Learning From David Montgomery: Worker, Historian, Activist

written by Peter Rachleff | June 17, 2012

On December 4, 2011, the labor movement, the left, the academy, and the historical profession lost a leader and friend. Eighty-four years young, David Montgomery had remained active and vital until his passing, giving an address at a labor history conference at the University of Iowa in July and speaking at a fall AFL-CIO workshop (with his son, labor economist Ed Montgomery) in Washington, D.C.; he continued to research transnational labor activism, and that research has inspired a panel at the November, 2012 American Studies Association conference in Puerto Rico. David's death occasioned many reflections among colleagues, his former students and fellow workers as far back as his pre-academic organizing days. Numerous eloquent obituaries have detailed David's accomplishments and testified to his impact. [1]

David had particular connections to Minnesota's labor movement and labor history, the place I have called home for the past thirty years. After graduating from college and serving in the military in the 1940s, he and his partner Martel (better known as "Marty") moved to Saint Paul in the 1950s, and he went to work as a machinist at Honeywell, where the United Electrical Workers was still the union. David was a shop steward, and his reputation as a militant organizer of his fellow workers soon spread throughout the sprawling plant. He lost his job when Honeywell closed his entire department, and the UE soon lost its foothold there in a raid by the Teamsters. He soon found

machinist work on the Saint Paul side of the Mississippi River, where he became known and respected within the International Association of Machinists (IAM) 459. David's activism also extended to electoral politics — he worked in Joe Karth's remarkable 1958 congressional campaign (as president of an Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) local, Karth ran on an anti-nuclear platform) — and to local labor history, where he assisted Meridel LeSueur and a cohort of former Farmer-Laborites and Communists in the production of the booklet, *The People Together*. This remarkable publication at once commemorates Minnesota's centennial and protests against the Minnesota Historical Society's disregard for the roles played by working people in the state's first one hundred years.

Given the worsening Cold War political climate, it became more and more difficult for David to continue playing a visible role in the labor movement. He later explained to an interviewer: "I was driven out of the factory; I was blacklisted. Becoming a historian was not my first choice. I had to do something, so I took the second best choice that was around then." As a graduate student in History, David brought important lessons from his shopfloor and political experience into the University of Minnesota's department, where he found an eager mentor in David Noble. In reflecting on his grad school days, David declared: "Being in factories…involved in struggles along with other workers there persuaded me that most of what was written in academic literature about the inherent passivity or conservatism of American workers in fighting to change anything was simply untrue." [2] The Cold War's impact on the labor movement might have prevented him from developing further as a factory organizer, but it was driving him to transform the field of labor history.

By the mid-1960s, the energies of the civil rights, women's, and peace movements were turning the study of American history upside down. New historians — many of them participants in 1960s movements — unearthed the roles of artisans and sailors in the American Revolution, the slaves' resistance to the "peculiar institution," and the struggles of women for the right to vote. The new labor historians, led by David Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, and David Brody, developed new ways of constructing the history of working women and men that questioned the more institutional analysis that had been dominant in the field since the rise of the "Wisconsin School" of John R. Commons and Selig Perlman in the 1910s and 1920s. The new labor historians insisted that the workplace was a site of struggle, that workers acted in collective fashions whether they belonged to unions or not, and that communities and local politics bore the mark of the struggles of working people for a better life. [3]

I'd like to use the space allotted me here to highlight what I think are some of his most valuable themes for those still seeking to work within the labor movement today. Some of you may disagree with my selection of key ideas, or my presentation of those ideas, and I invite you to weigh in with your own perspectives. Nothing would have pleased David more, and nothing is more useful for the ongoing vitality of our field and our movement.

