

## 10,000 Black Men Named George (2002)

**Director:** Robert Townsend

**Starring:** Andre Braugher (A. Philip Randolph), Carla Brothers (wife Lucille Randolph), Charles S. Dutton (Milton Webster), Mario Van Peebles (Ashley Totten), Brock Peters (Leon Frey).

A made-for-cable movie.

The story of the attempt to establish the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union of the black railway porters working for the Pullman Company, beginning in 1925, with the assistance of journalist and political activist Asa Philip Randolph. All black porters were referred to as George because they worked for owner George Pullman. More racism occurred in the payment of low wages to the workers. The Pullman company opposed any type of unionization among the workers or, indeed, any civil rights legislation.

**Spoiler Warning:** below is a summary of the entire movie.

Pullman train to New Jersey, 1925. A black porter sees a white woman stealing the towels and wash cloths from the train. He tells her very politely not to take the items off the train. She counters with: "Are you calling me a thief?" He says "No, ma'am, but the porters have to pay for any missing items from the train." He also says he can't afford to pay for the items, not on \$60 dollars a month pay. The woman demands to see the conductor (who is white). The conductor comes and demands that she open the suitcase. After some protest, she opens the suitcase and there are the Pullman towels. She now accuses the porter of planting the towels in her suitcase. The conductor doesn't believe her. She says George did it because "he's one of those fresh negroes attracted to white women." She wants George reported and fired from his job. This dispute ends suddenly with the collision of the train with another train. The porter is killed by scalding steam from a broken pipe while saving the white woman's daughter.

New York City. Randolph looks at a union agreement for the elevator operators and says that he never agreed to this. Then he finds out that his colleagues went behind his back and made the agreement. Randolph feels betrayed. The head negotiator for the businesses tells Randolph to sign or they will fire the "lot of them." Randolph signs and walks out of the room.

Randolph runs a small magazine known as *The Messenger*. He talks to one of the paperboys and finds out that sales are very slow. Now he walks over to his wife Lucille's beauty salon to say hello. He tells his wife that he's out of a job. They have blocked him from ever trying to organize the hotel workers again. He feels very discouraged and says he is done with trying to organize black labor. His wife wants him to continue, but she diplomatically says: "We'll talk later."

Talking to the black representatives of labor, the head of the Pullman Company, Barton Davis, says that George Pullman was a friend of Abraham Lincoln. After the assassination, he asked himself how could he help the recently emancipated slaves. So he starts hiring blacks as Pullman porters. A "union" representative named Ashley Totten has come to ask for some assistance for the family of a now deceased hero porter for whom a Pullman car was named. The family does get a pension, but it is only \$18 a month and the widow has five children, her mother and sisters. Davis refuses, saying it would set a bad precedent. He has Mr. Desmond escort the other reps out, while Davis talks with Totten. Davis tells Totten that he's firing the other men that were with him for insubordination and he would fire Totten too, but he likes him.

Totten goes over to the offices of *The Messenger* to ask Randolph to help unionize the Pullman porters. The "union" rep says recently such bad things have been happening at the company, that he can no longer live with it. Randolph asks Totten to take a walk with him. He finds out that the so-called union is really the company-directed ERP. Anyone speaking up for the porters gets fired. Randolph tells Totten that he can't help him. Totten gives an impassioned little speech about how much their people need to unionize and an impressed Randolph says: "I'll think about it."

At home with his family, his brother James tells Philip that it is simply impossible to organize the porters. These men have to beg, scrape and bow in a lifetime of humiliation just to get tips so they can make a living wage. Rather than discourage his brother, James's comments cause him to go, undercover so to speak, as a Pullman porter. He is called George just like all the other Pullman porters. And he is subjected to humiliation from the white riders on the train. For instance, a smart-ass, young white male literally throws his shoes into Randolph's chest and then asks the "boy" to shine them up and there will be a tip coming his way. Randolph gets very angry and the white guy says: "Is there a problem, George?" Randolph catches himself, gives a big fake smile and says "No, suh."

Totten tells Randolph that the porters have to spend hours loading and unloading luggage and don't receive any pay for this. If a porter complains about how the customers treat him, he gets fired. Some whites just ride the trains to see how far they can push the porters. Randolph is amazed at the way the porters are treated. An old porter named Leon Frey asks Totten where he got this "green horn" from? Randolph nearly gets into real trouble when a drunken, middle-aged, white woman disrobes and wants him to have sex with her. She tells him: "Your work is right here, George." Randolph gets out of there as fast as he can. He goes directly to Totten and asks him how many men can he get together for a union meeting?

