

THE ROLE OF LABOR IN THE TRANSITION TO SOCIAL WORKER

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In the following narrative, a trade unionist learns that social work theory is behind successful group work, with a little help from Florence Kelley and Jane Addams.

I can't remember when unions weren't part of my life. My home was a union stronghold. My father was a bricklayer, my brother a cooper, my uncle a furniture worker. My mother was a hotel worker with a tyrannical boss and no union. Union and workplace affairs were part of the dinner discourse. I remember as a grade school student, helping my uncle pass out leaflets for the CIO. Later, I helped him with his local union newspaper.

When I started high school, we had to buy our own textbooks. To get money for this, I joined some friends who were "cutting" tobacco. We traveled down to southern Kentucky and worked the harvest back north. When I complained to one farmer that \$4 a day didn't seem like a whole lot of money for 12 hours hard work, I got a valuable lesson in race relations. "Why should I pay you more," said the farmer, "when I can get a n——r for \$3 a day?" From this, I learned one important use of racism by employers.

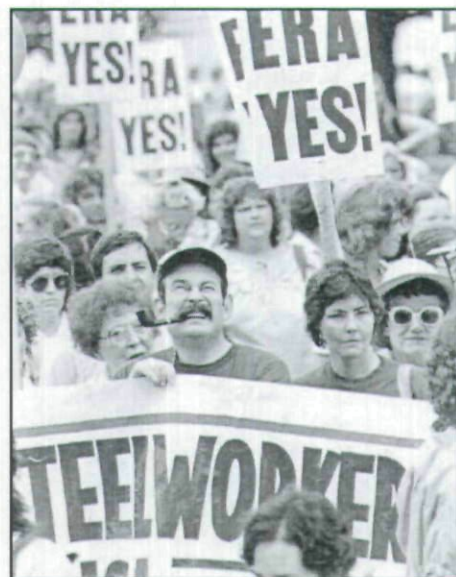
One of my jobs in college was editor of a local union newspaper at a G.E. plant in Louisville. This was right on the heels of the national strike against G.E. in 1960.

During college, I became an activist. I was a good activist, but a lousy college student. I was a founder of Students for a Democratic Society (joining when it was still the Student League for Industrial Democracy). In SDS, I always gravitated toward those who saw unions as a valuable ally in the struggle for social justice (Sale, 1973; Frost, 2001; Michel, 2004). New York's left-wing community was like a university to me, and I grabbed ideas and lore hungrily. From Dorothy Rose Blumberg (alum of Alderson's Women's Prison on a Smith Act charge; her fellow inmates

were Claudia Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Lolita Lebron), I learned about Florence Kelley, one of the pioneers in social work at Hull House, and how she and Jane Addams were founders of the Women's Trade Union League.

All my life I have tended to do things in a contrary way. Most sane people start at the bottom and work their way to the top. When I joined the labor movement, I started at the top and worked my way down. Here's how it went:

In February 1965, I became a full-time staffer for the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) as a writer and organizer. I wrote for the IUE NEWS, and began to write speeches for various union officials and labor-friendly politicians (Hubert Humphrey comes to mind.) My writing skills were needed in organizing campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, the plains of Ohio and the nascent delta of Memphis, Tennessee (Levy, 1994). Most of what I learned about organizing came from some seasoned organizers. My last organizing drive for IUE was in Memphis in 1967. We were trying to organize an RCA television plant that had "run away" from Indiana. The Ku Klux Klan had other ideas, however, and did not want a "n——r union" organizing in Memphis. We eventually brought in our own demolitions expert, whose job was to protect us from being blown up.



Steelworkers join other women's rights supporters urging the Illinois legislature to ratify ERA. Early 1980s.

Capitol grounds. Springfield, IL.
Photo by Jerry Harris

Itchy feet have long been one of my more prominent features. In 1967, I moved on to the West Virginia AFL-CIO as a writer and researcher. Part of this time was in defense of labor poet and organizer Don West, a founder of the Highlander Folk School, who was organizing a similar institution in south West Virginia (Lourence, 2007). Soon, I was involved in organizing drives and political campaigns being conducted in the hollows of Appalachia. I started teaching labor extension classes at West Virginia University. These classes were filled with steelworkers, glass blowers, chemical plant workers, and construction workers who never had an opportunity to complete their education. It was a joy to teach because these workers were genuinely hungry for knowledge.

