ANTONIO SOBERANIS AND THE DISTURBANCES
IN BELIZE 1934–1937

Belize has a long history of being peripheral in its membership of supranational organisations and the study of its history and culture have suffered accordingly. The names of the Trinidadian and Barbadian heroes of the Disturbances of the 1930’s in the West Indies are well known but that Belize too had its own disturbance and its own hero is virtually unknown outside of that country.

General studies of the English speaking Caribbean in the twentieth century rarely mention Belize prior to 1949 while even an excellent study of that country recently published manages only one paragraph on these disturbances and their instigator and concludes that they were “not prolonged and never spread beyond Belize city.” Older studies of Belize too are quiet on these troubled years and even a governor of the Colony in the ‘thirties, in a letter to the author, claimed that he could “not remember any disturbance in Belize in this period.” These statements are not borne out by the Colonial Office records or the Colony’s newspapers of the time.

That the Belizean riots and strikes were not of the same magnitude as those in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad is not in contention but the causes of Belize’s ‘troubles’ were analogous to those in the Islands and a study of them is long overdue. Their academic neglect is not only the result of the paucity of scholarship from which Belize has suffered but also because the disturbances and the political and labour movements associated with them were still-born and academics have tended to concentrate on the more efficacious and politically fulfilling nationalist movement of the 1950’s.

While these disturbances partially achieved their economic ends their failure to achieve any lasting permanent political movement, although disappointing to the leaders of the labour groups, was a reflection, not on their lack of character and determination and working class support for them, but rather on the nature of Belizean society in the 1930’s and on the hereditary political and economic structures which militated against any successful working class representation.

The manual group in Belizean society had never been represented for since 1892, when the Imperial government, against its better judgement but through its own fault, had been forced to grant an unofficial majority on the Legislative Council, the Colony’s political life had been dominated by the forestry and mercantile interests whose representatives sat in the unofficial seats in the Council. It was these groups who had used their political and economic power to control the Colony’s land and labour and who, because
these things were inimical to their interests, had suppressed agriculture, held back the development of communications and social services and generally sought to keep the Colony in a state of underdevelopment.6

The unhealthy, narrowly based economy this forestocracy had created collapsed in the late 1920's with the rapid decline of mahogany, the Great Depression and the disastrous hurricane which struck the Colony on the 10th September 1931 killing 1,000 people. Apart from the terrible destruction of lives and property, the hurricane shattered Belize’s trade; imports and exports dropped to half the 1929 levels and most of the lumber camps closed putting the labouring classes of Belize Town temporarily out of work. The Imperial government stepped in with a hurricane reconstruction loan in 19327 but this money, while enabling the middle classes to reconstruct (albeit with money they could not repay), did little to alleviate distress among the work force.8

Between 1932 and 1934 the situation worsened and insult was added to injury by the publication of the report of Sir Alan Pim,9 the Colonial Office's financial 'wizard' which only advocated partial retrenchment in the government service and did not provide for the massive public works programmes which had been widely expected after the hurricane and the return to direct rule.10

The Disturbances

The troubles began on February 15th 1934 when an unparalleled demonstration of the unemployed organised by some of the leaders of the old Progressive Party calling themselves the Unemployed Brigade (UB) took place in Belize Town. The demonstrators armed with placards saying 'Look in our ranks and see our wants' marched, in order and silence, through the capital, to the offices of the Governor where the incumbent, Sir Harold Kittermaster, interviewed a deputation of them. The Clarion later reported that Kittermaster was visibly jolted by the size of the support for the Unemployed Brigade and he promised to instigate immediate outdoor relief; reaffirmed that the Hurricane Loan Board would not foreclose on debtors and he told all the unemployed to register at the offices of the Belize Town Board.11 On February 16th, 1,500 men and 300 women were registered12 and while these numbers may appear small it must be remembered that Belize Town had a population of only 16,000 and a labour force of 4,000–5,000 and on this basis it can be seen that 25% or more of the work force had no employment and this percentage would not include forestry workers who had farms or who could fish. This percentage increased to 40% towards the end of 1934 when nearly 2,000 men were on the unemployed register and this figure and not the absolute number must be borne in mind when judging the extent of the distress and the size of the support for the working class cause in the Colony.

