

Lessons of the American Revolutionary Left of the 1970s

October 13, 2012

Book review of: Michael Staudenmaier. *Truth and Revolution: A History of the Sojourner Truth Organization, 1969-1986*. Oakland: AK Press, 2012. Bibliography, index. 387 pages. Paperback, \$19.95.

Michael Staudenmaier's *Truth and Revolution: A History of the Sojourner Truth Organization*, recently published by the radical AK Press, is a thoroughly engaging critical history of one of the most interesting revolutionary socialist groups that emerged from the radical upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s. While Staudenmaier clearly admires STO, many of whose members he knew and several of whom were his friends, this is far from being a hagiographic work. The author presents the group with all its foibles, its many frustrations and its ultimate failures, without ever letting us forget that what he admires about this group was its attempt to develop socialist theory while also being deeply committed to organizing and struggle. It is not surprising that this book is being widely read by many of the new non-state socialist groups such as Advance the Struggle and the Black Orchid Collective that have arisen out of the social movements of the last decade and become visible through their work in the Occupy movement, for today they are striving to establish a theory and practice just as STO did—and just as many other groups from a full range of left perspectives did—in the 1970s. While there are now a pile of books about the party-building efforts of the 1960s and 70s, Staudenmaier's is the most interesting one I've encountered.[1]

Perhaps I like this book so much in part because I lived in Chicago in the 1970s and knew a few of the STO members and always liked them. I was a member of the International Socialists (IS) and some of our members worked in the International Harvester tractor plant with some STO members and our two groups often collaborated, and sometimes differed, on workplace and community issues that arose there. Though STO formed part of the New Communist Movement and the IS had come out of the Trotskyist tradition, our groups overlapped in many of our political positions and in our work. We shared not only labor and community organizing experiences, but also found ourselves over the years involved in the same movements for international solidarity with the initial revolution in Iran in 1979 and with the Central American national liberation movements of the 1980s, and we shared preoccupations with the issues of African American struggles for civil rights and social justice and women's fights for equality and liberation. Like STO, we in the IS wrestled with the problems that arise in a political organization from young people's passionate personal relationships, with the issue of parenting and childcare, with the problems of leadership "heavies" who often seemed to make decisions without adequate consultation with the ranks. I think that anyone who was active in the left of the 1970s in almost any group would recognize themselves in parts of the STO story, and that new groups arising today will profit from Staudenmaier's thoughtful examination of STO's history.

STO's Theory

The Sojourner Truth Organization was founded in Chicago in 1969 and Chicago remained its headquarters throughout its history, though in the 1970s and 80s the name was also applied to a network of organizations in cities mostly in the Midwest affiliated with and largely led by STO in Chicago. Several initial founders, who remained its leaders throughout most of its history, came out of Communist Party backgrounds. Don Hamerquist had been an outstanding young leader of the Communist Party who some believed would succeed its longtime chairman Gus Hall, but after

attempting “to lead a coup in the party” and failing, he quit. Noel Ignatin (later known as Noel Ignatiev) had also been a Communist, but had left the CP with Ted Allen and Harry Haywood to found the Provisional Organizing Committee to Reconstitute the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (the POC). Carol Travis was the daughter of Bud Travis, a Communist Party leader in the seizure and occupation of the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan, by autoworkers in the strike of 1936-37. Many of the STO founders had also been members of Students for a Democratic Society (sds) and one had been a member of the Black Panthers. While STO formed part of the New Communist Movement, largely made up of Maoist organizations, it was from early on influenced by C.L.R. James who had come out of the Trotskyist tradition. Then too, Ken Lawrence had come out of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) experience, and brought the syndicalist idea into the group. Though its initial founding core had one African American and one Latina woman, both soon left the group and throughout most of its history STO was an all white organization.

