



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Still marching for Jobs and Freedom: A. Philip Randolph demanded \$20 minimum wage

written by Stephen Millies
August 31, 2023



A. Philip Randolph (center) during the 1963 March on Washington.

Aug. 28 was the 60th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. That year was the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, which allowed the United States to defeat the slave owners' confederacy.

It was Black soldiers, sailors and the Black general strike behind enemy lines that made the Northern victory possible. After a brief springtime of democracy during Reconstruction, Northern capitalists betrayed Black people, who endured decades of lynchings and Jim Crow segregation.

This year thousands of people gathered on Aug. 26 at the Lincoln Memorial to remember that great march and continue the struggle against racism and poverty.

The People's Organization for Progress brought a busload of activists from New Jersey.

The establishment wants the historic 1963 march to be seen as simply a feel-good moment. Only the soaring "I have a dream" portions of Dr. King's great speech are usually quoted in the media.

Far less mentioned was King saying that "the whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

Capitalists didn't want the March on Washington to take place. They feared those "whirlwinds of revolt" as hundreds of thousands of Black people and their allies were coming to Washington, D.C.

The wealthy and powerful were still keeping their capital a thoroughly segregated town. It would be another decade before people in the Black city would be allowed to vote for mayor.

A quarter-million people came to Washington on Aug. 28, 1963. A. Philip Randolph, the 74-year-old leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had wanted to call such a march decades earlier.

Randolph led the March on Washington Movement in the early 1940s that demanded an end to job discrimination and the desegregation of the military. Its threat to march on Washington forced President Franklin Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practices Committee.

Now, Randolph was the director of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom with Bayard Rustin as his deputy.

Honoring W.E.B. Du Bois

The day before the march, the legendary scholar W.E.B. Du Bois died at the age of 95 in Ghana. Du Bois wrote “Black Reconstruction in America” and many other classic works.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis wants to ban them from the Sunshine State’s schools as part of his war on Black History.

Du Bois co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909 and was editor of its publication, *The Crisis*, for many years. He gave the eulogy at the funeral of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were framed and burned to death in the electric chair on Juneteenth 1953.

Du Bois helped organize Pan-African conferences and joined the Communist Party USA in 1961. As NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins announced the passing of Du Bois, a hush came over the 250,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial.

[Wilkins said](#), “regardless of the fact that in his later years Dr. Du Bois chose another path, it is incontrovertible that at the dawn of the twentieth century his was the voice that was calling to you to gather here today in this cause. If you want to read something that applies to 1963 go back and get a volume of ‘The Souls of Black Folk’ by Du Bois, published in 1903.”

Racist violence hasn’t stopped

In 1963, bigots in Congress and newspaper editorial offices were predicting violence if “too many” Black people came to Washington, D.C. President John F. Kennedy also wanted the march canceled.

[He told Dr. King](#) and other leaders at the White House, “Well, we understand that injustice, and we want to help you any way we can. But I don’t think it’s a good idea to bring a large group of people here.”

The real violence was happening elsewhere. That spring Bull Connor's cops were using dogs to attack Black people in Birmingham, Alabama, with the approval of Gov. George Wallace.

Medgar Evers, the NAACP's Mississippi field secretary, was assassinated on June 12, 1963, at his home in Jackson. His assassin Byron De La Beckwith wouldn't be jailed until 1994.

The Ku Klux Klan bombed Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church on Sept. 15, 1963, killing four Black girls: Addie Mae Collins, 14; Cynthia Wesley, 14; Carole Robertson, 14; and Carol Denise McNair, 11.

President Kennedy himself would be assassinated in Dallas - a stronghold of the ultra-right - three months after the march on Nov. 22, 1963.

The great march was held on the eighth anniversary of the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till. The Black youth was tortured to death in Mississippi on Aug. 28, 1955.

An all-white jury acquitted Till's murderers after 67 minutes of deliberation. The killers then bragged about their bloody crime.

This year, while people rallied in Washington on Aug. 26, a white neo-Nazi murdered three Black people in Jacksonville, Florida. They were Angela Michelle Carr, 52; Jerrald Gallion, 29; and Anolt Joseph Laguerre Jr., 19.

A. Philip Randolph grew up in Jacksonville. Longtime NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the lyrics to the anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," was born there.

When the race-baiting presidential candidate Ron DeSantis came to a vigil honoring the three victims, he was righteously booed and called a hypocrite.

Ten demands

The capitalist media almost never mentions the [ten demands of the 1963 march](#). Among them was demanding a federal minimum wage of at least \$2 per hour – [adjusted for inflation](#), that's now worth nearly \$20 per hour. This demand was championed by A. Philip Randolph.