On February 21st the Governor’s relief measures manifested themselves. He ordered that rice and sugar be distributed at the prison to those registered but the ‘rice lab’ ration was badly cooked and inadequate and it was a humiliating gesture to the Unemployed Brigade. They were further demoralised on March 11th when the Governor, having his largesse rejected, instituted a scheme whereby a man might break, in a day, 5 cents worth of rocks, but no more, at the Public Works Department yard, thereby limiting his wages to 25 cents a week. The leader writer in the normally pro-Government Clarion called this “degrading and humiliating” and that “there must be a mistake”.13 There was no mistake however and the Unemployed Brigade leaders, disillusioned by the breach of faith
by the Government and unsure of what to do next, resigned en masse in an open letter to the Governor.\footnote{14}

From the ranks of the Brigade followers emerged a man who did know what to do next. He was \textit{Antonio Soberanis Gomez}, a barber, who became the first popular leader of the first popular movement in the Colony's history and who came to be known by friend and foe alike as 'Tony'. He held his first public meeting on March 16th, 1934 on the \textit{Battlefield}\footnote{15} where he denounced the \textit{Unemployed Brigade} leaders as "cowards" and explained that although he knew he was unfitted by origin, education and class to act as the spokesman of the unemployed he had been moved to pity by the plight of the people and he was prepared to die for them; it was better to be a "dead hero than a living coward".\footnote{16}

Soberanis from that day forward held bi-weekly and tri-weekly meetings on the Battlefield and alongside Brodie's store where he had the benefit of electric light and in his somewhat incoherent but messianic and vociferous speeches he called for the institution of a fair wage and work for the unemployed and he attacked Crown Colony government, imperial neglect of Belize and colonial officialdom. He soon gathered a group of lieutenants around him, who came to be known as the 'Colleagues' – among the most important were Igal S. Lahoodie ('Silver-Tongued'), Benjamin Reneau and Gabriel Adderly ('Nehi').\footnote{17}

At first the new leaders of the unemployed were dismissed by the press and the Government alike as "men of no importance"\footnote{18} but as Tony was airing genuine grievances and as he did not worry too much about the slander and sedition laws and exposed the idiosyncrasies and private lives of the higher colonial officials, his meetings soon began to attract large crowds. He spoke often about the rights of labour and in June or July the \textit{Battlefield Movement} became the \textit{Labour and Unemployed Association (LUA)} with Soberanis as its chief executive. The LUA could not register as a labour union as the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1883 made union registration illegal but the LUA was much more than another of the numerous \textit{Friendly Societies} which already existed to serve the middle classes in times of distress.

The Colony's two newspapers the \textit{Clarion} and the \textit{Belize Independent} saw the LUA in different lights. The \textit{Independent} had long attacked the policies of the Colonial Government and its principal columnist L.D. Kemp ('Prince Dee') came out with strong support for the \textit{Battlefield} orators. Kemp was a powerful, if somewhat longwinded polemicist who had, he considered, been badly wronged by the Colonial Government\footnote{19} and in his long, rambling articles he denounced specific administrative errors and questioned the political relevance of Crown Colony government. When the Soberanis movement faded away Kemp took to the rostrum himself.

The \textit{Clarion}, which was the paper of the Establishment and generally applauded the actions of the Colonial Government, while recognising the justice of many of the Battlefield criticisms was dismayed by Soberanis's vehemence and his personal attacks on colonial officials. As the movement went from strength to strength the \textit{Clarion} declared it to be subversive and detrimental to public order.\footnote{20} In this it was at one with the Colonial Government which found itself more and more the target of Battlefield attack. The Acting Governor, F.W. Brunton, described Tony as a "half crazy creature"\footnote{21} while Alan Burns (Governor 1934–40) regarded Soberanis as a "professional agitator"\footnote{22}
because collections were taken at Battlefield meetings to defray expenses. In May 1934 the Colonial Office had opened a file on the labour leaders and after a speech of Soberanis' on April 13th it was decided to arrest and prosecute him on the grounds that he had threatened Major Matthews, the Superintendent of Police, with unlawful violence.

In early May, Tony was arraigned before the Belize District magistrate F.C.P. Bowen who, while having no choice but to find Soberanis guilty, let him off with a caution for Bowen, one of the few native officials, was the only administrator in this troubled period who tempered justice with mercy in his dealings with the unemployed. Bowen's action however was not appreciated by the Executive which considered that a show of strength was necessary and Brunton, shortly afterwards, had Bowen removed from the bench and replaced him with the "case-hard" Denbigh Phillips who deservedly became very unpopular because of his severe sentences.

On July 8th there was a foretaste of things to come when Benjamin Reneau, one of Tony's chief lieutenants, resisted arrest for debt and a large crowd gathered outside the law offices of Franco and Ellis and intimidated the debt collector and his lawyers to such an extent that the issue was settled much in Reneau's favour. The Clarion called it "Mob Intimidation"; Major Matthews considered that "the slightest spark could have set the town alight" and the significance of the day's events were not lost on the LUA leadership who told the Battlefield crowd that night that the day was "history made in the Colony."

