exploratory look at his kind of history, see Bernard Mergen, "The Pullman Porter: From 'George' to Brotherhood," *3. South Atlantic Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (1974).

⁴The definitive work on the Brotherhood is William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925–37* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977). The eighty-three-minute documentary film, "Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle," is available on videotape for rent (\$75.00) or sale (\$195.00) from Resolution, Inc., 149 Ninth Street, Room 420, San Francisco, CA 94103. The oral history interviews used in the film have been expanded into a book by Jack Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman*

Porters (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989). The records of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, archived at the Newberry Library in Chicago and the Chicago Historical Society are available on microfilm from University Publications of America, as are the papers of A. Philip Randolph. Jervis Anderson has written an outstanding biography, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973). A more recent study which traces Randolph's civil-rights career is Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil-Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

⁵The black waiters and musicians unions are mentioned in James R. Green and Hugh Carter Donahue, *Boston's Workers: A Labor History* (Boston: Boston Public Library, 1979), 105. On the predominantly black "sand hog" Local 88 which joined the Laborers in 1935, see Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Peter Agard, *The Indispensable Ally: Black Workers and the Formation of the Congress of Industrial Unions, 1934–1941* (Boston: William Monroe Trotter Institute, 1987), 18. Although relatively few Boston blacks joined the new CIO unions (which were not as strong in this city as in more industrialized areas), they were active as members and leaders in the Packing House Workers Union, Local 11, and later Local 616, which represented African-Americans employed at the Revere Sugar Works as well as the packing houses. See Jim Bollen and Jim Green, "The Long Strike: The Practice of Solidarity Among Boston's Packinghouse Workers," in Kenneth Fones-Wolf and Martin Kaufman, eds., *Labor in Massachusetts: Selected Essays* (Westfield, MA: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, Westfield State College, 1990), 233–257. Some of the papers of Local 11 are archived in the Healey Library, University of Massachusetts at Boston.

⁶Walker interview, The Robert C. Hayden Transcripts of Oral History Interviews with Boston African-American Railroad Workers, 1977–1991, University of Massachusetts at Boston, Archives and Special Collections Department (hereafter cited as Hayden Transcripts).

⁷See Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619–1973* (New York: International, 1973), and James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980).

⁸*Ibid.* See Fletcher and Agard, *The Indispensable Ally*. An excellent example of a community study of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is Greg LeRoy, "The Founding Heart of A. Philip Randolph's Union: Milton P. Webster and Chicago's Pullman Porters Organize, 1925–1937," *Labor's Heritage* 3, no. 3 (July 1991): 22–43.

⁹Walker interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹⁰Others were not so fortunate. Benjamin Mays, for example, recalls in his autobiography that when he worked as a porter out of Boston while attending Bates College, he was fired after a dispute with a white conductor. He had also been involved in written complaints about working conditions and job assignments to the main office in Chicago. "... Since I was the only college man in the group the Pullman officials immediately suspected me of initiating the appeal to Chicago," he wrote. See Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: The Autobiography of Benjamin Mays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 61–62.

¹¹Bullock interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹²For a critical interpretation see Manning Marable, "A. Philip Randolph and the Foundations of Black American Socialism," in James Green, ed., *Workers' Struggles, Past & Present: A 'Radical America' Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 209–233.

¹³Walker interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹⁴Bolt interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹⁵Prescod interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹⁶Chandler interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹⁷Holmes interview, Hayden Transcripts.

¹⁸For an interview with E. D. Nixon, see Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 37–39, 43–51.

¹⁹Wade interview, Hayden Transcripts.

²⁰Baker interview, Hayden Transcripts.

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