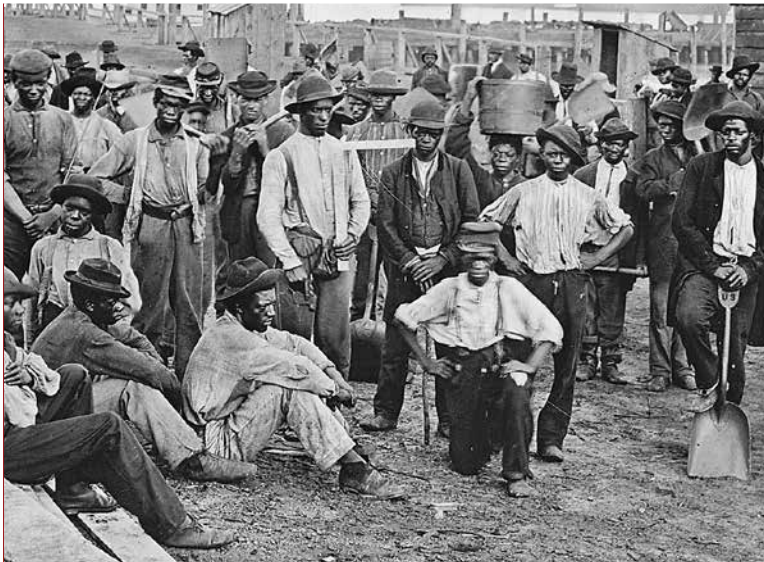


BLACK HISTORY MONTH



African Americans and Labor

When it comes to Black history and culture, work is central to it.

Whether talking about the unpaid labor provided by enslaved Africans to today's focus on entrepreneurship and fighting against economic injustice, labor is an important part of the discussion.

This year's theme for Black History Month 2025 is "African Americans and Labor," highlighting the intersections of work and the collective experiences of Black Americans.

The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) explains, "The 2025 Black History Month theme ... focuses on the various and profound ways that work and working of all kinds — free and unfree, skilled, and unskilled, vocational and voluntary — intersect with the collective experiences of Black people."

This year's theme invites reflection on the historical and contemporary roles Black Americans have played in shaping the labor force and their fight for equity and dignity in the workplace.

Labor has been a defining force in Black history, beginning with the horrors of enslaved labor in the United States. Millions of African Americans toiled under inhumane conditions, building the economic foundation of the nation. Even after emancipation, systemic barriers



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continued to exploit Black labor through practices like sharecropping, convict leasing and segregation in the workplace.

In 2025, we celebrate the centennial of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids (BSCP), the first Black-led labor union chartered by the American Federation of Labor. Founded in 1925 under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, the BSCP marked a turning point for African Americans in organized labor.

Porters, who worked long hours for low wages while enduring racist treatment, united to demand better wages, improved working conditions, and dignity. Their efforts transformed labor relations and played a pivotal role in the broader civil rights movement.

Over the decades, Black labor activism has left an indelible mark. From the Pullman porters to Black women leading strikes in the garment industry, to recent organizing in service

and retail sectors, African Americans have consistently fought for justice and equality in the workplace. These efforts are part of a broader legacy of resilience and innovation, as African Americans excelled in skilled trades, professions and entrepreneurship despite systemic barriers.

Today, labor remains central to the Black experience. Issues like wage gaps, discrimination and lack of representation in leadership persist,

underscoring the continued relevance of this year's theme. Black History Month 2025 honors the past while looking to the future, inspired by those who turned labor into a powerful force for progress.

Through this theme, ASALH encourages everyone to reflect on the interconnected histories of race, work and equality, and to honor the contributions and sacrifices of African Americans who shaped the labor landscape we know today.

Wyatt Fought for Labor, Civil Rights

Addie L. Wyatt, a trailblazing leader in union organizing and civil rights, left an enduring legacy that reshaped the labor movement and advanced social justice.

Born in Brookhaven, Mississippi, in 1924 and raised in Chicago, Wyatt grew up witnessing the systemic inequalities that African Americans faced in the workplace and beyond.

Wyatt's career in the labor movement began in the 1940s when she worked in a meat-packing plant in Chicago. Hired as a typist, she was soon forced to work on the production line, where she experienced firsthand the unsafe conditions, discrimination and exploitation faced by workers, particularly Black women. Wyatt's resolve to challenge these injustices led her to join the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), an interracial union known for its progressive stance on racial and gender equality.

