

SOCIAL ACTIVIST ANTONIO SOBERANIS GOMEZ(1897-1975)



- Antonio Soberanis was born on 17th January, 1897.
- “Tony” as he became fondly known became one of the early twentieth century leaders to lead a mass organized movement of workers against colonialism and in support of better wages and improved social and economic conditions.
- In the late 1930’s the forestry trade experienced rapid economic decline as a result of the Great Depression and the September 10th, 1931 Hurricane.
- Under these conditions nearly 25% of the working population lost their jobs out of a labor force of approximately 5,000 workers.
- On February 21st, 1934 the Governor intervened by offering “rice lab” to those who had registered and introduced a program where workers could make five cents per tin can of stone broken for road construction.
- Soberanis recalled that “...after seeing the sufferings and hardship of my fellow men, I made up my mind to try and help them, it’s then that I started the cry for independence and to free my country from colonialism...”
- On March 16th, 1934 Tony, who was making his living as a barber and was relatively uneducated, held his first public meeting at the Battlefield. He was noted as saying, “...although he knew he was unfit by origin , education and class to act as a spokesman of the unemployed...he was prepared to die for them... it was better to be a dead hero than a living coward.”

- He formed the Labour & Unemployed Association (LUA) along with men such as Igal Lahoodie, Gabriel Adderly and Benjamin Reneau.
- During his involvement Soberanis openly and regularly ridiculed the elites, merchants and colonial officials in an effort to expose the injustices faced by the workers. These became known as the Battlefield attacks.
- In 1934 on the occasion of the September 10th, 1934 Tony and the LUA achieved the feat of feeding 3,000 people at the Yarborough area after the parade. This contrasted sharply with the failure of the colonial authorities to bring aid to the people.
- On October 1, 1934 LUA agitation led by Soberanis came to a head resulting in a series of riots and skirmishes as well as the arrest of 17 LUA members including Soberanis. Despite attempts to acquire bail and even one attempt to forcibly free him with the help of snakes, Soberanis was held until November 6th.
- Soberanis continued his agitation and led a number of demonstrations across the country. He was arrested and charged on a couple occasions with use of threatening and insulting words and sedition.
- His hallmark as a Belizean hero perhaps lies with the fact that he was able to mobilize an organized mass movement in a countrywide forum despite his educational and financial limitations.
- After the 1930's disturbances which coincided with similar and more violent disturbances in the Caribbean, Soberanis remained active in public life and continued in his profession as a barber.
- He died in 1975 and was buried in Santana Village.
- On December 13, 1991 at the inauguration of the Battlefield Park, a bust of Antonio Soberanis was unveiled to memorialize his contribution to Belize.