

The Rustin Method

A 45-Minute Educator's Lesson on Bayard Rustin

*Labor Education * laboreducation.org/pillars/rustin * Version 1.0 * June 2026*

Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) was the strategist of the modern Civil Rights Movement. He trained Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Gandhian nonviolence in 1955. He organized the 1963 March on Washington in ten days. He co-founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI) in 1965 - the institutional spine of the Black labor / civil-rights coalition. He lived openly as a Black gay man at a time when both identities were criminalized - and he stayed in the work anyway.

This lesson is built for community teachers, high-school and college history & civics educators, library facilitators, faith-class leaders, and union steward training programs. It runs 45 minutes. The PDF is the script - print it, walk through it, and at the end every student leaves understanding how protest becomes power and why the whole person matters to the whole movement.

Learning Objectives

- > Students can name three of Bayard Rustin's specific contributions to the modern Civil Rights and labor movements.
- > Students can explain the core argument of Rustin's 1965 essay 'From Protest to Politics' in their own words.
- > Students can identify why Rustin's identity as a Black gay man was inseparable from his organizing - and how erasing it distorts the history.
- > Students can connect Rustin's methods to a contemporary organizing challenge in their own community (workplace, school, neighborhood).

Educator-Source Film

Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin (2003, PBS Independent Lens)

Directed by Nancy Kates & Bennett Singer. The definitive on-screen biography. Distributed by ITVS (itvs.org/films/brother-outsider) and available through Kanopy, public libraries, and select streaming platforms. Show 8-12 minutes during the lesson (Optional - see Agenda below).

The Rustin Method - 45-Minute Educator's Lesson

1. Facilitator Agenda - 45 Minutes**0:00 - 0:03 (3 min)****Welcome + Setting the Question**

Open with the line: 'You have heard of Martin Luther King Jr. You may have heard of A. Philip Randolph. Most of you have not heard of Bayard Rustin - and he is the one who put it all together. By the end of today you will know who he was, why he was nearly erased, and what his method can teach us about winning right now.'

0:03 - 0:10 (7 min)**Mini-Lecture: Who Was Bayard Rustin?**

Use the Five-Bullet Story (Section 2 below). Stay short. Avoid jargon. Hit the Quaker upbringing, the 28 months in prison, the six months teaching King in Montgomery, the ten days organizing the March, and the 1965 essay 'From Protest to Politics.'

0:10 - 0:18 (8 min)**Primary Text Reading + Discussion**

Hand out the 'From Protest to Politics' excerpt (Section 3 below). Read aloud as a class or in pairs. Then run the 3 discussion questions for 5 minutes.

0:18 - 0:25 (7 min)**Optional Film Clip OR Identity Discussion**

EITHER: Show 8 min of Brother Outsider focused on Rustin's 1953 arrest and 1963 Strom Thurmond Senate-floor attack (itvs.org/films/brother-outsider). OR: Run the LGBTQ+ Legacy discussion (Section 4) - 'Why did people try to erase this part of him, and what does it cost us when we let them?'

0:25 - 0:35 (10 min)**Role-Play: The 10-Day March**

Use the role-play scenario (Section 5). Break into small groups of 4-5. Each group must plan a 250,000-person march on Washington D.C. with 10 days notice, no internet, no cell phones, and one volunteer staff. Worksheet provided.

0:35 - 0:42 (7 min)**Connect to Now: Protest to Politics in Your Community**

Use the Application Worksheet (Section 6). Each student names ONE local issue they care about and writes down one protest action AND one political/coalition action that go together. Rustin's lesson: you need both.

0:42 - 0:45 (3 min)**Close + Take-Home**

Read aloud Rustin's 'angelic troublemakers' quote (Section 7). Hand out the Take-Home Card. Tell students: 'Pick one of the actions you wrote. Do it this week. Tell us how it went.'

The Rustin Method - 45-Minute Educator's Lesson

2. The Five-Bullet Story - Mini-Lecture Script (7 min)

Read these five short paragraphs aloud, in order. Stop after each one and ask 'questions?' - move on quickly.

Bullet 1 - The Quaker Beginning (1912-1937)

Bayard Rustin was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1912 and raised by his Quaker grandmother. Quakers believed every person carries a piece of God, which made racial segregation and war both unacceptable. Rustin carried both of those convictions out into the world for the rest of his life.

Bullet 2 - Prison for Pacifism (1944-1946)

Rustin refused to register for the World War II draft because he believed Quaker pacifism meant no war ever. He served 28 months in federal prison. While inside he organized to desegregate the prison itself. He came out radicalized and committed to Gandhi's method.