History too was the cause of Tony's next venture for he wished his association to celebrate, in a grand manner, the public holiday of September 10th, the anniversary of the Battle of St. George's Caye. To this end the LUA sought to obtain funds by collections and donations from the stores and merchant houses and when the biggest stores, owned by the old elite, refused to contribute to what Soberanis saw as a non-political and public celebration, he had them picketed and boycotted. Money however came in for his cause from "sympathisers who were not necessarily followers" and on the day of the 10th the celebrations were extraordinary. Tony, on a horse, led the hundreds of the LUA members dressed in their colours of red and green through the town and when the procession of the Friendly Societies had finished, the massed bands joined the Battlefield group and all marched off to the Yarborough district where a wreath was laid on Colonel Paslow's tomb and where nearly 3,000 people were fed in a vast picnic.

This great event, in sharp contrast to the prevailing economic gloom raised morale among the working class and in the Independent 'Man about Town' came out with the headline "Well done Tony". It was, in retrospect, Soberanis' finest hour for not only had he demonstrated that he had the solid support of the working class but he had shown that this support was not just based on his own charisma but also on the fact that his association could successfully organise a public event. The Independent now suggested that Tony was the man of the hour and that "he had set people to think. They are thinking that he will now put over his great objective having gone so far."

Spurred on by this success Tony grew more vocal in his demands and these were not only that the unemployed should be provided with relief and a job with a fair wage but that the now notorious Denbigh Phillips should not be allowed to live in Government House. On Friday 29th September, at a
Battlefield meeting, Soberanis forcefully reiterated these demands and declared that on the next Monday morning the LUA were going to picket the big stores and the BEC's sawmill to make the employees of this concern demand higher wages.

The picketing of Monday 1st October turned into a riot. The initial picket of the sawmill failed but an incident outside Harley's Branch store sparked off a fight between a picket and a certain Police Corporal Building which was to have repercussions later. A second attempt to intimidate workers at the Belize Estate Company's mill was more successful and the strike leaders closed down the works and then went off to do likewise to various other merchant houses. They marched to the premises of the coconut exporter, Manuel Esquivel, assaulting the owner and stealing some cash while others went to the Public Works Department yard where they smashed in the main gate. Having closed the town's main employers the crowd, armed with sticks, marched off to Queen Street to the Town Board offices where the people's leaders met the police and a fight ensued in which several constables were assaulted and in the fracas, one Absolem Pollard was shot. It was never discovered who shot Pollard but it was widely believed that Corporal Building was carrying a pistol obtained after his fight earlier in the morning. Several witnesses claimed to have seen him with it.

The riot was quelled at about 11 a.m. by the arrival on the scene of the Acting-Governor and a massed offensive by the police. The Clarion later claimed that if the force had shown the "white feather" there was no telling what would have happened. It described the crowd, rather luridly, as a "maddened throng" and it was happy that "the constables beat sense into the heads of the lawless." The paper agreed with the Acting-Governor that the rioters demands for $1.50 a day wages was "ridiculous" and it later applauded the harsh sentences given to the riot leaders by Denbigh Phillips.

Soberanis himself had led the abortive picket at the sawmill in the early hours of the morning but after its failure he had returned home and then gone to Government House and so had missed the main rioting. He did not arrive at the police station until 5 p.m. after the rioters had been either dispelled or incarcerated. After standing bail for 16 of the 17 arrested he was promptly arrested himself on the charge that in his speech on the 29th night he had threatened violence to deter Denbigh Phillips from carrying out his duties. There was a danger of another riot on Soberanis' arrest as several hundred people had gathered outside the police station and one, 'Pettie' (Christopher Velasquez), the local snake man, turned up with two large constrictors but it came on to rain hard and the crowd dispersed; the scheduled Battlefield meeting for the night, which would have kept the embers of revolt smouldering, being abandoned.

The outburst on the first, had caught the Government unawares and Brunton's first reaction was to ascertain from the Governor of the Bahamas, the whereabouts in the Caribbean of the nearest British cruiser. He admitted that the disturbances were "something serious" and that the circumstances had compelled him to promise $3,000 to the Belize Town Board for immediate outdoor relief. Burns, the Governor designate, had prophesied, not very perspicaciously, that "a shortage of money and unemployment will lead to civil disturbances unless something is speedily done" and Brunton, in his own justification, blamed the riot on the failure of the Treasury to provide adequate funds for public works and relief measures.

