

Steve Kindred: Irrepressible American Radical, 1944-2013

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Steve Kindred, an irrepressible American radical— student and antiwar activist, socialist, and labor organizer—died of cancer on December 9, 2013 in New York City at the age of 69.

Kindred, a legendary figure among Teamster activists, had worked in various states as a freight driver, car hauler, and limousine driver; helped to establish several TDU chapters; led wildcat strikes; and counseled reformers who ran for office. Brilliant, courageous, eccentric, down-to-earth, generous, and kind, Kindred was remembered by family and friends at a memorial service held at the Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies of the City University of New York on February 8.

Born on May 14, 1944 in Waverly, Iowa, Kindred was the son of Arthur Kindred, a Methodist minister, and Carol Hunt Kindred, who played music in the church; visited the congregation's poor, sick, and elderly; and raised three boys. Steve's brother Mike told the 150 friends and family members who attended the memorial that Arthur Kindred's support for the Civil Rights Movement and opposition to the U.S. war against Vietnam strongly influenced his sons. The family's Methodist missionary visitors who had served in other countries around the world widened the children's horizons. Hoboes knew the Kindred home as a place where they could get a warm meal. Their mother's ministrations to the poor served as a model for the concern for others and kindness towards society's less fortunate that came to form part of the core of Steve Kindred's character.

Educated in Iowa's public schools, Steve went off in 1962 to study at the University of Chicago, where he soon moved into the activist circles opposing the Vietnam War. His grad student friend Bernard Tuchman became a mentor who discussed political ideas and social movement strategy with him. Kindred became involved in the fight against the University of Chicago's complicity in the Vietnam War; the school was providing student lists and rankings to the Selective Service System. In the spring of 1966, Steve was among the students who occupied the university administration buildings as professors such as Jesse Lemisch and Staughton Lynd taught American history from the Bottom Up to the occupiers. As a result of his participation, Steve ended up being suspended from the university.

Steve became active in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Founded in 1960, SDS developed by the mid- to late-1960s into a national, mass organization through which passed thousands of members before its demise due to sectarian in-fighting at the 1969 convention. In 1966 Steve's father convinced the board of the Methodist camp at Clear Lake, Iowa, to allow the SDS convention to be held on its grounds. Meanwhile, back in Chicago, Steve had become persona non grata with Mayor Richard J. Daley's police department, and was constantly harassed by them.

After the collapse of SDS, Steve and other members of the University of Chicago student movement joined the newly formed International Socialists (I.S.), an organization that Steve saw as embodying his belief that socialism had to be built from below by ordinary working people. Led intellectually by Hal Draper, the I.S. defined itself as democratic, revolutionary and internationalist. The I.S. came out of the Third Camp socialist tradition; that is, it opposed both capitalism, including European Social Democracy, and the bureaucratic Communism of the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba.

Based initially in Berkeley and New York City, the group had decided by 1970 that its members

would move to Midwestern industrial cities and seek jobs in industry. The I.S. believed that socialists working in industrial unions could help to build rank-and-file caucuses that would either force labor union officials to fight the employers or push them aside. Out of these caucuses the I.S. was convinced that it would be possible to recruit working-class activists to socialism and to begin to build a small revolutionary socialist party in the United States.

Steve, who was then living in Los Angeles, worked with other I.S. members there to create a student worker alliance with its newspaper *The Picketline*. When in 1970 the Teamsters went on strike, Steve and other I.S. members recruited students to support the strike and won new friends among the Teamsters with whom they walked the picket lines. At that time, Steve met and worked with Curly Best, a Teamster who had founded the "500 at 50" club, fighting for \$500 a month at 50 years of age for retiring Teamsters.

When in July 1971 a group of rank-and-file Teamsters met in Toledo to create the Teamster Union Rank and File (TURF), Best was chosen as one of its national leaders and Steve became his aide and editor of TURF's newspaper. Steve had a gift for listening to workers, talking with them, and convincing them to become active in the rank-and-file movement.

TURF did not survive very long, but by the mid-1970s, the International Socialists had several members active in forming rank-and-file groups in various Teamster locals. Steve played a key role in the mid-1970s, traveling throughout the Midwest and meeting with local Teamster activists, convincing them to join the national contract campaign Teamsters for a Decent Contract and later in 1976 Teamsters for a Democratic Union. During the late 1970s Steve worked in Detroit with Teamster activists on local union election campaigns and with car haulers and provided leaderships for a massive wildcat strike in Ohio.

When in 1986 the International Socialists merged with two other organizations to form Solidarity: A Socialist, Feminist, Anti-Racist Organization, it was Kindred who made the motion to name the group Solidarity after the Polish workers movement *Solidarność*, which through mass union organization and strikes had challenged the Polish Communist government.

After the mid-1980s Steve married Ellen Goldensohn and moved to Manhattan, becoming involved in support for Teamster warehousemen. Steve was active in the TDU-supported Ron Carey for Teamster President campaigns in 1991 and 1996 and for a time in the 1990s worked as a union official in a local that had been thrown into trusteeship because of previous union corruption. In 2009 Steve became involved in the support committee for the workers at the Stella D'Oro Biscuit Company in New York.

Steve's friends knew him as a voracious reader of books on history, politics, and science, as lover of art and nature, as a loving father to his son, Benjamin. Steve often stopped to talk with homeless men he met on the street, got to know their names, and became friendly with them, helped them out with a few dollars now and then, and sometimes took their clothes home to wash and fold them. He walked down the street picking up and compacting trash, got into conversations with everyone, rushed to help anyone who might need help on the street, including interrupting at least one robbery with his powerful and, if need be, frightening voice.

Suffering throughout his life from depression, which he battled through with therapy and medications, he was at times deeply disturbed by issues public and private that could lead him to obsessive, uncontrollable and unstoppable monologues. Though oblivious at those moments to others, he remained at his core a remarkably kind, generous, and loving human being.

From the time he joined the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in the 1960s, through SDS, the IS and

TDU, Steve remained committed to the idea that society must be changed from the bottom up. He believed that every human being was an interesting and in their way an important person, treated all with dignity, could be counted on the side of the underdog. As his longtime friend Dave Finkel reminded those at the memorial service, Steve remained true to that compass, never fooled by the idea that there was a shortcut through support for some Communist country or work in the Democratic Party. Socialism would have to come from below, from the grassroots, from the rank and file, from the ordinary people whom Steve helped, trusted, loved, and respected.

A version of this obituary appeared earlier in Jacobin. 