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AFTERWORD

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consciousness and political vision. His work with Local 207, his involvement with the Communist Party, and his relationship with Andrew Steve Nelson, who bridged the two organizations, would dramatically change his life.

In Andrew Nelson, <sup>he</sup> met black man, a Communist, a militant labor organizer who would become his friend and mentor. Brown started attending Executive Board meetings and speaking up about conditions on the docks, especially the issue of upgrading black workers who often were common laborers, whereas whites had access to more desirable jobs. Soon he was elected shop steward. Nelson, older by several years, began grooming Brown for a leadership position. Their Friday lunch meetings and Sunday dinners became occasions for political discussions, informal instruction and union strategizing as well as enjoyment of delightful New Orleans cuisine which Brown clearly relished. Nelson was like an older brother, a man whom Brown admired much as he had admired his Grandfather. In time Brown would become vice-president of Local 207 and co-leader with Nelson.

His work with Local 207 gave him rich experience with a militant union dedicated to improving the lives of working people, especially black workers. Along with the mentorship of Nelson, it gave him the opportunity to learn new skills and rise to a leadership position based on his skills, militancy and courage. As an interracial union with black leadership, Local 207, struggling in the midst of a society based on white supremacy and black subjugation, also gave him



an inkling of a different kind of society that might be created through struggle.

Nelson also introduced Brown to the Communist Party. Brown had been favorably impressed by a Communist organizer in met in Los Angeles, but he had never attended a Party meeting until invited by Nelson. Nelson said the Party could train him to work with and organize people.

What impressed Brown about the Communist Party in New Orleans was its commitment to building the trade union movement, its advocacy and practice of racial equality (including black leadership), and its anti-capitalist stance. Brown was not particularly interested in the intricacies of Party politics or doctrinaire debates over Party line. What drew him was the Party's active involvement in working to improve the lives of working people, especially black people. But the Party offered more than the union because it also gave him a vision of a new society based on socialism and racial equality. Brown already understood, based on his own experience, that the interests of the bosses and workers were antithetical. The Party gave him an analysis of capitalism that deepened his innate understanding<sup>of</sup> boss-worker conflict. The analysis further gave him an appreciation of racism (Jim Crowism) as a deliberate ruling class strategy to divide and weaken the working clas(by fostering racial hatred. For Brown the Party gave him another militant, fighting organization with a program (fight Jim Crow, build strong trade unions, support voting rights and progressive



candidates) and vision (racial equality, socialism) that coincided with his developing social consciousness and working class values.

The Party ~~also~~ encouraged his love of reading and he threw himself into reading Marx, Engels, Lenin and other socialist literature.

As with his experience in Local 207, the Party gave him new skills. "I learned how to run meetings, set up committees. Sometimes we had all-day meetings on how to organize people, how to get them to register to vote by educating them, how to work with politicians, how to fight Jim Crow."

The Party also introduced Brown to individuals who strongly influenced his outlook. For the first time he was in an organization with whites who shared his commitment to racial equality and who treated him as an equal. He was impressed by the Party's district organizer (Levin) and he became friends with C.J. Meste, the International representative who was also a Party member. Brown and Meske enjoyed talking about conditions facing black and white workers in the South, and what could be done. They also sold Party literature together.

During these years, Brown's came to see in the trade union movement and the Communist Party the keys for improving the lives of black people and combating racism. His faith was reinforced by his own experience. The eight months he worked with black and white striking sugar refinery workers in the



towns of Reserve and Gramercy was one such key experience. Drawing upon his union and Party training, Brown managed to break down racial divisions among the workers and unify them, with the result that the strike was won. Clearly, in his mind, a program of actively fighting Jim Crow could succeed. This was the way to unite the working class, and it demanded organizational and personal action.

Brown was impressed by the personal commitment of white Party members to practice racial ~~inequality~~ equality in their daily lives. To Brown, personal integrity is a measure and indicator of political integrity. That is why the case of the 64 -- black and white people, many of them Party members, arrested for having an interracial party in New Orleans -- was so important to him, especially the fact that the group successfully fought the original convictions and got them overturned. "We helped establish the right to associate and visit each others' homes and attend meetings or demonstrate together regardless of race, color or creed. To me this was a victory for the workingclass in the South -- not just black workers or white workers. It was the working people as a whole that won. We put a nail in the coffin of Jim Crowism!"

Brown's biggest disappointment was his feeling, years later after living San Francisco where he had moved when unable to find work in New Orleans after his release from prison, that the Party and the trade unions were capitulating to racism. The triggering event was being snubbed on the streets by a white Party member and his feeling that the



Party failed to deal with this instance of "white chauvinism." This may appear to be a minor incident, but to Brown it was emblematic of a deterioration of political consciousness and militancy in the Party and the trade union movement. That deterioration was also reflected in Brown's view in the failure of the Party to stop the AFL and CIO merger, and the failure of newly created Local 2 to stop the growing discrimination against black workers in the hotel and restaurant industry in San Francisco. Brown's alienation from the Party and Local 2 in San Francisco becomes more understandable given how much he values opposition to racism in practice, not just on paper.

