

Teamster Reminiscences

By Mike Alewitz

I WAS STILL an ultra-left teenager when I hitchhiked through a winter storm from Kent State University to a socialist convention in Minneapolis in 1969. It was an amazing gathering. The backdrop for the convention stage was a giant hammer and sickle from the revolutionary struggle in France, May – June 1968. Around the auditorium were large posters of revolutionary figures, including the angry countenance of the armed Geronimo, feared warrior from the Bedonkohe band of the Ndenahe Apache.

One of the featured highlights of that convention was a special celebration of the 1934 strike, with about a dozen participants on a panel—men and women who played a critical role in one of the most advanced working-class strikes in history.

The panelists included V. R. Dunne, earlier an IWW militant, then a central leader of the strike; Farrell Dobbs, a strike leader who went on to lead the transformation of the Teamsters into a powerful industrial union and whose books remain essential texts for revolutionaries; and Marvel Scholl, who led the militant Women's Auxiliary. It also included Jake Cooper, a truck driver and militant in the strike who later served as one of Leon Trotsky's bodyguards. Our paths last crossed as he championed the militant P-9 Hormel meatpacking strike in 1986, when I painted a mural with the striking workers in Austin, Minnesota.

To my surprise, I was seated at a banquet dinner table with Farrell Dobbs, Marvel Scholl, Tom Kerry, and some other old-timers. Bedraggled and seriously lacking in social skills—I'd never been to anything like a banquet—I wondered why they put me there. But I came to believe that what they saw was a rebellious



At a commemorative event for strike martyr Henry Ness. Emanuel (Hap) Holstein is at the far right, 1935.

kid who was willing to hitchhike through a storm to be part of a revolutionary struggle. And that was worth something.

Reports from the 1969 convention, I realize Farrell might as well be speaking to us today, as he urged the gathering to “refute the lesser-evil swindle, point the way toward mass anti-capitalist political action.” He called on us to “refute the scoundrels who corrupt program in the name of bigness. Sheer force of numbers does not assure attainment of goals. If a movement lacks a class-struggle program and a class-conscious leadership, it will crumble in the test of battle, no matter how big it may be. The pages of history are replete with proof of that fundamental fact.”

The early generation of socialists seemed to have limitless patience in explaining and teaching revolutionary politics. They were thoughtful, fearless, and generous—representing the best qualities of the working class. These remarkable organizers could have enjoyed comfortable lives as labor officials—instead they remained revolutionaries. After the strike they were framed up and sent to prison for their political views and opposition to World War II. They remain largely unknown, but they were a different breed than those presented to us today as leaders: gathering honoraria, headlining events, or appearing in the “progressive” media. But having notoriety, titles, or positions is not the same as leadership.

A few months after the Minneapolis convention, my life changed dramatically as I watched fellow antiwar activists gunned down at Kent State University. Swept up in the national student strike of May 1970 (think, *Four Dead*

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in Ohio by Neil Young).

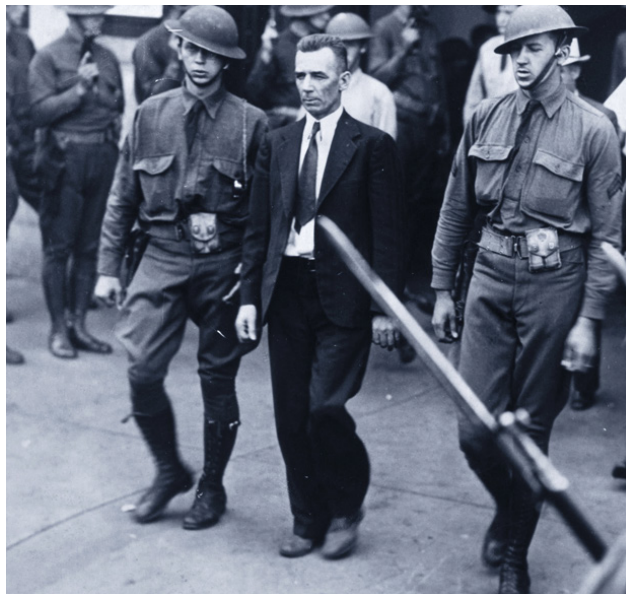
I eventually wound up with a pioneering band of lively socialists in Texas. We were anxious to learn from and emulate the old timers. We had no money, but we would save up and would fly people in to give classes on labor history, Marxist economics, philosophy, or other topics. Over a weekend, we forced them to give five or six class presentations and then we'd wring out every bit of knowledge we could during informal discussions over meals and beers. And a banquet, of course.

