

CARTON 8.23

STRONG IN THE STRUGGLE

MANUSCRIPT DRAFTS, CHAPTER 14

1999

2017/193
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CHAPTER 14 -- Looking Back, Facing Forward

(Sources: Interviews 8/11/99 and 8/21/98)

My grandfather always told me that god helped those who help themselves. That told me something, that you had to help yourself, that you didn't have to look up, there wasn't no god up there, god was down here within you. You got to move the situation, struggle to change things, and have faith in the people.

Sometimes people at the grassroots get to fighting each other. The problem is you got some shaky leadership, even in the labor movement. They collaborate with the bosses. They mislead the workers. That has got to change. We need to have a new labor movement, a new struggle.

When I look back I see that the trade union movement gave me inspiration and knowledge and experience of how to fight for freedom. I learned that the workers wasn't getting complete freedom and justice. We had to combat racism, fight for better working conditions, fight for jobs, upgrading, health needs, housing.

I learned that you have to fight for issues as the way to build any organization. If you want a strong organization you pick out issues to organize around. We fought Jim Crow as one issue to build the union. The union did an extraordinary job in the South on this and other issues. We dealt with social issues, like voter registration, as well as job

issues. In 1948 we was fighting like hell to get people registered in the campaign for Henry Wallace.

Racism is still a problem, and it's a problem in the unions. I remember when they was talking about the merging the hotel and restaurant workers unions in San Francisco back in the 70s, Charlie Gricus came to my house one day. He was telling me that we would have a better chance of fighting Jim Crow. He wanted me to work with him in bringing together the unions so we could merge. I thought it was good. But after they merged into Local 2 they still had problems with racism, not getting more black people into hotel work and into the union. They also didn't have many black people working on the staff of Local 2, only one brother on the staff. I talked to the president about that but they didn't follow through. So racism is still a problem in the labor movement. It was better when we had Charles Lamb and Sherri Chiesa as the union leaders. We had more blacks in the union then. The leadership of the union is working with the company to keep blacks out. So you got to fight the union and the company both.

I also think that the merger of the CIO with the AFL was a deadly mistake. We had bad leadership. We could have had strong unions throughout America. But the bosses wanted to block the organizing of a lot of businesses. There's a lot of places that are not organized. When the CIO ^{was} ~~was~~ came around it organized the textile, automobile, fur and leather workers, dock workers, packing house workers and many

workers. But when they merged with the AFL that stopped the organizing drive. I blame the Party for that. The Party should have built a leftwing movement in the trade unions, to keep the unions from going to the right. We needed a left-center movement to hold the unions and fight around issues like racism, health needs, housing. That could have moved the masses of the people. So that was a mistake made. They didn't do that.

I know some people look to [AFL-CIO president] Sweeney to make things different, but I say the power comes from the rank and file. The people themselves got to speak out. I don't give a damn how good a leader you got, if you ain't got a strong rank and file to fight around issues and build the organization.

We got to build a new, strong labor movement around issues. We need to be very militant and fight for issues. Blacks should study the history of progressive movements. We need to study how to mobilize the people. Reparations is one issue that we can mobilize black people of different classes with. We need to talk about redistributing the wealth. We can get brown people and some white people to unite with black people around that kind of issue.

We need an international labor movement. They need to make international contacts in other countries like South Africa where there is a strong union movement. First we need to start here, but we need to make contacts and have dialog with workers about issues we can use to build the labor

movement. You got to have a new labor movement. That means talking with progressive minded workers, black, white, brown, every kind of workers, to support a new labor movement. It's like taking a ball and rolling it. You got to start it off. People need to know the truth. As long as you got the capitalist system you ain't going to make it here, not the poor. They may get a few crumbs, the middle class may, but not the poor. We need a big movement here around issues. We need to get out there and hit the streets. When you start an organization you need organizers and you need to be able to protect them when they get thrown in jail. Like we did in the South. You get arrested, you have somebody to get the people out before things get vicious in the jails.

In New Orleans I worked with the NAACP and civil rights. I met Martin Luther King when he came to New Orleans. I was introduced to him by Rev. L. Davis. I talked with him a little bit around issues. He was down to earth. I told him I was for peace, freedom, socialism, and he didn't flinch. You know he went to a socialist school, quiet as it's kept, the Highlander School. I think Dr. King was correct in fighting for civil rights, and I think we made a lot of progress, but I think we should have been working to educate the working white about racism and how he is hurting himself by trying to maintain white supremacy.

I think Julian Bond and Kwesi Mfume are good top
of the NAACP,
leaders, but you still got to wake up the membership. They

need to mobilize the young people to build the NAACP. They can't let it just get conservative, middle class, petty bourgeois. They'll be satisfied as long as they get a dollar but that won't solve any problems. You need the masses, poor people, in the membership. That's where the power is. Like I told them in the labor movement, the source of power is the rank and file membership. Listen to them and you can't go wrong. I got faith in the masses.

I believe the Muslims helped to enlighten people, too, especially the brothers, to get them to come out and stand up like a man. They taught them how to treat one another right, get off of dope and alcohol, ~~and~~ to respect women, and to treat everybody right. They said the Muslims was anti-white, but I never read anything by Elijah Muhammad where he said to hate anyone.

I worked with the NAACP and the Muslims because they can bring out issues, help the people, and you need to reach all people to educate and motivate them.

