

16. AWOC's Volunteer period; the Strathmore Conference

Henry: I am going into a good deal of detail on this period, perhaps more than any others, because it is just about the first period in my career in which I think I can say that I made a difference in the course of events. Up to this point almost everything I have been able to report turned out to be a failure. I certainly was a failure in my academic career, having burned all my bridges at the University of California. I was a failure in my efforts to arouse opinion against the bracero system, specifically my efforts to get the American Friends Service Committee to take a stand, in which not only did they not take a stand, but in effect they repudiated my efforts to take a stand. I was disappointed, to say the very least. And then of course underlying all of this at a personal level was the failure of my marriage, and my failure to be able to see my children on any regular basis from then on.

So, for that reason, I'm going to develop this period that I call the Volunteer Period of AWOC, because I feel my role at that time was more successful and more personally satisfying than anything that had happened up to that point. This period covers the time when, to be kind of arbitrary about it, the funding for AWOC was terminated on June 30 1961, by George Meany of the AFL-CIO, because he was so disgusted by the expense of the adventure in the Imperial Valley, and the fact that there was nothing to show for it but tens of thousands of dollars in lawyer's bills, and also a bad stain on the reputation of the AFL-CIO and AWOC in particular, because of the fact that some of the staff had indulged in violent activity.

So, Smith's funds were cut off, with the sole exception of a few thousand dollars he had squirreled away in a trust account, which he had raised from dues, \$2 dues that he was nominally collecting from the poor souls who gathered on skid row in Stockton every morning, to get occasional work in the fields (I strongly suspect that on many occasions they were all flat broke, and Norman Smith himself paid those \$2 dues). So he had a little money left, and with that he kept paying the rent on the AWOC headquarters in Stockton. This was quite low, because he was renting the old Labor Temple of the San Joaquin Central Labor Council, which had moved to one of the suburbs, to more modern headquarters, and the building was just sitting there vacant until AWOC came along, so I don't think he had to pay very much. He had to pay the utilities, of course.

He kept a secretary on his staff to handle his correspondence and he kept me on his staff. I was eternally grateful for that, because I needed a source of income to continue finishing up a revised version of my bracero research, and also occasional research papers on the subject of agricultural economics of things such as the asparagus harvest, which was a big deal in San Joaquin county. It also made it possible for me to begin carrying out a dream, that revolved around something I call Harvest House, in which volunteers would come out for weekends, for a week, for 2 weeks, for a month, or indefinitely, because they were seriously concerned about the farm labor problem, and were willing to work for nothing to ameliorate the problem.

I wasn't able to devote full time to this for the first couple of months of this so-called Volunteer Period, because I was finishing up this report for the National Institutes of Health, which it was bound for eventually. In the meanwhile the permanent volunteers, and there were at least 2 of

them, I've mentioned them in the past but I'll mention them again because they were very important. One was Pat Bellamy, the other was Starry Kruger. They lived in this Harvest House full time, and made themselves useful to things like the child care center for the children of farm-laborer mothers who were out picking tomatoes or whatever it was, and couldn't afford to pay regular child care token salaries or hourly payments.

But along about the 1st of August I was finished with my new and truncated report about the bracero research and was able to devote full time, so from then on the whole Volunteer Period bloomed, in various ways which I've talked about in the past and won't repeat now, but here's what I think is the really important basic point of the whole period, and that is that we kept AWOC alive. I'm convinced that it would have disappeared from view entirely if somebody hadn't been doing something, rather than sitting in the office as Normal Smith did, and licking his wounds like an old warrior, and feeling sorry for himself, and telling the way it used back in his heyday, which was the 1930s when he was organizing automobile workers. He never tired of telling those stories, but he had nothing to say about experiences organizing agricultural workers, because he didn't even organize any of them. You can't organize bums on skid row into any meaningful organization.

