

Labor History, Oral History and May 4

by Staughton Lynd



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Remarks made at the Annual Dinner of the Friends of the Kent State University Libraries, April 15, 1998.

Since the 1960s we have become accustomed to the idea of "history from the bottom up." History, it is argued, should not be written solely from the standpoint of great white men, or seen through the eyes of the governing class. It is true that such persons create the bulk of the most easily accessible historical documents: laws, letters, memoirs, and the like. But the view from above is necessarily limited, and by whatever feats of ingenuity we must tease out the story as it was lived and perceived by the poor and working classes, by women, by African-Americans and other minorities. We must use manor rolls and court records, surviving issues of obscure periodicals, and narratives of times when the so-called inarticulate spoke through their conduct. These groups are not really "inarticulate." They just don't write very much, and their experience must be apprehended in other ways.

Tonight I want to explore a second distinction: between history written from the outside, and history written or remembered from the inside. I shall suggest that the old history is history written not just from the top down but also externally, from outside the experience being described. I shall contend that the best history penetrates to the inner feel and texture of what was at stake, to the values contended for, the hopes cherished, the

dreams that were dared and, alas, destroyed. You remember Vachel Lindsay's poem "The Leaden-Eyed":

Let not young souls be smothered out
Before they do quaint deeds, and fully flaunt their pride.
It is the world's one crime, its babes grow dull
Its poor are ox-like, limp, and leaden-eyed.
Not that they starve, but that they starve so dreamlessly;
Not that that sow, but that they seldom reap;
Not that they serve, but that they have no Gods to serve;
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

In fact, I shall argue, history written both from below *and* from inside the historical experience reveals that the history of poor and working people is a history of dreams, of reaping, of unexpected divinity, and of memorable death.

Labor History

Labor history tends to be deadly dull. This is partly because it is so often *institutional* history, the story of trade unions as revealed in their documents. But even the so-called new labor history, while it may be concerned about human beings rather than organizations, is still often history from the outside. What is going on when a worker refuses a promotion to foreman? Is he or she feeling, in the words of Eugene Debs, that "when I rise it will be with the working class, not from the working class"? Or is the worker more like Ken Tucker, in the collection of oral histories my wife and I entitled *Rank and File*, who became a union officer

in order to become a foreman, and only abandoned this career when management behaved so unfairly that (in Ken's words) "it got my back up"? If we aspire to learn not just what happened in labor history but also what labor history *meant* to its rank-and-file protagonists, new vistas open. I should like to illustrate what I mean from the work of a young man from Barberton, John Borsos.

In a book about the unionism of the early 1930s, entitled "We Are All Leaders", John wrote a brilliant chapter about Barberton. He told how almost all the union organizing there during the 1930s and afterwards was done by local people, not by outside organizers. He said that unionism in Barberton was a family affair: "When another plant in town went on strike, you almost always had an aunt or cousin working there, and so you joined its picket line as a matter of course." This localized, horizontal style of organizing ensured a strong movement, one that staged enormous Labor Day parades well into the post-World War II period.

Coming a little closer to Kent, John also has written an unpublished manuscript with the provocative title, "Ironing Out Chaos: The CIO-ization of the United Rubber Workers, 1933-1941." Herein he argues that the creation of the United Rubber Workers — in which John's own father took part — "was primarily the product of the self-organization of workers in Akron, a community-based, solidarity-oriented movement... [W]hat made the rubber workers as militant as they were in the 1930s and beyond was largely because the organization predated the CIO."

There was much that was unique about the rubber workers' organizing which, I suggest, we still have not fully grasped from inside the experience. Consider the six-hour day. It was introduced by Goodyear management in November 1930 as a means to share work in response to the Depression. But rubber workers fiercely held on to the six-hour day when management wanted once again to lengthen it, and retained it (I believe) at least until World War II. Why was the six-hour day so important to rubber workers? Was work in the "gum mines" really more burdensome than work on an automobile assembly line or in an open hearth? Or was something else involved?

Or take the sit-down strike. The sit-downs in the Akron rubber plants, like the great picket line around the giant Goodyear plant in 1936, are part of labor's mythology. But have we learned anything about the origin of the sit-down since Louis Adamic wrote in the 1930s? Adamic suggested that the sit-down tactic was invented at a local baseball game, as a means of protesting against an umpire's decision. Was it peculiar to rubber workers? Evidently not; think of Flint. Perhaps to Appalachians? To skilled workers who could not easily be replaced? And, since our theme is the internal landscape of such happenings, was there a peculiar joy in a sit-down strike, as workers today report when they slow down and work to rule in pursuit of the so-called "inside strategy"? Borsos quotes Ruth McKenney's *Industrial Valley*: "A man in the truck tire department [at General Tire in 1934] said he wouldn't stand for it any more, and out of that came the strike. The crowd marched out of the gates singing and booing the plant

manager and laughing. The rubberworkers went home confident and easy in their minds."