Itchy feet caught up with me again, and I headed for Washington, D.C., in 1968 and a post with the Newspaper Guild as editor and researcher. There wasn't much opportunity for organizing there, nor much opportunity for travel. I did help organize Washington Labor for Peace, one of the first labor groups against the war in Vietnam. (Soon after we published a full page ad in the *Washington Post* opposing the war, my bosses discovered that I was incompetent and canned me.)

Then, in 1970 it was on to the National Education Association's Higher Education Division. There as usual, I was hired in as a writer, editing the National Faculty Association newsletter. One day, a faculty strike loomed at a community college in upstate New York. NEA needed to send an organizer to help the faculty run the strike, but none of the NEA staff had ever been on strike. I was drafted to travel to New York to help the faculty to prepare for and eventually to conduct a strike at a community college. Teacher strikes in New York State were illegal under something called the Taylor Law. (For all I know, the warrants for me are still active.) For the next four years, I was involved in faculty union organizing drives in many states, helping organize the faculty at SUNY, CUNY, the Pennsylvania State Colleges, and others. At Wayne State University, I was lucky to enlist the help of a social work professor, "Ike" Krassner. Ike was a well-known community activist and a shrewd teacher of group work

skills. This was the first time I had encountered a social worker in a union organizing drive. (Most of my contact with social workers previously had been at the behest of the school's principal.)

By this time, in 1974, a profound sense of discouragement overcame me. I had hoped to help transform the labor movement into a more ardent agent for social change; but as a staff person, I was always subject to the elected leadership. I was frustrated having to carry out decisions and policies which didn't always seem right. While I would voice objections, I never prevailed. Feeling powerless, I decided on a new strategy.

I decided to start at the bottom, to go to work in industry and eventually seek union office. In that vector, I reasoned, I would be free to campaign for progressive causes (within the limits of my judgment). Following my tradition, I went to work for an independent racial labor newspaper in Chicago called *Labor Today* (Green, 1977). My time at it was mostly good. We printed stories from workers in the field about how they were fighting for better conditions. But, I still wanted to work in a factory.

So from there, my friends at the United Electrical Workers (UE) got me hired at a local steelyard. Now for once I was just another laborer in a factory. Moreover, what a factory! Virtually all of the workers were ex-offenders who had been placed by a social service agency. Some had spent many years in prison. To top it off, I was the only white guy working there. Nonetheless, they accepted me and, after a year, I was elected shop steward. I developed a reputation of talking back to the boss. Once on the night shift, we pulled a quickie strike over a contract infraction. I think part of the reason I was elected steward is that the workers thought the boss was more likely to listen to a white man. Or, maybe because they felt I was expendable!

As a union organizer, I had become familiar with group processes and had learned to work with them in forming organizations (see Ike Krasner, the Wayne State social work educator who taught me a thing or two about group work). Now, as a shop steward, I was also to help workers resolve personal grievances with the company. I was

unprepared for this, but I gradually learned good active listening skills. What I discovered was that sometimes workers just wanted to "vent" to get stuff off their chest. Frequently, workers would have a complaint or a gripe about some event or condition at work that the union could not help. The best I could do was practice "active listening" and "positive regard." I had never heard of Florence Hollis and "venting," but I developed the skills of "supportive therapy" in that shop.

In 1978, I jumped at a chance to work at U.S. Steel South Works, as a Millwright Apprentice. A recent fair employment case had obliged the steel industry to admit more minorities and women (and remove age barriers) to the skilled trades. This was a plant employing 4,000 workers and was one of the key mills of the basic steel industry. Furthermore, United Steel Workers Local 65 had a history of activism. I figured that if I could get elected to union office in such a union, I could begin to make a difference.

I became active in one of the several caucuses within the Local Union, hoping to be elected to union office and influence policy. I was eventually elected chair of the Apprenticeship Committee, but that was because nobody else wanted the job. I did learn a lot about hot, dirty, and dangerous work, however. Three workers were killed on the job while I worked there. I myself had worked previously on those jobs.

Heavy layoffs began to hit the mill in the early 1980s, as the steel industry reeled under the impact of foreign competition and an aging production process. Soon, the layoffs caught up to me and I was unemployed with little prospect of returning to work.