Brunton however was a lot happier once Soberanis was in jail as it was clear that
while the leader of the LUA did not partake in the riot he was the moving spirit. Tony's appeal for bail was refused until November 6th and, although his freedom on that day was celebrated by a big welcome rally at Liberty Hall and he was feted as Moses attempting to bring his people out of Egypt, during his imprisonment his lieutenants had been conspiring against him. On November 20th the Clarion reported that a "comprehensive split" had developed in the LUA. On the 8th December at a Battlefield meeting Tony revealed what was "inside the cup." He alleged that in his absence the executive of his association had formulated their own rules and more corruptly had misappropriated association funds. It was not to be the last time that peculation was to be the cause of dissension in a Belizean popular movement and the Clarion delighted at this development, declared that, as it claimed it had always believed, the Battlefield movement was but a "vast racket" whose collections were used to line the pockets of its leaders:

The split was the beginning of the end of the united Battlefield movement. Tony continued to lead the LUA and in January 1935 he was acquitted of the charge of threatening violence to Phillips as it developed that the magistrate had, prior to Tony's threat, stated publicly that he would horsewhip Soberanis and had, in fact, something of a reputation for horsewhipping his social inferiors.

The rump of the Battlefield movement under the leadership of Lahoodie and Reneau formed themselves into the British Honduras Unemployed Association (BHUA), which claimed it was the link between the employers and labour. It soon became as apolitical as the old Friendly Societies and it never exercised any labour influence as it could not be registered as a trade union. In the 1935 Silver Jubilee celebrations it paraded in the grounds of Government House as loyally as the Black Cross Nurses or the Patriotic Order of the Baymen.

Soberanis and the LUA continued to espouse the workers cause and to berate the Colonial Government throughout the early months of 1935 and in May of that year he and his new lieutenants 'Bangula' and a female fire-brand 'Ginger' instigated a strike and riot in Stann Creek Town where the railway workers on May 21st, demanding an increase in wages, blocked the Havana bridge and a fight broke out when the police arrived. The Governor had to send reinforcements and despatched a stern telegram to the Stann Creek District Commissioner to be read to the strikers. Although Soberanis had already left for the capital before the trouble started, Alan Burns was quick to pin the entire responsibility on the labour leader.

In October of 1935 the Government got the chance it had been waiting for when Tony went to Corozal Town and abused the Crown and various colonial officials including the Governor. The Government had tightened up the sedition laws and public safety regulations after the October 1934 riot and now charged Soberanis with insulting words. He was summarily tried and convicted in the District Court and fined $85 or 4½ months hard labour. On the charge of 'insulting words against His Majesty' he was remanded for trial by the Supreme Court and the Governor hoped that he would be put away for a long time. In fact Soberanis was acquitted in early 1936 but the Corozal convictions, an accident in Belize Town in October 1935 which continued to trouble him and the split in the ranks of the unemployed occasioned by the formation of the British Honduras Unemployed Association sapped his resolve and by 1936 his association was a spent force. Throughout that year the LUA had continued to organise meetings and demonstrations
and in November the Clarion could still say that Tony was "not a man without some influence" for the LUA was opposing certain candidates for election to the Belize Board but in reality it and its leader were no longer news.

In the early months of 1937 Soberanis was pleading with the Belize Town Board for a job for he explained that he had a family of twelve to feed and that the fines levied against him had all but ruined him as his trade of barbering was not very lucrative. On September 29th in the Independent in a letter entitled ‘Shall History Repeat Itself’ he recounted the story of the 1934 disorders and, in the light of the disturbances in the Islands he threatened that the situation of the Colony was again disturbing (which it was) and quoted an old Creole proverb “Every day bucket go da well one day e bottom fall out.”

It was, unintentionally, a comment on his own failure. His day was done for although he was again active in the ‘Open Forum’ of the 1940’s he never again obtained the total working class support he had drawn on in those halcyon months between March and October 1934.

Innovation and Failure

Working class discontent was not unknown in Belizean history. There had been a labour riot in December 1894 caused by the change of currency of October of that year and anger at the low wages being offered by the forest merchants and this upsurge was widely supported and only put down with the aid of Imperial troops. In 1919 also, on July 22nd, there was a more serious outburst of popular discontent concocted by the returned Belizean soldiery of the British West Indian regiment who had served in Palestine. Its causes were partly racial and partly economic but it too occasioned much popular support and again was only suppressed with the use of outside help. Both were largely ‘bread’ and ‘discrimination’ riots, but both had political overtones and the 1919 riot, in particular, threw up men who were intent on openly criticising the system of government under which they lived.

