

CARTON 8539

STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

BOOK PUBLICATION, RESPONSE AND
REVIEWS

2001-2003

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Subj: **for robert allen—contacting Lee Brown**
Date: 7/14/2003 9:05:02 PM Pacific Daylight Time
From: jarena@tulane.edu
To: BlkSchlr@aol.com
Sent from the Internet (Details)

Lee Brown

Dear Dr. Allen,

My name is Jay Arena and I am a graduate student in sociology at Tulane University and a political activist in New Orleans. I recently read your excellent oral history of Lee Brown. I found it especially interesting since myself and others have been trying to excavate the history of the revolutionary left here in New Orleans and had been doing research on Andy Nelson. Your book had more information than I had ever encountered on Nelson and then, of course, I learned about Brother Brown who I had never heard of.

Myself and some others activists would like to bring Brother Brown back to new Orleans for a talk and to educate us and as way to link the current struggles in new Orleans to a long historical process.. Is he still in good health? Would it be possible for you to send me his contact information, or send my information to him and our desire to have him speak here?

Thanks for both writing this important work and any help you can provide in contacting Brother Brown.
In solidarity

Jay Arena
504-314-6218
6440 s Claiborne Ave
apt 405
new Orleans, la 70125

—
Outgoing mail is certified Virus Free.
Checked by AVG anti-virus system (<http://www.grisoft.com>).
Version: 6.0.490 / Virus Database: 289 - Release Date: 6/16/2003

Subj: Lee Brown
Date: Friday, July 18, 2003 7:40:52 AM
From: RobertA648
To: jarena@tulane.edu

Dear Jay Arena,

I am sorry to have to tell you that Brother Lee Brown passed away last year. His health had been failing for some time, and he suffered a heart attack from which he did not recover. He would have been delighted and honored by your invitation. He always believed his mission in his last years was to educate young people about the history of the labor movement and to bring them into the struggle.

I wish you much success with your important work in New Orleans.

Robert Allen

Following is the obituary announcement that appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper:

(Published in San Francisco Chronicle, 6/30/02, p. A28)

LEE BROWN, May 28, 1921 - June 27, 2002

Lee Brown, a long-time labor and civil rights activist, died June 27, 2002, following a heart attack. He was 81.

Born in New Orleans, Brown at an early age became involved in the labor movement. A waterfront worker, he was an organizer for Local 207, a militant, interracial union affiliated with Harry Bridges' ILWU. Brown, a powerful speaker known for his fearlessness, rose to become vice-president of Local 207. At one time a member of the Communist Party and a victim of McCarthyite witch-hunting, Brown was imprisoned by the federal government for two years in the late 1950s.

With Rose Robinson in New Orleans he had a son, Brownie. His son died in the 1960s in a swimming accident, and Rose, from whom he was then separated, passed some years later.

Upon moving to San Francisco in 1960, Brown became a hotel worker and organizer at hotels such as the Fairmont and the old Jack Tar. He was a staunch member of Local 2 of the hotel and restaurant workers union.

In 1976 he married Grace Oliver, a fellow hotel worker and union organizer at the Mark Hopkins hotel. She died in 1986.

Brown was also well known as an activist in the San Francisco branch of the NAACP. Over the years he worked with groups as diverse as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam. After retiring he became an advocate for senior citizens' rights and affordable housing. A frequent contributor of articles to newspapers and magazines, in 2001 he published a memoir entitled *Strong in the Struggle: My Life as a Black Labor Activist*.

Brown is survived by his sister-in-law, Hasinah Rahim, and step-daughter, Gloria, in San Francisco, and by three grandsons and their families in New Orleans.

Strong in the Struggle: My Life as a Black Labor Activist

BY LEE BROWN WITH ROBERT L. ALLEN. PUBLISHED BY ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD, 2000. HARDCOVER, 195 PP., \$26.95.