What else was going on in the turbulent participatory democracy of rubber workers in the 1930s? Again Borsos quotes a wonderful passage from McKenney:

The rubberworkers had carried over the technique of Baptist prayer sessions, where everybody was free to "testify" as the spirit moved him, to their union meetings. Tirebuilders rose in the Federal locals to "testify" about "why ain't this union gittin' anywheres," whenever the thought struck them, which was rather often....

A third intriguing issue involves seniority. Seniority is often considered the CIO's signature achievement. But mechanical application of seniority to layoffs could result — and often does result today — in the youngest and most vulnerable workers, often women and African-Americans, losing their income entirely, while older white male employees continue to work overtime. There is a great deal of evidence that workers in the 1930s opposed a mechanical use of seniority in layoff situations, and instead advocated share-the-work plans. As John Borsos says, "Share-the-work was an inherently collective response: workers as a whole would withstand the deprivation." It was also a response in the manner of a family.

Finally, there is the matter of collective bargaining. Everyone knows that the IWW refused to sign contracts, whereas the CIO made a signed contract one of its principal objectives. Right?

Well, not altogether right. In Akron, Goodrich Local 5 of the CIO Rubber Workers refused to sign a contract for a year and a half "because, like the IWW, they believed that a signed contract might limit their range of activities."

I hope I have persuaded you that there may be more to be learned about the labor history of your own backyard. Contrary to the uniform pattern evident in many histories of the CIO, in this locality one finds a mosaic of seemingly unique local practices, of differences requiring explanation. They can only be understood, I submit, if we find a way to talk about the subjective *why* as well as the objective *what*. When it is possible, that is, when one is studying movements some of the participants in which are still alive, surely the royal road to greater understanding in depth is oral history.

Oral History

I don't mean to say that it is only through oral history that one can penetrate the inner life of those at the bottom of the social pyramid. As a graduate student in history I studied tenant farmers in the Hudson Valley of New York before the American Revolution. I had a problem. In southern Dutchess County, tenants supported the American Revolution. In Columbia County just to the north, tenants rebelled in arms in support of the King. Why the difference? Just at the end of my research, I found a set of petitions addressed to the revolutionary New York State legislature, in which tenant farmers asked to be given ownership

of their farms. Holding these old documents in my hands, reading the many names laboriously penned two hundred years before, a great light dawned. The landlords in southern Dutchess County were Tories. There, a tenant farmer would take his chances on independence, hoping to get title to his farm if his landlord was killed or forced to flee. In Columbia County the landlords were patriotic Livingstons. A tenant farmer in Columbia County might therefore place his bets on the Crown, believing that if the Livingstons were defeated, hanged, or dispossessed, their tenants might come into possession in fee simple. And so the Columbia County tenants went out onto the Hudson River at night and filched the lead from nets that the Continental Congress had strung across the river to prevent the passage of British ships. With the lead they made bullets, and went to war — just like their counterparts in southern Dutchess County, and for the same objective: land of their own.

But it is certainly easier to probe the inner life of other people if one can talk to them. Ordinary people don't write much, but they talk as much as any one else. Moreover, in talking as opposed to writing, feeling breaks through more easily. Recently I helped to organize a series of hearings to take testimony as to the oppressiveness of work for the United States Postal Service. I recall especially the testimony of two African-American women. Each had schooled herself to testify in a disciplined, objective manner. But each, after completing her formal presentation, said more. One said:

You'd have to be there to understand it. On one day the

supervisor tells you, this is what we want done, or how we want it done. You do it. The next day they say, "No, that's not right. That's incorrect. You can't do it that way. You shouldn't have done that" . . . Or, you get racist mail sent to your residence. I got a greeting card from an anonymous person, addressed to "Jackie, the nigger supervisor." Nobody did anything about it. Or, I was accosted on the floor by a male supervisor. I tell my supervisor, and I was told, "Well Jackie, you and he need to get along."

