The Essential Bob Fitch

written by Jane LaTour | June 30, 2011

OF ALL THE PROFILES written about Bob Fitch during his lifetime—in *Forbes Magazine, Monthly Labor Review*, etc.—two of the best were penned by student journalists. In typical Fitch fashion, he made time for the students, sharing his experiences, insights and passions. Jessica Johnson met Fitch while interning for the late veteran labor journalist Martin Fishgold, a friend of Fitch and his fierce partisan. Johnson began her profile with this description: "When you meet Robert Fitch, it's impossible to put the soft-spoken, bespectacled academic together with his infamous reputation." She was intrigued by the erudite, credentialed academic and the intensity of the invective leveled against him by detractors. Her profile was written in the late 1990s, while Fitch "was fighting his way through what is likely to be a highly controversial book on union corruption." It took Fitch until 2006 to get *Solidarity for Sale: How Corruption Destroyed the Labor Movement and Undermined America's Promise*, into print. But prior to that, whether on the page or in public discourse, Fitch was eager to share his analysis of unions, corruption, and the structure of the labor movement. Sadly, at the very time labor is under serious assault by powerful enemies, his brilliant critical mind, his passionate, edgy voice are now absent from the discussion.

Upon learning of Fitch's death on March 4, his friend Bertell Ollman summed up his essence: "Bob was full of joy—full of ideas." Ollman and his wife, Paule, were among the friends who visited Fitch in his small apartment on East 17th Street after his accident on January 25, when he broke his leg on an icy bridge while on the way to teach at LaGuardia Community College. Bringing healthy treats to the convalescent, the couple enjoyed hours of conversation with their friend, as they had for decades. My own friendship with Bob began on an autumn evening in 1985 at Charles Evans Hughes High School, after teaching our respective classes to Local 3 electrical apprentices. We walked down 18th Street together and into each other's lives. We shared countless phone conversations, dinners, movies, walks and talks. Over the years, we read each other's work, collaborated on projects, walked on picket lines. In the process, he taught me so much.

He placed great value on the Greek virtues of courage, wisdom, self-control, and justice. He produced a prolific stream of articles for numerous publications in a prose style that was always elegant, witty, and engaging. He was inspired by the lives of Thomas Paine and George Orwell. Like Orwell, he believed that, "good prose is like a window pane." Clarity was an important component of his work. He was always striving to make the work accessible for his ideal readers. Like Orwell, he made political writing into an art, and set out from "a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice, writing because there was some lie he wanted to expose." His work—the books and essays—with crystal clear expositions of Marxism, the economy and capitalism, urban planning and politics, on labor, the working class, and the Left, will endure.

In "Professor Fitch; A Man Full of Ideas," Delon Rhone, a staff writer for an independent student newspaper at Brooklyn College, described what the professor envisioned as his next step: "Fitch says that he sees himself completing his most challenging work in the near future. 'In five years,' says Fitch, 'I see myself completing my most ambitious book.'" That was written in December, 2006. While he never finished what he viewed as his magnum opus, Fitch was hard at work on the project. He spoke at numerous venues about various aspects of the book he jokingly referred to as The Bob Fitch Theory of History—a work that would unite his analysis of labor, the Left, Barack Obama, the Democrats, the fiscal crisis, and capitalism.

While reviled by many as an enemy of labor, the exact opposite is true—he was labor's champion.

"I love the labor movement both for its history and its promise," he wrote. "Only organized labor has the potential to reduce the huge and increasing inequalities in American life; the growing insecurity; the reduced horizons for both youth and old age. Only workers sticking together have the power to straighten backs; to look employers in the eye and demand justice. Realistically, only a powerful, inclusive labor movement has the potential to realize our democratic values of liberty, equality, and fraternity."

What his friends will miss is his warmth, his ever engaging need to argue the world, to question every assumption, to challenge the status quo — to upend the easy explanations; his sense of humor and self-deprecating wit, his generosity and capacity for joy. In summing up his life, Fitch's ex-wife Mary Oppenheimer, with whom he co-authored two books, *Ghana: End of an Illusion,* and *Who Rules the Corporations*, offered an apt quote from the great Rosa Luxemburg, whom Fitch deeply admired: "Freedom is always and exclusively for the one who thinks differently."

Footnotes