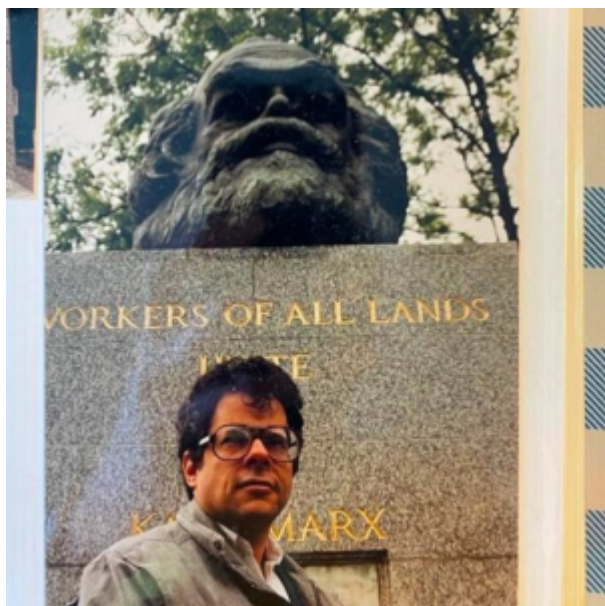
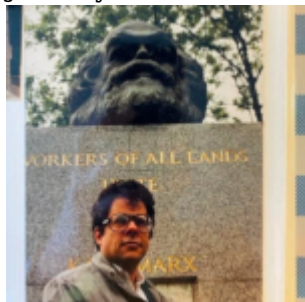


Mike Parker: Socialist, Labor Educator, Political Activist - 1940-2022

January 23, 2022



Mike Parker spent his entire adult life engaged in movements and organizations that he believed would advance the struggle for the creation of a democratic socialist society. In the 1960s he was first a leader of the Student Peace Union, then in California of the Free Speech Movement and the Peace and Freedom Party. In the 1970s he advised The Red Tide, youth group of the International Socialists. In the 1980s and 90s working with Labor Notes he played a central role as an educator in the labor movement, while in the 2000s he became a strategist for the independent Richmond Progressive Alliance in California. As speaker, writer, and organizer, over the course of his life Mike influenced thousands, imbuing them with the idea that they could build strong democratic organizations capable of fighting the corporations, challenging government policies, and making the world a better place.

Young Peoples Socialist League and Student Peace Union

Mike came to socialism through his family first; both of his parent were active in the Socialist Party in Cleveland where he grew up. Not only Mike but also two of his three brothers became active socialists and labor activists, Bill serving as the president of a United Auto Workers local in Detroit and Bob as the president of a United Steel Workers local in Cleveland. If Mike received his socialist ideas from his parents, he made a version of those ideas his own while a student activist in the early 1960s.

While at the University of Chicago, in 1959 Mike joined the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL) from which he imbibed three principles that would stay with him all of his life. First, the idea that

the working class would be central to the fight for socialism, and therefore one had to support the union movement. Second, the notion that the working class needed its own political party, independent of the capitalist parties. And third, the belief that democracy was absolutely essential to socialism. Mike came to think of himself as a revolutionary socialist, and these three principles would be recurring themes of his life's activity.

Parker became the national secretary, the top officer, of the Student Peace Union and encouraged other YPSL members to join. The SPU organized against the development of nuclear arms, with the slogan, "No Test! East or West!" that is, no testing either by the United States or the Soviet Union. That slogan reflected the YPSL's "Third Camp" socialist position, that is opposition to both capitalism and to the totalitarian Communist social systems. SPU argued that it would take a mass movement to force an end to nuclear testing and the elimination of nuclear arms. As one of its national leaders and its principal organizer, Mike succeeded in building an organization that by 1962 had 5,000 members, making it the largest leftist movement in the country at the time. At the same time, Mike also helped to recruit the leading members of the SPU to the YPSL. It was also in 1962 that Mike and fellow YPSL comrade Bernie Sanders were arrested during a civil rights demonstration.

Just about that time a struggle between two factions broke out within the YPSL over the question of political action. Michael Harrington and the "realignment tendency" argued for work in the Democratic Party, believing that the civil rights movement and the progressive labor leaders like Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers could "realign" the Democrats and transform them into a working-class party. Mike Parker and his political partner Joel Geier argued that workers needed their own party, a labor party. The labor party tendency had a strong base in the SPU, so Harrington and the realignment group tried to organize a merger between the SPU and the larger and more moderate National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE). Parker defeated the merger, but by then it hardly mattered. After the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and then the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the SPU went into decline, as did YPSL, both consumed by the intense faction fight between the realignment and labor party tendencies. But by then, everything was changing: the Vietnam War had begun to become a national issue, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had begun to grow rapidly, and the New Left was emerging.