Reviewed by Eugene Dennis Vrana,
ILWU Librarian & Associate Director of
Education

Through the life of Lee Brown, as told in this new autobiographical book with valuable assistance from Professor Robert S. Allen, we learn much about what it took to establish and defend the ILWU in hostile territory—in this case New Orleans—and about the experience of African American workers inside and outside the union. What we learn is easy to understand because of the simplicity and ease with which Brown tells his story and the clear, concise prose with which Allen provides context and chronology for this rich and moving tale of one Black man's journey through a life of progressive activism on behalf of racial justice and rank-and-file union democracy from Louisiana to Texas and California.

At the same time, however, it is also a challenging and provocative account that for some may be as difficult to accept as it is easy to understand—because what Brown's narrative reveals about his life also challenges the reader to figure out how far the labor movement, including the ILWU, may be from exposing and eradicating racism in the workplace and the union. But this was a fight Brown had no hesitation about waging in the working world, and was never disheartened about working tirelessly to improve the quality of life and opportunity for people of color wherever and whenever the opportunity arose—even if it meant being unpopular. His life of activism was no doubt made easier because he never aspired to paid office in any organization and so was loudly and proudly partisan wherever he happened to be.

Brown was born in 1921 in Louisiana and raised there by his grandfather on a farm. He left at age 15 to work for wages, starting with stints as a houseboy and then in the cotton fields. Through his network of extended family he found work through a segregated Black local of the laborers' union and with them participated in his first strike during the Depression at age 17. He took great pride when white trade unionists respected their picket line and, from the strike's successful conclusion, took to heart this early lesson in the importance of racial unity among workers. Equally important, he wrote, "The union made me feel like I could do something for poor people like myself and my cousin. The union gave me a way to go forward—to help change things."

Unique to this book is how Brown tells his tale with visual and emotional details of people, places and events that make it possible to follow with interest the twists and turns of his life and work and to understand the evolution of his personal politics (an index to names, places, and organizations would have helped the reader follow this journey). What we learn about him makes it easy, for example, to understand why he felt an affinity to the program and members of the Communist Party—an organization he moved in and out of over the next 50 years—as well as his involvement with the NAACP, the Black Panther Party, the Civil Rights Congress, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Nation of Islam and the Peace and Freedom Party.

When Brown moved briefly to Los Angeles in the early 1940s he encountered unionized jobs that enforced "whites only" in employment and preferred positions. "They block you," he wrote, "and that gives the boss and the owner more power to keep the



Elected officials of Local 207 in 1947. Seated at the right is Lee Brown, who then served on the trustee board. Other officers are (standing left to right) Andrew Nelson, president; August Harris, first vice president; Walter Green, second vice president; Albert Taylor, recording secretary.

workers divided. It weakens the union and the bosses can make inroads. You get bad contracts when they keep the Black and white and any other workers fighting each other."

When he moved back to New Orleans in 1944 he began working on barges under the jurisdiction of ILWU Local 207. The local was seven years old and besieged by attacks from conservative labor leaders in the American Federation of Labor in collusion with employers and police agencies.

His politics and personality meshed quickly with those of his new union, and he was soon elected shop steward and to the local's negotiating committee, executive board and board of trustees. He was active in the local's political programs in the community, especially for civil rights, which at the time focused on voter registration drives.

The 1940s were a difficult time for the ILWU and progressive politics in New Orleans. The union had lost a pivotal jurisdiction battle over longshore work with the more conservative International Longshoremen's Association—a battle in which the ILA, the AFL and the employers (often for different reasons but with the same target) successfully used police agencies and brutal goon squads to thwart the new union.

At the same time, there were unique traditions of racial cooperation along the levees. In 1875, for example, Black and white dockworkers agreed to share work equally. Both groups struck successfully in 1892. In 1902 the ILA was established in New Orleans and admitted Blacks to membership in separate locals (which was the general pattern of racial and ethnic "integration" in the ILA) and some Blacks were elected to union office at higher levels.