The Soberanis movement and the disorders associated with it, although less violent than the 1919 riot, were of greater historical importance than the earlier disturbances. Soberanis had a definite political purpose; he attempted to take his message beyond the confines of Belize Town and the troubles his movement brought forth were part of a larger Caribbean outburst.

Soberanis did not confine his attack on the Colonial Establishment to economic and social questions. Wages, prices and employment were the main concern of his followers and they were questions which had thrown up the LUA leader in the first place but they were not his sole concern. He was aware that many of the troubles which beset the Colony’s work force were the result of a top-heavy and bureaucratic administration which used the meagre colonial revenues to pay the inflated salaries of incompetent officials. He also knew that in the power structure the working class had no voice because they lacked representation in the Legislative Council and that it was in the interests of the mercantile elite to keep them so unrepresented. As this elite controlled the Council, it was up to the officials of the Colonial Government to protect the interests of labour and this they had conspicuously failed to do. In consequence, Soberanis, unlike his predecessors in 1894 and 1919, directed much of his invective against the colonial
officials and questioned the very relevance of Crown Colony government.

Not only did Soberanis attempt political criticism but he took that criticism out of Belize Town into the districts. That the capital was the Colony was still as true in the 1930's as it had been fifty years earlier and the districts were still very much regarded as the 'bush' which was only to be viewed safely from the confines of the capital. Most activities in the Colony were carried out in the capital as if the districts did not exist. The 'spontaneous' outbursts of 1894 and 1919 were solely confined to Belize Town. The LUA however saw fertile ground for recruitment to its ideas, if not its organisation, in the district capitals. Soberanis himself went several times to Stann Creek and Punta Gorda and as we have noted he managed to inflame the working classes in both the north and the south. In fact in Stann Creek Town he even attempted to get the Garifuna (Black Carib) population of that town to elect a candidate of their own race for the 1936 election campaign to stand against the traditional 'white' spokesman of the Stann Creek Valley. Such an idea was premature and only recently has it been accepted in that quarter that a member of the majority must speak for that majority, but it indicates that Soberanis was attempting to create a 'national working class consciousness', however crude and disorganised his approach. His mantle was not to be taken up again until the coming of the People's Committee and the revitalisation of the General Worker's Union in 1950.

Finally the 1934–36 troubles were of greater historical consequence than the earlier outbursts because they were both the precursor and, at the same time, the most insignificant of the West Indian disturbances of the 1930's. It is doubtful if news of the trouble in Belize had any influence on, or even reached the rest of the British West Indies for the Colony had long been a Caribbean backwater. It must be admitted however that the causes of the Belizean troubles, "the wretched conditions under which the people lived hitherto [which] had been gradually worsening over decades," and the political restrictions of Crown Colony government were the same as those which led to bloodshed in Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados. The Belize Independent in 1936 and 1937 reported the disorders in St. Vincent and Trinidad extensively and, if by that time the Battlefield movement had shot its bolt there was no doubt that the Colonial office saw Belize as part of the pattern of reaction to Imperial neglect which resulted in the West Indian riots and the commission to investigate them. Hoyos dated the outbreak of trouble in the British West Indies from the riots of January 1935 in St. Kitts — he should have dated it from the riot of October 1934 in Belize.

That blood was not shed in Belize and that the Soberanis movement faded away without any tangible result in the form of an effective labour or political organisation was largely due to the peculiar circumstances of the Belizean situation and experience. The old political, economic and class structures in the Colony were still strong enough to both create division in and to withstand a disunified and disorganised attack from the labour force they exploited while the Colonial Government, after October 1934, met the labour leader and his followers with conciliation not confrontation; work not humiliation.

Soberanis was no Cipriani or Bustamante. He lacked an elitist background, monied and influential friends and a formal education. His speeches were often incoherent and eschatological and couched in bombastic English and thus dismissed by the Establishment as the ramblings of a lunatic. His only political asset was his charisma among the unemployed and his almost transparent sincerity. He knew he was unfitted by birth, background
and learning for his self-appointed role as leader of the working class and admitted, in a pamphlet produced many years afterwards, that he had seen himself as a reluctant and 'stop-gap' leader, filling the breach until a middle class intellectual came forward to lead the dispossessed masses. The working class were, according to Soberanis, betrayed for although a few native intellectuals had rallied the working classes to protest at the insensitivity of the Colonial Government: "The intellectuals [the Unemployed Brigade] withdrew at the height of their [the working class] loyalty and devotion to them because they said they could not accomplish what the masses desired."\textsuperscript{55} Those intellectuals were astute enough to perceive the next step — open defiance and denunciation of the Colonial Government — but they shrunk from such a revolutionary step. They stopped and drew back not only because traditional loyalties died hard but because they realised well enough that the anger of the working class was not just directed towards the Colonial Government but also towards the mercantile elite and privileged classes to which they themselves belonged.

