

Bayard Rustin

(1912-1987)



Bayard Rustin was a strategist and activist in the struggle for human rights and economic justice for more than half a century.

Born in 1912, he was reared in West Chester, PA, by his grandparents, Julia Davis Rustin and Janifer Rustin. The Rustins were active in the community and Julia, who was reared in a Quaker household, instilled in Bayard a strong sense of social justice. Bayard excelled as a student, athlete

and musician. His activism began during his teenage years when he was arrested for sitting in the "whites only" section of a local movie theater. The first African-American to receive the D. Webster Meredith Prize for excellence in public speaking, he was West Chester High School's class valedictorian in 1932. He attended Wilberforce University and Cheyney State College. A gifted tenor, he was a member of the Wilberforce Quartet and the Cheyney State Quartet.

In 1937 Bayard Rustin moved to New York City. There he enrolled at City College, earning money for tuition doing odd jobs and singing with *Josh White and the Carolinians*. The highly politicized campus moved him to become an organizer for the Young Communist League which opposed the U.S. position on the escalating conflict in Europe. The YCL engaged Rustin to organize a campaign to end segregation in the U.S. armed services and advocate an antiwar position. But after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Communists reversed their position. They demanded that Rustin end the desegregation campaign and support the alliance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the fight against Hitler. Realizing that the Communists were more interested in supporting official Soviet policy than in either seeking racial justice in the U.S. or promoting peace, he broke with the YCL.

In the early 1940s, Rustin began associations with three men who were to deeply influence his political thought: A. Philip Randolph, A.J. Muste, and Norman Thomas. Randolph, organizer and President of The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an African-American trade union, was also head of the March on Washington Movement to protest segregation and inequality in America. A.J. Muste was leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a religiously based peace and social justice organization. Norman Thomas, a leader in the democratic socialist movement in America, worked closely with Randolph and Muste, and stressed the importance of democratic means and procedures in

organizations in order to avoid the totalitarian tendencies that dominated the Communist movement.

Hired as the FOR's Secretary for Student and General Affairs, Bayard Rustin toured the country conducting Race Relations Institutes to promote understanding between racial groups. He became the first field secretary of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a group that grew out of the FOR, and in 1942 he was part of a group dispatched to California by the FOR and the American Friends Service Committee to help protect the property of Japanese-Americans held in detention camps.

After America entered World War II, Bayard Rustin had to confront his options under the Selective Service Law. Although entitled to conscientious objector status as a Quaker, he believed the draft law discriminated against others who, although sincere in their antiwar beliefs, were not members of traditional 'peace churches.' Consequently, he refused to cooperate with the Selective Service System and was imprisoned in Lewisburg Penitentiary in 1943.

Following his release from prison, Bayard returned to work at the FOR, and, in 1947, under the auspices of the FOR and CORE, he took part in testing enforcement of the 1946 Supreme Court decision in the Irene Morgan case. That decision outlawed discrimination in interstate travel. Known as the "Journey of Reconciliation" the test consisted of volunteers violating the segregated seating patterns that were customary on buses and trains in the South. The demonstrators risked beatings, arrest, and fines. Arrested in North Carolina, Rustin served 22 days on a chain gang. His account of that experience, serialized in *The New York Post*, spurred an investigation that contributed to the abolition of chain gangs in North Carolina. The Journey of Reconciliation was a model for the "freedom rides" of the early 1960s.

1947 also found Rustin working with A. Philip Randolph's Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training, which was instrumental in securing President Truman's order eliminating segregation in the armed forces.

While working to promote democracy at home, Bayard Rustin also supported human rights struggles worldwide. In 1945 he organized the FOR's Free India Committee which championed India's fight for independence from Great Britain. Following the example of Mahatma Gandhi, whose methods he studied during a visit to India, he was arrested for nonviolently protesting Britain's colonial rule in Africa. In the early 1950s, he consulted with Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, both leaders in their countries independence movements. At home, he helped organize the Committee to Support South African Resistance which later became the American Committee on Africa.

As a gay man, relatively open for his time. Bayard Rustin also experienced antigay prejudice. His sexual orientation and his controversial political positions often relegated him to a behind-the-scenes role in various campaigns. An arrest on a morals charge in 1953 led to his dismissal from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, but he was soon hired by the War Resisters League (WRL).