By 1939 Local 207 was a small local mainly of barge and warehouse workers while the ILA worked deep-water vessels. Into this mix arrived Brown in 1944, who, as was his style, quickly connected with the various militant rank and filers, including Communists and other left-wing activists, and helped galvanize a new organizing program that built the local back up to 850 white and African American members in 1946.

As he fought for integration in the workplace, he also fought for it in the union. In 1955, for example, he brought a resolution to the ILWU International Convention in Los Angeles pointedly calling for all locals to accept travel cards of members in good standing regardless of race, color or creed. It was adopted by the delegates.

Back in New Orleans Brown continued to organize and build the union. By 1957 the membership numbers were up to 1700—but then came McCarthyism.

Brown had joined the Communist Party in 1946 because, "I was interested in anything that would help me do something for Black folks," and because he believed it helped him become a better organizer. The very next year the Taft-Hartley law was enacted which made it illegal for a Communist to hold union office. To protect the union, which was under general assault by anti-Communist state and Congressional committees across the country and in Hawaii, Brown and others resigned their party membership and signed the Taft-Hartley "non-Communist" affidavit. Eleven years later, and just one year after being elected vice president of Local 207, Brown was indicted for allegedly lying on his Taft-Hartley affidavit and was soon convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. The conviction was reversed on appeal after he had served two years.

The indictment and trial and the general witch hunt against ILWU leaders in New Orleans—Andrew Steve Nelson, the local's Black president, had been similarly indicted and convicted, but died before serving his sentence—made it difficult for Brown to find work. The situation was made worse by the fact that in 1958—while he was in prison—Local 207 had followed ILWU Local 208 of Chicago into the United Packinghouse Workers of America—a decision reached jointly by the affected locals and the International Union, and endorsed by ILWU Convention action—after reluctantly recognizing the West Coast union could not effectively protect its midland locals.

"It was inevitable," wrote Allen about the campaign against Nelson, Brown, Local 207 and the ILWU,

"that the white powers that be, at the local as well as national level, would go all out to destroy this beacon that illuminated a path towards a new, egalitarian and democratic America."

Later, looking back on his New Orleans experience, Brown wrote, "Our union, Local 207, New Orleans, Louisiana, was among the most militant, courageous and active in the South. Our president and vice president were Black, but our rank and file was both Black and white business agents, white shop stewards, whites on the negotiating committee. Our white members had overcome Jim Crowism and discrimination. White workers had become union conscious, and we were united on bread-and-butter issues. This was a high point of our union organizing in Louisiana. I felt proud."

In 1960 it was time to move on. He arrived in San Francisco, home of ILWU headquarters, to hopefully find assistance once again in getting a new start in the union, at the workplace and in the community. Here the narrative seems uncharacteristically incomplete as it is never made clear why Brown was not taken in by the ILWU "family" in the Bay Area (as were so many other victims of the McCarthy era)—or how he felt about virtually being left to fend for himself after 16 years of commitment, action and jail time in service to the ILWU, though he did have some personal contacts in warehouse Local 6. But there may have been little time to sort out these issues as he soon landed a job in a prominent hotel through the culinary workers union—thereby beginning more than thirty years of rank-and-file activism in the hotel workers union.

Throughout his working life, as documented so vibrantly in this relatively slim volume illustrated with wonderful photographs (including several from the ILWU library), Brown never seems to have lost his unrelenting drive to meet and mobilize working people.

With equal resolve he appears to have held fast to his determination to build rank-and-file unionism and defeat racism. As he says near the end of his account, "If we don't get ourselves together, we gonna move back."

Northern California Committees of Correspondence



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The CoC newsletter collective

This newsletter was produced by the following collective:

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PROGRESSIVES SWEEP SAN FRANCISCO ELECTION

by *Giuliana Milanese*

On December 12, 2000, the people of San Francisco, voting by district after a 10-year hiatus, gave progressive, reform candidates a near clean sweep of the City and County Board of Supervisors. Although there was only a 30% turnout for the run-off, the stage had clearly been set in November when 66% turned up at the polls.

