

Staughton Lynd and the Labor Movement

January 24, 2023



Staughton Lynd, who died on November 17 at the age of 92, was a remarkable American radical who played important roles in the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and in the labor movement, always in collaboration with his wife Alice. We reprint here an essay that Staughton Lynd wrote for the Winter 2005 edition of *New Politics* in which he discusses the views of his friend and collaborator Stan Weir. We have chosen this piece because we believe it provides an excellent view of Lynd's ideas, as well as Weir's. We introduce it with a brief overview of this life and conclude with some thoughts about his politics.

Staughton Lynd was born and raised in a Quaker family. His parents Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd were both sociologists who together wrote an academic best seller, *Middletown*, a study of a small city later revealed to be Muncie, Indiana. The book was published in 1929, the same year Staughton was born. While they were Quakers, Lynd's father said that his study of sociology had led him to see the value of Marx's notion of "class struggle."

Young Staughton grew up in New York City in the 1930s and 40s, studying at the Ethical Culture Society's Fieldston High School, whose curriculum centered on ethics and whose slogan was: "*The place where men meet to seek the highest is holy ground.*" After graduating, Staughton went off to study at Harvard College where he was briefly involved with Communist Party organizations. When faced with the draft board, he declared himself to be a conscientious objector and was assigned to a non-combatant unit, but when it was learned he had been associated with the Communists, he was given a dishonorable discharge.

He met his wife Alice in the summer of 1950 and they were married in the Stony Run Friends Meetinghouse in Baltimore, the Quaker congregation to which his parents belonged. A few years later when they moved to Georgia, they joined the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) there. Clearly the Quaker community was very important to his life.

After graduating from Harvard, Staughton earned his doctorate in American history at Columbia University and then took a teaching position in Georgia at Spellman College, one of the historically Black colleges. One of his students there was Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*. Lynd was an advocate of the "history from below" school that wanted to turn from writing about the political and economic elites who had ruled the country to describing the role of the working people who had made it.

At that time, he began to work with another historian, Howard Zinn, in the civil rights movement. In 1964 Lynd became the director of the SNCC Freedom Schools in Mississippi and with Bob Moses and others helped to organize Freedom Summer, organizing white students to come to the South to join the civil rights movement. His work, like that of all civil rights activists Black and white, put him in jeopardy.

When Black people, wanting to take leadership for themselves began to exclude whites from the civil rights movement, Staughton accepted a position in 1964 in the prestigious history department at Yale University and he and Alice moved to New Haven, Connecticut. At the same time, he began to become active in the anti-Vietnam War movement. He chaired the first march against the war in Vietnam in Washington, D.C. on April 17, 1965. Four months later he was arrested together with Bob Moses and David Dellinger at the Assembly of Unrepresented People. Standing at the steps of the Capitol in a utopian gesture they had declared peace with the people of Vietnam.

Then in December 1965, Lynd joined Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Herbert Aptheker, a historian and leading Communist Party intellectual, on a controversial trip to Hanoi to see what sort of peace terms might be acceptable to the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. Some called them traitors for meeting with the enemy. With the Yale administration and alumni turning against him because of his activism, Lynd took a leave of absence from Yale and moved to Chicago. In 1968 Yale denied him tenure.

Blacklisted from the leading universities because of his militant activism against the war, Lynd taught courses for a couple of years at Roosevelt University and Columbia College in Chicago and he worked for a while for Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation that organized community groups. He also studied for his law degree at the University of Chicago. While teaching and studying, Staughton and Alice conducted interviews with working class people who had been activists from the 1930s to the 1970s and wrote the book *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working Class Organizers* (1973). It was a book that many of us young radicals of the 1970s read and discussed. In those years Staughton also became involved in offering support to a group of truck drivers in the Fraternal Association of Steel Haulers or FASH in Gary, Indiana. They were then engaged in a struggle for autonomy with the Teamsters union leadership, which violently attacked the group, blowing up the house of one of its leaders.

With his law degree in hand, Lynd took a job at a law firm in Youngtown, Ohio, and also worked for the National Legal Services Corporation handling cases for the very poor. Alice also got a law degree and joined him in the legal work. Staughton soon fell in with Ed Mann and John Barbero, both United Steel Workers Union (USW) local officers and activists in the United Labor Party of Ohio, a small political organization of Trotskyist origins. Mann, Barbero, and others carried out a national union campaign and sued in court to get rid of the USW's no-strike clause and also backed William Litch for international union president against I.W. Abel.