“What We Demand:

“1.) Comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation from the present Congress – without compromise or filibuster – to guarantee all Americans access to all public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, and the right to vote

“2.) Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.

“3.) Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.

“4.) Enforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment, reducing Congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.

“5.) A new Executive Order banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.

“6.) Authority for the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits when any constitutional right is violated.

“7.) A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers – Negro and white – on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.

“8.) A national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living. (Government surveys show that anything less than \$2.00 an hour fails to do this.)

“9.) A broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include all areas of employment which are presently excluded.

“10.) A federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination by federal, state, and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies, and trade unions.”

All these demands were in the interest of the working class. After years of struggle, the billionaire class was forced to concede some of them.

The Voting Rights Act was enacted by Congress in 1965. It was largely gutted by five members of the U.S. Supreme Court in its 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* decision.

Instead of a minimum wage that gives workers “a decent standard of living,” the [current federal minimum wage](#) of \$7.25 per hour is worth half of what the minimum wage in 1968 could buy.

Instead of unemployed workers being placed “on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages,” at least 11 million workers are unemployed, [according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). This includes 5.8 million workers officially unemployed and 5.2 million “not in the labor force who currently want a job.”

Fifty years of reaction

After the struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s, capitalists have counterattacked. Millions of union jobs were destroyed because of deliberate deindustrialization.

An important step towards building the March on Washington was the June 23, 1963, Walk to Freedom in Detroit. One hundred thousand people marched down Woodward Avenue in Motown.

A key organizer was Reverend C.L. Franklin, pastor of Detroit’s New Bethel Baptist

Church and father of Aretha Franklin. Since then Detroit has been devastated by plant closings.

Instead of getting jobs in the big plants, many Black, Indigenous and Latinx youth were railroaded to the big prisons. The prison population increased nearly seven times between 1970 and 2014. Over two million members of the working class were locked-up.

Forty-two years and one day after the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on Aug. 29, 2005. President George W. Bush let Black and poor people drown and starve. Bush refused help from Cuba and Venezuela, who offered hundreds of doctors and other healthcare workers.

All these attacks make the words of Dr. King, given in his 1963 speech all the more important today. After referring to the “promise” of “the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” given to Black people, King said:

“It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.” This was really a demand for reparations.

Scabbing without and within

It wasn't just die-hard Jim Crow segregationists like South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond who wanted to stop the March for Jobs and Freedom.

To the shame of the labor movement, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations refused to endorse the demonstration. However its Industrial Union Department, led by United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther, did endorse it.

AFL-CIO President George Meany represented the building trades which at the time were virtually all-white. He hated A. Philip Randolph, who for decades fought discrimination in the labor movement.

Right up to the AFL-CIO merger in 1955, many AFL unions had membership clauses that barred Black people from joining. At the 1959 AFL-CIO convention, Meany attacked Randolph, spewing, “Who the hell appointed you as the guardian of all the Negroes in America?”

Ted Dostal, a revolutionary steel worker employed at U.S. Steel’s Ohio Works – now closed – got the Youngstown, Ohio, AFL-CIO Labor Council to pass a resolution denouncing Meany.

In 1963, a sit-in occurred at Meany’s home union – Local No. 1 of the Plumbers Union, located in the racist Howard Beach neighborhood of Queens, New York. At the time the local didn’t have a single Black or Puerto Rican apprentice.

Meany went on to scab on poor people everywhere by supporting the Vietnam War. The labor movement, now with many Black, Latinx and women leaders, has advanced since then.

Even endorsers of the March on Washington were worried about its militancy. They had reason to. People were on the move.

Walter Reuther, who spoke at the march, and some other speakers, demanded changes in the speech of John Lewis. The talk of the future congressperson – who was later nearly beaten to death by Alabama state troopers at Selma – was still pretty militant.

Key Martin, who led Youth Against War and Fascism and had been a participant in the sit-in at the Plumbers union, told this writer about the great response to [Mao Zedong’s statement](#) to the march.

Ten thousand copies were mimeographed and handed to marchers by YAWF members. People were thrilled that China was on their side.

Robert F. Williams, former leader of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP branch, asked Mao to write the statement. Mabel and Robert Williams organized armed self-defense against Klan terror and were driven into exile, finding refuge first in Cuba and then in China.

The best way to honor Dr. King's memory is for the labor movement to call a new Solidarity Day against cutbacks, bigotry and war. And to organize millions of workers at Amazon, Wal-Mart and every sweatshop.

