



Pullman Porters: From Resistance to Social Justice

Today we share the story of the galante, hard working men of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. They were the men that worked on the overnight rail cars that George Pullman designed with luxurious finishes and rented to various rail companies. The porters were required to be away from home for weeks at a time and were required to respond to every passenger's request. They cleaned the



**A. Philip Randolph
Pullman Porter
Museum, Chicago**

cabins, served food, heated bottles, helped passengers with baggage, helped them unpack, made the beds, and pulled down berths, and babysat children. For their efforts they received extremely low wages. Pullman deliberately underpaid them, to incentivize them to go above and beyond-for tips, and they had no voice, no protection against complaints, and could be fired at will. If a passenger stole a towel or broke a glass, it came out of their pay. Their hours were 16 hours or more long, and their living quarters were substandard. Despite these challenges, the Pullman Porter position was sought after as a pathway to the middle class, an alternative to sharecropping and other farm-based work. Once hired, Pullman Porters had to purchase their own uniforms, which was a challenge for many. After overcoming that obstacle, they went into a detailed training program and became experts at delivering care, protection, and luxury service to wealthy white passengers. Pullman cars were segregated, so Black passengers were not allowed in the luxury cars, but Pullman Porters served the entire train. Black families sending their children south for the summer or traveling north in the Great Migration benefited from the expertise of the porters who looked after their brethren, making sure that children ate and were safely delivered to their destinations. In contrast to the racist and demeaning treatment they often received on the job, Pullman Porters were highly respected in their communities. They were well traveled and had exposure to another world. They met all types of people and learned how to interact with everyone. Porters had to be healthy and strong enough to do the heavy lifting and scrubbing that came with the job. Their uniforms, shoes, nails had to be extremely clean, and service was delivered with a smile. Tipping was highly encouraged but could not be requested. Porters used their ability to anticipate needs, be extremely discreet, and improvise in emergencies to curry good tips from those who could afford to do so.

After a few generations, the Pullman Porters became strong enough to organize. Following a mass meeting in Chicago in 1925, they voted to start a union and recruited A. Phillip Randolph, a noted Civil Rights Activist, to lead them. Under Randolph, they founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and although the Pullman company was the largest employer of Black people in the United States, it used its financial and political influence to block any attempts to unionize its workforce, including firings, threats, and legal challenges. The Brotherhood stood strong, fighting for 12 years for fair wages, and better working conditions, empowering workers to stand up for their dignity as human beings. They received their charter from the American Federation of Labor (AFL), becoming the first Black union to do so, and in 1937 signed a contract with the Pullman company for the wages, benefits, and respect that they deserved. They helped redefine what was possible for Black workers through collective action! The Brotherhood had affiliations with five prominent African American newspapers and transported vital information to rural African American communities.

Hundreds of Pullman Porters went on to excel and lead in other occupations, including Justice Thurgood Marshall, photographer Gordon Parks, activist Malcolm X, Civil Rights activist E.D. Nixon, and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, to name a few. Let us honor their memory and contribution to the expansion of the Black middle class, the civil rights movement, and the great migration, by telling their story.