

A. Philip Randolph and the Sleeping Car Porters, 1925

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In 1867, Chicago industrialist George Pullman revolutionized rail travel with his Pullman Cars. Pullman train cars were leased to railroads and came equipped with highly trained porters to serve the travelers. The porters were recently freed slaves who Pullman judged to be skilled in service and willing to work for low wages. By the 1920s, 20,224 African-American men were working as Pullman Porters and train personnel, the largest concentration living in Chicago. At the time, this was the largest category of black labor in the U.S. The wages and working conditions the porters were subject to have been well below average for decades. The porters were regularly required to work 400 hours per month or 11,000 miles, which ever occurred first to receive full pay. The Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters, which was founded in 1925, was the first African-American labor union to sign a collective bargaining agreement with a major U.S. corporation. A. Phillip Randolph was the president of the BSCP. The men's efforts to fight for dignity, better working conditions, and fair pay by forming the union marked the beginning of a 12 year struggle. Their eventual triumph in 1937 marked the first time in American history that a black union forced a powerful corporation to the negotiating table. The following article, written by Randolph, was a defense of the porters and their demands arguing that these men were the company's most valuable commodities and that their vigilant dedication to their tasks demanded respect.

THE PULLMAN COMPANY AND THE PULLMAN PORTER

By A. PHILIP RANDOLPH



A. F. RANDOLPH

Pullman porters are efficient. They are loyal. They are honest. They are faithful. This, the company admits. Not only does the company admit it, but praises the porters to the highest.

Listen to the Pullman Company speak for itself on the porters' honesty. Note the following items, appearing in the column entitled "Honesty's Honor Roll," in the *Pullman News*, a monthly magazine of the company, of March, 1925:

Honesty's Honor Roll

Porter J. E. Avery (Jacksonville) was highly complimented for turning in a wallet whose contents aggregated \$750, of which \$250 was cash and the remainder endorsed drafts.

Porter E. Hutchinson (Chicago Western) found \$180 in a vestibule on the "Overland Limited" soon after leaving Chicago recently, and on arrival at San Francisco deposited it at the Pullman office.

Porter W. T. Davis (Chicago Southern) found a purse containing \$60 on the "Floridan" and was given \$10 for his honesty by the owner.

Porter G. W. Tisdale (Nashville) was rewarded for turning in a purse containing \$55.

And this is a general thing. One may find in practically every issue of the *Pullman News* the mention of porters for honesty. I need not remark that it is a commonplace that honest workers are an asset to any institution. The Pullman Company undoubtedly realizes this, else it wouldn't praise its employees for honesty. But it does little to make the porters' honest save by putting their names on the Honesty's Honor Roll, a reward of too unsubstantial a character to merit appreciation. The policy of the Pullman Company has been to reward their porters with praise and flattery only. But the porters want more than kind words.

There is also a Courtesy's Honor Roll in the *Pullman News* on which may be found the names of Pullman porters every month. "Is Your Name on the Service Roll of Honor?" is the caption of a page in the July issue of the *News*. Under this heading is an explanatory statement, viz., "The following Pullman employees have been commended by passengers for acts of courtesy and good service." A star indicates more than one letter of appreciation. Then follows a long list of porters distributed throughout the country, indicating that the Company recognizes the great service of the porters to it.

Pullman Porters Synonymous with Pullman Company

Well does the Pullman Company know that the Pullman porter is synonymous with the Pullman Company. When one speaks of the Pullman Company, the first image which comes to mind is the porter with his white coat, cap and brush. In fact, it is a matter of common knowledge that the chief commodity which the Company is selling is *service*, and that service is given by the Pullman porters. For comfort, ease and safety, the traveling public looks to the porter. Chil-

dren, old, decrepit and sick persons, are put in his charge. And the history of the Company shows that he has been a responsible custodian, ever vigilant, tender and careful of the well-being of his passengers. His every move and thought are directed toward the satisfaction of the slightest whim of restless and peevish passengers.

And oftentimes this service is rendered under the most trying conditions. Many a porter is doing duty though he has not slept in a bed for two or three nights at a time. Nor has he had adequate food. Despite the requirements that he be clean, he is often doubled and trebled back without ample time to give his body proper cleansing.

Treated Like Slaves

But despite the long, devoted, patient and heroic service of the Pullman porter to the Pullman Company, despite the fact that the fabric of the company rests upon his shoulders, despite the fact that the Pullman porter has made the Company what it is today, the Company, callous and heartless as Nero, treats him like a slave. In very truth, the Pullman porter has no rights which the Pullman Company is bound to respect. So far as his manhood is concerned, in the eyes of the Company, the porter is not supposed to have any. When he is required to report in the district offices to answer to some complaint, he is humiliated in being compelled to stand for two or three hours before the district officials decide to consider him, while there he is insulted by some sixteen-year-old whipper snapper messenger boy who arrogantly snaps out: "What d'you want, George." This may be a porter who has been in the service some thirty or forty years, trenching hard upon the retirement period. But what does that matter? He is only a Pullman porter. His lot is hapless. In obedience to the mandate of holy writ, when he is slapped on one side of the cheek, he is expected to turn the other one. And if, perchance, under the cross of oppression, of bitter insult and brutal exploitation, he should assert his rights as a man, immediately he is branded as a rattled brain radical, and hounded and harassed out of the service. Many a tragic and pitiful case may be cited of porters who committed the lese majeste of challenging the injustice of an Assistant District Superintendent, being deliberately framed in order to secure a pretext for persecuting him until his life becomes more miserable than a dog's, and is driven to resign. And this porter may be one who has not only rendered exemplary service to the Company but has seen a score or more years on the road.