The Free Speech Movement and the Peace and Freedom Party

Mike Parker and his friend Geier, both of whom had been students at the University of Chicago, now moved to the University of California at Berkeley where Mike studied political science. He and Geier began to work with a small group there led by the librarian and longtime socialist intellectual Hal Draper. Twenty-four of them, mostly former YPSL members, formed the Independent Socialist Club (ISC) in 1964. Members of the ISC were active in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which was leading fights for equal employment opportunities in the Bay Area. Responding to pressure from Bay Area business interests, the University administration attempted to clamp down on groups like CORE that were distributing literature and collecting funds for civil rights organizations. In October 1964, Jack Weinberg, a member of CORE and the ISC, was passing out literature when police attempted to arrest him, but three thousand students surrounded the police car in which he was being held. That launched the Free Speech Movement (FSM), one of the first and largest of the student movements on campuses across the country.

Mike was elected by the ISC to be one of its two members on the executive committee of the FSM, where he played a role developing the movement's strategies and tactics as it fought throughout 1964 and 1965 against the restrictions on advocacy. The FSM organized a hugely successful student strike and the occupation of Sproul Hall, the administration building, which was met by the biggest mass arrest in U.S. history until that time. Mike, unlike Weinberg, Draper, or the movement's

foremost leader Mario Savio, was not a public figure, but typical of his organizing style, he worked behind the scenes to provide support and advice.

Mike was involved in all the major Bay Area protest movements of the 1960s, including CORE's mass picketing in Oakland's Jack London Square in January 1965, where he was arrested, and such militant anti-war actions as Stop the Draft Week in 1967. Mike also organized in support of the United Farm Workers throughout the 1960s.

In 1967, the ISC turned its attention to building a new political party that could represent the civil rights and anti-war movements. Joel Geier remembers, "Mike was the crucial person in setting up the Peace and Freedom Party. He was the organizer both in Berkeley and statewide." Mike was involved in all that goes into creating a political party, gathering petition signatures, finding candidates, local meetings, state conventions. He also worked closely with Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, leaders of the Black Panther Party. Peace and Freedom and the Panthers both organized the campaign to free Huey Newton, the leading Panther organizer who had been arrested after a shootout with police. The California Peace and Freedom Party chose Eldridge Cleaver as its candidate for U.S. president in 1968 and also ran several other Panthers for state and national office.

The International Socialists and the Red Tide

In 1969, Mike was a founding member of International Socialists (IS), which succeeded the ISC and soon had about 300 members in several cities, though mostly on the coasts. The IS held discussions from 1969 to 1971 about how to take socialist ideas into the working class. It was decided that ISers who were able to should move to Midwestern cities, get jobs in heavy industry, and become members of the country's most important labor unions. Several members of the Berkeley branch then left to move to Chicago and Detroit, but Mike stayed in the Bay Area for a few more years as a leader of the branch. Technology had always fascinated Mike, and in that period, to make a living he became a television repairperson.

In this period, Mike worked with the high school age students of The Red Tide. The group had begun in Los Angeles and later merged with the Contra Costa Socialist Coalition; then it was refounded in 1974 as the youth organization of the International Socialists, establishing branches in Detroit and other Midwest cities. Mike talked with the group's members about capitalism and socialism, racism and Third World revolutions. Red Tide member Larry Bradshaw, then known as Bushy, remembered Mike as a mentor who offered, "light-handed leadership," helping the young people "in the building and sustaining of an organization of revolutionaries." Not long ago he wrote a letter to Mike in which he said, "You imbued in me, at an early age, the core premise of socialism from below; socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class — or it is nothing." He added, "To this day, I understand the Democratic Party is a party of war, imperialism and structural racism; that it is a party of capital, not a vehicle or not even tool or means for ending exploitation and oppression."

Mike played a key role in a debate within the International Socialists about how to organize in the working class. A faction called the Revolutionary Tendency, influenced by Leon Trotsky's *Transitional Program*, argued that the IS should develop a full, written program for the unions in which it was involved. Parker argued that that was a sectarian approach and suggested instead that socialists, guided by the goal of working-class revolution, do not need a paper program but rather long- and short-term tasks and the ability to continually reevaluate the situation. Socialist activists should be guided by workers' experience and consciousness in fighting the bosses, challenging the labor bureaucracy, and arguing against the idea that capitalism can be reformed. Mike's arguments helped defeat that sectarian faction and made it possible for the IS to go on to do important labor organizing work in the auto, steel, telephone, and trucking industries.