A reform team of independent candidates from ten districts appealed to voters on platforms emphasizing neighborhood preservation, the declining state of healthcare services, homelessness and the critical lack of affordable housing. Progressives elected were Chris Daly, Matt Gonzales, Sophie Maxwell, Jake McGoldrick, Aaron Peskin, Gerardo Sandoval and incumbent Tom Ammiano. The only defeat for the insurgent campaign was that of Eileen Hansen, one of the most progressive candidates, who was defeated by incumbent Supervisor Mark Leno in District 8 (which includes the Castro and Noe Valley)

The election represents a serious political setback for Mayor Willie Brown and the development policies his administration has pursued.

Grassroots activists were able to mobilize widespread and often dramatic protests against city policies that encouraged evictions, neighborhood displacement, and soaring rents, and that failed to affect the city's serious problem of homelessness. Also furthering the impression that the Brown administration favored only the well-to-do was talk of cutbacks in the municipal health facilities — rather than the extension of health care coverage in the city, as had been earlier discussed.

The commanding victory of community organizer and housing activist Chris Daly, swept into office by 82% of the vote in his race against businessman Chris Dittenhafer, is strong symbol of the opposition to the policies that had been carried out by City Hall. And, perhaps, the most embarrassing and revealing defeat for the Mayor was the voters' decision to turn aside incumbent Supervisors Michael Yaki and Amos

Brown, both of whom were first appointed to the Board by the Mayor.

Following the election, pollster David Binder told the San Francisco Chronicle that the results showed that the city's political left was alive and well, "The progressives spoke loudly tonight that they are in control of San Francisco." ♦

"The election represents a serious political setback for Mayor Willie Brown"

Report on February's Membership Meeting

by *Ron Johnson*

The morning of February 24 was rainy and the venerable Humanist Hall was chilly, but that did not dissuade the members and friends of the Committees of Correspondence for Socialism and Democracy (CCSD) who had gathered to hash out a plan of work for the year ahead.

While the hall was cool, the discussion was warm. While the subject, how to build our organization and advance the fight for socialism,

was as old as the hills, the conclusions were new and challenging.

Over the past several years, the Northern California CCSD chapters have been shrinking. Our past efforts to reverse this trend focused on building membership through activity; on organizing two major conferences at UC Berkeley and limited joint activities with Solidarity and DSA. Unfortunately, while the conferences and some of the

See 2001 Plans, page 3

Doctor of the Working Class

Strong in the Struggle: My Life as a Black Labor Activist

By Lee Brown with Robert L. Allen
Rowman & Littlefield. \$26.95

photo: Mary Englestein



Lee Brown

Lee Brown's memoir reads like a prizefighter's. And it's right that it should. The boxing talent he displayed in his hardscrabble youth served him well as an organizer, union leader and party militant. Though the "Brown Bomber's" boxing career was short-lived—he never quite lived up to the sobriquet he shared with Joe Louis—his hard-hitting aggressiveness marked him as a leader in later bouts outside the ring.

Born poor in backcountry Louisiana, Brown came of age as an itinerant worker. His "shaping-up" years coincided with the explosive growth of industrial unionism in the late 1930s. At seventeen, enrolled as a common laborer on Galveston's docks, he took part in his first union action, striking against an hourly wage of thirty-five cents. From Texas, he travelled west to Arizona, where he led a strike of railroad workers in the Lower Sonora Desert. A four-year sojourn in Los Angeles—working as a dishwasher, Hollywood extra, and packinghouse worker—left him longing for Louisiana, to which he returned in 1944.

Brown settled in New Orleans, a city

whose lazy, laissez faire atmosphere belied a long history of labor strife. He went to work in the dockyards, loading river barges with cotton and other cargo. He joined a militant, multi-racial union—Local 207 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, C.I.O.—and began his career as a union "troubleshooter."