But the first thing Randolph wants to do is write about his experiences as a Pullman porter, which he promptly publishes in his magazine. The article creates quite a stir. Davis and his cronies all read the article and don't like it. They ask Desmond for background information on the trouble maker. Desmond says he's "a failed Broadway actor, a socialist nut and a streetcar radical". In 1918 he was arrested for exhorting the negroes not to fight in World War I. The Justice Department has called him "the most dangerous negro in America." He gets his money from his wife who has a very successful beauty salon. Davis says they will ignore the article and make no comments to the press. Meanwhile, Desmond is to gather all the information he can on both Randolph and his wife.

A union meeting begins. Old Leon Frey is shocked when Randolph comes out to lead the meeting. Randolph introduces himself. He says he will be the only speaker because undoubtedly there are company spies in the room and he doesn't want anyone fired for talking about unionizing. He explains he can't be fired because he doesn't work for Pullman. They can't fire them for merely listening, no matter how powerful the company may think it is. The first thing Randolph wants to do is abolish the ERP company union, end the "the demeaning practice" of tipping and obtain a minimum monthly wage of \$150 dollars. The crowd really likes that! Even brother James has a big smile on his face. Randolph finishes by saying that the porters must be treated like free men. The audience stands and applauds him.

Mrs. Frey is a big supporter of the union. Her husband even offers to pay more than \$10 dollars union fee. Leon says he was born a slave in South Carolina and saw Sherman's March to the Sea. He says in the old days he was just glad to have a job and never thought this day of organizing would ever come. Lucille Randolph is also a big supporter. She even starts a woman's auxiliary to help the struggle of the porters for better treatment and pay.

Randolph tells his staff that they have 572 union members now. He also insists that they are going to have to start fund raising to support the organization. Totten wants Randolph to head up to Chicago to meet a big power broker named Milton Webster. After all, about half of the porters work out of Chicago. So Randolph heads for Chicago.

Chicago. Webster is dressed up in a really nice suit, wears his hat inside his favorite restaurant and smokes big cigars. He looks like a real character, all right. He flirts with the waitress, which makes Randolph feel uneasy. Webster acts like he is interested in everything else but the porters. He accuses Randolph of being one of those "new, fancy negroes" who don't have any real life experience. He grabs Randolph's hand to check them for calluses or any other sign of "real" work. He is so insulting that Randolph starts walking out of the restaurant. Webster comes after him naming all of Randolph's previous failures at unionizing. Randolph responds: "At least, I'm trying. What exactly are you doing towards forming a union?" Webster did try to start a union once, but the Pullman Company came after him hard, really hard. He now wants to know if Randolph is ready for Pullman to come after him. The New Yorker tells Webster he's ready for them. He also says that this has been a big waste of time. He is the head of the union and he can't be intimidated by Pullman or Webster. If Webster is not ready to help form a union, he should at least stay out of the way. He walks out of the restaurant.

Webster charges towards him on the sidewalk. He now agrees to work with Randolph. And now Webster turns completely supportive and compliments Randolph on some of the things he said at the union meeting (which others told him about).

Totten is brought to Davis by Desmond. Davis tells Totten that he knows that Totten recruited Randolph. He says he's very disappointed in Totten. Davis threatens to stop Totten from ever working again. They force Totten to call Webster to ask what train Randolph is coming in on to Chicago. Webster gives him the time of arrival, but Totten repeats a different arrival time to Webster, who in turn asks Totten if he's loco. Webster starts wondering why would Totten be acting so peculiarly.

Upon arrival at the station, the police grab Randolph to put him under arrest. Webster, pretending he's a police officer, grabs Randolph from them. He says this man is his prisoner and he's taking Randolph from them. When they are alone, Webster tells Randolph that he told him that Pullman would fight dirty and now it's started. He smiles and laughs: "We're going to war! We're going to war!"

Lucille chairs another meeting of the women's auxiliary under the guise of it being a sewing club.

Webster is working as a porter when Pullman thugs come in to give him a good beating. The man from Chicago busts a water pitcher up against the head of one of the toughs, but gets spun around and then knocked down by a punch to the face from a very light skinned black man behind Webster. While the others run from Webster, Webster kicks the black fellow in the groin area sending him flying onto a table. The other thugs come back, grab Webster and throw him off the train. Webster shouts to them: "I'll see you again!"