What STO’s founding members had in common was a desire to build what they understood to be a Leninist organization based on independent workplace organizing and a belief that to do so they would have to challenge the racism of white workers. The notion of the importance of organizing workers had its roots in Marx and Lenin, but it had taken on a new sense of urgency and possibility as a result of the May-June strike in Paris in 1968, the “hot autumn” of strikes in Italy in 1969, and the massive strike wave in the United States in 1970. Unlike other groups in the New Communist Movement, the International Socialists, the Maoist “parties,” and other groups that had gone into the workplace to build rank-and-file or reform caucuses within the unions, STO argued that it was necessary to build completely “independent workers’ organizations” that would not be part of unions and would not contest to control union structures and offices. The theory of independent workers’ organizations (or workers councils as they were sometimes called), principally crafted by Don Hamerquist, was one of the two distinctive theoretical and strategic ideas developed by STO.

The other idea that STO developed and popularized was “white skin privilege,” a theory first suggested by Noel Ignatin and Ted Allen (not an STO member) in a paper called “The White Blindspot” originally written for a debate in sds in 1967. (Actually Allen had used the term in 1965 in a piece commemorating John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry; the kernel of the idea came from W.E.B. DuBois *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*.) White supremacy, they argued, was largely founded on white skin privilege, a set of real social and material benefits that accrued to those deemed to be white, from preferential treatment by government and police to first hired and last fired in the workplace. White skin privilege was seen as the principal obstacle to unity between black and white workers. STO argued that in the course of labor and social struggles, whites would have to repudiate their white skin privileges and show support for the struggles of African Americans and Latinos, and that by doing so, unity between white workers and workers of color would make possible a united proletarian struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Hamerquist, who helped to develop these theories about white workers’ racism and about the nature of the union, brought in the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci whose then recently translated *Prison Notebooks* used the concept of “hegemony” rather than simply the state’s monopoly of force to explain bourgeois rule. (Gramsci later became enormously popular among leaders of the more social democratic New Left, who used his concept of hegemony and the “war of position” rather than a “war of maneuver” to justify their turn to the Democratic Party. And, of course, Gramsci became enormously popular in academia where his writings were used for cultural studies rather than cultural or social revolution.) Hamerquist argued that bourgeois hegemony was exercised over the working class through the labor bureaucracy and through white racism. He developed the concept of “dual consciousness” (*not* to be confused with W.E.B. DuBois’ use of that term), meaning that workers tended to have in their minds a bourgeois and a proletarian consciousness, and the job of revolutionaries was to help them in strengthening their proletarian consciousness. (In the political

tradition from which I come, we never had such a Manichaeian notion of workers' consciousness, but tended to recognize that most people of whatever class have a "mixed consciousness"—our minds made up of residues of beliefs and concepts from our family, religious training, grammar school education, the world of teenage peers, the bombardment from commercial advertising, and politicians appeals to patriotism—the challenge being to come to think clearly about the world—Marxism helps—so that they can make intelligent choices for a revolutionary alternative.)

While independent workers' organizations and white skin privilege were the two key ideas that distinguished the STO from other left organizations, during the 1970s and into the 1980s, the group also developed other positions that differentiated it from the New Communist milieu out of which it had come. During the 1970s Hamerquist and Ignatin wrote important documents breaking with Stalinism: they repudiated Stalin, they rejected the notion that Khrushchev or his successors had reformed the Soviet Union, and they rejected the idea that China or Cuba were socialist states, arguing that all were state capitalist. No doubt the influence of C.L.R. James had been important in leading them to this conclusion. They also rejected the Stalinist forms of party organization, arguing that most of what the left called Leninism were actually undemocratic structures and practices that would better be called Stalinism.

Finally, STO had throughout its history a very healthy concern about the relationship between a cadre organization or a political tendency attempting to build a revolutionary party and the movements, usually small but sometimes mass movements, in which it worked. Later in the 1970s and early 80s, STO would characterize this question between what we call in my tradition the issue of "party and class" as the issue of "autonomy." This notion of autonomy is perhaps what Staudenmaier values most in the STO experience, though as he would be the first to admit, nowhere did the group succeed in either adequately explaining the theory or in working it out in practice. Autonomy was for STO, as it has been the other groups on the left, a slippery concept expressing the high ideal of freedom of thought and action for a social group, but constantly entangled in the questions of organizational structure, leadership, and program.

