

The "New Negro" Takes Another Step

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IN the fall of 1925 Harlem was agog with a new excitement. The Pullman porters were organizing. Many of the so-called "leaders" of the Negro race were sceptical. They were not opposed to the organization of the 12,000 colored workers into a trade union, but they didn't believe it could be done. Years of exploitation by the white race had forced them to organize against white domination and white prejudice. The Negro worker was denied admittance into most trade unions and in time of strike, therefore, he acted as a strike-breaker. He was race-conscious, not class-conscious.

But there was one Negro leader who was far from sceptical about the possibility of organizing the Negro porters. For years A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen had been struggling to get out each month a small monthly magazine called *The Messenger*. In it Randolph preached the gospel of socialism and trade unionism to those of his race whom he and his comrades could induce to read it. They sold copies on the street corners at socialist meetings, criticized Negro leadership and urged the workers of Harlem to organize and fight for better living conditions and a "new social order," which alone could win their final emancipation.

IN 1917 he left college and helped conduct Morris Hillquit's campaign for Mayor, in Harlem. He was assisted by Frank Crosswaite, a young worker who had likewise become imbued with socialism and who is now shoulder to shoulder with Randolph in the campaign to organize the Pullman porters.

In the succeeding years Randolph and Crosswaite ran for various state offices on the Socialist ticket. In 1922 Randolph was the party's candidate for Secretary of State, and two years later, during the La Follette campaign, Crosswaite polled 135,000 votes for the same office.

When Marcus Garvey was touring this country in 1922 and '23 enlisting "subjects" for his proposed kingship of Africa, Randolph was one of his bitterest opponents. He regarded the Garvey movement as a species of black imperialism designed to oust all whites from Africa and establish black kings to "sit on the backs of the black workers." He believed it endangered the economic standards of Negro workers by encouraging a doctrine of race consciousness against all other races. This doctrine cut clearly across the class lines which Randolph was trying to draw in the minds of Negro workers. For that reason he went to Philadelphia in 1922 and conducted a campaign against the Garvey idea among the members of the longshoremen's union in that city. (The longshoremen's union is one of the few American labor unions which admit Negroes on the same basis as white workers.) Randolph's campaign helped to break

the backbone of the Garvey movement, which received its greatest blow when Garvey was sent to Atlanta penitentiary for using the United States mails to defraud.

IN the light of this background of struggle, it is not difficult to imagine Randolph's delight when he was asked to become General Organizer for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Here was a group of 12,000 Negro workers holding a monopoly of all the porters' jobs in the Pullman service: the "aristocrats" of black labor, as the locomotive engineers are the "aristocrats" of white railroad labor. There was no problem of overcoming the opposition of white labor leaders, no white union to claim jurisdiction over the trade and oppose the admittance of their Negro brothers. It was the logical group to organize first and there was no tougher nut to crack than the Pullman Company. A real challenge was presented to Philip Randolph and he has proved himself capable of meeting it.

The Pullman Porters' Brotherhood celebrated its first anniversary on August 25th, 1926. At that time practically 50 per cent of the porters in the Pullman service had been organized, had paid their \$5 initiation fee and become full-fledged members of the Brotherhood. It is doubtful if this record of a year's organizing activity among the workers of a single trade could be duplicated from the annals of American labor history.

It should not be construed, however, that this is the work of a single man. In the first place, the economic situation in which the Pullman porter found himself was the prime reason d'être for the organization campaign. The wage of the porters ranged from \$67.50 to \$90.00 a month, but 68 per cent of the men received the minimum wage. Tips were supposed to make up the remainder of a living wage. Any porter will tell you that this is a myth. Tips seldom aggregate more than \$20.00 a month, with an occasional man on a good run making as high as \$35.00. The men are asking for a minimum wage of \$150.00 a month and the abolition of the tipping system, which they claim denies them their "manhood rights."

The porters also demand pay for preparatory time. At present they are required to be on hand for at least five hours before a train leaves, making up beds, etc., without receiving a cent of pay for their labor. Their pay begins when the train leaves and stops when the train is due at its destination. Last March, to stave off the organizing campaign, the Pullman Company gave the workers a concession of 18 cents per hour for delayed arrivals in addition to a raise of five dollars a month in wages, but this is not a material change for the better. The porter is still required to make 11,000 miles every month. Any time spent over the 400 hours per month which such a run takes is not

paid for. The Brotherhood demands 240 hours as the basis of the monthly wage and pay for overtime, which is the arrangement under which the Pullman conductors, organized as one of the railroad brotherhoods, now work.

ANOTHER evil which the porters seek to abolish is the practice of "doubling." This means leaving for another point immediately after the porter's arrival from his regular run. For instance, during holiday rush traffic a porter running from Chicago to New York is often required to "double" out to Boston without any rest in New York or opportunity to see his family.