Her passion for justice and her ability to organize workers quickly propelled her into leadership roles. In 1953, Wyatt became the first Black woman to hold a senior office in a major American labor union, serving as the vice



CHICAGO URBAN LEAGUE RECORDS, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO LIBRARY/CREATIVE COMMONS

president of her UPWA local. She played a pivotal role in negotiating contracts that improved wages, safety conditions and benefits for workers, often bridging racial and gender divides within the labor movement.

She once said, "I was fighting on behalf of workers, fighting as a Black, and fighting as a female."

Wyatt's activism extended beyond union halls. She was a key ally in the civil rights movement, collaborating closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders. She

worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and was an instrumental force behind the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where economic justice was a central demand.

Wyatt became an ordained minister in 1955. A year later, she and her husband, Rev. Claude Wyatt, founded the Vernon Park Church of God in Chicago, which she served in for most of the rest of her life. She faced opposition from many in the Church of God community who condemned

labor union work as immoral and unlawful.

In 1962, Eleanor Roosevelt appointed her to serve on the Commission on the Status of Women.

As co-founder of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) in the 1970s, Wyatt advocated for women's rights in the workplace, championing policies such as pay equity, maternity leave and protections against workplace discrimination. Her work underscored the intersection of labor rights, racial justice and gender equality, inspiring

a generation of activists.

Wyatt's achievements garnered widespread recognition. She was named one of Time Magazine's Women of the Year in 1975 and received numerous accolades for her contributions to labor and civil rights. Yet, her greatest legacy lies in her unwavering belief that workers, regardless of race or gender, deserve dignity, respect and a voice.

Wyatt's story is a testament to the power of grassroots organizing and the transformative potential of intersectional activism.

