Kent Worcester
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An Interview with Wayne Price
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Retrieved on 2020-05-25 from anarchiststudies.noblogs.org

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or the welfare state. And if you think about it that is an awful idea. But most anarchists would draw the line at anarcho-capitalists, not to mention so-called "national anarchists," who are close to a fascist position.

KW: It's not as if Marxism hasn't had some of these problems.

WP: The varieties of Marxism are infinite.

KW: Do you feel like you've come full circle, and that you've returned to the politics that you identified with when you were twenty?

WP: Yes and no. In the sense that my values are fundamentally the same, then the answer is yes. I now identify with decentralism, which I put aside when I joined the unorthodox Trotskyists. But on the other hand, I no longer identify with pacifism. At twenty I did not place much value on the idea of a working-class revolution, which is now at the heart of my politics. Some anarchists would be sympathetic to my emphasis on class politics, and class conflict, but others would not. Of course, this question divides Marxists as well – for example, writers like Tony Negri and John Holloway call themselves Marxists but reject the idea of a class-based revolutionary struggle.

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Interviewer's bio: Kent Worcester is the author, editor, and coeditor of numerous books on political theory, labor history, and the politics of popular culture, including *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (1996), *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), and *The Superhero Reader* (2013). His most recent book is *Silent Agitators: Cartoon Art from the Pages of New Politics* (2016).

Introduction

Wayne Price is a longtime anti-authoritarian political activist. He was drawn toward pacifism and anarchism as a teenager in the 1950s, and he participated in the anti-Vietnam War movement during the 1960s and early 1970s. At the end of the sixties he became a teacher in the New York City public school system, and he remained active in teacher union politics from the seventies through his retirement. In recent years he has helped educate some members of a new generation of radicals through his articles, lectures, and books. He is currently a member of Bronx Climate Justice North, a grassroots climate justice group based in the north Bronx, and the Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council in New York City.

Although Wayne Price never abandoned the decentralist and libertarian-socialist ideals he held as a teenager, for more than two decades he participated in a succession of socialist organizations that drew inspiration from the Marxist tradition. In the mid-1960s Price joined the New York City branch of the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC), which renamed itself the International Socialists (IS) in 1969. He subsequently took part in a factional dispute within the IS that led to the formation of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) in 1973. While the RSL initially described itself as a radical Trotskyist grouping, albeit with a state-capitalist analysis of Soviet-style systems, by the early 1980s the organization started moving in an anarchist direction. The League dissolved in 1988 and fused with other anarchists to form the Love and Rage Anarchist Federation. When Love and Rage disbanded in 1998, Price ended up joining the North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists.

Wayne Price is the author of three books: *The Abolition of the State: Anarchist and Marxist Perspectives* (AuthorHouse, 2007); *Anarchism and Socialism: Reformism or Revolution?* (Thoughtcrime Ink, 2010); and *The Value of Radical Theory: An Anarchist Introduction to Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (AK Press, 2013).

He regularly contributes to a number of websites, including anarkismo.net; anarchistnews.org; utopianmag.com; and infoshop.org. A selection of his articles may be found on Anarkismo, at www.anarkismo.net.

This interview is based on two conversations that I conducted with Wayne Price in October and November 2018. The conversations were lightly edited by the participants. I would like to express my gratitude to Wayne Price as well as to the editors of Anarchist-Studies.Blog.

– Kent Worcester

Early Years

Kent Worcester: Why don't you say something about your childhood?

Wayne Price: I had a normal upbringing in the suburbs. I was born in 1946, right after the war, which means that I am a Baby Boomer. My parents moved to the suburbs – Valley Stream on Long Island – just as the area was being built. When I was a kid you could see houses going up almost every day. It was not far from the city. My father was a school teacher. At first my mother was a stay-at-home mom, but she then went to college and first became a guidance counsellor and after that a psychologist.

KW: Were they pro-union?

WP: Oh yes, my father was very active in the teachers' union, and they were both friends with former Communists.

KW: Were they sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement?

WP: Very much so. They were favorable to the left in general. That doesn't mean they were politically active – they were very busy with their lives. Later on, they became extremely angry about the Vietnam War. They subscribed to *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, but they did not take part in demonstrations. It was nevertheless clear where they stood on things like civil rights and Vietnam.

KW: When Draper's right he's more right than anyone.

WP: That's a nice way of putting it. He was rather prejudiced against anarchists, but he had a very sharp mind. I have a friend who calls himself an anarcho-Marxist. I don't know if I would use that term but it's not a million miles away from my own position.

KW: Are there anarchists who regard you as a pretend-anarchist?

WP: There are definitely people who contribute to the Anarchist News website who do not accept that I am part of the anarchist movement. The fact that I regard aspects of Marxist theory as useful for anarchists is highly problematic from their perspective.

KW: How do you handle this question of defining yourself as an anarchist?

WP: As it happens, I wrote an article on precisely this question of whether I regard myself as an anarchist. And my answer was, "Yes-ish." Whether I'm an orthodox anarchist is something I don't give a damn about. I don't know what orthodoxy would even mean in this context. I'm not particularly interested in trying to prove that I'm an anarchist.

Obviously I'm influenced by Marx, but I also think that we can learn a lot from people like John Dewey and others in the pragmatic tradition, as well as Freud, Darwin, and so on. One of the advantages of the anarchist tradition is that it is open in a way that Marxism is not. Anarchism does not claim to know everything and is willing to learn from other theoretical traditions. There are anarchists on the web who insist that it is impossible to be an anarchist and a socialist, and yet almost all of the classical anarchists called themselves socialists. Proudhon called himself a socialist, for example; so did Benjamin Tucker, and of course Emma Goldman.

