

Benita Galeana: incorruptible fighter for social justice

Benita, all heart and modesty, is suddenly gone. Symbol of an epoch; autodidact of revolution... a woman up in arms....

Carlos Fazio

Benita Galeana, a grass-roots fighter and life-long Communist who was considered one of the most important Mexican women of the 20th century, died in Mexico City on April 17—the same day which commemorates the death of a great woman of the 17th century: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Benita was born in San Jerónimo de Juárez, Guerrero, in 1907. Orphaned at the age of two, she came under the care of her older sister, Camila, who put her to work at an early age and never allowed her to attend public school. In her autobiography, Benita recalls that time of her life as being filled with hardships, beatings and disappointments. But instead of breaking her, the hardships made her stronger and taught her to fight for her ideals.

When she was still an adolescent she fulfilled her dream of going to Mexico City. By that time she was already a mother and had to leave her daughter, Lilia, with the child's paternal grandmother for a time, since her situation did not allow her to take the little girl along.

She arrived in Mexico City in the 1920's, a young woman, tall and beautiful, with her hair arranged in long braids—a style she would maintain her whole life. Her first job was as a hat-check girl in the *El Viejo Jalisco* cabaret; later, she worked for the Postal Service and Social Security. A well-known anecdote from those years tells how the PCM (Mexican Communist Party)—in an act of inexplicable prudery—expelled Benita from their ranks twenty years later, after it became publicly known that she



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had helped many of her party comrades with the income she earned at the cabaret.

She became a Communist before she turned twenty-five years old, in an incidental way. Her companion, Manuel Rodríguez, a member of the Mexican Communist Party, had been imprisoned for distributing anti-government propaganda. Benita participated in a rally demanding his freedom, but as she was about to speak the police arrived and arrested her for disturbing the peace. At that time—in the late 1920's—the Mexican Communist Party operated in clandestinity; its members and supporters were persecuted and frequently imprisoned.

During her brief stay in prison, Benita reflected on the meaning of the workers' struggle and the Communist cause, as she said in her autobiography: "I began to take an interest and would ask the Party comrades to explain things I didn't understand: what was imperialism, what about Japan, China...and all the rest" (*Benita*, Lince Editores, 1990, p. 76).

From that time on, her participation was indispensable at lightning meetings, protest events, graffiti-painting, the distribution of Party propaganda, and sales of *El Machete*, the PCM's newspaper, whose distribution had been prohibited by the authorities. "Without knowing how to read, along the way, by asking questions and listening to her party's orators Benita educated herself in political struggle and in the PCM's ideological line. During those years she became an orator with an enormous ability to win a following and to organize" (Sara Lovera, *La Jornada*, April 18). The police got to know her very well, so when meetings were held, she was one of the first to go to jail. The cry "Grab Benita!" became commonplace during confrontations with the cops. It is said that she was arrested on 58 occasions and beaten dozens of times.

Benita defended the right to free speech and to carry out political activity during an era in which prejudices against women were still predominant and there was a clear

double standard which permitted certain kinds of behavior for men and rejected the same behavior in women. "During the '30s women still couldn't vote or be elected and, of course, they had no right to make decisions in the halls of government" (Amalia García, "Doble Jornada," *La Jornada*, May 8).

Benita soon got involved in battles for a bill of juridical protection for workers, for family social security, respect for the right to strike, trade unionism, the emancipation of women in the factories, and against rising prices for staple goods. Her work was always that of a rank-and-filer, since she never occupied a post in the Party. In the mid-'30s, during the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas, the PCM obtained its legal registration and Benita could freely carry out her activities in favor of all the causes of the downtrodden.

When she was more than thirty years old she learned to read on her own and, with the aid of a typewriter, wrote her autobiography, *Benita* (1940), which has gone through a series of editions. She also published a book of stories, *Peso mocho* (1985) and left the second part of her biography, *Actos vividos* in galleys.

Always happy and optimistic, she had a number of amorous experiences; but the only one she considered really satisfying was her 37 years of marriage to writer and reporter Mario Gill. Benita retired from public life for several years after his death. Her daughter Lilia had died at the age of twenty-four from heart disease, but Benita and Mario Gill adopted six girls, about whom little or nothing is currently known.

She knew and lived alongside important Mexican literary and historical figures such as Juan de la Cabada, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Germán Lizt Arzubide, Leopoldo Méndez, Mirta Aguirre and especially José Revueltas, whom she helped join the Party when he was an adolescent. However, she

Grab Benita!

Marcelo González Bustos, historian and friend of Benita Galeana, remembers one of the many incidents in which the fighter for social justice risked her physical safety to defend her comrades-in-struggle. This one occurred in 1952:

"The car was entering Military Camp No. 1 when Benita threw herself on the trunk to try to stop it. Taking advantage of the car's open window, she stuck her hand in and grabbed then-President Miguel Alemán's tie, shook him and said: 'Are you going to give me the prisoners? Yes or no!' She watched as his Adam's apple went up and down under the pressure she was applying to his neck.

"The president asked for their names and a few days later Benita's friends, who were members of the grass-roots organization Squadron 201, were freed from jail" (*Reforma*, April 19).

distrusted those people she considered “stuck up.” In an interview with the writer Elena Poniatowska, she confessed her antipathy for Frida Kahlo: “That annoying Frida always rubbed me the wrong way.... We would see each other at demonstrations, but she was with the artists, and they never, even by mistake, joined with us front-line soldiers” (*Benita*, p. XII).