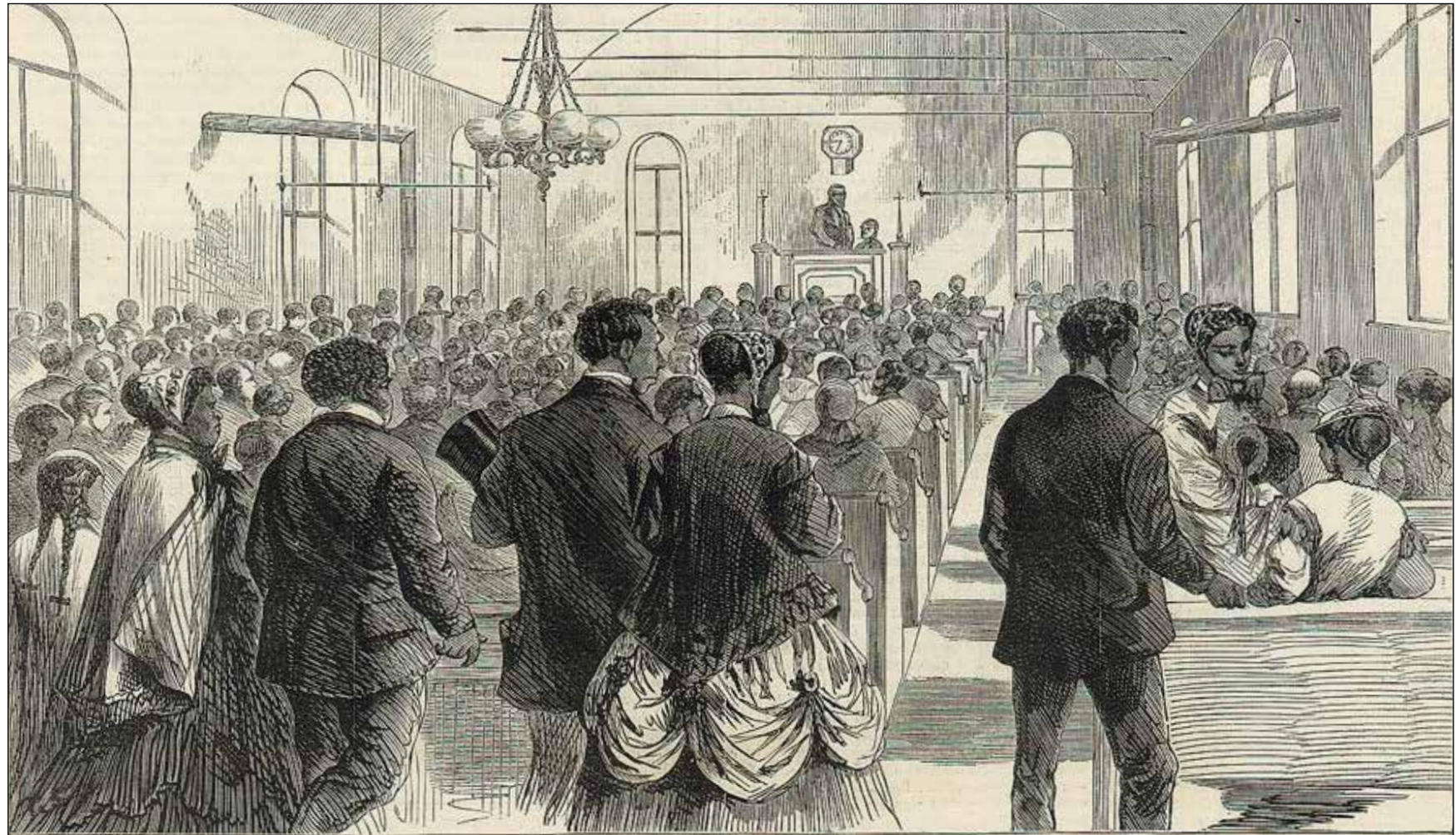
Black Workers Demanded Justice

In December 1869, a pivotal moment in American labor history occurred with the founding of the Colored National Labor Union (CNLU).

Established as a direct response to the exclusion of Black workers from mainstream labor unions, the CNLU represented a crucial step toward greater labor rights and equality for African Americans. At a time when the nation was still reeling from the Civil War and grappling with the complexities of Reconstruction, the CNLU sought to empower Black workers and advocate for their rights in a society that marginalized them.

The CNLU was founded in Washington, D.C., by prominent African American activists and labor leaders, including Isaac Myers, a skilled African American ship caulker, and Peter H. Clark, a teacher and abolitionist. It was conceived as an alternative to the National Labor Union (NLU), the first national federation of labor unions in the United States, which, while advocating for workers' rights, largely excluded Black Americans from its ranks. The CNLU's creation was both a necessary and a bold response to the exclusionary practices of white-dominated unions that denied Black workers opportunities for organizing.

The main goals of the CNLU were to elevate the status of Black workers by fighting for better working conditions, wages and job security. Its founders envisioned a future where Black men and women could join unions and participate in the labor movement alongside their white counterparts. This vision included pushing for equal treatment and opportunities in the



THE NATIONAL COLORED CONVENTION IN SESSION AT WASHINGTON, D. C.—SKETCHED BY THEO. R. DAVIS.—[SEE FIRST PAGE.]

THEODORE RUSSEL DAVIS, PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

workplace, regardless of race. The CNLU's platform included calls for the establishment of public schools for Black children, the improvement of labor conditions and political reforms that would ensure greater equality for African Americans.

The CNLU also sought to unify various trades and sectors of Black labor under one banner. It brought together workers from industries like agriculture, construction and manufacturing, creating a network that allowed African Americans to organize and share resources. Despite the prevailing racist attitudes of the time, the CNLU sought to ensure that African American laborers had the same rights and opportunities as their white counterparts.

However, the CNLU faced significant challenges from the outset. The white-dominated National Labor Union saw the CNLU as a threat to its own influence. The CNLU was hampered by economic instability, a lack of resources and the political realities of the Reconstruction era, which made it difficult to maintain a strong organizational presence. Moreover, as the nation moved into the 1870s, economic downturns and political changes diverted attention away from Black labor rights.

Despite these challenges, the CNLU made important strides in its brief existence. It organized several successful strikes and advocacy campaigns, raising awareness about the plight of Black workers and highlighting the necessity

of Black labor within the broader economy. The CNLU set the stage for future Black labor activism, contributing to the emergence of the Afro-American labor movement in the 20th century.

By the mid-1870s, the Colored National Labor Union began to disband, in part due to internal divisions and external pressure. However, the CNLU's efforts to organize Black workers and advocate for racial and economic justice laid important groundwork for future labor movements, including the formation of unions such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in the 1920s.

Today, the Colored National Labor Union is remembered as a pioneering force in both Black labor and civil rights history.

Black Labor and Architecture

The United States' architectural landscape is deeply intertwined with Black history, particularly in the South, where enslaved and freed African Americans played a vital role in constructing some of the nation's most iconic buildings.

Often working under oppressive conditions, Black laborers combined their skills, artistry and resilience to shape structures that stand today as testaments to their ingenuity and endurance.

One prominent example of Black contributions to architecture is the construction of the White House and the U.S. Capitol. Enslaved workers quarried stone, forged iron and performed intricate carpentry to create these national symbols. Their labor, uncredited for centuries, is now gaining recognition as a key part of America's architectural history.