Framing Up Porters

There are many ways in which to "get" a porter. A porter must be examined, unlike any other worker on the railroad, once every year. Many of them speak bitterly of this method of humiliation and abuse. If a porter is pronounced unfit, he may be retired or fired. Whenever the Company wants to "can" a porter who has the impudence to "speak up" for his rights and the rights of the men, the examining doctor, paid by

the Company, finds it necessary to give this particular porter a *very rigid* examination, and he does not *pass*. He is politely told that, on account of the report of the doctor's examination, his (the porter's) services are no longer required. Porter after porter avers this to be a fact. Of course it cannot be proved. But it is quite sufficient that the men assert it to be true. Large masses of men have a way of sensing the true reason for things, however subtly done. It is obvious that grave injustices may be done men, especially the bold spirits, under cover of medical precaution. If a man is up to be retired or fired, as a result of a Company doctor's examination, he should have the right to file a report of an examination in a first class hospital on his case. And the report of the examination in the hospital should be considered final and decisive. But in fact, the porters should not be subjected to a physical examination every year at all. It is unnecessary, discriminatory and hence, unfair. In this connection it is interesting to note that some of the porters objected to a certain Company doctor, and suggested that the Company employ U. Conrad Vincent, a colored physician of high standing, and, incidentally, a former Pullman porter with an excellent record card, but the Company balked. Why? Guess? It may not be so easy to frame a porter through annual physical examinations. The only remedy for this situation is organization. If, when a porter is told that he is unfit for any future service, he could say to the Company, "Well, I will report the matter to my union," a very different attitude would be assumed toward him. It is because the Pullman conductors have their own union that they are not subjected to the degrading ordeal of these yearly physical examinations. It must be remembered too, that there are only one-fourth as many Pullman conductors as Pullman porters. But their interests and rights are not disregarded as the porters' are, because they are organized. The philosophy of organization is aptly stated by an old grizzled farmer, who, while driving through the woods, nonchalantly flicking a fly which annoyed the ear of his horse, next a grasshopper which sat challengingly on a twig, then, a caterpillar perched snugly on a bough, with his whip, but balked significantly when he saw a hornets' nest. Upon inquiry by a cynical friend as to why he didn't flick the little busy hornet, buzzing menacingly on a little spongy looking knoll, he, with a mixture of chagrin and humor, growled back: "Them's organized." What he meant was that that hornet, if flicked, would report his troubles to his union and that the union would go to the bat for that *one hornet* who had been wronged. The old farmer knew that he could not flick the hornet and get away with it as he had done the fly, the grasshopper and the caterpillar, because the hornets are organized. Verily, hornets have more sense than some humans, perhaps, most humans. They are aware of the advantage of facing opposition *en masse*.

Porter's Word Regarded of No Value

A classic instance in point is the case of a porter who was accused by a woman passenger of having hugged her at two o'clock in the night. She claimed that she screamed and stuck him with a hat pin, that he hollered, but no one came or awoke. This, too, was in a ten section car. She never reported the incident until seven o'clock in the morning to the trainman. The porter denied it. The trainman and Pullman conductor wrote the woman's report to the Pullman office. The case hung on for six months. One morning one of the members of the Grievance Com-

mittee, under the Employees Representation Plan, was commanded to come to the office and sit on the case. This porter had been up two nights on the road. When he appeared in the office before the nine men sitting on the case, he pleaded that he was unfit to deliberate on the matter; that he needed rest. "To insist upon my passing judgment on this case, indicates," said the porter, "that either you undervalue your own ability or you over value mine, because you expect me to do in a few minutes what it has taken you six months to do, and still you have not finished." This porter member of the Grievance Committee maintained that it was ridiculous to think that a porter would hug a woman in a ten section car, that a woman could scream and not awaken the passengers or the Pullman conductor who was asleep in a berth only two spaces away; and that the porter could yell and not be heard. The accused porter had requested the officials to examine him stripped for the pin prick, but this was not done. The porter-member of the Grievance Committee pointed out that the Company was doing to the porter what a mob in the South would not do to its victim, namely, it was trying and convicting him without his accuser identifying him. He also contended that the woman might have dreamt that some one was hugging her, and the next morning put it on the porter, the most defenseless person on the car. This porter was fired after he had walked the streets for six months. The porter-member of the Grievance Committee was forthwith framed-up and fired because of his manly attitude in fighting for the accused porter. He is one of the responsible citizens of New York. Such rank injustice cries out to high heaven for redress! But there is none except through organized action.

Sentenced Before Convicted

This policy of the Pullman Company's, putting a porter in the streets immediately he is accused, before he is duly tried and convicted, is absolutely indefensible. No other worker on the railroads is so outraged. If, when he is reinstated he were paid for the time he was suspended, it would not be so bad. But this is not the case. The porter gets nothing for the time he has lost, even though he be vindicated. How unfair! A Pullman conductor who is accused, works while his case is being tried. Why? Because the conductors are organized.

Where a Porter's Word Counts

Even a porter's word is revered and respected by the Pullman Company at times. Pray, tell us what time is that, you naturally inquire. *Well, it is when the Company is being sued by a passenger.* A case in point: Lady "X" was a passenger on car "Z" coming from Chicago. Porter "Y" was on the car. Nine other women were also on the car. Lady "X" got up early next morning and went into the ladies' room. The nine women went into the ladies' room also within the course of an hour or so. After Lady "X" had left the car she discovered that she had lost a necklace worth \$25,000. She reported it to the Company's offices. She threatened to bring suit. The porter was brought to the Pullman offices and questioned. He was asked whether he entered the ladies' room after Lady "X" had gone in and come out; when he entered, if at all. The porter said that when he had women passengers on a car, he made it a policy of not going into the ladies' room. He said that all nine of the women entered the ladies' room after Lady "X" came out. The Company took the porter's word and rested its

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