Theme #1:
Marxism Provides Key Insights for Labor History

DAVID'S ENGAGEMENT with Marxism informed his scholarly work. Without didactically insisting on the value of a Marxist critique of capitalism, his books and articles analyzed labor history within a complex, well-constructed framework which incorporated key Marxist insights. David understood capitalism as an historical product and an unstable system, and he realized it posed collaboration versus competition as key issues for workers and employers alike. Not only did capitalism set a defining context for workers' lives and struggles, but their struggles forced changes in the institutions, politics, and culture of capitalism, in the United States and throughout the world.

Class conflict lay at the heart of capitalism, and it manifested itself in workplaces, in politics, in

race and gender relations, and in the formation of ideologies and cultures. His first book, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*, suggested that we could not understand the failure of Reconstruction without examining the changing nature of class conflict in the industrial and industrializing North. The more that capitalist manufacturers in the North were challenged by the organizations and demands of their workers, the less willing they were to promote an agenda of social transformation in the South. Similarly, in *Citizen Worker: the Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market During the Nineteenth Century,* David demonstrated fundamental contradictions between political democracy and market-driven economics, contradictions which fueled restrictions on grassroots expressions of political discontent, from Northern workers seeking the eight hour day and Midwestern farmers challenging banks and railroads to southern African-Americans confronting Jim Crow. Capitalism, David argued, ineluctably bound economics and politics, the workplace and the ballot box, corporate institutions, and the state. [4]

But these bound forces did not prevent workers from organizing and struggling, and their struggles often changed the course of American history. In *Workers' Control in America* and *The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925,* David traced workers' struggles for a shorter working day, for an end to exploitative payment practices, against unsafe working conditions, for more control over the pace and nature of the work process, for the democratization of communities (such as mining camps and Minnesota Iron Range "locations"), against racism and nativism, and for peace in international relations. In a remarkable public address on "Labor and Antiwar Activism in Minnesota," delivered in March, 2002 to a labor conference in Saint Paul, David discussed workers' struggles to prevent World War I, their support for mobilization against fascism in World War II, and their opposition to nuclear proliferation in the late 1950s. "In all three instances," he argued, "[workers] had a tangible influence on the course of national politics, though in none of them did they succeed in reshaping the world the way they hoped and intended." Although workers and their organizations often did not win (indeed, they rarely won) such battles, there were consequent adjustments and shifts in economic, social, and political institutions and policies. And later struggles tended to build on the achievements of the earlier ones, even the defeats.[5]

Theme #2:
Montgomery's "Syndicalism":
The Struggle in the Workplace

For David, the workplace itself was the primary site of class struggle. In the workplace, workers and employers (or their representatives) fought over how work was organized, how it would get done, and how much would get done. He frequently referenced Carter Goodrich's notion of the "frontier of control," that "invisible dividing line" where management's authority ceased and the scope for workers' decision-making began. David understood technology as a tool in management's campaigns to expand its decision-making power, and he also saw unions as tools in workers' campaigns to expand their power and authority. This theme came up again and again in his lectures and seminars, whether he was discussing slaves' use of songs to set a humane pace in the cotton fields, Welsh and Irish miners' efforts to teach Eastern European immigrants to refuse to work when foremen came around, or machinists' strategies to use piece rates to control their pace of work. While some labor historians paid particular attention to artisans' use of traditions and skills to resist the capitalist reorganization of work, the re-division of labor, and the introduction of time discipline, David was more interested in the new strategies, tactics, and solidarities employed by new generations of factory workers, who were being reorganized by their employers not only to produce but also to join together to resist production. Here, David's engagement with Marxism and his experiences on the shopfloor combined to enable him to see how capitalism, in its own development, generated working

class resistance. [6]

In a dialectical fashion, unions grew out of the shopfloor struggles, while they also served the needs of these struggles. Workers organized themselves into unions in order to codify their work practices and rules, to institutionalize the solidarity necessary to enforce them, and to provide the means to socialize new workers into them. Unions linked workplaces in local markets, regions, nations, and even transnationally, and they enabled workers to disrupt employers' efforts to interject competition across workplaces, competition which Jeremy Brecher has so aptly labeled a "race to the bottom." [7]

For David, then, workers' power in the workplace was indissolubly linked to workers' power at the bargaining table. They fed each other. And the logic of capitalism suggested that this dialectic would continue to unfold.

