

Sharing the pains, indignities and anger

the New Left's strategy of "industrialization"

First of May Anarchist Alliance

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Comrades,

This is an interesting interview with our comrade Miriam (M1 Detroit) on her history of “Industrialization” with her organization at the time the Revolutionary Socialist League. “Industrialization” was the term that the Left used to describe the strategy of getting mainly University and counter-culture youth activists to commit to point-of-production organizing in factories as part of the working-class. It was different than what is today known as “salting” – as “Industrialization” was not usually seen as a short-term stint around a specific campaign, but rather a long-term commitment to building a revolutionary presence in the class.

The organized entrance of a few hundred revolutionaries into the industrial working-class was one of the factors (along with the Black Power consciousness, returning Vietnam vets, and the broad influence of the counter-culture) in the upsurge in radical struggle in the workplace. In some sections of the Left “Industrialization” was encouraged in a top-down, authoritarian manner. Many New Left-era activists who “Industrialized” did end up leaving working-class jobs for academia and the professions after some time spent in the factories. Others eventually made home for themselves within the Union bureaucracy and left radical politics behind.

Miriam agrees that this interview can be posted widely, in order to share lessons and spark discussion. She adds:

“If we had had an anarchist understanding of bottom up organizing, incorporating community work we could maybe have gotten farther. Lessons indeed!”

Solidarity,

Kieran

Preliminary Interview Questions:

Did you industrialize as part of an organization or a group?

Yes, as part of the Revolutionary Socialist League.¹

If as a group, when did your group begin sending comrades into industry? Why did you all take this “turn” to industry, so to speak?

The Detroit branch of the Revolutionary Socialist League began industrializing in 1974–75. We felt it imperative to get work in the auto factories, work alongside, get to know and recruit auto workers to the revolutionary cause.

Which industries did you and your comrades target in particular, and why? Was there any discussion about service or agricultural labor?

The auto industry was targeted in Detroit. We also had cadre in the post office. The Chicago branch had workers in steel and auto. The New York branch had people in auto and the post office. We were looking for the larger unions, where we could possibly have a national impact. We looked for a diverse workforce.

¹ The RSL was an unusual Trotskyist group that over time criticized and abandoned first orthodox Trotskyism, then Leninism, and began questioning Marx. The RSL dissolved in 1989 with several former members helping found the anarchist network Love & Rage. — K

Why did you personally decide to industrialize? Was this a personal choice or did your group direct its members into industrialization?

I was asked if I wanted to move to the Midwest and go to work in the factory. I was in my early 20s, needed work and thought this could work for me.

Where did you industrialize? Why? Was this also your choice?

When I moved to Detroit in 1975, I first got a job at the post office. I was hired as an NTE (not to exceed 89 days) and rehired on that basis 3 times. We were not allowed to participate in the union. I attempted to go to union meetings and did a little agitation around that. When I was called for an interview at General Motors, I made that move and began work at GM in 1976. I was 26 years old, one of very few women in the plant, one of even fewer Jews, a closeted lesbian.

What were your objectives, both short term and long term, in industrializing?

My first objective was to make a life for myself, a secure job, friends, a safe place to live. Within that we needed a revolution to change the way the system works, and I saw it as my job to talk that idea up, to convince people we were right and to join with us, in their own interests.

Did these change? Why?

In the late 1980s I suffered political burnout. I made lifestyle changes, got married and left active political life. I continued my friendships and my job but was not selling Torch/La Antorcha or bringing people to meetings, etc.

What did you actually do, in terms of political activity, once you were industrialized?

There were 2 comrades in my plant, myself and my friend Lisa, now deceased. We wrote and distributed Revolutionary Autoworker, a newsletter specifically for our plant; we sold Torch/La Antorcha, the newspaper of the RSL, we passed out leaflets for meetings and actions. The RSL had similar campaigns in other plants and a wide range of activities we were involved in. Lisa and I brought people from the plant to as many of these activities as we could. We had a small group from the plant that met regularly, Lisa, myself and 3-5 other people. We went to union meetings and put forward proposals, both on in-plant issues and on wider political topics.

Did you reveal your identity to your co-workers? If so, when?

As soon as we started selling papers, people knew who we were. Some of the main confusion was among African-American workers who associated our radical-ness with the Communist Party and assumed we were in the Party.

Did you have contact with, or know about, militants from other countries who were also industrializing at this time? (Canada, France, Italy, etc.) Which groups in particular? What, if anything, was learned?

The RSL had a sister group in Jamaica which also looked to the industrial working class as the primary force for revolution. We were aware of Trotskyists, Maoists and other tendencies who were industrializing.