That faction fight was over, but Mike felt it was important to clarify some of the organization's fundamental positions, so he wrote a long document—practically an outline for a book—on the question of the so-called Communist countries. He wanted to address several important issues: What is socialism? What is internationalism? And what is leadership? In his document he explained in great detail the origins and functioning of the bureaucratic collectivist, totalitarian Soviet Communist society. He argued that the Soviet Union was not socialist, but rather a new form of class society ruled by the Communist Party bureaucrats who exploited the workers. He rejected the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” argument now called “campism.” He explained that though the Soviet Union opposed the United States and Western capitalism, it could not be supported because it behaved in ways similar to capitalism both within Russia and as an imperial power in the world. He called rather for solidarity with workers’ struggles for democracy and better lives in those Communist societies as well as in the West.

The United Auto Workers Union and the Rank-and-File Strategy

In the mid-1970s, Mike moved to Detroit where he got a job working at Chrysler’s Warren Stamping plant, which employed several thousand workers. He generally worked as an electrician both there and later at Ford’s famous River Rouge plant. At Warren Stamping he was elected as a delegate to the UAW convention but on another occasion was disappointed after failing to win election to the position of committeeperson. He also later worked as a contractor repairing and installing machinery, including, ironically, installing robots that were replacing workers. He believed that job gave him insight into how unions should negotiate for control over the introduction of new technology in the workplace.

More important than Mike’s role as an activist in his plant was his work to educate and train workers to fight the employers. In the 1980s, employers began to introduce what was called Team Concept or Quality Circles. Taking advantage of unions’ failure to listen to workers and help them to improve their work lives, the companies began to step in. Workers were told that the company wanted their collaboration to make better products more efficiently and safely. Managers now said to workers, “We’d like to hear your ideas.” Many union leaders and members welcomed the new approach.

When Mike heard this, it reminded him of a college course he had taken back in the early 1960s about “brainwashing,” which, at the height of the Cold War, was then a hot topic. How, wondered U.S. government officials, had the North Koreans succeeded in convincing U.S. prisoners of war to collaborate and in some cases even defect? How, Mike now wondered, had the companies convinced workers to collaborate with them, even though it often meant working faster, often with fewer workers, and earning the bosses more money.

Mike examined the Quality of Work Life movement, combining a study of corporate literature, his own shopfloor experience, and discussions with workers. In 1985 Labor Notes published his book *Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to Quality of Work Life*. He explained that workers were attracted to such programs because, they appealed to “workers’ best instincts—to do a good job, to be part of a group, to make a contribution.” QWL challenged the idea that unions best represented workers’ interests in the workplace. “The main point of quality of work life,” Parker wrote, “is to convince workers that their security and future are tied to the success of the company (or plant or department) instead of to their union—hardly the way to build labor solidarity throughout an entire industry.”

Mike pointed out how companies using Team Concept tried to clean up and clear out the plants, getting rid of excess parts and scrap, going to just-in-time delivery of parts to the workers’ machines, so that managers could see more clearly what each worker was doing and what all of the

workers were doing. In the early days workers were invited to activate a cord or button, called the *andon* cord to stop production and warn managers of problems on the line. All of this, however, was used to make the system more effective and to get workers to perform more efficiently, putting them under greater stress.

Labor Notes organized "Team Concept Schools" where Parker, along with fellow IS member and *Labor Notes* editor Jane Slaughter, discussed the pros and cons of Team Concept with workers from a variety of industries and unions. At the time, these programs were often called "Japanese management," because they had been developed at Toyota. But Mike and Jane rejected that name, pointing out that they had been adopted and further developed by corporations around the world. They called Team Concept and QWL "management by stress."

In 1992, Parker developed this critique further in another book, *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept*, co-authored with Slaughter. As Jane Slaughter said, "Mike's analysis of lean production and labor management cooperation was brilliant and not what anybody else was doing. It won enormous attention from union people and academics."

Mike was always an amusing and engaging speaker who often spoke through parables, using stories to illustrate his points. He was also a believer in the Socratic method, frequently doing less talking than questioning, because he believed that, asked the right questions, workers would figure out on their own what was wrong with the company's ideas of the team and quality.

