

"I AM A MAN"

Bayard Rustin, Memphis 1968, and the Labor-Civil Rights Bridge

MODULE SNAPSHOT

Grade level	8-12 (adaptable for 6-7)
Time	45 min single class OR 90 min block
Subject fit	U.S. History, Civics, Social Studies, ELA, Labor Studies
Standards	C3.D2.His.4.6-8/9-12; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 / RH.9-10.2

01

Learning Objectives -- Students Will Be Able To:

1. Identify Bayard Rustin's role as a labor organizer, not only a civil rights organizer.
2. Explain why the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike was both a labor and civil rights action.
3. Analyze how Rustin's mentorship under A. Philip Randolph -- and his counsel to Dr. King -- shaped the Memphis intervention.
4. Connect the phrase 'I AM A MAN' to the dignity argument Rustin made his life's work.
5. Apply Rustin's organizing principles ('angelic troublemaking') to a contemporary labor or civil rights issue.

02

Teacher Background -- 60 Second Brief

Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) was a Black, openly gay Quaker pacifist who brought Gandhi's nonviolence to the U.S. civil rights movement. He served as a chief strategist to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., organized the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs AND Freedom, and spent his life linking labor justice to civil rights. Mentored by A. Philip Randolph (founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters -- the first major Black union), Rustin directed the AFL-CIO-affiliated A. Philip Randolph Institute. In February 1968, Memphis sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death inside a faulty garbage truck. On Feb. 12, 1,300 mostly Black sanitation workers walked out, demanding recognition of AFSCME Local 1733, safer equipment, and a living wage. Rustin and Randolph urged Dr. King to come support them; King died on the Lorraine Motel balcony on April 4, 1968. The Memphis strike was the synthesis of Rustin's life argument -- labor justice IS civil rights -- and the moral hinge of the entire civil rights movement.

03

Primary Source Excerpts (For Class Handouts)

Bayard Rustin, public speeches

"We need in every community a group of angelic troublemakers."

Bayard Rustin, 'From Protest to Politics' (Commentary, Feb. 1965)

"The Negro today finds himself stymied by obstacles of far greater magnitude than the unprotected right to register and vote ... What is the value of winning access to public accommodations for those who lack money to use them? The minute the movement faced this question, it was compelled to expand its vision beyond race relations to economic relations, including the role of education in modern society."

A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

"At the banquet table of nature there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take, and you keep what you can hold. If you can't take anything, you won't get anything; and if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything."

Memphis Sanitation Workers placard, Feb. 1968

"I AM A MAN"

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Memphis, April 3, 1968

"It's alright to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's alright to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a

day."

04

Discussion Questions -- 5 Essential

1. What does "I AM A MAN" mean? Why those words, in that order? What is the difference between asking to be respected and DECLARING one's humanity?
2. Bayard Rustin called civil rights and labor 'the same fight.' What did he mean? Use evidence from his 'From Protest to Politics' excerpt.
3. Why did Dr. King come to Memphis when he had so much else on his plate? What does his presence -- and his death there -- tell us about how he understood labor justice?
4. Bayard Rustin was openly gay in 1968 -- a time when that could end your career and your place in any movement. How might that experience have shaped his commitment to dignity for marginalized workers?
5. If "angelic troublemakers" exist today, where do you see them? What labor or civil rights fights would Rustin be in if he were alive now?

05

Activity -- 'The Coalition Letter' (20 minutes)

In groups of 3-4, students will draft a one-page letter FROM Bayard Rustin (1968) TO a contemporary labor union -- one currently organizing in their state. The letter should explain why civil rights organizations should join their fight. Students must incorporate at least TWO of the primary source excerpts in the letter (paraphrased or quoted). Groups share aloud; class identifies which arguments are most persuasive and why.

Materials for the activity:

- Handout of primary source excerpts (above)
- Blank paper or letter template (one per group)
- Map or list of current organizing campaigns in your state (e.g., laboreducation.org/strikes)

06

Assessment -- Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

On a sticky note or index card, students answer:

1. Name ONE specific way Bayard Rustin connected labor and civil rights.
2. Why does Memphis 1968 matter to BOTH movements?
3. What's one issue happening RIGHT NOW where you'd apply 'angelic troublemaking'? Why?

07

Extensions & Going Deeper

- > Field trip (in person or virtual): National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel, Memphis, TN.
- > Read Bayard Rustin's 'From Protest to Politics' (Commentary, Feb. 1965) in full.
- > Research a current labor strike in your region. Which civil rights organizations support it? Which do not? Why?
- > Interview a current union member (or sanitation worker) about dignity at work. Compare to the 1968 demands.
- > Watch 'Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin' (PBS documentary, 2003).
- > Visit laboreducation.org/local-3866 and laboreducation.org/strikes to see ongoing organizing in the South.

MODULE 1 OF 5 -- THE OTHER FOUR ARE WAITING TO BE CO-WRITTEN

This module was built by Labor Education as a starting point. We're seeking partnership with The Rustin Institute, the Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice, and the A. Philip Randolph Institute to co-develop Modules 2-5. Educators using this material -- please send feedback. Partners interested in co-authoring -- please reach out.

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"We are all one -- and if we don't know it, we will learn it the hard way." -- Bayard Rustin
Labor Education | Module 1: 'I AM A MAN' -- Rustin, Memphis 1968