Economic neglect by the monied classes for the Battlefield movement was as damaging as their political neglect. Soberanis' supporters were unemployed or intermittently employed persons like himself who could barely earn enough to support their own families. They had little to spare to fund organisations like the LUA and the Soberanis movement depended for its revenue on collections at the Battlefield meetings and on occasional donations. The LUA was lucky if it could drum up $4\textsuperscript{56} in an evening to defray expenses and the trips of Soberanis and his organisation's executive to Stann Creek and Corozal were largely paid out of their own pockets. Such a lack of cash, transport and patronage was in sharp contrast to that afforded the critics of the Colonial Government in the 1940's and 1950's by R.S. Turton the Belize City chicle millionaire. To what extent Turton, who was bitterly anti-British, funded the People's United Party in the early 1950's is not precisely known\textsuperscript{58} but it seems likely that his aid was not inconsiderable. He certainly made life easier, in the late 1930's and 1940's (after the reintroduction of the elective principle into the constitution in 1936) for his political proteges by providing them with free accommodation and probably cash. Those men and the PUP later never seemed to be hampered in their political activities by a need for money while lack of funds by the LUA not only restricted its ability to fight the Establishment but also reflected on the weaknesses of its composition.

Lack of middle class leadership and middle class finance was partnered by, or perhaps produced, disunity in the Battlefield movement itself. Soberanis was the figurehead but he lacked the necessary confidence in himself and a certain authoritarianism and intolerance which seems to reside in successful leaders. His imprisonment in October 1934 allowed his colleagues to conspire against him and to challenge his supremacy thus creating a split in the organisation of the movement. If the movement was weak, uncertain and poorly structured prior to that time the chances of its success afterwards were completely destroyed. History, environment and economic status had made the labouring class of the capital independent and querulous of spirit. Such traits are virtues in politically experienced, homogeneous societies but are positive drawbacks for the successful establishment of labour and political organisations in adverse circumstances in heterogeneous societies kept in political immaturity and political and economic dependence. Factionalism destroyed the efficacy of the LUA as it nearly wrecked the PUP in 1951 when John Smith defected to the loyalists, but in the later instance George Price managed to turn
the party leader's defection to his own good. Soberanis never tried to effectively conciliate or to effectively defame the Lahoodie faction for in truth, unlike Price, he never really perceived the working class power he had unleashed and the opportunity with which he had been presented.

That opportunity was circumscribed by the controls exerted by tradition, law, and economic necessity on the Colony's labour force. That body, for which forest work was the main occupation, had long been manipulated by the forestocracy. The forest worker, every Christmas, contracted to supply the timber merchants with labour for the next ten months for a fixed monthly wage and a three month 'advance'. The advance and the contract tied the labourer to the employer for the cash was quickly spent on holiday festivities and provisions for the new year. Breach of contract was punishable by imprisonment under the stringent and archaic labour laws. The Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1883, as well as making illegal trade union formation, made failure to work or absenteeism a criminal offence and the sanction of the law was widely used. At the turn of the century, of the summary convictions in the Colony, nearly one-third were for breaches of this Ordinance. As the labourer could not pay a fine he generally went to prison and still had to work off his contracted time with his employer on his release.

The nature of the work too tended to encourage working class fissiparity and selfishness. There was little chance of any organised resistance to Government or capital for the workers were scattered for most of the year throughout the Belizean bush. Only at Christmas was the Government afraid of trouble as the forest workers descended on the capital. Even at this time however argument and friction were more in evidence than class solidarity for the individual worker sought to obtain the best new contract for himself and was not to be disposed into alienating an employer with a 'good' contract. In January or February the workers returned to the lumber camps and only the old, sick, children and women were left in Belize Town. It was noted that Soberanis' followers were mainly women for even in those bad years of 1934 and 1935 a worker had to go out of the capital even if he could only get work for a few weeks. In consequence Soberanis could never count on having the same male faces in his following and his supporters were constantly in a state of flux — only the chronically unemployed and the women providing a regular captive audience.