Mike's political tradition had always emphasized the idea that it was necessary to build rank-and-file movements to fight for workers because labor union officials could not be relied upon to do so. At the heart of this was the notion of democracy both in the union and in the workplace. In 1998, Mike took this up in another book, *Democracy Is Power: Rebuilding Unions from the Bottom Up* (1999), co-authored with Labor Notes staffer Martha Gruelle. Mike's classes at Labor Notes conferences and schools and his book influenced thousands of union officers, stewards and rank-and-filers.

When the International Socialists merged with other left groups to form Solidarity in 1986, Mike was a founding member. Throughout their years in Detroit, Mike and his wife Margaret, whose political activism paralleled Mike's, were known for their generosity, opening their home to meetings of socialists, labor union activists, and many others. They hosted the first annual Superbowl/Anti-Superbowl, for fans and not-fans, later carried on by others in their activist community after they left. At home, Mike exercised on his Nordic Track machine and spent time with Margaret and their daughter Johanna.

The Richmond Progressive Alliance and DSA

In 2007, Mike and Margaret left Detroit and returned to the Bay Area, buying a house in Richmond. They discovered there that a group of community activists had created an independent political organization called the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA), which was fighting the powerful Chevron oil company. RPA had even succeeded in electing the mayor, Gayle McLaughlin. Mike and Margaret joined the RPA and Mike became one of the party's principal strategists. In 2016 the RPA won a five-person supermajority on the seven-member city council. B K Williams of RPA said, "Mike really held the group together. He mentored me and everyone else who came along. He deepened people's politics, knowledge, skills, and acumen."

With the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016, the Democratic Socialists of America began to grow rapidly, Mike and Margaret joined when they saw that it was attracting large number of young people to socialism. Mike accepted DSA's strategy of running candidates in the Democratic Party, but just as throughout his earlier life, he continued to believe that it was necessary to overthrow

capitalism, that the Democratic as well as the Republican parties served the capitalist class, and that the working class needed to organize its own political party. As he said in a recent interview published by the Bread and Roses caucus in its paper *The Call*, "This organization [DSA] needs to make clear that the enemy is not just Republicans but capitalism, and that the capitalist class exerts influence through the Democratic Party too. So, number one, we need to create that kind of understanding. For now, we can do that without having a formal, legal party, but eventually we will need one."

"I was very lucky to befriend Mike Parker at a time when I really needed his practical wisdom," said Natalie Miridi, who served on the DSA National Political Committee. "Although most people typically associate him with Labor Notes, Solidarity, and his books, I also credit him with helping DSA through our growing pains and several very difficult years between 2017 and 2019. He gave me advice on many phone calls which I dearly needed (even though it almost always started with, 'you're really not going to like this') and could not get from many other people in my life,"

Mike became an informal advisor to many labor union organizers and activists too numerous to name. Pam Galpern, a New York telephone worker and activist in CWA Local 1101, commented, "One of the things that made Mike so special was that he had this tremendous wealth of experiences and wanted to share them, not by talking over people, but by talking with them."

If Mike exerted a powerful influence on people, it was in large part because of his confidence. Jane Slaughter observed that Mike acted on this principle: "Decide what you believe and what you're going to do, and proceed as if you're right." If when you proceeded you discovered you had made mistakes, you would adjust course, but it was important to engage. Mike's political principles, his commitment to the labor movement, his belief in independent political action, and belief in socialism from below were exemplified by his long, full, and exemplary life.

As Bernie Sanders told Labor Notes, "I knew Mike Parker when I was a student at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s. Mike was a brilliant advocate for workers and unions, and he remained so for the rest of his life. Mike fought tirelessly for human solidarity and a more just and humane world. His life's work and his dedication should serve as an example for all of us."

Lois Weiner, a member of the Berkeley ISC and currently of the *New Politics* editorial board, said, "I think Mike was remarkable for being an intellectual whose commitment to democracy extended to his way of talking and being with people who didn't share his views and knew less than he did. He was a lovely human being."

In Richmond, just as in Detroit, Mike and Margaret had a wide circle of friends, many from among their fellow political activists. Mike sang for a while in the Contra Costa Chorale and hiked every Wednesday, while Margaret worked in her garden. Margaret died of cancer in January 2020 and Mike died of pancreatic cancer on January 15, 2022. They are survived by their daughter Johanna, Mike's brothers Bob and Bill Parker, and their many friends.