Pullman now takes action against Lucille and her beauty shop. Two black men hand out flyers in front of her business saying that she and her husband are both Bolsheviks. Her friend Emily stops coming to the shop. In fact, business goes totally bad. All she gets now is cancellations and no shows. Lucille tells her husband that this is the first time they ever came after her. She says she doesn't know how to fight something like this.

Thirty porters get fired in St. Louis for trying to organize and a union man got arrested for "preaching social equality in the South." Totten says the "crackers" will hang the arrested man for sure. Randolph tells Totten to get the man up to New York City. Totten is a bit discouraged and makes Randolph more frustrated than he already is. Randolph tells him: "Did you think it would be easy? Huh?"

Totten goes to complain to Davis about the 54 firings of porters. Davis makes it 55 by firing Totten. Totten says Davis can't fire all of the porters. Davis tells Totten that this is a white man's country and Pullman will never sit down with Randolph or other blacks to negotiate labor terms.

The union fellows realize they have a major spy in among them. Webster says he is going to find out who it is and he's going to kill him. Randolph says any violence on their part will allow Pullman to exploit it to delegitimize their union efforts. Randolph also says he's going to the A.F. of L. (American Federation of Labor) to see if they can help their union out. Webster walks out. Totten volunteers to go try to calm Webster down.

Lucille has to close her shop. The place is boarded up.

Washington, D.C. Randolph and Webster meet with the head of the A. F. of L. They want to make their union the legitimate union of the Pullman Company. Webster puts the man on the defensive, but the man says: "I am not proud of this organization's prejudiced attitude." He says by them meeting here, maybe they can chip away at some of the prejudice. But for right now, there is no way their union can be recognized by his organization. Randolph says then they must strike. The head man warns him that nobody recognizes their union, not even his labor organization. A strike is a last resort, not a first resort. Randolph gets up to leave, but the white guy asks him to wait. He wants to be given a chance to talk to the head of the mediation board, a former governor of Kentucky. He will ask him to at least sit and hear out the case for the brotherhood union of Pullman porters. Randolph smiles and shakes the man's hand.

Randolph gets his hearing. With him are Webster, Totten and Leon Frey. Davis says that the so-called union has been padding its membership list. Their membership is actually one-tenth of what they claim. Furthermore, the ERP is the only representative of the Pullman porters. Totten gets angry and shouts that the ERP is a sham. The board chairman sides with the Pullman Company. Webster walks out before the chairman finishes his verdict.

1929. The real union leaders talk about having a vote for or against a strike. Webster is opposed to a strike. Totten supports it. Leaving the union headquarters Ashley is beaten badly by a bunch of company thugs. Randolph discovers Totten. A doctor examines him and tells Randolph that the man's spine is injured. The police cover for Pullman saying it was a simple robbery. Webster says they absolutely have to smoke that spy out. So they get someone to watch the trains and especially Mr. Desmond. He always comes right on time to get information from a porter.

Webster and Randolph go to confront the spy. He is none other than Leon Frey. Webster announces it in front of all the staff. His wife comes to his rescue, but Leon admits that he did it. He justifies himself by saying that he was a slave. He got his freedom, but no job. So Pullman comes along and offers jobs to negroes. He tells everyone that they are going to lose their jobs and nobody will hire them. Webster tells him: "If you don't want to be in the union, don't be in the union. But why'd you have to spy for them?" Leon gives the pitiful answer: "Because they asked me." Because of him, says Webster, Totten is in the hospital. His wife starts going home without him. She asks him: "How could you, Leon?" He even spied on the women's auxiliary of which she is a member. He spied on his own wife of 43 years.

Lucille tells her husband that they are running out of money and he is paying the rent on the union office out of their funds. Randolph says he has to catch a train and that the Depression is killing their union membership. Lucille says that he wouldn't do this if they had children. He agrees, but says that they can do this so other people's children will have it better than they do. Lucille is still upset, so Randolph just leaves.

Chicago. Randolph, leading a union staff meeting, gets a phone call from his wife. His mother has died. Randolph says he can't come, because he has no money for a train ticket. Webster and the guys pass the hat around and give him more than enough money for the fare to New York. Randolph says he can't accept this. They tell him that Mrs. Randolph was a part of the union movement from the very beginning. They want him to go. Randolph still says no. Webster, however, insists that he take the money and go home. Randolph takes the money and goes.