Internal divisiveness, lack of leadership and the stifling restrictions of law, tradition and economic necessity was however only half the story. Soberanis and his movement were mainly defeated by a Colonial Government which chose to compromise rather than confront. The movement foundered because its immediate demands were easily satisfied once the Government had been stung into action. The peak of the labour troubles coincided with the arrival of a new governor, Alan Burns, in November 1934 and Burn's sincere desire to ameliorate the sufferings of the working class resulted in the creation of a number of public works schemes between 1935 and 1939. Burns, whom the Colonial Office admitted "was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet" pressed the Office for free grants for the Colonial Development fund to finance road work schemes his executive had drawn up. When he arrived in 1934 Belize had only a few miles of 'all weather road' but on his departure in 1940 all the districts, except Toledo, had been, or were about to be linked to the capital by motor roads. These road works were but disguised relief schemes for the unemployed and the quincena system used to build...
them was much criticised for each mile of road was expensive — manual labour was preferred to that of machines so that the maximum labour force could be employed.

Although uneconomically produced these roads absorbed large numbers of the previously unemployed and partially remedied defects in a communications system long criticised. Burns, like Kittermaster before him, believed that the only salvation of Belize lay in its agricultural potential and he justified his road programme by claiming for every highway that it would open up vast tracts of the Colony for agricultural development.

The Battlefield movement therefore had the ground cut from beneath it by the energetic and able Burns who in six years obtained more Imperial aid for the Colony than his predecessors had done in the previous fifty but this is not to say that the Governor was a humanitarian above all else, or an antagonist of the system of government he represented. His concern was for the maintenance of law and order which he considered the first essential of ‘good government’ and he believed that the way to stop trouble was to remove its causes. The raison d’etre of his road programme, which was not a vast development plan but a series of piecemeal exercises in pragmatism, was the employment of idle hands lest the devil find work for them.

For those ‘malcontents’ like Soberanis in which the devil was too deeply rooted to expunge, Burns had no liberality. Authoritarian and intolerant by nature the Governor had an almost fanatical dislike of those who opposed him especially the LUA leader whose opposition was not even backed by breeding, education, money or social status. His remarks on Soberanis have already been noted and when the Royal Commission came to Belize in 1938 the secret report on the Colony’s ‘agitators’ prepared by the Governor concentrated on R.S. Turton and Soberanis.

There is, lastly, one other factor which probably contributed greatly to the emasculation of the Battlefield movement. The Colonial Government provided not only bread but circuses — the latter more by accident than design. 1936 saw the re-establishment of the elective principle into the Colony’s constitution. This was not a deliberate ploy to deflect the increasing political pressure on it for it had been promised since 1930. Anyway the election build-up should have left the Colony’s working class relatively unaffected for it was a strictly middle class affair, the voting and candidacy qualifications being income levels not possessed by Belize’s labourers. In fact the reverse was true. The capital’s labour force had long been conditioned to look to the local elite for representation and although that elite had never represented anyone except itself, old traditions died hard. The people believed that certain of the candidates in the 1936 elections, if elected to the Legislative Council, would air and seek redress for the grievances of the working class. In the weeks before that election in February 1936, Arthur Balderamos Snr., R.S. Turton and L.P. Ayuso all, in their pre-election speeches and hustings, stated that they would seriously take up the question of employment and, in consequence, overnight became the ‘people’s men.’ Only one of these men continued to wear the same colours after he was elected but the record shows that the pre-election fervour undoubtedly stole much of the thunder from an already fissiparous Battlefield movement. It is perhaps ironic that the practise of ‘democracy’ in action removed the last vestiges of support from the only true democrat in Belize in the 1930’s.

Antonio Soberanis died in 1975 an unsung hero. Histories of Belize in the past have
ignored him. Histories of the future will resurrect his name along with that of Fred Gahne, Samuel Hayes and H.H. Cain — other Belizean heroes whose exploits have not yet been fully appreciated. May his bones rest in peace and the memory of this sincere and much abused man live long in the annals of Belizean history.

