

Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America: The Working Class in American History

The New Deal era marked a transformative period in American history, characterized by sweeping economic and social reforms aimed at addressing the devastating effects of the Great Depression. While the New Deal had a profound impact on the nation as a whole, its legacy was particularly significant for the working class, especially in the South.

In the South, where poverty, inequality, and racial discrimination were deeply entrenched, the New Deal provided a glimmer of hope. Labor leaders and activists emerged as powerful advocates for the working class, fighting for better wages, working conditions, and social justice. Among these leaders, three individuals stand out as particularly influential: A. Philip Randolph, Myles Horton, and Septima Poinsette Clark.



The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America (Working Class in American History) by Erik S. Gellman

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A. Philip Randolph

A. Philip Randolph was a pioneering labor leader and civil rights activist. Born in Florida in 1889, Randolph witnessed firsthand the injustices faced by African Americans in the South. He began his career as an organizer for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), a union representing African American railroad workers.

Under Randolph's leadership, the BSCP became a powerful force in the labor movement. Randolph organized strikes, lobbied for legislation, and advocated for equal rights for African Americans. In 1941, he led the March on Washington, a massive demonstration that pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802, which prohibited discrimination in defense industries.

Randolph's work had a profound impact on the labor movement and the civil rights struggle. He helped to break down racial barriers in unions and inspired a new generation of activists to fight for social justice.

Myles Horton

Myles Horton was a social activist and educator who dedicated his life to empowering marginalized communities in the South. Born in Tennessee in 1906, Horton was deeply influenced by the teachings of Booker T. Washington and Mahatma Gandhi.

In 1932, Horton founded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. The school provided training in leadership, organizing, and social action to young people from the South, particularly African Americans. Horton believed that education was a powerful tool for social

change, and he worked to create a space where people could learn, organize, and advocate for their rights.

Highlander Folk School played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement. It provided training and support for activists like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and John Lewis. Horton's work helped to build a grassroots movement for social justice that transformed the South.

Septima Poinsette Clark

Septima Poinsette Clark was an educator and civil rights activist who dedicated her life to promoting literacy and empowering African Americans in the South. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1898, Clark grew up in poverty and faced discrimination throughout her life.

In 1957, Clark founded the Citizenship Schools in South Carolina. These schools provided literacy classes and civic education to African Americans, who were often denied access to education due to segregation. Clark's work played a crucial role in the voting rights movement, as it helped to register African Americans to vote and participate in the political process.

Clark's legacy as an educator and civil rights activist continues to inspire activists and organizers today. She helped to break down racial barriers in education and empower marginalized communities to fight for their rights.

A. Philip Randolph, Myles Horton, and Septima Poinsette Clark were three extraordinary individuals who played a pivotal role in shaping the labor movement and the civil rights struggle in New Deal America. Their work had a profound impact on the working class in the South, helping to break down racial barriers, promote social justice, and empower marginalized

communities. Their legacy continues to inspire activists and organizers today, who are fighting for a more just and equitable society.



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