In 1956, at Mr. Randolph's request, he was granted leave from his position as Executive Secretary of the WRL to assist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the early days of the Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott. His extensive background in the theory, strategies, and tactics of nonviolent direct action proved invaluable and were the foundation of his close association with Dr. King. Following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rustin drafted a series of documents that led to the founding of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

As the civil rights movement grew, Bayard Rustin was the principal organizer of many demonstrations, including the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, and the 1958-59 Youth Marches for Integrated Schools. He was the Deputy Director of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Considered by many to be the high point of the civil rights movement, the march was, at that time, the largest demonstration in the nation's history. It was also the platform for Dr. King's historic "I Have a Dream" address. The peaceful, integrated demonstration, a coalition of civil rights, labor and religious groups, helped create the political climate for the passage of the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

In 1964 Rustin helped found the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI). The Randolph Institute has 200 chapters conducting programs to strengthen relations between the black community and the labor movement. During the mid-1960s he helped organize the Recruitment and Training Program (R-T-P, Inc.) which successfully increased minority participation in the building and construction trades. A longtime supporter of worker's rights, Mr. Rustin participated in many strikes and was last arrested in 1984 while demonstrating in support of the clerical and technical employees of Yale University, five months after receiving an honorary degree there.

Following the peak activity of the civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin increased his involvement with international affairs. In 1975, he organized the Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC). Citing their common histories of discrimination, he felt that blacks and Jews should maintain their alliance, forged during the civil rights movement. He believed that Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, merited the support of African-Americans. He made numerous fact-finding visits to the region and was an early advocate for Soviet and Ethiopian Jews in their struggle to emigrate to Israel.

Mr. Rustin had a long involvement with refugee affairs. As a Vice Chairman of the International Rescue Committee he traveled the world working to secure food, medical care, education, and proper resettlement for refugees. His visits to Southeast Asia helped to bring the plight of the Vietnamese "boat people" to the attention of the American public. In 1980 he took part in the international "March for Survival" on the Thai-Cambodian border. In 1982 he helped found the National Emergency Coalition for Haitian Refugees, now the National Coalition for Haitian Rights. As Chairman of the Executive Committee of Freedom House, an agency that monitors freedom and human rights. Mr. Rustin observed elections in Zimbabwe,

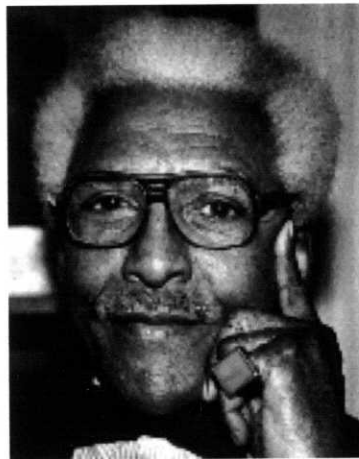
El Salvador and Grenada. His last mission abroad, coordinated by Freedom House, was to Haiti where he met with a broad spectrum of individuals to help determine how Americans could best assist democratization there.

Late in life, Bayard Rustin gave numerous interviews discussing how his sexual orientation had impacted on his work. He was invited to address gay and lesbian groups and testified in support of New York City's 'gay rights' bill. He shared the last decade of his life with Walter Naegle.

A collection of Mr. Rustin's essays, Down the Line, was published in 1971. An updated volume, Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin (edited by Don Weise and Devon Carbado, Cleis Press) appeared in 2003. In 1976, Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest, based on his Radnor Lecture at Columbia University, was published. He made three musical recordings, which have been reissued by The Bayard Rustin Fund, Inc., and are available from the address below. The recordings include spirituals, work and freedom songs, and Elizabethan songs. Three biographies, Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen by Jervis Anderson (1997), Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement by Daniel Levine (2000); and Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin, by John D'Emilio (2003) are available. Two biographies for young readers, Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement by James Haskins (1997), and No Easy Answers: Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement, by Calvin Craig Miller (2005) have been released. An award winning documentary film, "Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin," (Nancy Kates/Bennett Singer, Question Why Films) debuted in 2003.

At the time of his death, Bayard Rustin was Co-Chairman of the A. Philip Randolph Institute and President of the A. Philip Randolph Educational Fund. He was Chairman of Social Democrats USA, a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, and a life member of Actor's Equity. He served on numerous boards and committees, and was the recipient of more than a dozen honorary degrees.

In 1995 a historical marker honoring Bayard Rustin was installed in West Chester, PA, at Lincoln & Montgomery Streets.



Walter Naegle