Among other things, I was trying to let outside forces know that AWOC was not dead, and that we were doing things. I wrote a rather lengthy booklet called "To Build a Union", which had to do specifically with some thoughts about how to organize farm workers, and how not to organize them, and I sent copies of that to the Ruther brothers. Walter Ruther was head of the old CIO wing of the AFL-CIO, what might be called the liberal wing, and of course Meany was head of the AFL wing, and I thought that if AWOC could be kept alive, that there was hope that the Ruther wing could become sufficiently interested to take over the torch that had been let drop and extinguished when Meany withdrew all the money, but Ruther himself had funds in his side of things, and so we hoped that there could be a revival of AWOC in a new direction if we kept things going.

I don't know who had the idea to begin with, but whoever it was, and it might have been I myself, but in any event it seemed to me that it would be a good to have a meeting of the various local groups that had started up after the withdrawal of funds from paid staff at a number of localities throughout the Central Valley. Some of the more serious members of AWOC kept things going on a volunteer basis, and called themselves Area Councils, and I thought that it would be a very useful exercise to have a meeting of the leaders and as many members as were able to come, to gather in one place to exchange ideas and to listen to reports from people who had been involved in previous organizing efforts dating all the way back to the 1930s, with the lessons that were to be learned from those previous efforts.

And so we began working on that on pretty much a full-time basis from the middle of November on, and decided that it was to be held in Tulare country, more specifically in a little town called Strathmore, which was one of several local groups that had continued to work together even without any funds at all from the outside. They themselves paid the rent on building in which they held meetings regularly, and they were so close to a number of other groups that at least we would have a pretty good turnout from those local people. We got

them interested to the extent that they took it upon themselves to line up places where people could stay, and people coming to this conference were not looking for hotels and motels, they were willing to stay with friends, sleeping on couches or in sleeping bags. The same thing for feeding arrangements, we left this all up to volunteers at the local level.

We took it upon ourselves to send out letters of invitation to representatives of the previous organizing drives, and in some respects we were fortunate, and in some we were disappointed. To give you a couple of examples, we lucked out in that we were able to get the grand old man of the American liberal left, namely Norman Thomas, who had run for president six times, I believe, as a representative of the Socialist party. He was of course a democratic socialist, as distinguished from the authoritarian socialists of the Marxists, and he was going to be in Southern CA on a speaking tour at that time, and we were able to get a commitment that he would speak to our little conference. I guess it was going to be on the opening day, which was going to be Saturday Dec 1. Norman Thomas himself had been vitally involved in an effort to organize sharecroppers in the South in the mid-1930s, called the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, and it had a fair success for some years, and was really notable in the fact that it was the first effort to organize a biracial union on the south, and they succeeded in that, although the Ku Klux Klan tried to break them up many times with force and violence.

So anyway, Norman Thomas was going to speak to us, and we tried to get a speaker from one of the efforts that was made in the 30s in CA by the non-liberal left, that is the authoritarian left, and if they weren't Communists they were cheating the party out of its dues – probably they couldn't afford to pay the dues anyway. So there was no question about it that they were Communist influenced if not dominated, and we were willing to hear speakers from that point of view if we had been able to find any, but they were either all dead or they weren't willing to speak.

Then there was a group in the 1940s, led by Ernesto Galarza, which put a great deal of effort into organizing the biggest of all the many big agro-businesses, this was one called DiGorgio, the largest fruit grower and packer and shipper in the world, I guess. And they put up picket lines around the main ranch of the DiGorgio corporation, and maintained that picket line for a couple of years, and eventually had to admit defeat. I got to know Ernesto Galarza quite well. He appears as one of the main chapters in my book, along the Father McCullough, another important figure in history in my opinion. But Ernie wasn't willing to appear because at that time he was still resentful of my staying with AWOC. He felt that AWOC had undercut the very existence of his union, and that they deserved to get the support of the money that the AFL-CIO gave to Norman Smith.

Ernie Galarza was with AWOC. He was assistant director under Smith for a while, until he felt that when Smith signed up a worker who was a field worker rather than a packing-house worker, that the dues should have gone immediately to his, that is Galarza's, union, which had a charter from the AFL-CIO, even though it was being held in abeyance in favor of AWOC. And if Norman Smith had signed up any packing-house workers, which he never tried to do, that those dues would have gone to the packing-house union, which also had a charter for that branch of the industry. Well, as a matter of fact Smith kept them all in a trust fund and Galarza resigned

in protest over that, and he would have liked me to resign with him, but I didn't. So he didn't appear at our conference.

