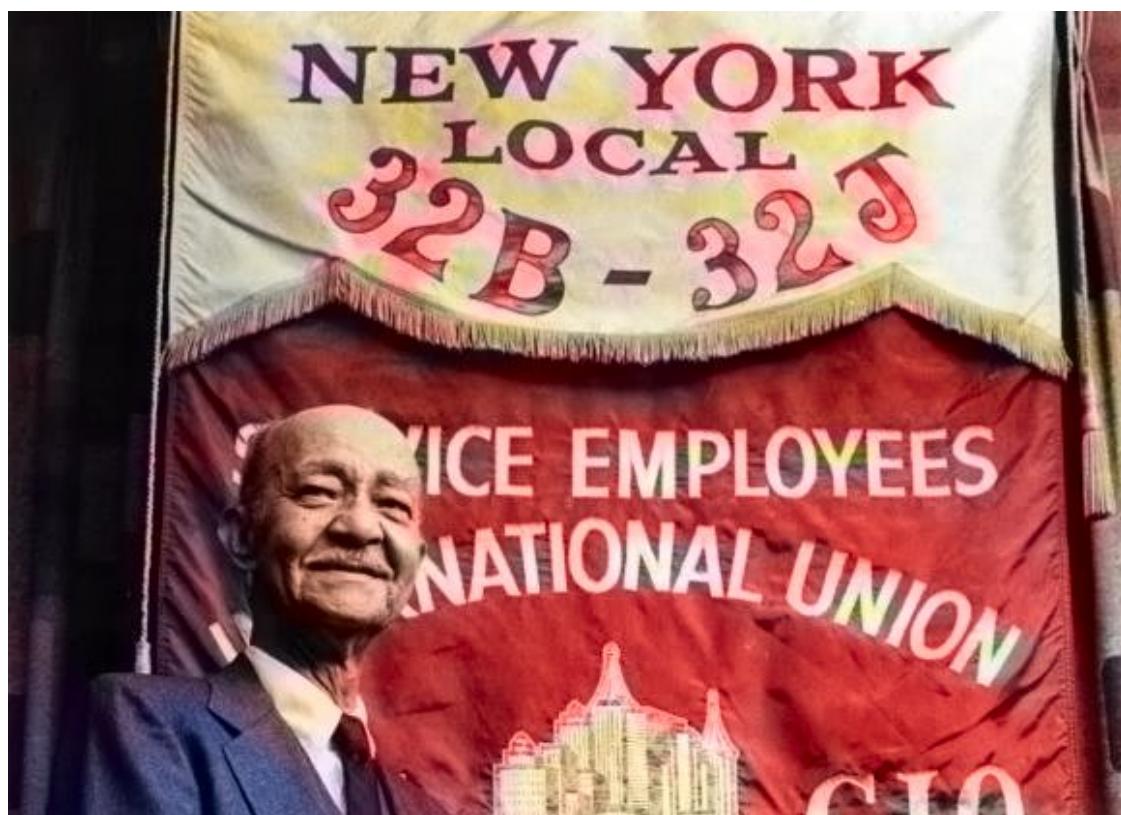


How a Black elevator operator helped forge the SEIU

written by Stephen Millies

March 1, 2021



Thomas Young

One of the largest unions in the United States is the Service Employees International Union. Two million essential workers belong to it.

Hospital workers belonging to 1199SEIU are on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic. So are the SEIU members keeping thousands of buildings clean coast-to-coast.

An important battle to build the 175,000 member strong SEIU Local 32BJ was a 1934 strike. Its spark was the firing of Black elevator operator Thomas Young, an immigrant worker from the Caribbean.

At the time there were 20,000 elevator operators in New York City. Their labor was essential for Manhattan's old garment district.

Over 200,000 workers were employed there, often in 12-story high buildings. Ninety years ago they produced close to half of the clothing worn in the U.S.

Elevator operators were needed to move goods and workers from floor to floor. By the 1920s, most of the elevator operators in the United States were Black men.

Landlords paid them miserable wages and demanded that they act like obedient servants. A. Philip Randolph — who later led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom — tried unsuccessfully to organize elevator operators into a union.

1934 strike

In November 1934, Thomas Young was fired for saying “step in, please” instead of “down, please.” The operators and other building workers had enough.

[They went on strike](#) to get a union and dignity. Strikers went from building to building in midtown Manhattan pulling out workers.

But how could they win? A quarter of the working class was jobless. There was no unemployment compensation.