Over the years, in several cities, I had the opportunity to learn from earlier generations of revolutionaries. I had no special relationships, but I was lucky enough to attend classes, organize meetings for, meet, or interview comrades like Farrell Dobbs, Edmond Kovacs, James P. Cannon, Peng Shu-tse, Hugo Blanco, and many others.

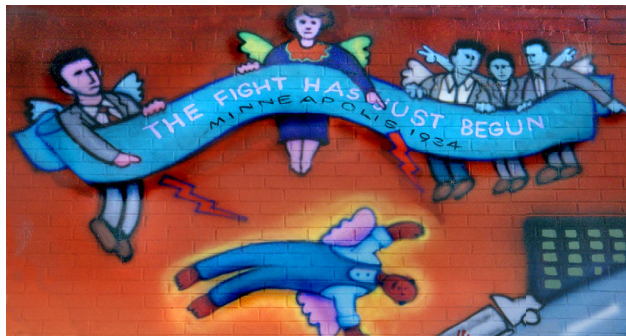
How generous they were. They never asked anything for themselves, never tried to advance themselves with a career—they only tried to leave us with the precious insights they had gained in bloody, hard-fought struggles. Whether it was understanding the dynamics of world revolution or how to organize the defense of a picket line or maintain a headquarters, it was treasure that needed to be passed on. It was inconceivable to imagine them chasing after some liberal capitalist candidate in an elusive hunt for crumbs.

In 1997, I worked with striking Teamsters to paint a giant mural in Teamster City Chicago, near Haymarket Square, where the frame up and execution of revolutionaries in the fight for the 8-hour day inspired the beginnings of May Day, the international holiday of the working class.

I painted a small vignette of angels in the heavens—Farrell, Marvel, and the Dunne brothers throwing bolts



Strike leader V.R. Dunne under arrest, August 1934.



Detail: *TEAMSTER POWER! EL PODER DE LOS TEAMSTERS* (now destroyed) by Mike Alewitz, 1997 (www.tinyurl.com/Teamster-Power). Artwork courtesy of the artist.

of red lightning to earth and holding a banner reading “Minneapolis 1934—The Fight Has Just Begun!” Henry Ness was also included. Murdered by the police, Ness’s funeral drew 100,000 mourners. A thrilling account of the strike and that event was written by Meridel LeSueur, titled “I Was Marching.” It still gives me chills (www.tinyurl.com/I-Was-Marching).

The dedication of the mural *TEAMSTER POWER! EL PODER DE LOS TEAMSTERS!* was a militant, spirited rally with hundreds of Teamsters and labor activists. I stand by my words to the rally, “This union did not come into being as a gradual process. It was built as a modern industrial union—as a powerful force for working people—through a massive

struggle that shook this country to its foundations. The Minneapolis strike, along with San Francisco and the Toledo Auto-Lite strikes, laid the basis for the formation of the CIO. That’s where our industrial unions come from.

“What motivated Farrell Dobbs, Marvel Scholl, and the others was not a buck-an-hour more or a period of relative peace with the boss. What motivated them was the idea of building an organization that could change society from the top to the bottom. And that is what they did. They were ordinary workers like you and I. They were no smarter or talented than us. What characterized them was their tremendous confidence in the ability of working people to change the world. They never doubted that. And so, they were able to make historic changes.”

It remains for us to carry it forward—through our art and organizing—to bring to birth a new world based on human needs, respect for nature, and international solidarity.