Shortly after Lynd arrived in Youngstown, the steel companies began to close the mills in what was then called deindustrialization. Working with his friends in the USW, he developed a plan to create a community-owned and -managed steel company to take over the closing mill. He became the chief lawyer for an ecumenical council of churches allied with rank-and-file steelworkers attempting to save the mill. Getting political support proved a futile task, and one after another the plants closed. He described the experience in *The Fight Against Shutdowns—the Youngstown Steel Mill Closings*. That experience, he said, seeing the power of capital and its domination of the political system, made him more of a Marxist than ever.

Back in 1994, journalist Jane Slaughter did an interview with Staughton Lynd for *The Progressive* magazine in which they talked largely about President Bill Clinton's economic policies, and what

Lynd called the president's hypocrisy. Toward the end of the interview, Slaughter asked him, "Are you a Marxist?" to which he replied, "I find myself in an odd position about Marxism, and I've been in it a long time. Namely, to the Marxists, I seem like some sort of middle-class sentimentalist. To everyone else I seem like a hardcore Marxist."

While many of us on the left shared a common critique of both capitalism and the labor bureaucracy, Lynd's views set him apart. He was right that others in the left sometimes viewed him critically, but not for the reason that he suggested. We had long admired him. He had played an outstanding role in both the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, and, though he wanted to see workers reform the unions, and see the creation of a labor party and a socialist movement, he held views that placed him outside the strategic perspective of most other left labor activists. It was not, as he suggested, that "middleclass sentimentalism" that led others on the left to criticize him, but rather what seemed to many of us his utopian rather than strategic approach to the labor organizing.

Consider his approach to the unions and collective bargaining. Lynd argued that unions should reject use the National Labor Relations Act by means of which workers obtain legal recognition for their unions. He criticized and (in theory) opposed the signing of union contracts because of no-strike clauses, even though those contracts often codified workers achievement in improving wages and benefits and provided a point from which to advance fights for new demands. He rejected the notion that workers organizations such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) should run for the highest offices in the international union. He believed that would lead to their inevitable bureaucratization.

Lynd wanted workers instead to concentrate on organizing primarily at the local level and establishing horizontal ties with other rank-and-file workers to create an alternative central labor council (as a substitute to the AFL-CIO's official local central labor bodies). He worked to create such a group in Youngstown of longtime, local leftist leaders in the United Steelworkers. Local groups like these, he believed, would be the authentic vehicle of a genuine workers' movement. At the same time, he thought that labor activists should also strive to create local labor parties offering a political alternative.

In advancing these views, Lynd often tended to be moralistic, condemning those who did not share his approach and vision for being vanguardist, bureaucratic. or social democratic. Yet when it came to trying to save the Youngstown steel mills, he allied with the local churches (whose politics were social democratic at best), supported a project that would have had a local advisory board that included local business, and called upon the Democratic Party politicians to get the government to finance it. Those he criticized were doing much the same in those desperate times, trying almost anything to try to save the workplace, the jobs, and the union, to save the community with its churches and schools, with its Little League teams and Brownie groups. In practice, Lynd and the rest of us on the left at that time ended up doing similar things.

Whatever differences one might have had with him, Lynd spent virtually his entire adult life in the movements for peace, for racial justice, and for workers' power and for the ultimate goal of democratic socialism. His belief in racial equality led him to put his life in danger in the Deep South, and his commitment to peace cost him his prestigious appointment at Yale. Moving to Ohio and rubbing elbows with steelworkers, he and his wife Alice strove to build a militant labor movement. The two continued for fifty years to analyze, to criticize, and to organize for the better world in which they both believed.

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Alternative Unionism

A New Politics *Classic*

Staughton Lynd

Singlejack Solidarity

Stan Weir

Edited and with an afterword by George Lipsitz, foreword by Norm Diamond

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004 384 pp. \$19.95

This rich collection of writings by the late Stan Weir invites friends, rank-and-file workers, and radical intellectuals to reconsider their assumptions and to recommit themselves to the struggle.

I met Stan Weir about 1970. He was turning fifty and teaching in a workers' education program at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. He lived at the time in Danville, Illinois, where a group of eager young people surrounded him.