Workplace Organizing

Staudenmaier provides a useful chronology of the STO's activities: from 1969-1975, workplace organizing; from 1976-1980, anti-imperialist solidarity; from 1980-1986, tendency building and direct action. During the first period of workplace organizing, STO grew to fifty members in the Chicago area, many of those members engaged in organizing in factories in Chicago and for a while in steel mills in Gary, Indiana. In those workplaces STO often put out factory bulletins with names like *Talk Back* and *Breakout!* as well as its newspaper *Insurgent Worker*. STO, and the several lawyers in the group, also became involved in assisting workers in plants where it did not have members. While STO was sometimes involved in heroic and inspiring struggles, as Staudenmaier's account makes clear, the group's labor organizing activities seldom led to the formation of stable groups in workplaces. In part this was due to STO's refusal to run for union office—though it did sometimes tacitly support reform candidates in the unions.

Though many STO members were in unionized workplaces, the union was not an arena of struggle for the group and consequently it could not turn its workplace struggles into institutional victories that might have changed the character of the unions. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that in many of the larger workplaces in Chicago, such as the Stewart-Warner plant, STO was only one of several left groups—from the Communist Party to the New American Movement from Maoists to Trotskyists—that had organizers in the plant, often with their own bulletins and newspaper. STO's refusal to permit its members to run for office led to splits in the organization, as several of its best organizers, such as its leaders of the Latino caucus at the International Harvester plant, left the organization. Nowhere did STO succeed in creating the independent workers' organization which

stood at the center of its political theory.

All of the revolutionary socialist groups on the left in the 1970s were attempting to build a revolutionary party out of their work in industrial workplaces. The STO experience might be compared to that of other leftist groups, mostly Maoists, that ran their members for election as union steward, built local union caucuses, and participated in broader union movements, such as Steelworkers Fight Back, a caucus that supported Ed Sadlowski's campaign for president of the United Steel Workers (USW) in 1977. Local union and national campaigns gave activists an opportunity to talk not only about shop floor issues, but also about the large issues facing the union, the industry and the society. When workers found their shop floor work had an impact on union policy and relations to the employer, they achieved power, as well as a greater sense of their own power, and often also improved their wages, working conditions, and benefits. The most successful among the left organizations in such union work was IS, which was involved in initiating such caucuses in the United Auto Workers, the Communications Workers of America, as well as participating in such caucuses in the American Federation of Teachers and the USW. Most significant of these experiences was the IS's role in establishing Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), a long standing caucus in the Teamsters union.[2] The IS also initiated *Labor Notes*, the union reform newspaper and education center with biannual conventions that attracted a thousand union activists each year. While the IS initiated these projects, they were never conceived of as socialist projects and from the beginning were independent (autonomous) organizations with their own leadership, organization and resources, and programs. The collapse of the social movements of the 1970s (among African Americans, Latinos, women and students) and the end of the recent period of labor militancy with the recessions of 1974-75 and 1979-80, accompanied by the country's rightwing administration under Ronald Reagan and depoliticization of the society, made the task of relating labor work to socialist ideas and organization a challenge for all of those on the left, with no simple answers.

Throughout that first five years of labor organizing, STO had constant interactions with African American and Latino workers and leftists, but its white skin privilege theory proved of little use in building alliances between white workers and workers of color, while STO could never decide if it should recruit people of color to its own organization, or urge them to join an African American or Latino socialist group. STO literature often challenged white workers to give up their white skin privilege and to support the demands of African American and Latino workers, but in practice it was not always clear what this would actually mean. Most other left groups viewed STO's white skin privilege theory as liberal and moralistic; in any case, it proved no guide to action. Based on Staudenmaier's account, African American and Latino organizations and leaders appear to have been mystified by STO's theory and practice. The few African American workers who joined STO during this period left in the splits. By the mid-1970s, STO was reduced to six members.