The second woman supplemented her testimony as follows:

What do I want? I want [beginning to cry] to be compensated for the humiliation, the degradation. Even though what happened was not the cause of my divorce, it contributed to it. . . . The EEO investigator comes down. . . . [He tells me] it's my fault, and analyzing me as a divorcee, saying, "The reason you are divorced is that you got to the point where you outgrew your husband." And me coming home every day for two years, yelling and screaming about what they were doing to me. And he's going to tell me that I outgrew my husband! No, I drove him crazy! Because I was going crazy.

Oral history forever surprises us, and reminds us that what we infer from the outside may often be wrong. It is important not to assume too quickly what events have meant to someone else. If at all possible, at the end of any interview the interlocutor should be given a chance to sum up for him or herself. When Alice and I helped to edit a collection of oral histories on Palestine and

Palestinians, we interviewed a young man who grew up in a refugee camp in southern Lebanon and had been imprisoned at the Ansar detention camp when Israel invaded Lebanon in the early 1980s. During interrogation this young man was badly mistreated. Three of his teeth were knocked out. While his hands were tied behind him Israeli soldiers urinated in his face. Pliers were applied to his genitals. At the end of the interview we asked the young man to say what his detention meant to him, expecting an anti-Israeli diatribe. Here is what we were told:

When I lived in the [refugee] Camp, I never met a Jew, I never met an Israeli. The propaganda was that they were all killers. The first time they bombed the Camp, I was eleven years old. It was in 1972. They destroyed a lot of houses. They killed a lot of my friends. What would you expect me to feel about Israelis? I felt that they were killers, that they had taken our land, and so on. I never felt that they were human beings.

When I went to prison, I met some Israelis. I changed my attitude. When we heard that [an] Israeli killed himself because he could not stand the situation and was very sympathetic with us, and when I met [an Israeli soldier who became a] friend -- he was really a nice person! He was a human being! I started distinguishing between one person and another.

Before, I had an attitude that came from living through all the hardship and shelling, living from one invasion to another, having our house completely destroyed by the Israelis. But

violence breeds violence. I had some friends in Ansar who attacked Israelis after their release to get revenge. They are all dead now.

I changed my mind about how a human being can torture another human being. Now I don't have the heart to torture another human being, because I know how it feels. Even the person who tortured me, if I should meet him one day, I would never torture him because I know how it feels. That's how it changed my attitude.

Finally with regard to oral history, I want to underline that when we talk about the inwardness of experience, we may be talking about the process through which a person or a social movement finds an enduring identity. Forgive me if I draw on my own experience to make this point.

When I was five or six years old, a young man named Sam Levinger carried me on his shoulders in a May Day parade in New York City. Later that year Sam Levinger went to Spain as a volunteer for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. As a child I was told that he was wounded in the groin by machine gun fire, and died because medical supplies were inadequate.

Recently I was asked to review a book on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and learned more facts about Sam Levinger. He came from Columbus, and attended Ohio State. His father was a rabbi. For the last sixty years I have assumed that Sam Levinger was a Communist, as were most of the volunteers for the Lincoln Brigade. Now I learn that he was a member of the Young Peoples

Socialist League, as I might have been had I been fifteen years older. I learned the date and place that he was fatally wounded: in August 1937, at Belchite. These facts are all new to me, but the inward, essential meaning of Sam Levinger's life and death became part of me as a child. I do not even actually remember being carried on his shoulders. Like so much of oral history, it was told to me, and I accepted it as true, and it was true. Levinger touched my life, teaching me without words that one should be prepared to give one's all for an ideal.

A few years later there was a second defining experience, and this one I do remember. A graduate student of my father's took me on the New York City subway to visit the headquarters of the Socialist Party on the East Side of Manhattan. When we were on the shuttle between Times Square and Grand Central Station, he told me the following story. The story goes that during the Spanish Civil War there was a long line of people waiting for lunch. Near the back of the line was a well-known anarchist spokesperson. Someone said to him, "Comrade, you shouldn't be wasting time standing in the back of a lunch line! You have important work to do: you should go to the front of the line. Think of the Revolution!" The anarchist stayed in place and replied, "This is the revolution."

I have to tell you that, for better or worse, these two incidents — being carried on Sam Levinger's shoulders, hearing the story about the anarchist in the lunch line — could be viewed as defining the political person I have tried to be all my life.