A first product of our friendship appears in this collection, the edited transcript of an interview conducted by my wife, Alice Lynd, and myself for our book *Rank and File*. It is entitled "The Informal Work Group" but is actually a mini autobiography. Therein Stan Weir describes how as a young merchant seaman during World War II he was educated by ex-Wobblies and other veterans of the 1934 general strike. "On that ship," Stan told us, "I finally found a cause and a vehicle for pursuing it."

Later, when Stan and fellow longshoreman Robert Miles founded Singlejack Books, I wrote two books for them. The first was a "little book" that could be slipped into a hip pocket or a blouse, *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer*. The book was organized around an idea suggested by Stan and mentioned several times in this collection, namely, that when a worker punches in, he or she leaves in the glove compartment of the car the constitutional rights that a citizen takes for granted. *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer* is then the effort to recreate these same rights in the workplace by other means. Thus, in a particularly bold and imaginative flight, Stan suggested that in a unionized workplace a discharged worker has a right to see his or her union representative before leaving the plant, and this is the workplace equivalent to the right of *habeas corpus* on the street.

In 1982, Singlejack published my account of the closing of Youngstown's steel mills, *The Fight Against Shutdowns*. This was a case study of a problem that necessarily preoccupied Stan Weir, because it underlay his unjust exclusion from his craft as a longshoreman: the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy. As a "B man" in West Coast longshore, Stan and other B men were given the work that was left over after the regular "A men" took their pick of jobs, and were unable to protest because they were not allowed to join the union. In effect, they were temporary workers allowed to make a living only during the time it took the industry to implement "containerization" and, thereby, cut in half the number of longshore workers permanently needed.

My last sustained contact with Stan was in the mid-1990s. I had set out to edit a book of essays on the "alternative unionism" of the early 1930s: the local industrial unions, and horizontal networks thereof, organized from below at a time when there was as yet no National Labor Relations Act and no Congress of Industrial Organization. Stan called me up. Why had he been left out? he asked. I haltingly explained that the authors were all young academics, publishing their research for the first time. That didn't satisfy him. I felt ashamed, and the result was his essay, "Unions with Leaders Who Stay on the Job," which became the final essay of my book and is also included in this collection.

Stan wrote it, so he told me, with tears running down his face.

II

So what are the big things to remember about this extraordinary man?

First is his sense of humor. An essay in this volume, "Whatever Happened to Frisco Jeans?", offers several examples. Stan (in California) would telephone me (in Ohio) for no other purpose than to share a new joke. Nor was this a superficial mannerism. Stan viewed humor as an essential element of any subculture of ordinary people who felt confident in confronting the world and in improvising solutions to the world's problems. When he heard in 1956 that Hungarian workers in a bicycle factory were making bicycles for themselves, he decided that this revolution must be for real and began to imagine something similar happening at his Chevrolet plant (199-200). He would often begin a workers' education class by asking, "What is the funniest thing that ever happened where you work?"

Second, Stan broke with both the concept of a Leninist vanguard party *and* with bureaucratic business unionism. This was unusual. Only a few others, such as the late Marty Glaberman, chose the same lonely path. Far more common was the transformation Stan reported in 1956: "The capable people who had built the Workers Party's auto fraction in the industrial Midwest had become UAW staffers. They had lost their identity as radicals." One sees the same thing today even among members of the IWW.

Stan long wanted to write a comprehensive critique of the vanguard party, and did not live to do so. The fragments lovingly collected here convey the gist of what he wished to say. It comes down to certain relatively simple insights: Radical intellectuals who consider that their task is to bring theory to the workers (as Lenin advocated in *What Is To Be Done?*) will never attract workers to a radical movement. Rather, the intellectual needs to listen to workers and learn from them at the same time that the intellectual shares his or her own insights. Further, what needs to be created is not a single, vertical structure, but horizontal networks of informal work groups and local unions "that cross traditional union lines."

As to bureaucratic business unionism, it is hard for me to untangle the ideas I took from Stan Weir and those I developed for myself in abrasive encounters with Steelworkers, Auto Workers, and Teamsters. Here are sample statements by Stan:

"The failure of the union officialdom cannot be solved by voting 'the old guys' out." With these words Stan set himself at odds both with the Communists who worked so hard in the 1930s to capture offices of influence in the CIO and its affiliated national unions, and with the Trotskyists and ex-Trotskyists who labored in efforts such as Miners for Democracy, the Sadlowski campaign, and Teamsters for a Democratic Union half a century later.