What was the relationship between your friends who industrialized and militants from other American leftist groups who industrialized? Did you coordinate efforts, work independently, see each other as rivals?

The American left at that time was extremely sectarian, each group fighting the other almost more than the capitalists. One Maoist in my plant organized a caucus (a bit larger than ours) and in one of his leaflets claimed he was not “a Communist, like Miriam and Lisa.” His orientation was much more towards getting a position in union leadership where our efforts were more directed toward the self organization of the rank and file to put pressure on the union leadership.

Why did you decide to stop industrializing?

I never did. I worked in the plant 30 years and am now retired. I continue to attend union retiree events, socialize with friends and (now divorced and back active again) invite them to radical gatherings, picket lines, meetings, etc.

What, in retrospect, do you think were some of the great strengths of industrializing as a form of political practice? What about its limits? What would you say you personally accomplished while industrializing?

The greatest strength of industrializing is that it puts the revolutionary in day to day contact with the working class. She or he is working alongside other workers, sharing the pains, indignities and anger along with the cooperation and solidarity that such an environment entails. The limit is in thinking that working class per se makes one revolutionary. When and if the working class moves toward revolution, its experience in working together gives the class a dynamic expertise. Its relationship to the means of production means it can dramatically affect the capitalist production system, stop it in its tracks. Workers are alienated from their labor, although many take pride in a job well done. They are not alienated from one another; in fact the cooperation and helpfulness among workers stands out in my experience. They were always exceedingly generous to me personally and to each other, when in need. They also have a certain sophistication about the world, both from the veteran experience as well as working with people from a variety of cultures. They bring this back to their communities and are well positioned to combat fear and ignorance.

Once you “de-industrialized,” did you cease political activity altogether, or did you find other ways of militating? What was the “transition” out of industrializing like?

Soon after I retired from the plant, I began to go to demonstrations called by Autoworker Caravan, led by the same Maoist who had dissed me earlier. The Occupy movement developed and I was very excited by that, seeing a window of opportunity open that a new and younger generation might learn from Tahrir Square in Egypt and build movement to take control of their lives, fight injustice, challenge the system.

Which workers (women, minorities, “unskilled,” veterans, whites, etc.) seemed to be the most receptive to a. your efforts to organize at the point of production, b. your socialist ideas?

The African-American workers were most receptive to the wider range of political ideas, while the young white vets were more into point of production organizing. The RSL milieu was largely gay, Black, both men and women, workers, single women raising children. We dealt with all the issues that come up from trying to live with oppression and repression, had a strong fight back ethic, and merged many of the struggles and issues we organized around.

Was there any discussion about “deindustrialization”? Were you aware this was happening? Did you invent strategies to combat this? Do you think there was any way to stop it?

Some of the people who went into the plants left of their own volition. Some stayed with RSL and got different types of work; others left politics altogether. We did not discuss this as a policy.

What was the general social composition of those who industrialized? (race, gender, age, education)?

The people who industrialized from the RSL were men, women, mostly though not all white, some African-American, early to mid 20s in age and generally college educated. When I went to work in the plant I had graduated high school and had about 2 years of college with no degrees.

Which texts in particular helped inform your move into industry or your organizing once there (histories, authors, classical theoretical works, etc.)?

We read Farrell Dobbs Teamster Power and Teamster Politics, Melvin Dubofsky’s History of the IWW. We used Trotsky’s writings on the united front as a way of understanding transitional demands, Marx on wage labor and capital and Lenin on the role of the state, army and government.

How did your work organizing at the point of production intersect with other struggles of the time (women’s liberation, black power, etc.)?

We merged struggles: we organized the case to free Karen Norman (an African American woman charged with killing her rapist/boyfriend) primarily in the plants. We waged the struggle

against apartheid and in solidarity with South African revolution primarily in the plants. We promoted the idea that no one is free unless everyone is free, revolution is necessary to change the system. We were strong proponents of gay and lesbian liberation as well as women's liberation. We encouraged solidarity with all struggle.

For those in the SWP(U.S.): The program laid out in “Leading the Party into Industry” (in the volume The Changing Face of US Politics) advocates “footloose” industrializers rather than militants who establish themselves for long periods of time (which seems to be promoted in much of the Maoist literature). Did SWP industrializing actually take this “mobile” form (meaning, SWPers quickly moving from one hot spot to another)?

We were not in the SWP, but: we encouraged our people to stay for long periods of time. We valued the time spent getting to know people and allowing people to get to know us. Also, by the late 1970s the earlier militancy experienced by organizers was beginning to ebb and footloose industrializers were not as successful. The footloose method was also used by the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s especially when organizing unions.

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