The porter must shine the passengers' shoes with his own polish, must buy his own uniform and go without sleep on his run. Three hours' sleep a night is about all he ever gets, and on a long run of three or four nights like the one from New York to Miami, Florida, this means a terrible strain on a man's physique.

In other words, the porter has grievances. And not the least of these grievances is the "company union" which the Pullman Company forced on its workers in 1920. Like the company unions in other industries, it is called the "Employees' Representation Plan." All the grievances which a porter may have are supposed to be adjusted by the Grievance Committee established by the plan, but experience has proved that most of these cases are adjusted against the porter who has the grievance. The porters under this plan are also supposed to have the right to vote themselves higher wages at the yearly wage conference if they so choose, but history does not record any such occurrence since the plan was organized. The fact that more than half of the porters have revolted against the plan shows how little confidence they have in it.

The company has frequently resorted to somewhat shady tactics to control the machinery of the Employees' Representation Plan. One example of the not altogether "moral" pressure used occurred on February 28, 1924. On that date the Second Assistant District Superintendent of the Pullman Company in the Pennsylvania Terminal, New York City, presented the following memorandum to Mr. F. R. McGuire, the Receiving Cashier:

"The following P. T. (Penn. Terminal) porters have not as yet voted. In order to secure every possible vote, please withhold their pay checks until O. K'd by the chairman of the Election Committee, R. Lancaster."

A list of 45 names followed, one of whom was later discovered to have been in the employ of a private industrial detective agency for years. Roy Lancaster is now Secretary-Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. It appears he did not fall for this kind of democratic election.

William Des Verney, a former official of the Pullman Company's welfare organization, known as the Pullman Porters' Benefit Association, is now an organizer for the porters' union. He, too, became disillusioned of "company unionism" and decided to sacrifice his job as a porter, which he had held for 37 years, to throw himself into the organization work. He was one of a committee of four who organized the Pullman Porters' Benefit Association in 1915.

"I labored under the impression," he says, "that the Pullman Porters' Benefit Association would prove to be a useful instrument in improving the conditions of the porters, but time has shown it to be a marvelously efficient instrument

operating in the interests of the Pullman Company."

The association provides that each porter shall pay \$26.00 a year as dues, for which he receives \$10.00 a week when he is ill—for 12 weeks only, \$200.00 for disability and \$1,000 at death. This gives the worker a stake in the Pullman Company, because if he should leave the service he would have to pay 50 per cent more dues to remain in the association.

WHEN two of the leading figures in the Pullman Company's "Union," Lancaster and Des Verney, left that union in 1925 to help organize a real union of their own, the Pullman Company got worried and began to advertise in the Negro press the virtues of its various plans for helping its employees. The editors of some of the Negro papers were thus constrained to support the company against the workers in their struggle. Those who did came in for much excoriation at the hands of Organizer-Editor Randolph. The battle waxed furious. The churches were divided on the issue. At first Randolph and his co-organizers were denied the use of the churches in the various cities where they went to organize. But gradually the ministers, as well as the editors of the Negro newspapers, were won over to the cause of the Brotherhood. And today we see the interesting spectacle of the editors of conservative colored newspapers pleading the cause of a labor organization in their editorial columns. We read of church after church from Harlem in New York to the Negro section of San Francisco opening its doors to Randolph, who began his radical career as a "dissenter."

Last spring the Committee on Arrangements for the Sesqui-centennial in Philadelphia invited Mr. Randolph to represent the Negro at the opening session. On the appointed day, Randolph took his place beside Secretary of State Kellogg and Secretary of Commerce Hoover on the platform at the Philadelphia exposition. Kellogg mouthed patriotic platitudes and denounced the radicals. Hoover spoke of prosperity. Randolph recited the achievements of a downtrodden race and prophesied further emancipation for his fellow-colored-workers through the medium of labor organization. The Ku Klux Klan was represented on the platform by a man who tried to prevail upon Mayor Kendrick to stop Randolph from speaking. It was bad enough to invite a Negro to speak from the hallowed rostrum, but to invite a black "red" was going a bit too far!

Nevertheless, Philip Randolph spoke to the end, and the real spirit of '76 burned anew in the hearts of many of his countrymen. The spirit of Abraham Lincoln, the great emancipator, was likewise more manifest in this young Negro than in the record of Lincoln's blood son, Robert Todd Lincoln, who for years presided over the destinies of the Pullman Company.

Now the case of the Brotherhood is before the United States Railroad Mediation Board. Whether this board will recognize the Brotherhood as the bona fide representative of the interests and wishes of the Pullman porters or will grant recognition to the company-controlled "employees' representation plan" is a matter for conjecture only. If the latter proves to be the case, the Brotherhood's fight for life will be just beginning and it will need the support of every citizen interested in social justice and the advancement of the Negro race and the working class as a whole.