Similarly his attraction to forms of black nationalism reflects both his continuing interest in the problem of black unity and consciousness and his sometimes doubt about the Communist Party. He makes it clear that his attraction to the Black Muslims was due less their religious doctrine and more to the fact that the Muslims affirmed that African Americans had a unifying history linked to past civilizations and cultures, a history not limited to slavery and savagery. His involvement with the AD NIP party came during a period when he was disillusioned with the Communist Party and had been fired from his job at the Jack Tar. The AD NIP Party, through the Black Security Guards, provided him with work and a sense of organizational activism on behalf of the black community. It also provided an outlet for his early writings in which he advocated trade union militancy.



Actually, at one level Lee Brown saw no contradiction between being involved in black nationalist groups, trade unions, the Communist Party and the NAACP. He states that he was always interested in anything that would help working class black people and, in his mind, all of these offered possibilities for improving the lives of black people. His involvement with the NAACP -- an affiliation that continued throughout his life -- suggests a powerfully felt commitment to being part of a struggle specifically aimed at gaining civil rights in the present society. He brought to the NAACP a militancy and concern for working class issues that had informed his trade union and Party activism. These were not always welcome, leading to a sometimes fractious relationship with the more bourgeois NAACP leadership. Nevertheless, he never abandoned his commitment to the NAACP and his hope that it might emerge as a militant, progressive organization.

Finally, it is worth noting that Brown's repetition of his support of the program of the Communist Party despite what he sees as the failures of its leadership is more than rhetorical. It suggests a basis for his continuing optimism and activism in the face of setbacks: namely, that the failures of individuals (leaders) may be common, but they are not sufficient grounds to abandon commitment to and hope for a program of struggle.

"I got faith in the masses," Brown says.



Old Version

consciousness and political vision. His work with Local 207, his involvement with the Communist Party, and his relationship with Andrew Steve Nelson, who bridged the two organizations, would dramatically change his life.

NOTES:

Continue with his experience in Local 207 with Andrew Nelson and CP giving him a deeper understanding of strategic objectives (right to organize, end jim crow, right to vote) and goals/visions (racial equality, socialism)

LOCAL 207 and mentorship of Andrew Nelson: Gave him rich experience with a militant organization dedicated to improving the lives of working peoples, especially black workers. Gave him the opportunity to learn new skills and rise to a leadership position based on his skills, militancy and courage. As an interracial union with black leadership Local 207, in the midst of a society based on white supremacy and black subjugation, also gave him an inkling of a different kind of society that might be created through struggle.

COMMUNIST PARTY: For Brown the Party gave him another fighting militant organization with a program (fight Jim Crow, build strong trade unions, support voting rights and progressive candidates) and vision (racial equality, socialism) that coincided with his developing social consciousness and values. He was little concerned with doctrinaire issues in the party and most affected by its



strong advocacy and practice of racial equality, including support of black leadership. This was not simply an intellectual issue but one that affected him deeply personally. Note his respect and affection for certain white party members in the South. His feeling that the the case of the 64 was an important victory over Jim Crow. Moreover, his feeling after living in San Francisco, where he had moved when unable to find work in New Orleans after his release from prison, that the Party and the trade unions were capitulating to racism was his biggest disappointment.

BLACK MUSLIMS - AD NIP Party -- His attraction to the Black Muslims was dues less their religious doctrine or commitment to black nationalism and more because the Muslims affirmed that African Americans had a history linked to past civilizations and cultures, a history that not limited to slavery and savagery. His involvement with the AD NIP party came during a period when he was disillusioned with the Communist Party and had been fired from his job at the Jack Tar. The AD NIP Party through the Black Security Guards provided him with work and a sense of organizational activism on behalf of the Black Community. It also provided an outlet for his early writings in which he advocated trade union militancy.

CIVIL RIGHTS GROOUPS/NAACP -- Civil rights congress and offshoot of party work, but his earlier invovlement with the NAACP -- an affiliation that continued throughout his life -- suggest a powerfully felt commitment to being part of a



struggle specifically aimed at gaining civil rights in the present society. He brought to the NAACP the militancy and leadership strategies he had learned in the trade union movement and the Party. These were not always welcome, leading to a sometimes fractious relationship with the more bourgeois NAACP leadership. Nevertheless, he never abandoned his commitment to the NAACP and hope that it might emerge as a militant, porogressive organization.

PROGRAM vs FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP -- Finally, his repitition of his support of the program of the Communist Party despite what he sees as the failures of its leadership is also revealing. It suggests a basis for his continuing optimism and activism in the face of setbacks: namely, that the failures of individuals (leaders) are not sufficient grounds to abandon commitment to and hope for a program of struggle. "I got faith in the masses," Brown says.



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IMPLICATIONS for theory & praxis (?)

RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN -- mother, grandmother, Aunt Betsy, Aunt T-Babe, girlfriends (esp. Mildred in LA), Mrs. Sims, Mrs. Poplar, Rose, Moselle, Grace. (Opportunism vs. Partnering) (?)

DEEP INTEREST IN LEARNING, perhaps inspired by Grandfather's praise of education and his own youthful curiosity. (?)



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Over the several years of our collaboration on this book each time I left Lee Brown's apartment he would open his third floor window and watchfully observe as I made my way to my car. His neighborhood was not particularly safe. In fact, the day after we completed our final interview a man, an alleged drug dealer, was shot to death outside a store across the street from Brown's apartment building.



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