

# Howard Zinn (1922-2010)

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[Editors' note: Howard Zinn, among his multitude of other contributions to the left, was a long-time sponsor of *New Politics*. We express our deepest sympathies to his family and post here an article by NP board member Steve Shalom that will be appearing in the spring issue of *Democratic Left*.]

The outpouring of tributes, remembrances, and expressions of grief at the death of Howard Zinn should come as no surprise. He touched — and profoundly influenced — so many people in so many ways, people who in turn have contributed to the arduous but essential process of creating a better world.

Given the extraordinary success and value of his *A People's History of the United States*, it is often forgotten that Howard's first book, *LaGuardia in Congress*, received an honorable mention for the Beveridge Award for the best book in American history. And it was at his first teaching position, at Spelman College half a century ago, that he played an important mentoring role to students who were working to desegregate the South. (His book *SNCC: the New Abolitionists* chronicles some of this great struggle.)

At Spelman (before they fired him for supporting civil rights protests) and at Boston University for two and a half decades, Howard taught and advised thousands of students and moved them to think deeply about their role in the world and to see themselves as the makers of history. His lectures on anarchism and Marxism drew overflow crowds, crowds who knew they wouldn't get a party line, but a subtle appreciation mixed with humor and critical insights. The same was true of his plays — especially *Emma* and *Marx in Soho* — which evoked laughter and tears from audiences.

His book, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal*, laid out with remarkable clarity the case against the U.S. war on Indochina and what needed to be done. Along with the collections of documents that we in the antiwar movement invariably referred to, Howard's book was the crucial resource on every activist's bookshelf. Likewise, his essays on dissent and disobedience were a manual for the nonviolent protest movement. And his reflections on his own role as a bomber pilot in World War II helped so many of us grapple with the moral issues of war and peace.

Howard went beyond the button that said "Question Authority." Question it, yes, but if you find it illegitimate — as so much authority is — then resist it.

This wasn't just the lesson of his writings and his lectures: this was the lesson of his life. Howard didn't just inspire movements, he was part of them. When there was a march to be marched, Howard was there. When there was a Pentagon leaker to be hidden, Howard and his wife Roz did the hiding. When there were calls to oppose wars in Central America, occupation in Palestine, racial and gender oppression, human rights violations, or the exploitation of workers — whether in far-away factories or on his own campus — Howard rallied to the cause. And when there were small groups getting set up or activists needing advice, Howard was there for them too. He was there with his courage, good humor, and irrepressible optimism. Beyond his personal warmth, it was this optimism that always kept his smile glowing.

His *People's History* and its various spin-offs have been earthshaking in their impact. Through them, countless people have come to look at the world in a new way. No more is history the private

preserve of princes, politicians, and plutocrats. It is within our power to change the world, and change it we must.

In 2005, Howard was invited to Spelman College to give the commencement address there 42 years after he had been fired. He told the graduates:

"My hope is that you will not be content just to be successful in the way that our society measures success; that you will not obey the rules, when the rules are unjust; that you will act out the courage that I know is in you....

"...you don't have to do something heroic, just something, to join with millions of others who will just do something, because all of those somethings, at certain points in history, come together, and make the world better."

It may seem odd to sing the praises of someone who all his life has championed the thousands of unnamed people who make history. But every so often from the people there emerges an individual who embodies the greatest strengths of the people at their very best: their spirit, their integrity, their hopes, their courage, their intelligence, and their compassion.

Such an individual was Howard Zinn.

He will be deeply missed.

— Steve Shalom