Bullet 3 - Teaching King in Montgomery (1955-1956)

In 1955 Rustin traveled to Montgomery, Alabama to meet a 26-year-old Baptist pastor named Martin Luther King Jr. King knew Reinhold Niebuhr but he did not yet know Gandhi. Rustin spent six months teaching him the philosophy and the tactics. The Montgomery Bus Boycott became a Gandhian campaign because Rustin made it one.

Bullet 4 - The Ten-Day March (August 1963)

In the summer of 1963, A. Philip Randolph called him: the march Randolph had been threatening since 1941 was finally on. Rustin had ten days to organize 250,000 people, 2,000 buses, 21 chartered trains, food and water and bathrooms and a sound system on the Lincoln Memorial steps. He delivered. Zero arrests on the day of the march. Senator Strom Thurmond stood on the U.S. Senate floor and read Rustin's 1953 morals-charge arrest record into the Congressional Record to try to break the march. Randolph refused to fire him. The march went on.

Bullet 5 - From Protest to Politics (1965-1987)

After the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, Rustin published 'From Protest to Politics,' arguing protest alone could not deliver power without electoral and coalitional organizing on the other side. That essay shaped the strategy that elected the first generation of Black mayors, congressmembers, and union presidents. Rustin co-founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute the same year. He died in 1987 still organizing. President Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013, fifty years to the month after the March on Washington he had organized.

The Rustin Method - 45-Minute Educator's Lesson

3. Primary Text Excerpt - 'From Protest to Politics' (1965)

Bayard Rustin published 'From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement' in Commentary magazine in February 1965, six months before the Voting Rights Act was signed. The full essay is online at crmvet.org/docs/rustin65.pdf. The following excerpts capture his central argument.

Excerpt A - The Strategic Turn

"The civil rights movement is evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement - an evolution calling its very name into question. It is now concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but with achieving the fact of equality."

- Bayard Rustin, 'From Protest to Politics,' Commentary, February 1965

Excerpt B - The Coalition Argument

"The civil rights movement will be advanced only to the degree that social and economic welfare gets to be inextricably entangled with civil rights. ... It is institutions - social, political, and economic institutions - which are the ultimate molders of collective sentiments. Hence the basic challenge confronting the movement is now economic, social, and political - that is to say, fundamentally political."

- Bayard Rustin, 'From Protest to Politics,' 1965

Excerpt C - The Long Game

"There is a strong moralistic strain in the civil rights movement which would remind us that power corrupts, forgetting that the absence of power also corrupts."

- Bayard Rustin, 'From Protest to Politics,' 1965

Discussion Questions (5 min)**Question 1.**

What does Rustin mean by the move from 'protest' to 'politics'? Give an example from any movement happening today.

Question 2.

Rustin argues that 'the absence of power also corrupts.' What does that mean in plain English - and do you agree?

Question 3.

Rustin built a coalition between Black civil rights organizations, organized labor, religious congregations, and progressive whites. Which coalition would you have to build today to win something where you live? Who is missing from your table?

The Rustin Method - 45-Minute Educator's Lesson

4. The Whole Man - Black, Gay, Quaker, Organizer (Discussion)

Bayard Rustin lived openly as a Black gay man at a time when both identities were criminalized, demonized, and routinely used to destroy careers. In 1953 he was arrested in Pasadena on a morals charge that followed him for decades. In 1963 Senator Strom Thurmond stood on the U.S. Senate floor and read that arrest record into the Congressional Record to try to break the March on Washington. A. Philip Randolph refused to fire him. The march went on.

"I always felt that the gay community had a contribution to make to the human-rights movement. We are all of one piece. There is no liberation that isn't a liberation of every part of us."

- Bayard Rustin

Discussion (5 min)

- > For decades many historians taught Rustin's life without ever naming that he was gay. Why do you think his identity was edited out - and what does that erasure cost us when we try to learn from him?
- > The Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice in Princeton centers his queer leadership as inseparable from his civil-rights work. Why does it matter to teach the whole person?
- > Where do you see the same kind of erasure happening today - in your school's curriculum, in your workplace's history, in your community's storytelling?

5. Role-Play - Plan the March in 10 Days (10 min)

Break the class into groups of 4-5. Each group is the planning committee for the August 28, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. You have 10 days. You have one office, one mimeograph machine, no cell phones, no internet. Randolph has just called and said 250,000 people are coming. Solve the following six problems in 8 minutes - write your answers on butcher paper:

- > TRANSPORTATION: How do you move 250,000 people from every state to Washington DC in 10 days?
- > FOOD + WATER: How do you feed and hydrate 250,000 people on the National Mall for 6 hours in August humidity?
- > BATHROOMS: How do you provide enough sanitation for 250,000 people - and what happens if you fail?
- > SOUND: How does every one of those 250,000 people HEAR Dr. King's speech from the Lincoln Memorial steps?
- > SAFETY: How do you keep 250,000 people calm, disciplined, and unarrested in a Jim-Crow southern-aligned federal city?
- > MESSAGE DISCIPLINE: One hostile senator just read your top organizer's arrest record on the Senate floor. What do you tell the press?

