

History from Below Workshop
Sponsored by the Rural Organizing Project
Grants Pass, Oregon
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Dan Leahy's Written Presentation

Thanks very much to the Rural Organizing Project for organizing this event. I have been reading a lot of historical material in anticipation of this event, especially material by your Oregon historian, Professor Jeff LaLande. He is a real resource for Southern Oregon populist history.

Before I begin my presentation, I wanted to mention three books that I have read recently. I want to recommend them to you.

Some Books to Read

It Started in Wisconsin by Paul and Mari Jo Buhle. This book has a great series of essays in it that explain the history and organizing of the Wisconsin Occupation that took place in the winter of 2011 at the State Capitol in Madison.

Why Movements Matter by Edwin Amenta. This book is about the Townsend Plan movement of the mid 1930s to the 1940s to create a guaranteed income for seniors over 60 years old. This is particularly important to Oregon since in 1936 Oregon ranked #1 among all states with the highest number of Townsend Clubs per congressional district.

Railroaded by Richard White. Professor White is a historian of the West and this book is about the transcontinental railroads being built in the late 19th century. He has a great characterization of them during that time, but his characterization is very fitting for what we are experiencing today. This is how he characterized them: “corporate containers for financial manipulation and political networking.” Of course, many of the populist and progressive social movements of this time period were confronting these “corporate containers.” But we today are also faced with our own “corporate containers” like JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs and the rest.

Local History and Social Movements: Some Examples

It's great to be a part of the exploration of local history. I think there is a direct link between knowing your local history and the success of social movements. History is a storehouse of strategy, tactics, concepts and language that can help us to understand and confront the problems we face in the present day.

I was asked to give a short talk on the origins and structure of social movements, especially those emanating from rural areas. Before I do that I want to give you some examples, some from my own experience, about how history can inform the construction of social movements.

Wisconsin Occupation and Recall (February 2011 to June 2012).

I think there was an intimate connection between people's historical and cultural knowledge of La Follette's Progressive era institutions and the sustained 14 month social movement to recall Governor Walker. In fact, I think it was the mobilization of this inherited culture that gave the social movement strength and direction.

Walker was not just attacking union rights, like those of AFSCME which was founded in Wisconsin. Walker's proposals represented a destruction of La Follette's civil service system and pension system, his statewide university system now with 26 campuses, 182,000 students and 32,000 staff and faculty, and his notion of an educated populace who governs.

Here's one of his quotes: "Wealth or man? Which shall lead, money or intellect? Who shall fill public stations, educated and patriotic free men or feudal serfs of corporate wealth?" The history of Fighting Bob La Follette, their Governor, US Senator and founder of the Progressive Party, is still alive in Wisconsin.

The Battle of Seattle (November 1999)

When those young people met at Seattle's King County Labor Council hall in the summer of 1999 to plan their shut down of the WTO Ministerial, they passed by a pictorial display of the Seattle General Strike of February 1919.

As many of you know, the General Strike Committee controlled Seattle for four days and, as the saying goes, nothing moved but the tide unless the GSC said so. It was the only General strike in US history that moved to the second stage of revolution which is the temporary substitution of governmental authority. I think that understanding of Seattle labor history helped give those young people the self confidence to make that history come alive once again as they successfully shut down the Ministerial.

Progress Under Democracy (1980-1986)

In the late 1970s rural organizers in Eastern Washington wanted to stop the simultaneous construction of five 1000 megawatt nuclear power plants by a public entity called the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS).

They read its history and discovered it was made up of Public Utility Districts (PUDs), a populist institution that took over the property of East coast monopolies who used to dominate the state's energy systems.

They also discovered the populist's public power slogan "Progress Under Democracy" and found the original intent of the PUDS was to provide for the conservation of water and power for the benefit of country residents. Using this historical knowledge, slogan and language, they formed a PAC called Progress Under Democracy, recruited young public power activists to run for PUD commissioners and by 1986 had stopped four of the five plants and re-inserted the populist idea back into their own institution.

The Citizens Party (1978-1979)

In the initial organizing of a new national political party, called the Citizens Party, one of the lead organizer's was trying to find the language for public ownership of national energy resources so that it could be proposed in the national platform.

This organizer also worked as an energy conservation consultant and had a project in St. George, Utah. He wanted to know where the idea for St. George's municipal owned electric system came from. He went to the library and began looking into newspaper stories from the early 1900s. Much to his amazement, the demand for a publicly owned electric system was in the platform of Utah's Citizens Party that had preceded his Citizens Party by about 70 years!

The 99% and the 1% (September 2012).

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement certainly helped us focus on the 99% and the 1%. That's what made it so extraordinary to be reading through the Farmer's Alliance song book from the late 1870s, which is in your packet of materials, and see a song entitled, "Labor's Ninety-Nine."

Here' the first and final stanza.

1 "There are ninety-nine that live and die in want, hunger and cold. That one may revel in luxury and be wrapped in its silken fold. The ninety-nine in their hovels bare. The one in his palace with riches rare. The one in his palace with richest rare."

#4 "The night so dreary, so dark, so long. At last shall the morning bring. And over the land the Victor's song of the Ninety and Nine shall ring. And echo a far from zone to zone. Rejoice, for labor shall have its own. Rejoice, for labor shall have its own."

After 140 years we are back to the same 1% controlling it all. But we also have 140 years of historical struggle to utilize in our efforts to put the 99% on top.

I hope that some of these examples will encourage you to explore the archives and historical documents and connect that history, language and experience to today's social movements.