She visited the Soviet Union in the era when — according to her — “nobody was unemployed.” In 1988, she fulfilled her dream to visit Cuba and personally meet Fidel Castro, whom she greatly admired. She also visited Manuel Noriega’s Panama.

Her last seven years were filled with intense activity; she fought for democracy, respect for the popular vote, freedom to demonstrate and civil rights. Last year she even went to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, to support the movement for peace in that state. In March she attended a rally for the freedom of seven women prisoners accused of being Zapatistas, and just a few days before her death she participated in a Mexico City protest against tax increases.

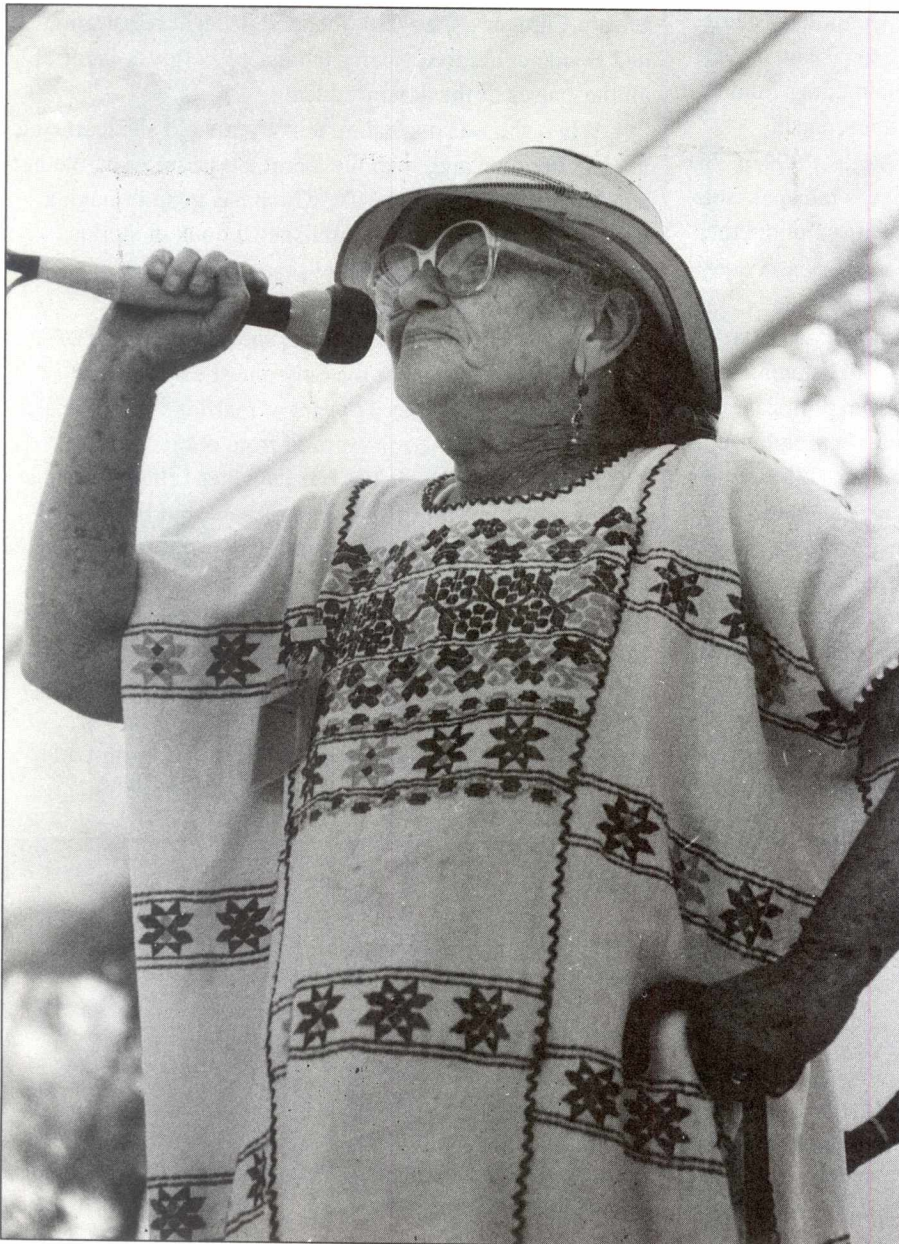
Benita was the recipient of numerous awards and tributes during her life. Several women’s groups that participate in pro-democracy struggles named their umbrella organization the Benita Galeana Women’s

Coordinating Committee; a ballad was written about her; Guerrero State Radio and Television produced a biographical radio novel on her, now being retransmitted by Radio Educación; Mexico City’s Channel 11 transmitted a video with photographs of this fighter for social justice, and a movie about her life is to be produced. The day after her death, the Chamber of Deputies held a minute of silence in her memory.

The house where she lived for forty years is a testament to seven decades of struggle for her ideals. With more than 2,000 books, many photographs and paintings, it has been converted into the Women’s Study Center, which is what she wanted.

Comparing Benita’s life with that of Sor Juana, Horacio Labastida states: “Sor Juana and Benita were different and yet the same. The former did not know that the source of her agony was an unjust political establishment; the latter, illiterate, understood this immediately. But both coincided in giving priority to human freedom over any attempt to destroy it” (*La Jornada*, April 21). ❧

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