

Rustin, Bayard (17 Mar. 1912-24 Aug. 1987), civil rights leader and political activist, was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, the illegitimate son of an immigrant from the British West Indies. Raised by his maternal grandparents (his grandfather was a caterer), Rustin was educated in the local public schools. He first experienced racial discrimination as a member of his high school football team when he was denied service at a restaurant in Media, Pennsylvania. After high school, he worked at odd jobs, traveled widely, and studied at Wilberforce University in Ohio, Cheney State Teachers College in Pennsylvania, and the City College of New York, never earning a formal degree.

As a young man, Rustin joined the Young Communist League, believing at the time that Communists "seemed the only people who had civil rights at heart." As a Quaker and pacifist, however, his beliefs conflicted with party policy. When Communists demanded U.S. participation in World War II in June 1941 after the German invasion of Russia, Rustin broke with the party. Thereafter he devoted himself to the antiwar and civil rights movements. In 1941 he became field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and race relations director for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a nondenominational group founded by the radical pacifist [Abraham J. Muste](#) to promote the nonviolent resolution of world problems.

Rustin was soon allied with [A. Philip Randolph](#), president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and an advocate of civil rights for African Americans. Rustin organized young people to participate in Randolph's 1941 March on Washington Movement, an effort to pressure President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) to ban racial discrimination in employment. When Randolph postponed the scheduled mass protest march because the president established a Fair Employment Practices Committee, Rustin accused the civil rights leader of compromising his principles.

Rustin paid dearly for maintaining his own principles, serving twenty-eight months in a federal prison for refusing to register for the draft. After the war, he continued to promote pacifism and civil rights. In 1947 he participated in the first "freedom ride" (the Journey of Reconciliation) sponsored by CORE, an effort to desegregate interstate bus travel. As a result, a court in North Carolina convicted Rustin of violating the state's Jim Crow laws and sentenced him to labor on a prison chain gang. He also served as executive director of the War Resisters League (1953-1955), an indication of his hesitancy to devote himself solely to civil rights. By the early 1950s, however, Rustin drew closer to Randolph and other African-American civil rights advocates.

Although Rustin remained committed to the use of nonviolent civil disobedience, he increasingly stressed the need for African Americans to build alliances with white reformers, especially with progressive elements in the labor movement. As the civil rights movement intensified in the late 1950s, the importance of Rustin's role heightened. Randolph sent him to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 to aid [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), in organizing a boycott against the city's segregated buses. For the next five years, Rustin worked closely with King, tutoring him in how to organize mass nonviolent demonstrations and also in the importance of building alliances with progressive white reformers. Rustin favored an interracial coalition of poor people because he believed that the achievement of civil rights alone would not lift the mass of African Americans from poverty. Yet until segregation collapsed, he concentrated on the struggle for civil rights. In 1960 Rustin organized civil rights protests at both the Republican and Democratic national conventions. Later he organized the most massive and effective civil rights demonstration in history--the August

1963 March on Washington. More than 250,000 people gathered at the nation's capital to endorse civil rights legislation and to listen to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The march illustrated Rustin's commitment "to build, through means that are democratic and nonviolent, a just society . . . in which men of all races . . . need not fear each other." In 1964 Rustin organized an equally successful one-day boycott of the New York City public schools in order to speed the process of integration.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ended one phase of Rustin's career. Success split the civil rights movement. One element, consisting mostly of younger African Americans, gloried in "black power" and suggested that violent action might be necessary. Rustin insisted that civil disobedience had not failed and that the time had arrived to move from protest to politics. He argued in 1965 that since civil rights legislation had failed to end poverty for African Americans, the movement should turn to coalition politics and join with trade unionists and white liberals to erect a more generous welfare state. Rustin's refusal to endorse "black power" and to reject white political allies caused militant African Americans to condemn him as an "oreo," a black cracker with a white filling. In response, Rustin drew closer to his white allies. During the 1968 New York City teachers' strike, he supported the cause of the United Federation of Teachers against the demands of African-American militants who sought community control of the schools. Rustin forged firm links with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations and with the Jewish-American community. Because of his support for the state of Israel and his commitment to multiracialism, Rustin was honored by the American Jewish Committee in 1978 for "illustrious leadership in the cause of racial justice, world peace and human understanding."

From 1964 until his death, Rustin served as executive director of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, which sought to amalgamate the civil rights and labor movements. Only by working with labor, liberal, religious, and reformist business groups, Rustin asserted, could African Americans achieve improved economic and social conditions. Rustin wrote a series of books and pamphlets in defense of a multiracial civil rights movement and a social democratic welfare state, including *Black Studies: Myths and Realities* (1969), *Down the Line* (1971), and *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (1976). Only a few months before his death, Rustin admitted publicly in an interview published in the *Village Voice* that he was a homosexual. He had previously hidden his sexual orientation because public knowledge of it as well as his youthful communism might have ended his influence as a reformer. Rustin died in New York City.

Rustin was a leading exemplar of the African American-Jewish American, civil rights movement-labor movement coalition that did so much to demolish segregation and to build the American welfare state. Moreover, he used nonviolent civil disobedience to mount extremely effective multiracial mass protests.

Bibliography

There is no single collection of Rustin's papers. Much material on him may be found in the records of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in the Library of Congress and in the Congress of Racial Equality Papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. For a full-length account of his life, see Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (1997). His contributions to the civil rights movement and to political coalition building can also be followed in Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (1990), and David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1988). Obituaries are in the *New York Times*, 25 Aug. 1987; *Jet*, 7 Sept. 1987; *New Leader*, 7 Sept. 1987; and the *New Republic*, 28 Sept. 1987.

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