From the right-wing to the revolutionary left

How I was radicalized

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For May Day, we are presenting the start of a new multipart series around the question 'How were you radicalized?' On the radical left, many people often speak of their protest or organizing experiences, almost like old war veterans. But one of the more interesting stories…people's personal path to radical politics, aren't always told.

The first part in our series takes us briefly though the '60s and '70s and is from Tom Wetzel. Tom's other writings can be found on his personal website, as well as on ideas & action, a publication by Workers Solidarity Alliance (WSA).

I grew up in a blue collar family of auto-didacts. I lived with my grandmother who was a milliner who worked in hat-making factories. She was strongly influenced by Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who was an organizer with the Underground Railroad of the 1850s. Parker had developed a critique of Bible-based religion because he believed it could not provide an adequate basis for attacking white supremacy. My grandmother told me that I should regard all humans as my "brothers and sisters."

My family encouraged me to read and think for myself. A childhood friend recently told me that in high school he perceived me as an "intellectual." As a teenager my initial political direction was to the right. When I was 19 I was a member of the Young Republicans at a local community college. I had read Ayn Rand's various books, but also was influenced by the distributivism[1] of Chesterton and Belloc. They wanted a return to the pre-capitalist economy of self-employed farmers and artisans.

Between the mid-'60s and the mid-'70s I moved from right wing politics to the revolutionary left.

After graduating from high school I worked for six years in the gas station chain operated by Standard Oil of California (now called Chevron). I usually worked graveyard shift to avoid bosses. I worked often with older black men. They told me stories which helped me to better appreciate the circumstances of life faced by black people in America. This was during the period of the

[1] A kind of economics based on Catholic social teachings.

black freedom movement, and I gradually became a supporter of that movement. This led to some heated arguments with certain members of my family.

Working as a gas jockey helped to develop my class consciousness. At the time of the national student strike against the Vietnam War in May-June 1970, a network of the younger workers in that chain began a rule disobedience. The company had a very strict hair and dress policy that seemed to be modeled on the Marines. As a protest we began to ignore it…grow beards etc. This was initiated by one of my high school buddies. Chevron sent a VP from San Francisco to L.A. and we were all fired. The company liberalized the dress code after our firing.

The lesson I learned from this was the weakness of purely spontaneous forms of workplace protest. At the station where I worked there was a diverse group…some blacks, two gay men, immigrants, younger and older. I realized that an effective movement among that workforce would need to have discussions with the different people, listen to their grievances, and get them involved.

There was actually a lot of worker rebellion going on in the early '70s such as the illegal national postal strike and the national wildcat strike of over-the-road truck drivers. To fight a court injunction in L.A., students from UCLA replaced Teamsters in picketing the trucking companies…with the drivers cheering from across the street.

By the early '70s I was doing a lot of socialist reading. From Marx's philosophical manuscripts to the left-wing of the old American Socialist Party. I appreciated writers who could explain the ideas to ordinary people in clear language.

In 1970, after starting work as a teaching assistant (TA) at UCLA, I attended a union organizing meeting along with 40 other people. The TAs union at UCLA was a grassroots organization with no paid officers or paid staff. It was run basically through a shop stewards council and assemblies in the departments. For me, this was concrete proof of the possibility of grassroots unionism.

By the early '70s I had become an advocate of both democratic, militant unionism and a labor political party. I was sympathetic to the International Socialists at that time. Leninism was really quite dominant in radical politics in that era. The Leninists who were particularly dogmatic liked to call themselves "revolutionary communists". I eventually realized I couldn't stomach Leninism even in its milder I.S. form.

A New Left writer who I appreciated was Staughton Lynd. He was one of the people who helped to create the New American Movement. NAM called itself a non-Leninist revolutionary socialist organization. So I joined. I think for me the most important aspect of NAM was its emphasis on socialist-feminism, which was in practice the source of what is now called the "intersectional" approach.

An early NAM project was Jeremy Rifkin's People's Bicentennial Commission. I helped to organize the L.A. chapter. This was basically a propaganda effort to promote worker self-management under the slogan "economic democracy."

My conception of socialism had been influenced by guild socialism. I had come across this via my reading of Bertrand Russell's Roads to Freedom. This led me to read G.D.H. Cole, whose The Meaning of Marxism is an excellent introduction to Marxism.

In organizing my department into the TAs union, I worked with a younger friend who was an anarcho-syndicalist. Ralph had been a member of "The Resistance" in the late '60s. He was also part of an anarchist faction expelled from the local Students for a Democratic Society chapter by the Marxist-Leninists. Although short-lived, the Resistance was the first group in that period in L.A. to develop an anarcho-syndicalist political position. From Ralph, I first learned about the

Spanish revolution. Reading about that movement helped me to see the concrete viability of a syndicalist strategy and I was inspired by the mass collectivizations of industry.

I think the key change in my thinking during the course of the ‘70s was that I gradually began to develop more of a critique of the state and electoral politics. I think my shift from right to left in the ‘60s happened mainly because I began to get a more realistic grasp on capitalism, its brutality (as manifested in imperialist wars for example) and oppressive class structure. But I also think the general emergence of radical social movements in that period was an influence because it encourages you to believe that social change is possible.

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