Theme #3:
What Is The Labor Movement?

THE STRUGGLE OVER THE "FRONTIER of control," the struggle to embody positions of strength in contracts, job descriptions, work rules, and recognized past practices is only part of the story, part of the labor movement whose past, present, and future occupied David Montgomery's heart and imagination. My appreciation for such issues began in the fall of 1974, my first semester in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh. One afternoon, in his crowded labor history lecture course, David dropped a bomb. "Do you realize," he asked his students, "that if you said 'labor movement' in late nineteenth century America, you would have been talking about five different kinds of organizations?" As our pens stood erect over our notebook pages, he proceeded to name them: trade unions (of course); fraternal and benefit societies (the embodiment of what he called "working class mutuality"); co-operatives (both producer and consumer); reform associations (like Eight Hour leagues); and political parties (mostly at the local or, occasionally, the state levels). If you were studying the 1880s and wanted to be precise, he hastily added, you might want to add a sixth organizational form, the mixed local assemblies of the Knights of Labor. Within them, workers from various occupations and industries came together to support strikes, boycott nefarious bosses, and promote local political issues, from restrictions on convict labor to the construction of public buildings with union labor. We furiously took notes, then caught our breath. Then, he dropped another bomb: "If you were to say 'labor movement' today [1974], you'd be talking about only one kind of organization, the trade union." [8]

There we were, "we" being, particularly, the labor history graduate students who wanted not only to write about labor history but also, from within the labor movement, to help make labor history, and our mentor was serving notice — more than a decade before scholars and activists would begin to decry the "decline" of the labor movement — that the "labor movement" of our era, the last quarter of the 20th century, was a profoundly narrowed, diminished, and restricted shadow of its historical self. We might not have understood all the implications of such an historical assessment at that moment, but it has certainly haunted my awareness as I have witnessed plant closings, the contracting out of jobs, defeats of strikes, collapse of union organizing campaigns, the firing of union activists, and the passage of anti-union legislation. [9]

David's work and that of many of his graduate students explored the complex organizational infrastructure of the labor movement from the last quarter of the 19th century through the passage of the Wagner Act (1935) and the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), and the construction of the modern American system of collective bargaining. In books like *The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925,* and *Citizen Worker: the Experience of Workers in the U. S. with Democracy and the Free Market in the Nineteenth Century,* and many

scholarly and popular articles, David researched, analyzed, and documented how working women and men organized themselves outside as well as inside workplaces, how these organizations were inter-connected through shared values, ideologies, and leaderships, and how they ebbed and flowed historically in strength and influence.