In the South, plantation architecture often relied heavily on the craftsmanship of enslaved people. From the stately mansions of Charleston to the intricate ironwork of New Orleans, Black artisans were central to the



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region's distinct aesthetic. These workers possessed diverse skills, including bricklaying, woodworking and blacksmithing. Their contributions ranged from structural integrity to ornamental detail, blending African techniques with European styles to create a unique architectural legacy.

Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) such as Tuskegee University showcase the role of Black architects and builders. Tuskegee's founder, Booker T. Washington, emphasized self-reliance, leading students to construct many campus buildings themselves under the guidance of architect Robert R. Taylor, the first accredited Black

architect in the U.S. Taylor designed more than 25 buildings on the Tuskegee campus.

It wasn't just at HBCUs that Black architects made their mark. Julian Abele became the first Black graduate of architecture from the University of Pennsylvania in 1902. Working for Horace Trumbauer, a Gilded Age architect, he became the primary designer for the expansion of Duke University, which was then a whites-only institution. It wasn't until after his death in 1980 that his work was recognized. His original drawings for Duke are now considered works of art. In 2016, Duke University renamed a campus quad in his honor.

In urban centers like Atlanta and Memphis, Black architects and laborers shaped neighborhoods, churches and schools that became hubs of cultural and social life. Many of these structures remain standing, serving as reminders of Black communities' resilience and creativity during eras of segregation and disenfranchisement.

In southern California, Paul Revere Williams became the "architect to the stars," designing more than 2,000 homes.

Over the course of his 50-year career, his style came to define the region's architecture. He became the first Black member of the American Institute of Architects in



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1923. He designed the homes of such stars as Lucille Ball, Frank Sinatra and Barron Hilton.

Yet, because white clients often refused to sit next to him, he learned how to draw upside down so he could sit across from them and show his work.

Black architects and builders often faced systemic barriers that limited their recognition and opportunities. Organizations like the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), founded in 1971, continue working to address these inequities by advocating for greater representation and celebrating Black contributions to architecture.

The Fight for Economic Justice

The Poor People's Campaign, conceived by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1967, stands as a cornerstone of Black history and labor activism.

The movement challenged economic inequalities that disproportionately affected African Americans and other marginalized communities. In advocating for systemic change, the Poor People's Campaign sought to unite people across racial and geographic divides, focusing on poverty as a shared struggle that required collective action.

Dr. King's vision for the Poor People's Campaign was shaped by his growing recognition that racial equality was inseparable from economic justice. Despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, millions of African Americans remained trapped in poverty, unable to fully access the opportunities that equality promised. The campaign called for a "revolution of values," challenging America to prioritize human needs over profits and military spending.

In May 1968, just weeks after Dr. King's assassination, the campaign culminated in a dramatic demonstration: the establishment of Resurrection City on the National Mall in



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Washington, D.C. For six weeks, thousands of people lived in makeshift tents and shanties, bringing attention to the lived realities of poverty in America.

Participants from diverse backgrounds, including Black, Latino, white and Native American communities, joined together to demand an economic bill of rights. Their demands included fair wages, affordable housing, robust welfare programs and an end to systemic discrimination in employment.

Though the campaign faced logistical challenges and did

not achieve its immediate legislative goals, it left an enduring legacy. The Poor People's Campaign reframed the national conversation about poverty, highlighting it as a structural issue rather than an individual failing. It inspired future generations of activists to continue the fight for economic justice and civil rights.

In 2018, the campaign was revived under the leadership of Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis. Known as the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, this contemporary movement builds on Dr.

King's vision while addressing modern challenges such as mass incarceration, environmental injustice and systemic racism. It unites people across lines of race, religion and geography to advocate for policies that combat poverty and inequality.

As part of their clarion call to action, the leaders issued a statement saying, "If America does not address what's happening with visionary social and economic policy, the health and well-being of the nation is at stake What we need is long-term economic policy that establishes justice,

promotes the general welfare, rejects decades of austerity and builds strong social programs that lift society from below."

Elements of its 2024 agenda include abolishing poverty as the fourth leading cause of death in the U.S., a minimum wage of at least \$15 an hour, an end to voter suppression, healthcare for all, affordable housing, strong social welfare, an end to gun violence, protection of women's rights, fully funded public education, justice for Indigenous nations, just immigration laws, environmental justice and an immediate cease-fire in Gaza.

Sanitation Strike Was Turning Point

The Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968 stands as a powerful moment in the history of labor and civil rights in the United States.

What began as a fight for better working conditions and wages for Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, quickly became a critical chapter in the larger struggle for racial equality, culminating in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s involvement and tragic death.