Social Movement Construction

I think social movements arise out of a perceived failure of the political class to remedy some social injustice. Like when farmers felt the railroads were unfairly controlling the production and distribution of their produce. Or when WWII vets were faced with the contradiction of having defeated a racist Nazi regime only to be confined with a racist system of segregation. Or, when those same vets came home thinking the end of war meant peace rather than continuous war.

Perception of a social injustice is not enough, however. Some people believe social movements arise only when things get a lot worse. I don't think so. Social movements don't arise simply because an injustice gets worse. They arise when either organizers apply resources or charismatic leadership occurs or indigenous leadership attached to a community base takes up the injustice.

Whether it is any one of these or the combination of all three factors, social movement's need to answer four questions: Who. What. With whom and How. Who is the movement, the we. What is it that they want, their vision? Who are they going to get it with, their strategy. And, what their method of enforcement, tactic.

In order to answer these four questions, they need to be constantly creating and re-creating several key social movement components:

An Autonomous Space, as Lawrence Goodwyn says, within which movement participants can come to some new social analysis of the situation they are confronting. Sometimes that's all I felt we could accomplish at the Labor Education Center I ran. A space that pushes out all the distractions that keeps working people from thinking. The Farmers Alliance used the cooperatives for this space. The Grangers used their halls. The IWW used their reading halls. The Knights of Labor used their Assemblies. The Civil Rights Movement used Highlander Center in Tennessee. Labor in Wisconsin used their School for Workers at the University. Somewhere there has to be space for thinking not dominated by the political class; a space where analysis and strategy can be thought out.

New Organizational Forms. You don't get new policy with the same institutions. Social movements create new organizational forms. And, the extent to which these forms mirror the society they want, they are successful. The Congress of Industrial Organizations was a new form to organize industrial workers. The Civil Rights Movement created new local alliances that went beyond the existing ministerial structures. SNCC was a new organizational form parented by Ella Baker. The Women's Liberation movement came out of consciousness raising groups. The Seattle WTO protesters rejuvenated "affinity groups" and developed convergence centers. The OWS utilized governance assemblies, like the Peoples Movement Assemblies of the US Social Forums.

Recruitment Devices. There needs to be a mechanism to attract people to your movement, to your organizational form. The farmers alliances used roving "lecturers". The Townsend movement used a commissioned sales staff. Much of the organizing in the mid-1930s used radio. The formal AFL-CIO unions used hired organizers. Increasingly, present day movements are using various forms of electronic social media from email to facebook.

Internal Communication. Without a strong internal communication system, one that is owned and controlled by the movement itself, the movement will be defined by its enemies. Sending press releases to media outlets owned by your enemy is beyond counter productive.

The Seattle Union Record which announced the Seattle General Strike of 1919 was a daily newspaper owned by the labor movement itself. The key communication device that linked the sitdown strikers at GM's plant in 1936 to the community was the Women's Emergency Brigade. Many of the CIO union drives were assisted by foreign language newspapers and cultural associations.

Independent Finance. Successful social movements need money and it **does** make a difference where it comes from. If it doesn't come from you movement's base, your independence and your movement is jeopardized. The labor movement had union dues. The Civil Rights Movement had church donations. The Townsend movement had fan club purchases of booklets, pins, etc. A major difficulty with social movements resourced by external funders is that their priorities get distorted and disconnected from its potential base.

A New Political Voice. The pinnacle of social movement development is the creation of a new political voice, one that articulates the movement's social vision. Practically all social movements eventually created such a voice. The Populist movement's Peoples Party, the Progressive era Progressive Party, Huey Long's Union Party, the Civil rights movement's Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Black Power's Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the anti-nuclear Citizen's Party, the environmental movement's Green Party or the neo-conservative's Tea Party.

A difficulty with many resource based movements in the US is their attachment to a tax exempt organizational form (IRSc3) or to an existing political party, which stymies the development of an independent political voice. Nevertheless, as is clear from the recent Wisconsin movement, absent a new political voice the movement gets suffocated in the existing framework of two-party politics.

Capacity to Withstand Governmental Repression. As is obvious, the capacity and enthusiasm for governmental repression of social movements is growing by leaps and bounds. The post WWI Red Scare, Hoover's FBI, the post WWII McCarthy era, the Red Squads and Cointelpro of the 60s and 70s, the ICE police and the Homeland Security state all represent the government's protection of the political class. We saw this most recently in the nationally coordinated attack on the OWS encampments.

One of the greatest accomplishments of social movements is their ability to continue to build and expand their infrastructure and their community base knowing that repressive forces are acting against them.

Transforming Existing Resources into Power Instruments. This is a concept I learned from Aldon Morris, author of **Origins of the Civil Rights Movement**. It's something that movements do. The Farmers Alliance transformed cooperatives into representations of the economy they promoted. Radios became recruitment devices. The Civil Rights Movement transformed a church into a movement center. Martin Luther King, Jr. transformed the language of the Church into an immediate demand. Greyhound buses became Freedom Rides. Breakfast programs became schools. Parks became general assemblies.

Final Thoughts

Social movement history seems to have come full circle. The great populist uprising of the 1880s and 90s focused on finance, on creating a financial system attached to the existing economy. Here we are 100 plus years later and we are faced with the same problem. Finance has disconnected itself from the real economy and accumulated massive wealth selling debt to the rest of us.

Here is how Huey Long in 1934 characterized our problem:

“It is not the difficulty of the problem we have; it is the fact that the rich people of this country – and by rich people I mean the super-rich – will not allow us to solve the problems, or rather the one problem that is afflicting this country, because in order to cure all our woes it is necessary to scale down the big fortunes, that we may scatter the wealth to be shared by all the people.”

Thanks again for the invitation to be a part of this history from below workshop.

