Oral history is not history as it is found in documents but as it is passed on by word of mouth. Oral history does not pretend to be unbiased; it gives one person’s view of events. In the following interview with Mr. Antonio Soberanis we hear about the first Belizean nationalist movement from the mouth of its founder and leader.

**Question:** Mr. Soberanis, could you tell us a little bit about the circumstances that led up to the founding of the Labour and Unemployed Association?

**Answer:** In 1934 in the month of February they had a depression here and they used to feed the people at the prison. And they used to cook the food in the same copper kettle in which they used to boil the officers’ clothing. And I organized a group of my countrymen and we formed a party named L. & U. A. (Labour and Unemployed Association). The Government used to pay women 5 cent to break kerosene can of stone. The workers were getting 50 cents to work on the road. And I fought against that until, by 1942, they were getting a dollar a day and transportation. I went to Panama in 1942 because of the war.

**Question:** How did you accomplish your goal?

**Answer:** We made demonstrations. We made no appeals to Government. We marched around the town with banners: "We want more work! We want more work!" "We want more pay! We want more pay!"

**Question:** How many would come to the demonstrations?

**Answer:** Oh, thousands. It’s a pity I don’t have a picture I took when I fed 6,000 people one day in Yarborough after a big march on the 10th of September. (The picture was lost in the hurricane Hattie.)

**Question:** Where did you get the food to feed so many people?

**Answer:** I begged collection from the merchants and I went to all of them and asked them to give me rice, beans, salt meat. And I had men hunting; they got peccary, gibnut, and deer. Mr. Aron Arnold gave us bull. I had fishermen going fishing. I had a house as big as this filled up with all kinds of things: plantain, bananas, cocoas, everything!

**Question:** Did you regularly provide food for the members of your party?

**Answer:** Yes, you see, I opened credit for them at the different shops. The Belize Estate Company had a store—where the Post Office is now—and they used to give the people spoiled rice and rotten onions and potatoes, so that, when the people got up country, they couldn’t use the food. So I went to the different shops and got credit for them. And the people paid me and I paid the shops for them. But still I had to take some of my own cash pay for some of them, because they were very ungrateful to me.

We also had a nursing group, the Red-and-Green Cross Nurses. (The colors of the L. & U.A. were red and green.) Christobel Usher was a certified nurse and she was the head of the nurses. If one of our members was sick, they went and gave free attention. If one of them needed medicine, we got medicine for them.

**Question:** Was this a political party?

**Answer:** Yes, it was a political party. It was then that I started to fight for the independence of Belize.

Who helped you to found the L. & U. A.?

**Answer:** James Barnett, John Lahoudie, Chano Lovell, John Neal, Benjamin Reneau, and Archibald Lodge. Archibald Lodge is the only one of these still living.
So I opened their eyes up.

Money, you come to me and report to me."

And if they don't bring back your afraid of them. They can't do you anything give you, don't give them anything. Don't be afraid of them. I said "If they came and get them that must not be afraid of the then no money. So I went there and told policemen went there, the policemen would take those poor Indians' pigs and go and sell them for you in Corozal." They said: "Any fowl or turkey you got?" E says: "Yes." The policemen say: "Get them, I will say: We want our country back, we want our government. I was not against the Englishman. I have nothing against him; I have more thank for him than anything. But what I don't like is imperialism, colonialism. We want to be a free country. Not that I hate them, I personally. Because they have done a lot of good for my country, and they did a lot of bad too. In my opinion, they have done more good than bad for our country. But I am against colonialism. I want a free country.

Did you have a newspaper in which you expressed your ideas?

No, The Belize Independent used to support our movement and The Claron was supporting the Government.

How often did you hold public meetings?

Sometimes we had two meetings for the week, sometimes only one for the month, because I went to all the villages.

In those days those poor Indians, when the policemen went there, the policemen would say: "Any fowl or turkey you got?" E says: "Yes." The policemen say: "Get them, I will go and sell them for you in Corozal." They would take those poor Indians' pigs and things and sell them in Corozal and give then no money. So I went there and told them that must not be afraid of the policemen. They must respect them but not be afraid of them. I said: "If they came and get any pigs or things from you, get their number and their name, and if they don't want to give you, don't give them anything. Don't be afraid of them. They can't do you anything for that. And if they don't bring back your money, you come to me and report to me." So I opened their eyes up.

What I don't like is imperialism, colonialism. We want to be a free country.

Could you tell us something about the first labour strike that occurred in Belize?

That was the 1st of October of 1934, when they arrested me. This was a strike against the Belize Estate. I was at Government House along with some others speaking to the Governor when that happened. I told the people to wait until I got through as I was going to speak to the governor. But the B.E.C authorities feared that the people would start a strike there. And the people chased all the B.E.C officials out of the place there. The same evening when I got through with governor —because they rang up the governor and said there was trouble in town — so he asked us to excuse him and said we could come back another day that his presence was needed in town. So I came to the shop and found several of my boys. So I went to the station to get bail for them. I found that they were going to give them bail. So they said yes, but I must come back later. By this time they were planning to arrest me. So I went back again about an hour later; they said the bail was not ready yet, I should come back at five o'clock, and they arrested me and charged me for something that happened the Saturday before. And they wouldn't give me and bail.

That night if it wasn't on account of the rain, something would have happened because the people were going to break down the station. And we had some Honduranians that were here and they were going to start a revolution here. But I got out and I begged them not to do anything; I was not for violence. I wanted a peaceful demonstration; I didn't want violence. Well, with that they kept quiet.

They had no sedition laws in those days, so they locked me up 35 days until they passed a sedition law.

Why were you charged for sedition?

You see Mr. Turton gave me a bulletin that was given to him when he was a member of Council and it said there that the king and reigned 2 years of robbery of the poor. And I took it and I read it at one of my meetings and they charged me for sedition for reading it; and I read it in public and they tried me for sedition because I was defaming His Majesty the King. I was tried for treason and at the first trial they couldn't come to a verdict; at the second trial they couldn't find sufficient jurors because I made objection to them. And the third time they tried me I was acquitted unanimously.

What effect did the strike have?

The workers at the sawmill — I don't remember what pay they got — but they got a raise in pay anyhow, and they got better benefits than they had before. And they were satisfied to a certain extent at the little bit in those days: A tin of milk was 5 cent, plantain used to be 3 or 4 for 1 cent. So things were very cheap in those days, although the pay was very small.

What old are you, Mr. Soberanis?

I'm only 77. I was 77 the 17th of January gone. I was born in San Antonio, Rio Hondo, in the Orange Walk District. I was born in 1897. My father came to this country in 1894 from Mexico; he was a Mexican Indian. My mother was born in Corozal of Mexican parents. But my father was pure Indian from Yucatan.