In February 1968, two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were killed when a malfunctioning garbage truck crushed them to death. The deaths brought to light the hazardous and degrading working conditions faced by Black sanitation workers, who were employed in one of the most dangerous and underpaid jobs in the city. These workers were predominantly Black, and their plight was largely ignored by the city's leadership.

Frustrated with their long-standing mistreatment, the sanitation workers, represented by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), decided to take action. They demanded better wages, improved working conditions, the right to unionize



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and the recognition of their dignity as workers. Their slogan, "I Am a Man," became the rallying cry of the strike, emphasizing the basic human rights that were being denied to them. This demand for dignity was a call for racial equality and social justice.

The strike gained national attention, and on March 18, 1968, the situation reached a tipping point when Dr. King arrived in Memphis to lend his support to the workers. Dr. King, who had already been deeply involved in the struggle for civil rights and economic justice, saw the strike as part of the larger fight for human



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rights and equality.

Dr. King delivered a speech in support of the sanitation workers, declaring that their

struggle was part of the broader fight for justice, equality and human dignity. He joined in the

demonstrations and marches, leading thousands of supporters through the streets of Memphis. Dr. King's involvement helped to draw national attention to the strike and put pressure on city officials to negotiate with the workers.

The strike took a tragic turn when, on April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. His death shocked the nation and brought the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike into even sharper focus. In the wake of Dr. King's assassination, the strike continued, with workers demanding justice in his honor. The city, under immense pressure, finally agreed to the workers' demands. They were granted wage increases, better working conditions and the right to unionize.

The Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike highlighted the intersection of race and class, illustrating that the fight for racial equality was inextricably linked to the fight for economic justice. Dr. King's involvement in the strike underscored his belief that civil rights were not solely about legal equality but about the right to live with dignity in every aspect of life, including the workplace.

The courage and perseverance of the sanitation workers, combined with Dr. King's leadership, helped to forge a path toward greater social and economic justice for African Americans and all workers.

Chris Smalls Took On Amazon

Chris Smalls, a former Amazon warehouse worker turned union organizer, has become a powerful symbol of modern labor activism.

In a time when corporate giants wield vast influence, Smalls' determination to fight for the rights of workers has reinvigorated discussions about labor rights, racial equity and corporate accountability.

Born in Hackensack, New Jersey, Smalls worked as a supervisor at Amazon's Staten Island warehouse, JFK8. His journey into labor activism began in 2020 when he raised concerns about unsafe working conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Smalls and his colleagues feared for their safety as the virus spread, but they felt their concerns were ignored by Amazon's management. In response, Smalls organized a walkout to demand better protections for workers.

Rather than addressing the workers' grievances, Amazon fired Smalls, citing a supposed violation of quarantine protocols. The termination was widely perceived as retaliatory and drew national attention to the challenges faced by workers in one of the world's most powerful corporations. Undeterred, Smalls turned his termination into a rallying point, launching a grassroots effort to unionize the workers at JFK8.

In 2022, after months of organizing, Smalls and his team (including colleague Derrick Palmer) achieved a historic victory. The Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which he co-founded, won a union election at JFK8, making it the first Amazon facility in the United States to unionize. The win was groundbreaking because of Amazon's size and



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anti-union stance and because it was achieved through a worker-led, independent union rather than an established labor organization.

Praising his work, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, said, "All over this country people are working crazy hours, with terrible working conditions, inadequate wages, poor benefits ... and what you have done is to take on one of the most powerful corporations in America owned by the second-wealthiest guy in this country."

Smalls' organizing efforts defied expectations and highlighted the power of grassroots activism. He leveraged

social media, local community connections and a deep understanding of workers' needs to build solidarity.

"We don't need millions of dollars," Smalls said. "We just need the peoples' power and the power of the community behind us."

The ALU's success also underscored the challenges faced by Black workers, who disproportionately hold low-wage, high-risk jobs in industries like warehousing and logistics. Smalls has been vocal about how race and class intersect in these struggles, stating, "We are the underdogs. We are the forgotten ones."

Smalls continues to advocate for

broader labor reforms. He has testified before Congress and engaged with policymakers to push for stronger labor protections and corporate accountability. His efforts have drawn praise from progressive leaders and grassroots activists who see his work as a blueprint for modern organizing.

Smalls' story is one of resilience and determination, proving that even in the face of a corporate behemoth, workers can unite and demand change. His fight for justice at Amazon has inspired a new wave of labor activism, making him a pivotal figure in the ongoing struggle for workers' rights.