Issues and conditions will move the people, but they need somebody to carry the ball. You got issues here -- you got people hungry, people sleeping in the streets. You need somebody to get out there and mobilize them, wake 'em up, shake the bush. Conditions will move anybody, but you got to have some leadership.

You need good leaders, people who are militant, got some experience and are willing to fight back. You don't want leaders who gonna go along with the bosses and collaborate

like some of these preachers. At the same time you have to be careful when you make criticisms because you can divide the people. You have to lead by bringing out issues. That was how I tried to lead, throwing out issues and getting people to support the issues.

In the Communist Party I learned to be more militant. The Party gave me a militant consciousness. I learned the issues we need to fight for and how we need to organize to fight for jobs, housing, health needs and against discrimination, particularly white chauvinism. But I also came to see there was racism within the Party, and I read books, Wilson Record's book, Bill Gould's book, Black Workers in White Unions, that opened my eyes.

I felt the leadership of the Party in the South was more militant, more struggling. We had some militant ^{white} leaders here in San Francisco, like Archie Brown, and Billy Allan and ^{my} Mickie Lima. But in the South you had to stick together, and some went to jail like the case of the 64. We never did have that kind of problem with white chauvinism.

The Party gave me experience and knowledge, but we had some bad apples, some bad leadership. I studied Marx and Lenin, historical materialism, dialectical materialism, bringing the workers together. I read books by William Z. Foster, Herbert Aptheker and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. I learned to see errors in how we was fighting and how to fight to move stones out of the way in our everyday struggles. We

studied and had classes on the labor movement and all kinds of issues. I also used to meet with the black Party members from other unions to talk about job issues, racism on the job, and other issues. If you know and know that you know about issues, and if you observe and learn from the struggle, from books, from people then you can help find a solution to the people's problems. I learned a helluva lot about the capitalist system from studying in the Party.

When they called me before the UnAmerican Activity Committee I think they was trying to use me against the ILWU. Maybe they figured I was a weak man, didn't know nothing. They didn't know I was studying at night, my head in the books, reading Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin.

So they put me in prison. But that was like throwing the rabbit in the briar patch. I was at home. You'd be surprised at the people you meet in prison from the left. We was discussing Marxism, socialism. Hell, I think I read more about communism in prison than I did outside.

I supported the program of the Communist party, but over time I thought the national leadership became weak. You could have built a left-center in the labor movement. You could have built a strong trade union movement. When they passed that damn Taft-Hartley law that should have been stopped by the labor left-center movement. The Communists could have played a very important role. Then when the AFL and CIO merged that should have been stopped. That's why they

stopped organizing the rank and file. The leadership sold out to big business.

In February 1992 the northern California Party members split off from the Party. I wasn't at the national Party convention a few months before the split, but I understand the national Party leaders wouldn't let Angela Davis, Charlene Mitchell, Carl Bloice, and Herbert Aptheker and other people speak and raise issues about democracy in the Party and the fight against racism. I supported Angela Davis and the others, but Gus Hall, the national party chairman, kicked them all out of the convention. That's when I stopped paying dues and quit the Party.

I also thought that Gus Hall was against the senior movement. That's another reason I didn't care too much for him. Henry Winston, who was Afro-American and national chairman of the party before he died in 1986, was a strong supporter of the senior movement. We used to talk about issues whenever him and his wife came to California. When Henry Winston died and Gus Hall, who used to be General Secretary, took over the chairmanship that ended black-white collective leadership at the top level of the Party. A lot of the black Party members didn't like that.

Kendra Alexander and the northern California party members formed a new organization called the Committees of Correspondence. But the Committees of Correspondence had their own problems. They set up a steering committee to put together the program. But a few individuals came up with the

program without discussing it with the whole steering committee. We didn't know a damn thing about it. We should have had a chance to discuss it before it was brought to the general membership. That's democracy! I talked to Kendra Alexander about that and she agreed with me that it was wrong. After that I still supported the Committees of Correspondence, but I wasn't so actively involved anymore.

If we don't get ourselves together we gonna move back. I remember one time I made a speech and I said we gonna have creeping fascism in this country. One guy got up and said, "No, you ain't got creeping fascism, you got running fascism in this country." That's what we gonna get if people don't wake up.

I still believe that socialism is the only solution to the problems of working people. They say that socialism failed in Russia, but the people in Russia still want socialism. That's a lot of propaganda coming out there. The people ain't finished yet. They're gonna rebuild the Party. The Party fell apart but the people still want socialism.

Same thing here. The people need to get some knowledge about issues and we need good leadership. That's what its gonna take to build the movement for socialism. You got to get some people who will stand up and build an organization around issues. You got to bring in people from the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, any where you can find people willing to stand up and mobilize. I know some middle class

people may think everything is alright, but you got to fight that. Raise issues! Education, health care, housing.

Some young people today only think about making money. I say to young people, try to get an education. Not just to get a good job, but you need to also know how to help your people. You can work for business or the government, but you should put something in the community, too. A community health center, community schools to teach our history and teach the history of the struggle. Build something for the people.

Today big business controls everything. Big business controls the educational institutions, it controls the churches, controls the penitentiaries, controls the government, controls the laws. There's got to be a change. It's gonna be hard, but the workers got to do it. No child should go to bed hungry at night. That's wrong. People not gonna stand around and starve. People need to wake up and fight to survive. They have to fight for bread-and-butter issues, and when they see they can't get that under capitalism then they gonna move toward socialism. You just got to educate 'em, motivate 'em and agitate 'em.

That's my opinion, brother. You can tell 'em Lee Brown said it.