We also sent an invitation to Cesar Chavez, who at this time was executive director for the Community Service Organization, which was the Mexican-American group that was primarily interested in the problems urban Spanish-speaking people; it taught them to attend classes in English if they couldn't speak the language well enough, and when they did know how to speak well enough, to get citizenship papers, register to vote, and the CSO handled things like police brutality problems, and so forth. Chavez felt the emphasis should be not on building the middle-class urban Mexican-American group, but on lifting up the under-class, meaning almost entirely agricultural workers, and at this very time in Dec of 61, he was engaged in an intramural fight with the president of CSO, named Tony Rios, who I also knew quite well, a nice guy, but there was an honest difference of opinion as to where emphasis should be placed. And Chavez just didn't have time to come to our conference, because he was engaged in this internal debate. He sent Dolores Huerta to represent him, and it would have been nice if Dolores had spoken on his behalf, and had spoken about the Chavez technique, which was to begin with small house meetings, in which he got maybe a half-dozen guys who were seriously interested and who were then willing to go out and talk to others in a kind of a cell division method.

As it turned out, we had as one of our speakers on this very method, none other than my close personal friend Father McCullough, and you may possibly recall that one of the side-effects of the disaster in the Imperial Valley was that Father McCullough and Father McDonald, the two prime movers of the effort to work with Spanish-speaking farm workers, including locals and braceros, the two padres had come down to the Imperial Valley to lead some union songs, and for their trouble they got fired from their positions working with the Spanish-speaking, because the archbishop of SF, who was nominally their boss, was on his death-bed, and the archbishop of San Diego, who had control over the Imperial valley priesthood, took great umbrage at their invading his jurisdiction.

But by Dec of 61, Father McCullough had become pastor of St. Ambrose church in Berkeley, located on Gilman St., and had a new archbishop after the old one had died, who was not unfriendly, and besides that, McCullough had worked out a way of presenting his pitch in which he pointed out that the system of beginning with small house meetings and gradually working outward had been used by the beginnings of the Catholic church itself, at the time when it was an illegal organization, and would have been thrown to the lions by the Romans, if they had tried to hold mass meetings. So with that background he was able to continue talking to groups such as ours.

We had a few other speakers, and that was the burden of the first day, which was Saturday. I was surprised and very, very happy that efforts succeeded to the extent that we overflowed the hall. We had a couple hundred people come to this conference, and that more than we had expected. There weren't chairs for everybody, so we had a standing-room audience for most of the sessions.

Sunday was given over to decision-making and we had prepared some draft resolutions. One of the members of our Stockton group had written an open letter to the Secretary of Labor, a fellow named Dr. Goldberg, thanking him for taking a more liberal view toward the farm labor issue, things that might be done to help domestic workers and things that might be done to enforce the requirements of the bracero law, which in theory was supposed to prevent braceros from being used to lower wages, to break strikes, or anything of that sort. And this was couched in terms that the average worker could identify with, in a way that stuff that the stuff that I wrote would have been too academic. And so that was good, I was very happy to see that.

And then there were proposals for the type of organization that we should strive for, and certain limitations that might be placed, and it was deliberately intended that this evoke a discussion. For example, we talked about the issue of violence, and we began with a resolution that condemned violence and promised to practice non-violence. But then people began asking what do you do when the goons start beating you about the head with ax-handles, or threatening you with firearms. And somebody else said, what if we were to get the offer of aid and assistance from the Teamsters union, which is well known for fighting fire with fire, whenever they felt necessary. So there was a lively debate back and forth. It ended with our voting by a substantial majority to adhere to non-violence.

And then there was a discussion about whether we should accept aid and comfort, if it were offered, from an organization that was sympathetic to an authoritarian-left vision of the Good Society, meaning, and without naming names, the longshoreman's union, which was very friendly to the Soviet Union, which at that time was still riding high. Once again, after a lively discussion, I was happy to say that came down on the side of a democratic version of the left.