Local 207 was led by Andrew Steve Nelson, a tough black Communist who became Brown's mentor, friend and comrade. Nelson quickly recognized Brown's talent for organizing, and together they devised tactics for winning over workers at the cotton compresses, fertilizer plants and feed mills targeted by the union. Nelson shared Brown's ideals: to galvanize black workers through rapid-fire strikes and organizing campaigns, and to "bury Jim Crow" by uniting blacks and whites on terms of revolutionary equality.

Nelson introduced Brown to Marxism, and enlisted him in the Communist Party's French Quarter chapter. They doubled the local's membership in a series of hard-fought strikes. Some twenty years before Mississippi's Freedom Summer of 1964, they risked their lives in voter registration drives, exchanging gunfire with white vigilantes in one backwoods encounter.

Their success was ephemeral—the Cold War reaction of the 1950s swamped them. Nelson fell under close federal scrutiny. Wracked by asthma and chronic nephritis, he died soon after his indictment and conviction on charges of violating the "union-busting" Taft-Hartley Act. His death in 1957 marked the decline of Local 207.

Brown stepped into the breach and came under fire from the same quarter. Summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Brown startled the panel by stubbornly refusing to cooperate. He insisted on reading his own statement and was so adamant that the Committee finally instructed the Marshals to eject him. (He had planned to interrogate its members on the subject of racism—specifically, whether the Mississippi segregationist James Eastland, then head of the Senate Internal Security Committee, was a member of the Ku

Klux Klan.)

In 1958, Brown faced trial on the same charges that Nelson had braved: falsifying the non-Communist affidavit required of union officers by the Taft-Hartley Act. The case against him rested on the testimony of paid informers, whose meager evidence sufficed to convict him, despite a well-mounted defense.

Brown served a two-year sentence in Texarkana prison. He made the prison library his university—reading texts on black history, social change and revolution, and poring over the volumes of the *Social Science Encyclopedia*. His eagerness to share his radical opinions with other inmates pricked the interest of the prison guards, who honored him with a spell in "segregation"—their euphemism for solitary.

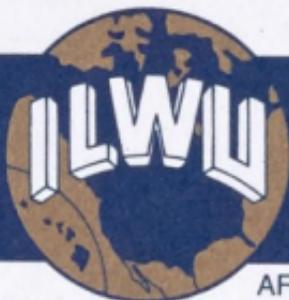
Upon his release in 1960, Brown moved on to San Francisco, where he resumed his troubleshooting career. He joined a small culinary workers local and the porters at the Fairmont Hotel named him their shop steward. He became a picket captain and was instrumental in a bitter, but successful, housekeepers' strike that lasted three years.

Brown returned to the Communist Party soon after his arrival in San Francisco. Although he was impressed with many of the Party's activists—notably Kendra Alexander, who later played a key role in the Committees of Correspondence—he was soon disillusioned by the Party's failure to pursue its program against racism. He regretted the Party's abandonment of the principle of "black-white, collective leadership," which the lamentable Gus Hall jettisoned after Party Chairman Henry Winston died in 1986. But he remained a committed socialist and distinguished himself as an activist in many causes after his retirement.

Lee Brown's memoir, ably co-written with Robert L. Allen, is a remarkable story: the odyssey of a tough, self-educated intellectual, a rank-and-file leader who well deserves his self-bestowed title, "Doctor of the Working Class." Like Andrew Steve Nelson, whose eulogy he pronounced, Brown was, and is, a dauntless combatant: a man who fights "with his life in his hands". ❖

—D. D. Ferguson

EUGENE DENNIS VRANA
ASSOCIATE EDUCATION DIRECTOR
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See esp. p. 12 Gene

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Charleston 5 campaign
update—p. 5