On the street Randolph is accosted by a former porter who lost his job and blames Randolph for that. The man wants to hurt Randolph, but a couple of men grab the angry man. Randolph arrives home. He is very discouraged, but this time his wife picks him up. She says: "I was wrong. We have come too far to quit now. You're not going to walk away from this one." Buoyed by the unexpected support from his wife, Randolph replies: "This one I win or die trying."

At the office Philip gets a check for \$10,000 dollars. He can cash it, if he agrees to walk away from the union. As Randolph says, it's a trap to discredit him. But they must go before the membership as to how he should answer the company's request. At the meeting a union member gives Randolph a hard time. He tells the membership about the \$10,000 dollars offered to him by the company. He says Randolph is lying and is accepting the \$10,000 dollars. Randolph tells them all that he gave the check back to the company. Webster has to save the day. He tells the members that they all know him. They know what he stands for is beyond reproach. And he backs A. Philip Randolph. He was with Randolph when he received the check and he personally saw him deliver it to the company. Totten arrives to make sure the union supports Randolph. He gives a speech saying that never again will the company (or the white man) tell them who their union leaders will be. He says: "Phil stays!" The audience bursts out with applause and support for Randolph.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Inauguration, 1933. Washington, D.C. The head of the A. F. of L. talks with Randolph and says the atmosphere is improving greatly. He thinks that now he can get the Federation to recognize Randolph's union. Davis reads in the newspaper about the Pullman union being recognized and he doesn't like it. He calls up the head of the A.F. of L to express his great disappointment, but gets nowhere. The angry Davis slams the phone down hard.

Mr. Desmond and his boys pay a visit to Randolph and his wife. They let Lucille enter her apartment. Desmond hands Randolph a blank check that could amount to as much as one million dollars. Randolph tells him there is no way they can stop the union from becoming a reality. He hands the check back to Desmond.

April 9, 1935. The headline is that "Congress Passes Railway Labor Act -- Showdown Vote Likely Expected at Pullman." Webster is ecstatic. Davis is miserable. Randolph and his men got 10,000 signatures from porters in support of the real labor union. One of the staff says: "10,000 men named George." Pullman now suggests massive firings. The doubting Thomas asks who will be doing the shoe-shingling? Desmond says they can get the Mexicans and Filipinos. "They can bow and scrape with the best of them."

1935. The union men are angry because Pullman is saying that many of the men coming out to vote can't vote because they were fired as of yesterday. Randolph speaks to one of the white officials and tells him if they don't do something quick, they are going to have a riot on their hands. The men can't be fired without proper review. This scares the white guy, so he says the voting can go ahead, as long as the union leadership will prevent any violence.

At night the call comes in about the election result. Randolph hangs up the phone and says: "It looks like I still have a job. We won in a landslide." There is great celebration among those who worked so hard for the union. The next day the sign goes up for the National Headquarters of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

"On August 25th, 1937 the Pullman Company signed the first ever agreement between a union of black workers and a major American corporation. It was twelve years -- to the day -- of the founding of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

"For the next four decades Randolph carried forward his fight for equality. In 1963, commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Randolph initiated the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was at that gathering that a young Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech and Randolph passed his torch to a new generation of leaders in the fight for Civil Rights."

Review:

Feel-good movie about the triumph of good over evil. The fat cats of the Pullman Sleeping Car Company wanted to keep the blacks as virtual slaves to the company. Not only slaves, but abused and humiliated slaves receiving very little money. Pullman Company people don't think they will ever have to sit down with the representatives of the blacks. One of the big reasons for this is that this is a white man's country, says the top boss. Another reason for their confidence is that the company will do any dirty thing to stop the workers from organizing. It's almost as if these corporate fat cats were kings believing they have a divine right directly from God to rule over the black children.

A. Philip Randolph took big chances trying to organize black labor. The bosses could have done to Randolph what they did to Totten -- damage his spine and leave him crippled for life. And yet he persevered through it all to win recognition for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. I really enjoyed the work of Charles S. Dutton (as Milton Webster). Also good were Andre Braugher (as A. Philip Randolph) and Mario Van Peebles (as Ashley Totten)

Patrick Louis Cooney, Ph. D.

<http://www.vernonjohns.org/snuffy1186/10000blk.html>