Oral history invites us to help others define their identities from the inside, on the basis of what is already there. We have a choice with working-class students, for example, whether to encourage them to feel dumb, backward, and dependent on us for enlightenment, or whether to encourage a sense of pride, self-reliance, and creativity. Paolo Freire of Brazil condemns the philosophy of education which assumes the student to be an empty vessel into which a predetermined content must be poured. Oral history can be part of an alternative, Freirian approach.

Let me quote a few passages from the Nicaraguan journal *Envio* describing the schools that have been created by Brazilian university students for the children of families involved in the movement of landless peasants to seize and cultivate uncultivated land.

Children are stimulated . . . to exchange among themselves what they know and what they don't know and to learn that "not knowing" is transitory. "Not knowing" is understood as "not knowing yet" . . . The exchange of knowledge makes it possible for children to see themselves as capable; each person has some knowledge that not every one else has, and carries many "not knowing yet's" which will be converted into knowledge at school. They figure out that nobody knows everything and also that nobody knows nothing. . . . The teachers in these settlement schools know that one of the forms of domination is to make subordinates think that they don't know anything and the dominators know everything.

To learn Brazil's history, "they start with their own short life histories, the history of their family and of the saga to reach the settlement where they now live; from this they can feel closer to previous histories... The songs and stories that have passed orally from generation to generation and that each child brings to the group are converted into 'pedagogical content' and are then related to the songs and stories of other groups, other cultures, other peoples."

We might say that the fullest use of oral history requires an inward style of education to complement the practice of history from below and from inside.

Kent State and May 4, 1970

Coming to May 4, 1970, of course it is you who are inheritors of that history, and who are best situated to define its inward meaning over time. I've had some peripheral contact with the tradition, on the basis of which I offer the following comments.

First, soon after coming to Youngstown I was asked to represent a group of Kent State professors who were protesting the plan to build a gym on the site of the May 4 events. I can't remember the legal basis for the lawsuit. Perhaps its basis was more ethical than legal. I believe that what was really at issue was a protest against what seemed to my clients a psychological *denial* of what happened on May 4, an attempt to act as if it had never been, by physically covering over the spot. The lawsuit may be

viewed as asserting the traditional Quaker belief that disturbing matters should be "held in the light," dealt with face to face.

Your granite memorial, surrounded by one daffodil for each soldier from the United States who was killed in Vietnam, and inscribed with the words "Inquire, Learn, Reflect," seems to me an important step in the right direction.

Second, the meanings of May 4, 1970 necessarily include some labor history. Your library has notably contributed to the work of remembering, of holding in the light, by the packet of materials it distributes to visitors concerned to come to grips with the meaning of May 4. The materials in the packet include Governor Rhodes' speech of May 3, 1970, in which he said among other things: "we were very fortunate last night [that] we had 700 National Guardsmen in this area on the truckers strike." Dan LaBotz writes in his history of the reform movement in the Teamsters union, "The contemporary Teamster reform movement actually began with the 1970 wildcat strike."

The wildcat started when the national freight contract expired at the end of March. Disappointed at the national union's failure to come anywhere near the \$3 an hour increase it had asked for, rank-and-file union members stubbornly refused to return to work. In Toledo on April 10, 2,000 truckers shouted down their officers and refused the proffered strike settlement. When William Presser ordered the 16,000 wildcat strikers in the Cleveland and Akron area to go back to work, they not only refused but in mid-April 500 of them marched through downtown Cleveland in a public demonstration of defiance of the Teamster

leadership. Pacific Intermountain Express attempted to move two convoys of thirty trucks each, but the first convoy was stopped at Richfield, Ohio by 150 men throwing bricks and bottles that destroyed the windshield of every truck. In Middletown, Ohio some 400 steelhaulers stopped trucks and forced drivers to drop their trailers and go home in their cabs.

Thus it came about that on April 29, Governor Rhodes declared an emergency and deployed 3,200 National Guardsmen in the Cleveland-Akron area. But when fifty state troopers and Guardsmen attempted to move a three-truck convoy out of a Yellow Freight Terminal, they were driven back by 200 rock-throwing strikers.

Of course I am not suggesting that there was a coalition or conspiracy between striking truck drivers and rebellious students at Kent State. It does seem that the powers that be used rather similar language to characterize protesting blue-collar workers and their student counterparts. Thus Governor Rhodes said of the striking truckers: "There are hoodlums roaming our highways and city streets, armed with shotguns and rifles with intent to kill, and we're going to put a stop it." You can compare the language he used about students in his May 3 speech here at Kent State.

