

Stan Weir  
(and a brief snapshot of left wing politics)

One evening, toward the end of August in 1968, I received a call from someone named Stan Weir, explaining that he had just arrived in Washington from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and that a mutual friend gave him my name. He will be spending the year in Washington, doing research on a union democracy study. Could he meet with me? Absolutely. Union democracy was one of my favorite subjects. I invited him to come to dinner the next day.

When he showed up, I was greeted by a tall, muscular red head, carrying flowers for Sylvia, and a note book in which to record my immortal words. We began talking about our involvement with the labor movement. I summarized my few years with the ILGWU, the laundry workers and AFSCME. Stan's involvement was a lot longer, and as a worker, not as a union staffer. When he told me about his work in California, I asked him if he knew some of the union people I had worked with when I was at the Jewish Labor Committee. I didn't realize it, but most of the people I asked him about had been members of the Independent Socialist League (ISL)—followers of Max Schachtman, an early follower of Leon Trotsky. Stan smiled and said, "you found me out." Yes, he knew them, and he had been an active member of the ISL.

Trying to figure out 20<sup>th</sup> century left wing politics can drive you crazy. There had been utopian socialists and Marxian scientific socialists through most of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, the official Socialist Party was formed in 1901 from the merger of the Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Labor Party. And after the Russian Revolution, the Communist Party was established, and in the '20s, there were several different factions with different faction leaders: James B. Cannon and William Z. Foster and Jay Lovestone. What the various left wing parties wanted was to change our economic system from capitalism to socialism-- to put the means of production into the hands of the workers-- but they had different ways of going about it.

When, in 1928, Stalin denounced Trotsky, and when Cannon, who was there, read what Trotsky wrote, he concluded that Trotsky was right. Cannon converted Max Schachtman who had been the leader of the Young Workers' League, and they formed the Socialist Workers Party, but they split, and after World War II the ISL was formed with Schachtman as its leader.

I had gotten to know the ISL within months after I started organizing for Local 38, in 1951. I had met Anne Draper who was an organizer for the hatters union. I was trying to organize workers in the Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue custom tailoring and dressmaking shops; Anne was trying to organize workers in custom millinery shops in the same area. Anne was the wife of Hal Draper who was the editor of Labor Action, the ISL newspaper.

Some time after our meeting, Anne tried to get me to join the ISL. She invited Sylvia and me for dinner, and we had a lovely evening. I did not join ISL, but I did buy a

subscription to Labor Action. Some months later, Anne invited us to attend an ISL meeting at which Max Schachtman was to speak. We accepted; we met Schachtman, and were duly impressed by his oratory. (One incident stands out. During the question and answer period, a disheveled man stood up and announced, "My name is Maxwell Bodenheim. I have written a poem." And he proceeded to read his poem, and Schachtman listened politely.) Subsequently, in 1957, the ISL merged with the Socialist Party (SP), which had previously merged with the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), calling itself the SP-SDF. As I said, trying to make sense of left wing politics can drive you crazy.

Stan knew everybody in the ISL. I knew them casually; he knew them intimately. He had been fighting the good fight since the early '40s: As a merchant seaman and a member of the Seaman's Union of the Pacific during World War II. After the war, he had worked in an auto plant and was active in the United Auto Workers. He moved on to work as a longshoreman and was a member of the International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union. It was in that capacity that he took on ILWU President Harry Bridges, and a union practice that he considered unfair. The union had created a B category, a second class category of longshoremen. There were 700 men in the B category, and they were supposed to be promoted to A in a year, but they weren't. Stan objected, and he and a large group of B workers were fired. He brought a lawsuit which dragged on for 17 years. He lost.

In 1968, most of that was behind him. He had been hired by the University of Illinois a few years earlier, to teach in its labor education program, and he was having a great time. Stan, his wife Mary and his two daughters, Kim and Laurie, had moved from California to Champaign-Urbana, and now looked forward to the year in Washington, where Stan would be doing research. They rented a house near us in the Takoma section, and Carol and Laurie went to school together and became good friends. The research work he did for the study was a labor of love. Stan was committed to fighting for workers' rights and for union democracy. He was against the bosses, whether they were management bosses or labor bosses. Stan's contribution to the study, "Comparative Union Democracy," dealt with the limitations of democracy in several American unions, including the Steel Workers, the Electrical Workers and the Auto Workers.

I had been at the US Civil Rights Commission for three years, and suggested to my supervisor, Sam Simmons, and staff director, Bill Taylor, that I could play a useful role for the Commission. I knew most of the labor leaders who supported civil rights and I offered to do for the Commission what I did at the JLC: attend union conventions, distribute Commission publications and discuss the work of the Commission with union officials. I offered to attend the upcoming UAW Convention in Atlantic City, and received approval. As the date for the convention approached, I thought it would be a great idea to invite Stan. I was driving a rental car, and had reserved a room at the Convention hotel. Stan could come along at no cost. When I suggested it, he refused. Why? No reason. I used all my powers of persuasion, and suggested that he think about it. I called him the next day and explained that we would have a terrific time in Atlantic City. He reluctantly agreed.

We arrived at the Convention Hall just as the first day's morning session was ending. The delegates were leaving for lunch. As we picked up our guest badges, we spotted a group of people whom we knew: Several UAW delegates and guests, and at the center of the group, Max Schachtman. We headed over. Schachtman spotted Stan and waved to him, calling out: "Hello Red! When are you going to make the revolution?" This was not said with affection. It was said with derision. Max Schachtman was ridiculing Stan. All these former radicals had moved dramatically to the right. Schachtman actually was the head of the right wing caucus within the merged SP-SDF. He was an outspoken supporter of LBJ and the Vietnam War. Stan was the only one of them who still had his socialist principles, who still believed. I now realized why Stan did not want to be there.

2-5-11