However, the positive aspect was that this provided opportunity for social activism. Members of the Local founded an Unemployed Committee as part of the union, and we began to service the many welfare needs of the unemployed steelworkers. While we became known in the city as a group of noisy demonstrators, we also began to develop a sophisticated network of social services. We developed a food pantry that distributed groceries on a bi-weekly basis to unemployed steel workers as well as others in the community. No one was turned away. We

worked with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP—more social workers!) at U.S. Steel to expand counseling services to the unemployed, and with Chicago Community Colleges to bring college courses into the union hall. Members facing foreclosure could get financial counseling and some direct intervention on their behalf. I began to learn about managing service provision on a larger playing field, while interacting with a variety of community service providers.

In 1981, that chapter of my life ended. Now I had to make a living, and was able to land a job as a counselor in an alcohol and drug rehab facility. (Remember those EAP social workers I met at U.S. Steel?) I promptly enrolled in night classes in substance abuse at a community college. These classes were taught by social workers, and they had a specific approach to working with these disadvantaged populations. One day, my instructor suggested that I should seek a Masters in Social Work degree and become a professional social worker. Fortunately, in 1990, I landed a better job with the Adult Probation Department, which encouraged their employees to seek advanced degrees. Therefore, I enrolled at the Jane Addams College of Social Work.

I began to see how my trade union experience informed my development as a social worker. I had many skills, but now I had a theoretical framework for understanding what I did. As an indifferent student with poor grades in college, I was apprehensive about enrolling in a graduate program; but for some reason, this time was different. I loved the course work and did well. In fact, I liked it so much I decided to keep going. After I got my M.S.W., I promptly entered the Doctoral Program at JACSW.

As a probation officer and now a supervisor, I was challenged to assist workers who wanted union representation in the Probation Department. (I do not recommend this as a career move.) I recommended some persons for employment who I knew were pro-union and had experience in organizing. As a supervisor, I had to play a strictly neutral and "hands off" role in the union organizing drive, but sometimes, over coffee, I could drop a word or two of advice. One source of

frustration to the social workers in my union (Mental Health Probation) was the inability of the union staffers/organizers to understand some of the specialized issues experienced by social workers in large bargaining units. One of our issues was salary inequities. We figured that, as Masters-prepared officers, we deserved higher pay. However, in a large bargaining unit, the demands of our small band went unheeded.

As the strength of the now unionized officers grew, many of my supervisory colleagues began to wonder if they could benefit from unionization. They pointed to the advantages of having a seat at the bargaining table. Furthermore, supervisors had issues of their own which needed addressing. Therefore, we began a campaign to organize ourselves into a union. Now that I was not limited by "neutrality," I could be an activist once more! This involved a lot of "active listening" as I chatted up supervisors from all over the country. We were able to help supervisors "reframe" some of their concerns about unionization. Additionally, we began to understand some of the "dyads" and "triads" that comprised our groupings. (Thanks to Salvador Minuchin, et al.)

First, we had to find a union that would take us. In the end, this became the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP). This choice seemed to satisfy those supervisors who were uncertain that other unions would be a good fit for us. I was elected a Steward, with a responsibility to organize at the main Probation Office, which was situated in the criminal courts building. As I approached individuals to solicit their support, I was glad that I had taken courses in active listening and interviewing skills. The courses in group processes helped me understand some of the undercurrents of our efforts.

The Probation Administration, while not thrilled at the prospect of having its supervisors unionized, did little to prevent organization. Occasionally, a word would be dropped here and there about how union support could adversely effect individual advancement, but that was pretty much the extent of it. After many months of organizing and labor board hearings, we finally had an election to determine if the supervisors wished to be

represented by the union. We union supporters won this election, but we also knew that we faced some tough bargaining as we took our place at the bargaining table.

As this campaign concluded, so did my quest for a Ph.D. I had always wanted to try my hand at teaching, and now I had the credential that would let me have a crack at it. I took early retirement from the Probation Department, and began a career as an assistant professor at a small, southern university. Unfortunately, the laws in this state bar the unionization of public employees. Fortunately, in this benighted southern community, there are many opportunities to employ the lessons I had learned as a unionist and social worker.

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