His students' explorations have added many layers of richness and complexity to this scholarship, and their contributions — and their teaching of subsequent generations — suggests that David's legacy will continue to shape our understanding of capitalism, class relations, the workplace, working people, and the labor movement. Consider this selection of examples, drawn from some of the dissertations David supervised which then became books: Bruce Laurie's attention to volunteer fire companies and other neighborhood organizations in the struggles of Philadelphia artisans and first generation factory workers; Shel Stromquist's research into community support for railroad workers' struggles in the late 19th century; Jim Barrett's examination of Chicago's "back of the yards" communities' support for immigrant packinghouse workers in the era of the *Jungle*; Eric Arnesen's exploration of both black and inter-racial organizing on the New Orleans docks and its waterfront neighborhoods; Peter Gottlieb's and Kimberly Phillips' reconstructions of the peregrinations of Southern African- Americans into and out of Pittsburgh and Cleveland steel mills and the relation of these migrations to black communities North and South; a range of investigations of working-class communities and independent labor politics, including Reeve Huston on small-town political activism against a regional landed gentry in antebellum upstate New York, Julie Greene on political activism by the supposedly "apolitical" American Federation of Labor, Grace Palladino on anthracite miners' quest for government regulation of conditions in their workplaces in 19th century Pennsylvania, and Cecelia Bucki on the working-class base for socialist municipal politics in Bridgeport, Connecticut; and then there are the studies of race and gender as sources of bonding and organization as well as division and competition, including Iver Bernstein's painful retelling of Irish immigrants' involvement in the New York City "draft riots" in the midst of the Civil War; my own study of African-American workers' organization, on their own behalf and with white workers, in post-Civil War Richmond, Virginia; Tera Hunter's appreciation of African American working women's struggles to control laundry and domestic labor in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction urban South; Dan Letwin's exploration of interracial organizing among Alabama coal miners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Priscilla Murolo's exploration of working girls' clubs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Gunther Peck's excavation of class struggles within immigrant and ethnic communities in the early 20th century West; Ileen DeVault's investigation of the roles played by gender in the construction of white collar work at the turn of the 20th century; Dana Frank's documentation of working-class women's use of consumer organizing to buttress the post-general strike (1919) labor movement in Seattle; Dorothy Fujita-Rony's reconstruction of Seattle's Filipino working class within a transpacific framework. And I fear having given offense to those scholars I have left out. [10]

David Montgomery's Living Legacy

LEARNING FROM THE KEY THEMES which I have discussed — the value of Marxism in analyzing capitalism, the centrality of the workplace as a site of class struggle, and the variety of institutions which make up a labor movement — can serve us well today, not only as labor historians but also as labor activists. The 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing "Great Recession" remind us that capitalism is an unstable system. Struggles by nurses to control patient staffing ratios, by teachers to control class size and curriculum, and by manufacturing workers to challenge the logic of the products they make remind us that the workplace continues to be a site of class struggle. In the "Madison Uprising" of 2011 (and the larger and ongoing Wisconsin struggle) workers, students, social justice activists, immigrants, welfare recipients, and even Democratic politicians created a veritable soviet in that capital city, inspired by struggles for democracy in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, and

inspiring broad-based struggles against the right-wing agenda in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, and more. True, the much bemoaned current percentage of the workforce in unions (perhaps 10 percent) is well below that of 1974 (when the percentage was closer to 20 percent) or the great unionized decades of the 1940s-1960s, (when it was 30 percent or more), and such figures reflect a shift of the frontier of control in the workplace towards management and a consequent shift in bargaining table clout in the same direction. But capitalism's instability, on the one hand, and the 1 percent's efforts to make the 99 percent bear its burden, on the other hand, has provoked working-class resistance of an order not seen in decades.

At the same time, working class organization has spread a thicker and thicker web. Particularly due to the massive influx of immigrants since 1990, diverse forms of working class organization — fraternal and benefit societies, reform organizations (especially on behalf of immigrant rights), and worker centers (which provide services, teach English, maintain hiring halls, and mobilize protests) — are emerging. There has been a multiplicity of local political organizations (the Working Families Party in New York, Greens, Independents of various stripes), many of which include significant working class voices. There are food co-operatives aplenty, plus community supported agriculture (CSA) networks, with working class participants, and growing interest in building the infrastructure of local food movements. There are a range of local, national, and international media and communications, from "Labor Radio" to "Labour Start." And then there is the Occupy Movement, its presence, its impact on political discourse, and its widening web reaching into issues of foreclosures, healthcare, the environment, education costs and content, and more.

In all these ventures, even in their inchoate forms and despite the suppression from without, are all of David's themes about capitalism, the workplace, and the labor movement. I see in the determination and the ferocity of these developments, both in their local depth and in their international connections and inspirations, their creativity and militancy, the great fierce spirit of David Montgomery: restless, indefatigable, strategic, and propelled by the lived agonies and desires for freedom in those all around.

Footnotes