Loren Goldner (1947-2024): Crossing Paths with a Revolutionary Internationalist

written by Gifford Hartman | June 6, 2024

Loren Goldner

Loren Goldner, activist and writer [for *New Politics*, among other publications — *NP eds*.], passed away in Philadelphia on April 12, 2024. We first met through exchanging letters in July 1997 after he was laid off from his position as librarian for the Center for European Studies at Harvard University. On a whim, he decided to travel around East Asia for three months. He was fifty and I was a thirty-five-year-old itinerant radical who had been living in Seoul, South Korea since 1994, teaching English and living out of a backpack, but more importantly making contact with Korean revolutionaries and working-class militants. This is where Loren and I found instant affinity.

In September, when I arranged to meet him at the airport, he told me to look for an "old guy in a blue windbreaker," a seemingly trivial description that defined my lifelong image of Loren's humbleness and lack of pretense. He literally had no interest in the spectacular consumer frenzy for commodities and lived a life of extreme frugality. In that spirit, I helped him find a cheap, tiny room in an old-style inn, called a *yo-in-sook*, in the historic and ungentrified center of Seoul, replete with sliding doors under a tiled roof supported with exposed log beams, that would be fitting for the most ascetic Buddhist monk. He loved it!

Loren was fascinated by Seoul, so I took him on long walks and introduced my militant Korean friends, many of whom were veterans of the Great Strike of 1987. We found "gritty" workers' districts, where during long talks over sumptuous – but cheap – dinners we discovered we had both been radicalized in Berkeley, albeit a half generation apart. We contrasted his experience of the tumultuous sixties with my coming of age in the Reaganite eighties. The highlight of his brief first stay in Seoul was attending the annual Jeon Tae-il rally, in honor of the garment worker whose self-immolation in 1970 sparked the modern Korean labor movement.

Prior to the event in a massive sports arena, we sat on the ground outside, eating snacks and drinking with younger Korean militants. We marveled at a huge contingent of Hyundai auto workers — most of whom had just been driven across the country in charter buses from the company town of Ulsan — marching into the event with such swagger and confidence from their recent strike successes that it felt like watching a conquering army of larger-than-life heroes coming home to celebrate a decisive victory. Loren dubbed them the "workers' 82nd Airborne," an insider reference — about the most militant elements of the working class — that we shared for the rest of his life.

When I left Korea in 1999, both Loren and I had left our marks. I worked with comrades to translate

and print as a pamphlet Loren's *Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today*. It was very well received because our Korean friends knew next to nothing of this tradition, to the point that some had assumed Bordiga was a Stalinist. Due to our influence, these comrades were translating texts from other unorthodox radical perspectives, like Italian left communism, Dutch-German council communism, and the Situationist International, and publishing them for the first time. South Korea's military dictatorships, which only ended in 1993, drove political radicals underground and the comrades we met were hungry to learn about revolutionary ideas that had been censored for decades.

Our paths crossed again in 2001 in Berkeley, when I moved back and Loren was staying for a few months to take care of his elderly mother who was in poor health. When my mom, who was also living in Berkeley, died unexpectedly in her early sixties, Loren saw how hard I had taken it. He borrowed a car and we drove down Highway 1 along the California coast and simply talked. It was the best therapy for grieving imaginable. Several hours later, when we got to Big Sur, we bought burritos, a six-pack of beer and spent the afternoon at the beach, sitting on the sand, eating, drinking, and talking, and finally watching the sun set over the Pacific. There is no remedy that makes the process of mourning easier, but Loren really, really helped me get through that painful and emotionally difficult period.

Since I knew Loren could not get the memory of those legendary Hyundai autoworkers out of his head, the "workers' 82nd Airborne," I was not surprised when he found an English teaching job at Yonsei University in Seoul in 2005. But before leaving, he needed to transport his library of over 10,000 books from California to his new U.S. base in New York City and I agreed to be co-driver. When we had met in 1997, we also bonded over a love of Beat Generation literature, especially Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, so we lived out our Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty fantasy in our four-day cross-continental road trip (albeit in a huge rental truck). We even stopped in Chicago to visit Forest Home Cemetery to pay tribute to the Haymarket Martyrs. Loren remained in Seoul until 2009 and wrote several excellent accounts of class struggle in East Asia, especially about his visit to the 77-day occupation of the Ssangyong Motors factory at the end of his stay.

I did not get to see him as often, except for a few short trips to New York City or during his infrequent visits to the Bay Area, but he was one of the only true friends and comrades with whom I have shared so many common interests and passions. We could talk into the wee hours – or for the entirety of a 2,900-mile drive – about anything under the sun, literally. I deeply miss those discussions, yet they have forever shaped my character. Loren's keen intellect and passion for fighting for a better world will be missed by all who had the good fortune to know him.

Whenever the working class rises up, with militant strikes or factory occupations, or people fight back against exploitation and oppression anywhere, I will remember Loren, raise my fist in solidarity, and cheer them on in the spirit of those Hyundai "82nd Airborne" auto workers we saw when our paths first crossed in 1997.

On April 19, 2024, I facilitated a workshop called "Striking to Win: Identifying Chokepoints Along Supply Chains" at the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago. The room was packed with rank-and-file workers from various logistics sectors, like railroad, longshore, maritime, warehouse, and other related industries. I began the session by honoring my fallen comrade; in unison, all ninety of us chanted:

"Loren Goldner — ¡Presente!"