Anti-Imperialist Work

In 1976 STO decided that the economic and political climate was at a "lull," suggesting that workplace organizing would not be possible for some time. The group therefore should turn its attention to theory, education, and work in the anti-imperialist movements. (This is very similar to the notion of the "downturn" developed by Tony Cliff of the Socialist Workers Party of Great Britain in 1978 and then the International Socialist Organization of the United States shortly afterwards.) So in 1977 Ken Lawrence developed the STO's mandatory "Dialectics Course" with reading from Hegel, Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Luckacs, C.L.R. James and Mark Twain (yes, that's the same Mark Twain you're thinking of). STO members would take a week off work and political activities to go out into the country for these sessions in which all members participated, first as students and then as instructors. The "Dialectics Course" helped to give the STO a reputation as one of the most intellectual and theoretical groups on the left.

Most of the group's work at this time was in support for anti-imperialist struggles, particularly the struggle of Puerto Rico for independence. While STO worked at first with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) a Marxist-Leninist party in Puerto Rico and the United States closely aligned with Cuba). STO eventually, however, became part of the National Liberation Movement (MLN), a collection of left groups that supported the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), a Puerto Rican group that set off 120 bombs in Chicago and New York between 1974 and 1983. STO members believed that they had to support the Puerto Ricans struggle against imperialism, including the armed struggle.

While STO sometimes differed with the FALN and other Puerto Rican groups, it would not make its political difference public because of the repression that the armed movement and other Puerto Rican organizations were facing. Consequently, STO's own political positions became completely lost in its unconditional and apparently uncritical support of the MLN and FALN. Also, like some other left groups, STO took a position of support for the revolution in Iran, including initially backing the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who ultimately brought the rightwing Islamic dictatorship. Similarly, STO found itself becoming an unconditional and uncritical supporter of Central American revolutionary movements during the period of its participation in the solidarity groups such as the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). Throughout the years of this work, Staudenmaier explains, STO's member worked frantically, rushing from one crisis to another, from one organization to another, until in the frenetic race from one emergency to another some in the group felt that they lost sight of their own identity and objectives.

Tendency Building and Direct Action

After five years of work in the anti-imperialist movements, STO changed its direction once again, this time to tendency building and an emphasis on direct action. STO had had a wealth of organizing experience, and despite being unable to point to many significant victories, its core ideas—*independent workers' organizations* and *white skin privilege*—had become attractive to a number of organizations in cities in the Midwest and in some other areas of the country, most notably Denver, Colorado, and Portland, Oregon, though there was also an attempt at organizing in Mississippi. Led by STO, these local collectives now put their energies into the anti-war movement that had developed against Ronald Reagan's wars in Central America and into the new anti-nuclear movement led by the Clamshell Alliance. STO was attracted to these movements because of their commitment to direct action, though appalled by their pacifism and opposition to violence, and frustrated by the middle class, white composition of the movements.

The attempt to build a national tendency eventually failed for several reasons. Since its founding in 1969 STO had been plagued by what Staudenmaier calls "informal hierarchies," that is, a small group of the original founders—Hamerquist, Ignatin, Travis, and Lawrence, and a couple of others—dominated the group whether or not they held formal office. They tended to develop the positions, write the documents, maintain contacts with local and national organizations, and determine the course of the group. STO failed throughout its history to establish democratic structures and processes and that both undermined its own functioning and proved an obstacle to establishing a national tendency. Then too, STO's core theoretical concepts—*independent workers' organizations* and *white skin privilege*—seemed to be unrelated to the group's work in the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements in the 1980s, work which had little to do with the workplace or with winning white workers from their racism. Finally, demography was a real factor: many of the group's members were aging, a few were parents with responsibilities for their children, and others, having left the industrial workplace, were moving on to other careers. (Ignatin, for example, born in 1940, turned 45 in 1985, and left the group a year before it died.) While STO had been interested in building an international tendency in the 1980s together with the *autonomia* groups in Italy and Germany, the debilitation of its own based in the United States made this impossible.