Solidarity was the answer. The garment workers, most of whom were women, had reestablished the International Ladies Garment Workers Union the year before in New York City's dress shops. (Eighty years later the ILGWU joined other unions to form UNITE HERE!)

One of the ILGWU members who joined a sit-down strike was a teenager named Ethel Greenglass. At the age of 15 she graduated from Seward Park High School but had to go to work to support her family.

Within a generation the vast majority of ILGWU members were Puerto Rican and Black. Later, thousands of Dominican and Chinese workers were employed.

But in 1934, most of the workers came from Eastern and Southern European immigrant families. Many spoke Italian or Yiddish.

Garment workers and Teamsters refused to cross the picket lines of the strikers, many of whom were Black. New York City's then largest industry was shut down tight.

The Communist Party's daily newspaper in Yiddish, "Morgen Freiheit" (Morning Freedom), was read by thousands of garment workers. It called for all-out support for the strikers. Within four days the landlords were forced to sign a union contract with the elevator operators and other building workers. ("Local 32B-32J: Sixty Years of Progress")

The struggle continues

Ninety years later Manhattan's Garment District is a memory. Sure, there's still some sample shops open.

But the vast majority of clothing sold in the United States is produced by super-exploited workers overseas. They need our solidarity just like the elevator operators did in 1934.

Global capitalism gets more and more deadly. The March 25, 1911, Triangle Shirtwaist fire in Manhattan killed 146 workers, the vast majority of whom were women. The April 24, 2013, collapse of the Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killed 1,134 workers — eight times as many.

The elevator operators are almost all gone as well. Black workers are often the first victims of automation.

Twenty thousand elevator operators lost their jobs in New York City. The jobs of 50,000 Black coal miners were eliminated between 1930 and 1980. (“Black Coal Miners in America,” by Ronald L. Lewis)

The young striker Ethel Greenglass married the electrical engineer Julius Rosenberg. Both activists were burned to death in the electric chair by the U.S. Government on June 19, 1953.

The Rosenbergs were framed during the anti-communist witch hunt for giving “atomic secrets” to the Soviet Union. W.E.B. DuBois gave a eulogy at their funeral, declaring these martyrs died because “they would not lie.”

Justice for janitors

Despite these tragedies the working class continues to fight. Over the past 35 years, hundreds of thousands of building workers have joined the SEIU.

A hallmark of the union’s organizing efforts has been its “Justice for Janitors” campaign that was launched in Denver in 1985. In 2001 alone, 10,000 janitors working in the suburbs of cities like Washington D.C., Philadelphia and New York

joined the SEIU.

Los Angeles was this movement's crucible. On June 15, 1990, the LAPD viciously attacked a demonstration of striking janitors, most were Latinx, who cleaned the gleaming office towers in Century City.

At least 148 people were injured, including a pregnant woman who miscarried. The city was eventually forced to pay \$2.35 million in damages to these SEIU Local 399 members and supporters.

The massive police violence was the turning point in a two year long organizing campaign. Visiting Danish trade unionists were appalled at the anti-union hostility of Danish-owned cleaning contractor ISS, which employed 250 of the 400 janitors in the Century City complex.

This outfit signed a union contract the same day its unionized New York operations were threatened by SEIU Local 32B-32J following the cop attack.

The 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion was sparked by the acquittal of sadists-in-blue who clubbed Rodney King 56 times. But the Century City police riot was part of the social tinder of the uprising. Just as the LAPD attack on the Nation of Islam's Muhammad Mosque No. 27 in 1962 — in which Ronald X. Stokes was killed — helped lead to the 1965 Watts Rebellion..

The struggle at Century City stopped a decade of union busting in Los Angeles office buildings. The number of janitors more than doubled there between 1980 and 1990, reaching a total of 28,883

Scab cleaning contractors were the norm in new office buildings. Already unionized outfits demanded wage cuts.

Building workers, many of whom were immigrants, revolted and organized. Ten

years after the 1990 police riot they marched up Wilshire Boulevard — named after a real estate developer who became a socialist — and returned to Century City.

After nearly three weeks on strike they won a 26% wage hike for workers employed at 900 buildings across Los Angeles County.

Ninety-eight percent of these strikers were immigrants. Eighty per cent from Central America. Fifty-five percent women. (“A Clean Sweep”, by Harold Meyerson, The American Prospect, June 19, 2000)

The fighting spirit of these Latinx immigrant workers, overwhelmingly women, revitalized the labor movement throughout Southern California. There’s a little bit of Thomas Young and Ethel Rosenberg in “Justice for Janitors.”