The most important connection between the truckers and the students was that the same National Guardsmen were used to contain both. When the young Guardsmen arrived at your campus they were, in the words of LaBotz, "exhausted." I suppose fatigue is a rather rudimentary kind of inwardness, but surely it had something to do with what followed on May 4.

Lastly, I have found myself musing about an event which occurred almost exactly two hundred years before the Kent State tragedy, the so-called Boston Massacre of March 1770.

At that time British soldiers were quartered in the city of Boston, which meant that any given household was obliged to let a soldier use their spare bedroom. To add injury to insult, the poorly-paid soldiers "moonlighted" at ropewalks and other places of work, taking employment from those whom they also policed. All this was at play on a certain late winter evening when a crowd gathered around the building that housed British officers and custom officials. Sentries were drawn up in a line before the Custom House. Paul Revere's famous engraving shows the crowd a respectable distance from the British rifles, being mown down without reason. But in fact the demonstrators were much closer to the soldiers, hurling snowballs dipped in icy water with an oyster shell center, shouting curses at the "bloody lobster backs." The soldiers opened fire. As I recall, five men were killed, of whom the best-known to history is the African-American sailor, Crispus Attucks. It was never determined whether there was an order to fire. Captain Preston who was in command of the sentries may have given the order, but it could not be proved, and John Adams successfully defended him on that ground. Perhaps it was the British civil servants hanging from second floor windows of the Custom House.

What was the meaning of the Boston Massacre? After the tragedy Sam Adams led a delegation of Bostonians to the British authorities, demanding that soldiers be removed from the city.

They were removed, to an island in Boston Harbor. Because of this the Boston Tea Party became possible three years later. Perhaps, in a similar way, what happened here on May 4, 1970 set limits to what the Nixon administration could do in Southeast Asia. We know that in the spring of 1968 General Westmoreland asked the Johnson Administration for more soldiers for Vietnam, and that this proposal was rejected because of a fear of domestic unrest. The saturation bombing and invasion of Cambodia may likewise have become impossible to implement because of the Kent State killings and the nationwide student strike that followed.

If this may have been the external impact of May 4, what was its inner meaning? Once more, that is for you, not me, to determine, but I will share an impression, based on my own experience within the Movement of the 1960s.

There was a difference between the student movement as it existed in the early 1960s, and the student movement of 1970. In the early 1960s we espoused nonviolence, participatory democracy, consensus decision making. At the University of Texas, SDS members sponsored a weekly event known as "gentle Thursday." What might be considered the last moment in time in which that style was the style of the whole movement was the scene at the Pentagon in the fall of 1967, when demonstrators called on soldiers to "join us!" and put flowers in the rifles of the soldiers confronting them.

A different student movement emerged after 1967. Policemen were called "pigs." Movement members spoke of "icing" and

"offing" one another, and perhaps among the Black Panthers such killing actually took place. As opposed to consensual decision making and an experimental approach to truth, little groups hurled at each other their dogmatic interpretations of the Marxist classics. Laboratories were bombed, Brinks vehicles robbed, ROTC buildings burned.

Yet the two styles of student movement, that of the early 1960s and that of the late 1960s, might coexist in the same location. As some students, frustrated by what they thought was their failure to affect a seemingly endless war, began to lash out in violence, others were just joining what they hoped was a movement based on love.

I didn't know them, but I suspect the four students killed on May 4 were not exactly bystanders, but were in varying degrees Movement sympathizers in the spirit of the early 1960s, caught up in the violent and angry Movement of 1970. Forgive me again for offering something personal. Years after 1970, our youngest daughter called us from boarding school. "I hope you won't be angry", Mom and Dad, she said, "but I've decided to go to a demonstration in Washington to protest United States policy in Central America". "Oh," I responded, "can I come too?" As we drove from central Pennsylvania to the capitol, I told Martha about what happened at the Pentagon. When we arrived in Washington, she asked if we could buy some flowers, so that if we encountered soldiers into whose rifles one might insert a blossom, she would be ready.

I think of Allison Krause and her classmates that way. A faraway observer, Yevgeni Yevtushenko, wrote something similar.

Of course: Bullets don't like people who love flowers.
They're jealous ladies, bullets, short on kindness.
Allison Krause, nineteen years old, you're dead,
for loving flowers.
When, thin and open as the pulse of conscience
you put a flower in a rifle's mouth and said,
"Flowers are better than bullets," that
was pure hope speaking.

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Acronyms

- CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations)
- IWW (Industrial Workers of the World)
- ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps)
- SDS (Students for a Democratic Society)

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