

William 'Bill' Lucy

Architect of 'I AM A MAN' | CBTU Co-Founder | Conscience of Labor

"Memphis gave the world William Lucy -- and William Lucy gave the world a blueprint for how labor and justice are one and the same." -- Labor Education ebook, Chapter 2

Born in Memphis. Lived for Labor. Honored Worldwide.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee on November 26, 1933, William 'Bill' Lucy (1933-2024) served as Secretary-Treasurer of AFSCME for nearly 40 years (1972-2010) -- the highest-ranking African American in the entire labor movement. During the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike, he created the iconic 'I AM A MAN' slogan that became the battle cry of a movement. In 1972, he co-founded the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) and served as its president for 40 years. In 1994, he became the first African American elected President of Public Services International -- the world's largest union federation. He co-founded the Free South Africa Movement, led the U.S. tour for Nelson Mandela after his release, and helped monitor South Africa's first democratic elections. He passed September 25, 2024, at age 90.

HOW CBTU AND APRI CONNECT

APRI (founded 1965 by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin) and CBTU (founded 1972 by William Lucy and four other Black union leaders) are the two official AFL-CIO Black constituency organizations. APRI was the institutional vision built at the elite level. CBTU was the rank-and-file expansion built when AFL-CIO President George Meany refused to address Black trade unionists' concerns. Same fight, different rooms. Lucy is the bridge -- he carried Randolph's labor-plus-civil-rights fusion into Memphis 1968 ('I AM A MAN') and then into CBTU in 1972. Today, APRI Memphis and CBTU Memphis stand together as sister chapters in the city where the two movements became one.

Three Defining Acts

MEMPHIS 1968 -- 'I AM A MAN'

As AFSCME's national point person on the Memphis Sanitation Strike, Lucy crafted the four-word placard that turned a strike for wages and safety into a moral declaration. The slogan reframed labor as dignity -- and made Memphis 1968 the bridge between the labor movement and the civil rights movement.

CHICAGO 1972 -- THE FOUNDING OF CBTU

In September 1972, over 1,200 Black union officials from 37 unions gathered at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago -- the largest assembly of Black trade unionists in U.S. labor history. Lucy and four co-founders (Nelson Edwards/UAW, Charles Hayes/Meat Cutters, Cleveland Robinson/Distributive Workers, William Simons/AFT) created CBTU to fight discrimination 'within the house of labor.'

WORLDWIDE -- FREE SOUTH AFRICA + OBAMA 2008

Co-founded the Free South Africa Movement (1980s), led Mandela's U.S. tour, and used CBTU's networks to deliver one of the earliest critical labor endorsements for Barack Obama in 2008.

JOIN CBTU -- BUILD ON LUCY'S FOUNDATION

The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists welcomes union members and allies committed to advancing Black trade unionists' voice within the labor movement. National: cbtu.org. CBTU Memphis stands alongside APRI Memphis as sister chapters carrying forward Randolph, Rustin, and Lucy's vision.

Labor Education x CBTU Memphis | laboreducation.org/bill-lucy | cbtu.org

"The conscience of the labor movement." -- Tribute to William Lucy (1933-2024)
Stewarded by CBTU Memphis. Honoring the elders who paid the way.