



Clayola Brown

President, A. Philip Randolph Institute | Washington, DC

“And together we nurtured one another.”

The importance of mentoring in shaping young and senior leaders

In 2004, Clayola Brown became the first female president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the oldest constituency group of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which has promoted racial equality and economic justice since its founding in 1965. Brown succeeded iconic labor and civil rights leaders Randolph and Bayard Rustin and has skillfully led the organization into the 21st century.

Her lifelong commitment to labor activism began in the early 1960s, when she was just a teenager, in her hometown of Charleston, South Carolina. She and her mother were part of a successful effort to organize the Manhattan Shirt Factory in Charleston. Around that time, there was a huge influx of northern manufacturing companies relocating to the South to take advantage of the low unionization rate in the region. In the 1970s, Brown played a role in organizing employees of textile giant J.P. Stevens & Co. In 1980, after a 17-year struggle, over 3,000 workers won a contract through the newly formed Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Brown eventually became education director for the union and played a pivotal role in helping its 500,000 members negotiate better contracts. In 1995, the union merged with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and formed the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). Brown served on the AFL-CIO Executive Council from 1995 to 2005.

Brown's story highlights her commitment to making room for the next generation of black trade unionists, a passion birthed in her own experience of being nurtured and mentored by her mother and other black women in the labor movement as well as by white union brothers and sisters.

Brown graduated from Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida. She has done post-graduate work at American University, Queens College and York University in New York City.

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My mother, not one to take orders easily, decided that we were going to do something about the conditions in the textile plants around Charleston. Along with a number of family members, we went looking for jobs where we could earn a living wage as opposed to just a paycheck. My mother managed to get me fired from my first three jobs. She made it clear that I was not defined by the kind of work I did. It was just a job that I was doing. No matter what door I walked in to earn a living, I carried with me the dignity and respect that comes with being a human being. So I got started in organizing, following my mother from place to place to look for good working conditions, good benefits, and a decent wage.

Like me, many black women who were a part of the labor movement carried the culture of our families and communities into our work. The needs of our families made real clear why we had to do what we did. There was a passion that came through our culture. And the labor movement wasn't quite sure what to do with us.

Finding a mentor to help me navigate the labor movement was very high on my priority list. It was always men who helped to mentor me from one spot to the next. And in the beginning it was mostly white men in trade union organizations who came from similar family backgrounds as mine. The white folks were poor too. When poor was for real, it didn't matter what color you were. The only color that ever mattered was the green of the dollar, which all of us were looking for at the end of a good day's work—a fair day's pay.

Later—as was God's will and as luck prevailed—I was able to meet some very strong sisters in the movement and together, we nurtured one another. Among us, the mentoring process was one of sharing as opposed to following—and of being there for each other when times got hard and hot. As only those of us who were doing it could understand, we could hold each other up without having to say one spoken word.

When I became president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 2004, we needed to

determine where the organization wanted to go. One of the principles that stuck in my mind most was mentoring young people and giving them opportunities to reverse-mentor us seasoned leaders. I knew that they needed mentorship in addition to labor education and political activism experience. We had to include young people because they see ways to get things done that we don't even think about. The young folks that have been a part the past 10 years have taught the elders so much by finding ways of getting around situations that seemed insurmountable.

Setting the agenda for what's next has been wonderful because the elders sat down and listened to our young folk. We had to be big enough to understand that just because we were older, we did not necessarily have to be leading.

Young women don't want to hear about what used to be and what we did back then. They want to know what we are going to do now. How are we going to prepare for the future? One thing is crystal clear, people know when it is their turn to lead; and people who are in positions need to know when to turn leadership over. What traditionally happens with women is that the turnover becomes more problematic than it ought to be.

Sisters can help one another move to the next spot instead of fighting one another to get to the spot. We are getting better at it, but we should have been way down the road. We know what it is like to lift someone, to pull someone, to support someone. And we have got to be even more committed to that practice.