PETER D. ASHDOWN

FOOTNOTES

1. British Honduras was renamed Belize in 1973. I have used the modern name when referring to the country as a whole but I have used the old names for Stann Creek Town (now Dangriga) and for Belize Town (now Belize City).
3. Ibid. p. 67.
4. Sir Alan Burns to P.D. Ashdown, 10th February 1977. In his defence it should be said that Sir Alan is now an old man with a failing memory.
5. Grant op. cit. pp. 33–60.
7. In exchange for the Hurricane Reconstruction Loan the Legislative Council had to accept Treasury control and reserve powers for the Governor.
8. The main allocations in the loan were for property reconstruction and a loan to the Belize Estate Company to build a sawmill.
10. Belize was therefore a 'pure' Crown Colony for two periods, 1870 to 1892 and 1932 to 1936. Any chance of progress in the first period was wrecked by the maladministration of Sir Roger Goldsworthy while the second period was dominated by the need for reconstruction after the 1931 hurricane.
12. Governor to the Secretary of State, 7th March 1934, CO 123/346.
15. The Battlefield was a piece of grass outside the Belize Court House and in the centre of the town. It was the traditional open air meeting place.
17. Report of the Superintendent of Police to the Governor, 27th November 1934. To be found in CO 123/346.
18. Governor to the Secretary of State. 19th March 1934. CO 123/346.
19. L.D. Kemp had had his boat the ‘C.L.’ impounded and himself imprisoned by the Guatemalan authorities for smuggling in 1933. The Colonial Government refused to take up his case for compensation with Guatemala as they believed him guilty.


21. Acting-Governor to the Secretary of State. 6th August 1934. CO 123/349.

22. Governor to the Secretary of State. 13th June 1935. CO 123/353.

23. Tony had told Major Matthews to ‘remember the licking he had got in 1919 for more of the same was coming soon.’ Matthews had been assaulted in his own yard in the ex-servicemen’s riot of July 22nd 1919.

24. Acting-Governor to the Secretary of State. 6th August 1934 CO 123/349.

25. Clarion 19th July 1934 p. 64-A.


27. Clarion 19th July 1934 p. 64-A.

28. At this battle in 1798 the Baymen and their slaves had defeated the Spanish force led by the Governor of Yucatan which was supposed to expel them from their Belize River settlement. The holiday is now called National Day.


30. Colonel Paslow was one of the heroes of the Battle of St. George’s Caye.


33. The Belize Estate Company was the largest employer of labour in the Colony at its sawmill and lumber camp. It had a special relationship with the Colonial Government and its local manager had an almost hereditary seat on the Legislative Council.

34. The most systematic and exhaustive coverage of the events of 1st October is to be found in the Report of the Superintendent of Police op. cit.

35. Pollard was not killed but wounded in the neck. He did not know who had shot him.


37. The LUA had petitioned Brunton for Phillips’ removal and after this was rejected Tony had threatened to ‘pull’ the magistrate from the bench.


39. Acting-Governor to the Secretary of State 24th October 1934. CO 123/346.

40. Alan Burns to the Secretary of State 1st October 1934. CO 123/346.

41. Acting-Governor to the Secretary of State 24th October 1934. CO 123/346.

42. Belize Independent 7th November 1934.

43. Clarion 22nd November 1934 p. 653.

44. In 1956 a split was created in the People’s United Party when Nicholas Pollard, Secretary of the General Workers Union, was expelled from the Union for alleged peculation.

45. Clarion 13th December 1934.


47. Governor to the Secretary of State 22nd May 1935. CO 123/353.


49. Daily Clarion 9th November 1936.

Ibid. 29th September 1937 p. 16.

I would argue, without proof, that Belize, being a Colonial 'backwater' received a greater proportion of the incompetents in Colonial service than any other West Indian colony.

A. Shoman, below cited p. 10.


Report of P.C. Ellis on a Battlefield meeting held on July 1st, 1934. To be found in CO 123/347.

Belize Town was upgraded to city status in 1943.

Assad Shoman, in his excellent pioneering article, 'The Birth of the Nationalist Movement in Belize 1950–54' in the *Journal of Belizean Affairs*, No. 2, December 1973, stated that Turton “gave modest financial support to the Party and facilitated Price's trips abroad.” (pp. 28–29). He is however not dogmatic about this and the extent of Turton's financial support will probably never be known.

In 1934, H.P.C. Bowen, on being upbraided by the Acting-Governor for the leniency of his sentences defended himself in a remarkable letter. In that letter he quoted a case, the Belize Estate Company versus Dionicio Lambey, in which the prosecuting lawyer had stated in court that the Company did not want a refund of the defendant's 'advance' but wanted him imprisoned as a warning to others. H.P.C. Bowen to F. Brunton, October 22nd, 1934 CO 123/349.

Burn's energy and pressure led to the construction of the Northern Highway. The San Antonio-Punta Gorda Road, the Belize-Cayo Road and the Stann Creek Valley Road.

Gangs of labourers were hired by the Government for a two week period and then laid off for several weeks so other gangs could be taken on. All the unemployed were therefore, in theory, given the chance of intermittent work.