Each group reports out for 60 seconds. Then tell them what Rustin actually did: (1) 2,000 chartered buses + 21 chartered trains via union locals; (2) 80,000 boxed cheese-and-peanut-butter sandwiches assembled by Riverside Church volunteers; (3) 292 portable toilets arranged through the National Park Service; (4) a custom sound system from the U.S. Army Signal Corps after the original system was sabotaged the night before and the FBI rewired it; (5) 2,000 in-house Black NYC police marshals deputized to keep the peace - no police arrests; (6) Randolph held a press conference and said, 'I would not consider for one moment dismissing him.' Period.

The Rustin Method - 45-Minute Educator's Lesson

6. Application Worksheet - Protest + Politics in YOUR Community (7 min)

Each student answers all four prompts on a sheet of paper. Collect or photograph at the end.

- > 1. Name ONE issue in your community that you care about (workplace, school, neighborhood, city).
- > 2. Name ONE PROTEST action that could draw public attention to that issue. (A rally, a sit-in, a die-in, a strike, a letter campaign, a teach-in, a press conference...)
- > 3. Name ONE POLITICAL or COALITIONAL action that would translate that attention into power. (A voter-registration drive, a candidate endorsement, a union contract demand, a coalition with another community group, a city council ordinance, a school board run...)
- > 4. Rustin's lesson is that you need BOTH. Which one is your community already doing? Which one is missing? What is one thing YOU could do this month to build the missing side?

7. Take-Home Card - Print and Hand Out

"We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers. Our power is in our ability to make things unworkable."

- Bayard Rustin

Pick ONE of the actions you wrote on your worksheet. Do it this week. Then tell your teacher / your steward / your community group what happened. The work continues only if you continue it.

8. Educator FAQ**Q: Is this lesson partisan?**

No. It teaches history, primary-text reading, and movement strategy. Rustin himself worked across coalitions - religious, labor, civil-rights, progressive-white - and explicitly refused single-party identification.

Q: How young can this lesson run?

Suitable as written for grades 9-12 and college. For grades 6-8, skip the 1953 morals-charge detail and use the LGBTQ+ discussion in age-appropriate framing (i.e. 'he was openly gay at a time when that put your career and your safety at risk - and people still tried to erase that part of him').

Q: What if I can't show the film clip?

Skip it. The lesson runs in 45 minutes without it. The Brother Outsider trailer is on the public Rustin page at laboreducation.org/pillars/rustin and runs 2 minutes if you have a projector.

Q: Can I run this in a non-school setting?

Yes - it was designed for union halls, library programs, church history/civics classes, community-center Black History Month sessions, and faith-class educators. Use the same agenda.

Q: Who can I cite as the steward of Rustin's archive?

Walter Naegle - Rustin's partner of ten years - has long managed the archive, image rights, and writings. The Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice (rustincenter.org) now hosts the dedicated BRCSJ Queer History Archive at rustincenter.org/brcsjqueerhistory. Researchers and educators are directed there.

9. Sources & Stewards

- > Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice (Princeton, NJ) * rustincenter.org
- > BRCSJ Queer History Archive (Walter Naegle, steward) * rustincenter.org/brcsjqueerhistory
- > A. Philip Randolph Institute (national, co-founded with Rustin 1965) * apri.org
- > APRI Memphis Chapter * laboreducation.org/unions/union_apri_memphis
- > 'From Protest to Politics' (1965 essay, full text PDF) * cmrvet.org/docs/rustin65.pdf
- > 'From Protest to Politics' (original Commentary magazine) * commentary.org
- > Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin (2003 PBS / ITVS) * itvs.org/films/brother-outsider
- > Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin (John D'Emilio) * press.uchicago.edu
- > Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen (Jervis Anderson) * HarperCollins, 1997
- > Rustin (2023 feature film, Netflix, dir. George C. Wolfe, star Colman Domingo)
- > Labor Education - Four Pillars Hub * laboreducation.org/four-pillars

The Rustin Method - 45-Minute Educator's Lesson

AFTER YOUR LESSON - REPORT BACK

Send the date, location, attendee count, and 1-2 takeaways to labor@laboreducation.org so we can track Bayard Rustin Method lessons across union halls, schools, libraries, and faith communities. March 17 (Rustin's birthday) is recommended as Bayard Rustin Day - run the lesson then if you can.