"When working people mobilize to control their working conditions, they rid themselves of the old vertical structures and turn to horizontal forms of organization . . . anticipating the need for an alternative unionism that draws its strength from solidarity agreements rather than cooperation with employers."

About what happened to the labor movement in the United States after World War II: "The goal of the peacetime [labor] policy was to eliminate strikes in support of grievances during the life of contracts." Real change in the labor movement must begin by reclaiming the right to direct action whenever workers perceive it to be needed.

Thus, Stan Weir stood four-square for at least the last thirty years of his life in advocating a

qualitatively different kind of labor movement. In place of the mainstream unions of Germany before World War I, criticized by Rosa Luxemburg, or the “new men of power” like Walter Reuther who appeared so quickly at the head of CIO unions, Stan visualized a unionism closer to the ground and to the workplace, accountable to the shop stewards and informal spokespersons who rose from the ranks, and committed to archaic notions like “an injury to one is an injury to all.”

And he found this new labor movement. Many commentators of like mind, such as myself, have pointed to agreements to share and share alike when workers confront layoffs. The seniority system so often lauded by labor historians does not express the idea that an injury to one is an injury to all. New hires, often women and minorities, are put on the street with nothing, while white males in their fifties continue to work overtime. However, there are old and new instances of workers disregarding seniority to share what work is available equally, at least until the work available does not decrease below, say, four days a week.

Stan saw in the longshore hiring arrangements won by the 1934 general strike a similar egalitarianism in apportioning daily work assignments. These arrangements were based on “longshoremen’s control over daily hiring in the dispatch hall” and a “commitment to work opportunity equalization.”

Of course, the degree to which West Coast longshore from the 1930s to the 1960s approximated an egalitarian vision made it doubly painful to be thrust out of that work at the same time that these hard-won institutional arrangements were scrapped. Indomitably, brother Stan found an even fuller expression of his beliefs in the practice of a Spanish longshore union, “La Coordinadora.” Attending a meeting of the International Harbor Workers in Denmark in 1982, Stan met delegates from La Coordinadora and thereupon went to Spain to have a look. Like Lincoln Steffens, he could thereafter say that he had seen the future—a union larger than the West Coast longshoremen with no more than a single paid staff person—and it worked. La Coordinadora remained, for the next twenty years, the closest approximation he knew of to the hoped-for shape of the future.

III

“Death doesn’t end relationships,” Stan writes in the first essay in this book about his friend James Baldwin. Maybe. But I think to keep the relationships alive, when the other person can no longer speak up, we have an obligation to be ruthlessly self-critical.

Stan once made a special trip to Youngstown to urge me not to submit to publication an essay by John Lippert. At the time Lippert was working in a Detroit automobile factory, and had written a riveting account of a wildcat strike. Stan’s point was that the account might give management some indication of who had been the movers and shakers in the wildcat, and subject them to discipline. One doesn’t snitch. However exciting the article, he argued, it should not appear.

At a memorial for Stan at the Socialist Scholars Conference, I met persons who had known him as a member of the International Socialist group in, I believe, the early 1970s. This was at a time when IS was trying to be a Leninist vanguard party, all the way to telling people—no matter what the hardship—how they should spend their time and plan their days. Stan, I was told, protested. This was the origin of his break with the last radical group to which he belonged and the basis of the isolation expressed in the essay “I Am Lonely.”

Finally, I think I should testify that the loneliness Stan Weir experienced was to some extent—perhaps only a small extent—expressive of the fact that people who leave vanguard parties sometimes carry with them certain vanguard attitudes that are hard to shake. I recall Stan once saying, “We believe, don’t we . . .” It was as if there was an organized “we” that had certain ideas

and Stan was checking to make sure that he and I both shared them. To say the same thing in another way, Stan had certain ideas in which he believed strongly and he tried very hard to cause other persons to accept these ideas.

In conclusion: If there is such a thing as a worker-intellectual, Stan Weir was it. He read Hobsbawm (I recall his excitement in discovering Hobsbawm's concept of "organic intellectuals"). He read George Rude. He read all sorts of writers of whom I have never even heard (see page 32). He was a warm, humorous, decent human being, who never cut himself off from whence he came. As Mark Anthony said of Brutus: The elements in him were so co-mixed "that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, This was a man."