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STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

BOOK REVIEWS

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## 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



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