Eugene: who posed these questions?

Henry: Our local group, the Stockton group, began with these draft resolutions, and maybe I drafted them myself, and they were approved by our group, but then it was necessary to sell them to the larger group, and in some cases we changed wording here and there.

I recall that I drew up something to the effect that we should not only have elections, for leadership at every level within our organization, but that these elections should involve choices. In other words, that we try to avoid one man or woman candidacies for any office, that there should be a choice, and this didn't pass. I guess people had in mind some figure so universally beloved and in fact this became a real problem later on, in the case of Chavez himself.

But all of this kind of discussion was quite new to many of the people involved, and I think it was very healthful.

Finally, we had a speech from Norman Smith himself, I think that he wanted it that way, and I guess the planning committee felt he was entitled to it, so he went on at great length, as he always did, and finally came down to cases in a way which was unscripted, I didn't know it was coming, nobody knew it was coming. But he pointed out that the national AFL-CIO was about

to hold its biennial national convention in Miami Beach FL, in fact the opening session was to be on Fri Dec 9, and here we were on Sun afternoon Dec 2. And Smith pointed out to us, to our great surprise, that under the bylaws of the national organization, the AWOC was entitled to a voting delegate to that national convention, and an alternate if for some reason the voting delegate were unable to attend some session.

Well, as if by an invisible hand I got to my feet and I made a motion, that we pass around a hat or two and take up a collection to send a delegate and an alternate to Miami Beach, and to make a pitch to the national convention, that funding be restored to AWOC. This motion was seconded and was passed by acclamation, and a hat was indeed passed around, and \$317 was collected. The idea being – I don't remember the details, I was in a euphoric state – it was assumed that the cheapest way to travel would be to drive. Gasoline was cheap at that time. By sharing the driving it would be possible to get to Miami Beach by Friday. Also it would save money for motels because one person could sleep while the other was driving. A lot of this was taken for granted.

Then there came the time for choosing the delegate and alternate. As I say, there hadn't been any opportunity to think about this in advance, but somehow or other, from the fact that a certain woman had spoken eloquently in a number of the earlier discussions, she was nominated for delegate. Her name was Maria Moreno. And true to what I would have hoped, someone else was also nominated, so it was a contest. I can't remember the name of the other guy, but Maria won out, fair and square. And then for the alternate there was also a contest, this time between the chairman of the Strathmore area council, who had had a lot to do with helping with all of the arrangements, and there was another nominee, but the chairman of the local area council was elected fair and square.

Then there came a fascinating discussion in which someone pointed out that it wouldn't look right to have a man and woman who weren't married, driving across the country, unchaperoned, in an automobile. Well, I thought this was delightful because it showed that the farm workers themselves were kind of the backbone of American propriety, not a bunch of hoodlums.

One of the proposals for handling this question of propriety was to have their respective spouses accompany them, but somebody else pointed out that they weren't active in the farm labor movement. Eventually a couple of other people who were active in their respective area councils were elected, one a woman and one a man, and so I guess they all drove in a car with the women sitting in the back seat and the men in the front seat. When they were to stay in a motel they would rent two different rooms. So there was no problem, and it worked out fine.

I do believe that they got down to Miami Beach in time to register at the opening of the convention. There are some details that are not part of any historical record that I know of, and unfortunately all the principals are now deceased, that is, Maria Moreno herself, and this fellow. It should be remembered that all of this was 55 years ago. It was a very important event in more ways than one. At this very moment a woman is making a documentary and has received a large grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to make a

documentary about the life of Maria Moreno, and that documentary will include as much information as this film maker can dig up about the Strathmore conference. So it was an important event, and it's something that would not conceivably had occurred had I not been involved. So that's why I dwell on it at length.

Eugene: the conference was just 2 days?

Henry: Yes. Oh, it was also made into a documentary for KPFA, the listener-supported FM station in Berkeley. A staff member for that station was there at Strathmore, taping most of the proceedings of the conference, and he worked them into a documentary, which he called "We Shall Go On".

Eugene: Is that available?

Henry: that's a good question. It may be in the archives.