Black labor leaders' legacy honored amid DEI backlash

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Black labor leaders were a critical part of the Civil Rights Movement.
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When Nannie Helen Burroughs established the National Association of Wage Earners in the early 20th century, Black women and girls faced unchecked racism and sexism in the workplace.

The prejudice didn't stop with employers. Burroughs tried to register her organization as a union under the American Federation of Labor, now the AFL-CIO, but its leaders turned her down, said Danielle Phillips-Cunningham, author of a Burroughs biography.

So Burroughs ran her own employment agency in Washington, D.C., where she made uniforms for domestic workers and held lectures on women's rights and issues affecting Black workers. She established a school to educate women in fields they were barred from, like stenography, and provide them credentials Burroughs hoped would make employers take them more seriously.

Unable to secure funding from white or Black men without compromising her vision, Burroughs sometimes had to hunt her own food and sell crops to provide for her students, said Phillips-Cunningham, a Rutgers University-New Brunswick professor in the department of labor studies and employment relations.

Burroughs is one of many Black labor leaders who have fought to secure better working conditions for people of color, trailblazing work that continues today, Phillips-Cunningham said.

This month, that work is being celebrated by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Though the group decided to focus on Black labor movements well before President Donald Trump was re-elected, the theme has become particularly salient in light of his attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion programs and states' restrictions on Black history in schools, according to association President Karsonya Wise Whitehead.

"This is an exceptional theme for this particular time, because it is making people think about these contributions, it's making people think about who does America belong to and it's making people think about who built America," Whitehead said.

The labor and civil rights movements have been intimately connected.

As union membership peaked after World War II, some progressive groups in the deeply segregated labor movement began organizing across racial lines, according to Emily Twarog, a professor of history and labor studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. But many unions, particularly those in industries like steel and automotive manufacturing, still had breakaway factions of Black employees, she said.

"They have to fight really hard sometimes for equal recognition and not being segregated into the kind of crappiest jobs in the plants," Twarog said.

These Black labor groups quickly became instrumental in the broader Civil Rights Movement. A. Philip Randolph, who waged a 12-year fight to get higher wages and shorter shifts for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was a key figure in planning the famous 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; the United Auto Workers provided much of the funding for the event.

The economic demands of the march and its keynote speaker, Martin Luther King Jr., are still not well known, even among labor activists, Twarog said: "We don't teach people that he was actually a major labor activist and was on his way to a picket line when he was assassinated."

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Twarog said, more job opportunities opened up for African Americans, particularly in municipal jobs like the Postal Service and sanitation. That was thanks in part to Title VII, which bars discrimination in employment on the basis of characteristics such as race and gender. She said this also led to a wave in organizing in the public sector, which helped further integrate unionizing efforts.

Women like Dorothy Lee Bolden picked up Burroughs' mantle, Phillips-Cunningham said. Bolden went from house to house in Atlanta gathering the support needed to form the National Domestic Workers Union in 1968, which quickly became a political powerhouse and served more than 10,000 people.

"The late Jimmy Carter said for any politician Black or white who wants to run, to have a shot at winning an election in the state of Georgia, they must talk to Dorothy Lee Bolden and members of the National Domestic Workers Union of America," Phillips-Cunningham said.

Though the national organization no longer exists, Phillips-Cunningham said, the Georgia arm has remained influential in the campaigns of politicians such as two-time gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, Sen. Raphael Warnock and former President Barack Obama. "The legacies of her organizing have extended into today," she said.

Now, Black workers such as Service Employees International Union President April Verrett and National Education Association President Becky Pringle have risen to the highest ranks of the movement. Others are still pushing for change from the margins through dedicated centers and organizations that address the issues still plaguing Black workers today.

Black workers remain more likely to be union members than white, Asian and Hispanic workers, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in January. But Black employees, especially women, still generally earn less than their white counterparts, and they are the most likely group to say they've experienced discrimination at work, according to Pew Research Center.

Labor unions like the Illinois chapter of the AFL-CIO have made strides by launching initiatives to increase women and non-white workers in specific trades like construction, Twarog said.

"When there's a mandate to broaden out who's included, it works. It works really well," Twarog said.

Phillips-Cunningham said she is deeply troubled by the "crisis" caused by the Trump administration's rollback of protections for workers of color and hobbling of federal regulatory commissions meant to protect workers' rights. But she said she's proud to see unions like the SEIU leading the effort to challenge these moves.

"Black labor organizers, thank goodness for them, because they are motivated. They are out there. They are organizing. They're filing lawsuits. They are educating people about what is happening."