

CARTON 8:17

INTRODUCTION

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**Strong in the Struggle:
My Life as a Trade Union
Militant**

by Lee Brown

Edited by Robert L. Allen

Introduction

I ring the bell at Lee Brown's apartment building in a housing project in San Francisco's Western Addition neighborhood. He immediately buzzes me in through the metal gate. For the first few months of our meetings he would always look out his window to check who was there before buzzing me in. Now he says he recognizes me by how I ring the buzzer. He opens the door and waits as I climb the stairs to the third floor. "You in, Bro' Robert?" "I'm on the way up, Bro' Brown."

At 78 years of age, Lee Brown is tall and husky with light brown skin. His voice is deep and rich. When discussing racist and capitalist adversaries he adopts an exaggerated scowl, but more often his eyes have a mischievous twinkle and he is quick to laugh.

In his bedroom, which also serves as the livingroom, a photograph of Elijah Muhammad is displayed prominently over the bed with a Million Man March poster on the adjacent wall. The room is crowded with ^a~~the~~ bed, an old easy chair, TV, VCR, and four sagging bookcases overflowing with well-thumbed books, newspapers, magazines and miscellaneous papers. An alcove is crammed with a file cabinet, more books, documents, photographs and papers. The hundreds of books and pamphlets in his apartment reflect his love of reading and his wide ranging interests. His collection includes books on labor history, black history, ancient African civilizations, religion (especially Islam), socialism, economics, biography and philosophy.

We talk at the formica kitchen table sitting on two folding chairs. The table is usually cluttered with a big bowl of fruit in the center, papers scattered around it, and various canned and bottled goods from the welfare department on the table and on the floor. He offers me a bottle of Ginseng soda. I take a second bottle from the refrigerator for him.

He is a man who delights in good food, though he seldom gets out to restaurants now. A good cook, he enjoys preparing a favorite dish -- savory goat stew -- for the pleasure of friends. Each week he looks forward to two meals at a local community center, hoping that they might satisfy his appetite, as the trade union struggle fed his spirit.

Whenever he leaves his apartment he believes in dressing to make an impression. That means wearing a three-piece brown pinstrip suit, with gold watch and chain in the vest pocket, 5 or 6 pens and reading glasses in the coat pocket, four buttons on the lapels (Africa/Black USA Unity pin, NAACP Lifetime membership pin, Local 2 button, HERE button -- Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees union). On his head he sports a black leather fez with a map of Africa outlined on its front in green, yellow, red colors. He uses a walking cane and wears brown boots. He impresses one as a man who thinks well of himself and is not hesitant to make known his views.

We met through a mutual friend, Patricia Scott, who knew of Lee Brown's efforts to write his autobiography and my interest in African American involvement in social movements. I was immediately fascinated by Lee Brown's story -- which he had already started

writing with the help of his late wife, Grace, and a friend, Tom Dunphy. He asked if I would help him with the project and I agreed.

For more than 60 years Lee Brown has been deeply committed to the struggle for the rights of working people in this country. A largely self-educated man ("doctor of the working class" is how he describes his education), Brown took part in grassroots labor struggles on the waterfront of Galveston, Texas, and in railroad labor camps in Arizona in the late 1930s, fought for jobs for black actors in the Hollywood film industry in the 1940s, and campaigned for workers rights in the great hotels of San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s.

Brown made history as one of the top leaders of a militant, interracial union in the Deep South during the 1940s and 1950s. He was vice president of Local 207, Warehouse and Distribution Workers' Union (affiliated with the International Longshoremens' and Warehousemens' Union) in New Orleans. Also a member of the Communist Party, Lee Brown paid a high price for his commitment. In 1957 he was investigated by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee. Brown refused to cooperate with HUAC. At the hearings he created a sensation when he adamantly refused to answer any questions until the Committee allowed him to make a statement. (He had planned to pose his own set of questions to the committee, including: Was Senator Eastland a member of the Ku Klux Klan?) For his insistence on having the right to make his own statement, Brown was accused of being a defiant, arrogant witness and ejected from the HUAC hearing.

The following year Lee Brown was charged with violating the Taft-Hartley law, which prohibited union leaders from being members of the Communist Party. Although he had previously withdrawn his membership in the Communist party to meet the requirements of the law, he was convicted nonetheless. He became one of the first labor leaders imprisoned during the McCarthyite witchhunts, and he served one of the longest prison terms of any of the Taft-Hartley victims. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment at the federal penitentiary at Texarkana, Texas.

Born to a farming family in rural Louisiana in 1921, Lee Brown first joined a union at age 17 when he was working on the dry docks in Galveston, Texas. It was there he had his first taste of labor conflict when the union called a strike in 1939 for better wages.

Later he worked on the railroads in Arizona. When a foreman unfairly dismissed a worker, Brown told the others: "Let's call a meeting. Together we should stand up for this brother." The effort was successful, and Brown was launched on a course of lifelong militant labor activism.

By World War II Lee Brown was in Los Angeles working for RKO Studios and actively involved in the NAACP. He campaigned for better jobs for blacks in the film industry, and along the way he met many famous black actors, including Louise Beavers, Mantan Moreland and, later, Paul Robeson. He even had a couple of bit parts in films.

After the war Lee returned to New Orleans where he got a job on the docks loading river barges. He joined Local 207 and soon became a shop steward. Local 207 was known for its militancy and

consequently disliked by the employers. With black and white members its president, Andrew Steve Nelson, was black -- a situation virtually unheard of in the South, and especially galling to local authorities. Brown's fearlessness and militancy got him chosen as vice-president of Local 207.

Like many other black activists at the time, he also joined the U.S. Communist Party. In an effort to decapitate the militant black leadership of Local 207 and end the ILWU presence in New Orleans, both Brown and Nelson were indicted under the Taft-Hartley law, the National Labor Relations Act. Nelson was convicted, but died before being imprisoned. Brown was convicted and imprisoned at Texarkana.

Serving time in the penitentiary was not easy, but Brown was not dissuaded from his politics. When he was released in 1960 he moved to San Francisco and joined Local 110 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union at the famous Fairmont Hotel, where he became the first shop steward in any hotel in San Francisco. From then until his retirement he was a union organizer and a leader of the struggle against discrimination in employment for black workers in the hotel and restaurant industry in San Francisco. During this period he met and married Grace Oliver, who was also a union activist in the hotel industry.

On coming to San Francisco Brown resumed a tenuous relationship with the Communist Party. However, disillusioned by racism within the Communist Party, Brown later drifted away from the CP and flirted with various Black Nationalist groups, including the Nation of Islam. Nevertheless, his fundamental belief that

grassroots organizing of all people is the key to social change eventually brought him back into the CP. Although he left the Party for good in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing schisms in the CPUSA, he remains committed to the ideals of socialism.

Since retirement, Brown's militancy has not diminished. He has thrown himself into the senior citizen's movement, working with such organizations as the Senior Action Network and Legal Assistance to the Elderly, and marching in demonstrations in Sacramento demanding more state aid for seniors.

Lee Brown's story is unique: A black labor activist in the South, Southwest and the West who worked with several different labor unions, as well as the NAACP, the Communist Party and Black Nationalist groups; a militant who paid the price of imprisonment for his political principles; a Communist who lived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union but who remains committed to the struggle for radical change.

For Lee Brown, life and the struggle for change are one and the same. As he put it: "I have dedicated my life in the service of poor people."