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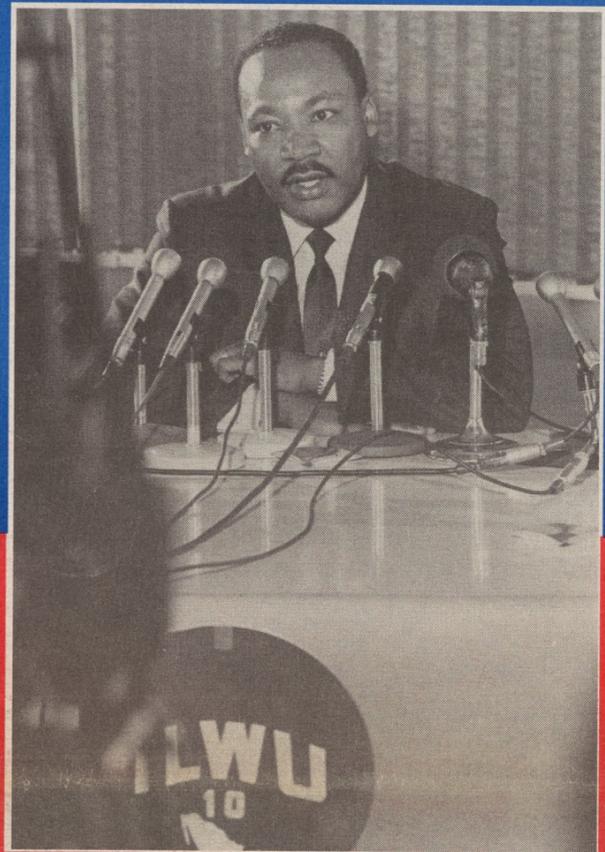
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February 2001

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BLACK HISTORY MONTH: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Labor Movement

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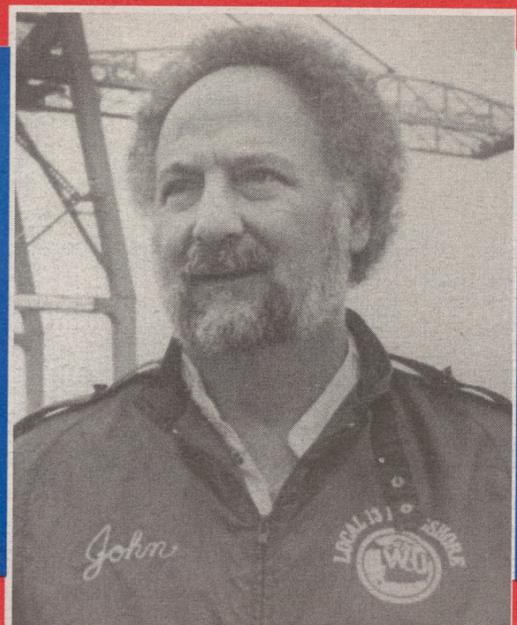


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Strong in the Struggle: My Life as a Black Labor Activist

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At the same time, however, it is also a challenging and provocative account that for some may be as difficult to accept as it is easy to understand—because what Brown's narrative reveals about his life also challenges the reader to figure out how far the labor movement, including the ILWU, may be from exposing and eradicating racism in the workplace and the union. But this was a fight Brown had no hesitation about waging in the working world, and was never disheartened about working tirelessly to improve the quality of life and opportunity for people of color wherever and whenever the opportunity arose—even if it meant being unpopular. His life of activism was no doubt made easier because he never aspired to paid office in any organization and so was loudly and proudly partisan wherever he happened to be.

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The indictment and trial and the general witch hunt against ILWU leaders in New Orleans—Andrew Steve Nelson, the local's Black president, had been similarly indicted and convicted, but died before serving his sentence—made it difficult for Brown to find work. The situation was made worse by the fact that in 1958—while he was in prison—Local 207 had followed ILWU Local 208 of Chicago into the United Packinghouse Workers of America—a decision reached jointly by the affected locals and the International Union, and endorsed by ILWU Convention action—after reluctantly recognizing the West Coast union could not effectively protect its midland locals.

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