After STO withered away in 1986, several of its leaders went on to have interesting jobs and professions in other areas. Carole Travis, breaking with STO's historic opposition to taking union office, became the president of United Auto Workers Local 719 at the GM Electromotive plant, serving three terms (nine years), and later went on to work for the Service Employees International Union as Director of the Illinois State Council for thirteen years. Most recently she participated in the Occupy movement in both Zuccotti Park and Oakland. Michael Goldfield became a professor of labor history at Wayne State University in Detroit focusing his research on workers' movements and labor, and in particular on the failure of the labor unions to organize the South. Noel Ignatin became a professor at the Massachusetts College of Art, best known for his book *How the Irish Became White* and for his journal *Race Traitor*. The Sojourner Truth Organization's survivors and successors have put its digital archives on the net, with as complete a collection as possible of its journals, newspaper, and pamphlets. Many of the former STO members retain their revolutionary socialist worldview and continue to contribute to movements as they have in some cases for fifty years.

The Lessons of the Experience

Sojourner Truth Organization represented only one of dozens of groups and involved only hundreds of the thousands of leftists who in the period between the late 1960s and 1980s were involved in attempts to build revolutionary organizations. American economic and political power, police repression, and the difficulties of developing a political theory and practice appropriate to the United States led all of those efforts to fail. In 1979-1981 most of the Maoist groups collapsed; the Socialist Workers Party, the largest Trotskyist group, after a belated and brief attempt at entering industry and the unions, evolved into a Castroite sect; the International Socialists split three ways between 1978 and 1979, and the New American Movement majority gave up its revolutionary vocation and merged with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) to form the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA). The STO suffered the common fate that befell what we can call the Generation of 1968.

After one has finished reading Staudenmaier's book three points stand out in my mind. First, STO never succeeded in developing the democratic structures and processes necessary for an effective political organization. Second, STO's two core theories—white skin privilege and independent workers' organizations—never proved a guide to action. They did not accurately describe the nature of workers' movements in the labor unions with their particular relationship to capital, nor did they adequately capture the nature of American racism in such a way as to guide the work of activists. Third, STO's healthy concern about the autonomy of mass movements, workers' organizations, and the struggles of African Americans and Latinos never emerged as a clear theory of any sort. While it always considered itself Leninist, STO never succeeded in describing the relationship between a revolutionary organization and the way it should relate to the movements in which it operates.

What lay behind the STO's white skin privilege and union abstention theories? I suspect that STO's theories were rooted in their attempts to grapple with the strengths and weaknesses of the Communist Party out of which either they or their parents had come. The white skin privilege theory expressed their profound frustration with the widespread racism of white workers—which had become so palpable South and North during the Civil Rights movement and the War in Vietnam—and which proved so obdurate. The Communists—despite the remarkable work they had done (not without its serious problems created by the vicissitudes of the Stalinist era, but better than everyone else's), despite their often brilliant and courageous African American cadres, and despite their remarkable and also courageous white fighters against racism—had not been able to turn the corner on the issue in a big way on a national scale—organizing the South being the big unfinished job as Goldfield has pointed out—though they did a remarkable job in various places in the CIO period. The race problem in America is just so terrible and so intractable. And then, of course, the Communist Party had by the late 1930s become tied to a strategy of trying to ally with

or to penetrate the union bureaucracy, a policy which had further distorted its own Stalinist politics. So STO leaders like Hamerquist, Ignatin, and Travis attempted to think their way out of these problems by developing critical theories of white racism and the nature of the labor bureaucracy, which is to their credit. But in the end, those two theories, this self-definition, failed to serve as a guide to action and also became so important to the group's sense of its unique identity, that theory formed a barrier to practice, that is, to mass work, recruitment, and ultimately to the group's survival.

Notes

[1] Others include: Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002); A. Belden Field, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Fred Ho et al., *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (AK Press, 2000); Milton Fisk, *Socialism from Below in the United States: The Origins of the International Socialist Organization*. Fisk's book is really a history of the International Socialists (IS) up to the founding of the ISO. There are also many memoirs of revolutionary activists of the period now available.

[2] Dan La Botz, "The Tumultuous Teamsters of the 1970s," in Aaron Brenner et al., eds., *Rank and File Rebellion: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below during the Long 1970s* (New York: Verso, 2010). See also Dan La Botz, *Rank and File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union* (New York: Verso, 1990).