KW: From the outside it seems as if some number of younger anarchists are close to an anarcho-capitalist position.

WP: I don't know if those people call themselves anarchists or not. The right-wing libertarians who toy with anarcho-capitalist ideas basically want what we have right now but without the police

WP: Exactly. It was said of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, that she loved anarchism as long as she could be the anarch. And of course, she probably built the largest group of anarchists that this country has ever seen, with the single most widely read anarchist paper in the country. We don't always think of the *Catholic Worker* as an anarchist paper, but it's true.

But what else can we expect? These are human beings created by capitalism.

KW: Did your background in psychology help you avoid some of these issues?

WP: Not avoid, but perhaps understand. It's useful to be able to listen and not just talk. And of course, the anarchist tradition is very good on this question, with its emphasis on consensus, using facilitators rather than chairs, and so on. There's an attempt at least to encourage everyone to participate on an equal basis. That's the ideal, at any rate.

KW: Presumably many anarchists have problems with a class-centered approach to politics. There's an entire current that builds on the extreme individualism of Max Stirner, for example.

WP: Absolutely. My articles are often reprinted on a website called Anarchist News, and they have a coterie around them of self-described individualists, egoists, post-leftists, Stirnerites, and so on and they always object to any kind of reference to the working class.

KW: Do you think of those sorts of anarchists as closer to you in political terms than, say, a Marxist who identifies with writers like C.L.R. James and Martin Glaberman, because of the shared anarchist label?

WP: No. Not really. I've always felt close to the libertarian socialist tradition, as well as people who regard themselves as Marxist-humanists. I've also learned a lot from the council communists – people like Paul Mattick. I've also learned from the unorthodox wing of Trotskyism, including someone like Hal Draper.

KW: Any siblings?

WP: One. I have a brother who is two years younger than me. He never became a radical – he was a musician and he then became a lawyer.

KW: Were you politically active in high school?

WP: Oh yes – there was a small group of us who launched a magazine that we somewhat pompously called *Thought*. I drew a picture of Rodin's The Thinker that we put on the cover, and our slogan – falsely attributed to Voltaire – was "I may disagree with everything that you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it." We circulated the magazine as best we could, and at one point it was banned by the school administration, but even after that we continued to circulate it. I remember the reaction of many of our fellow students, which was "Why must you always write about controversy?" From their point of view there was everyday life, and then there was a special zone called controversy, which is how many people felt back then.

But we saw ourselves as radicals. My best friend Jeff and I were influenced by the various radical authors that we read – Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and Eric Fromm, among others. We were excited to attend meetings in Manhattan that were held at the War Resisters League, and that were attended by people like Dave McReynolds and other radical pacifists. At one point we put out a leaflet that we distributed at demonstrations in which we set forth our reasons for opposing the Vietnam War. This was at a time when very few people had even heard of Vietnam. The leaflet included a quotation from Mike Mansfield, who was the only U.S. Senator to oppose the war from the outset, about how the U.S. should never get involved in a war in Asia. I was very proud of that leaflet.

KW: Was your high school group organized around a specific ideology?

WP: Not really – everybody had their own point of view. Most of the people involved were left-liberals, while Jeff and I were more or less anarchist-pacifists.

KW: How did writers like Macdonald and Fromm come to your attention?

WP: One summer I attended to a camp for teens that was run by the YMHA, and one day we went on a trip to a local university. While browsing at the campus bookstore I came across a book by Dwight Macdonald that was titled *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1957). He borrowed the title from Kropotkin. Macdonald's book was later reissued under a different title, *Politics Past*. It was a collection of his writings, and I was very impressed. The same summer I ran across a copy of *Commentary* magazine that included an article by Paul Goodman on utopian thinking. Macdonald had mentioned Goodman's name, so I read that. That summer I also read a collection of essays by Albert Einstein that included a number of pieces about socialism. I was very much impressed by the idea of a decentralized, cooperative, socialism.

When I returned from the camp, I saw that my mother had a copy of Eric Fromm's *The Sane Society* (1955), which was also written from a humanistic-socialist perspective. All of these books left a big impression on me, and my friend Jeff was also interested in reading books by these kinds of authors. We got hold of copies of Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1962) and the book he wrote with his architect brother Percival, *Communitas* (1960). Their book helped convince me that it was technologically possible to organize a decentralized, human-scale society. *Communitas* has important things to say about urban planning, technology, education, and so on. Authors like Goodman and Macdonald also pointed me in the direction of Lewis Mumford, who was an earlier writer in this decentralist-humanist tradition.

KW: Each of the writers you've mentioned have very distinct voices, and they don't follow any particular party line. Macdonald is famously quirky and also very enjoyable to read.

WP: Yes, a very interesting character. Intelligent but quirky indeed. At the time I found his writings absolutely inspiring. Goodman was a terrible writer, but he very much had his own voice, and

least, anarchists seemed deeply involved in the punk movement, around bands like Fugazi.

WP: We participated in those sorts of events, but mostly we put out a newspaper, and we tried to build local groups around the country, and indeed across North America. We took part in the various demonstrations that were held in Washington, D.C., and helped build anarchist and anticapitalist contingents at those kinds of events. We tried to do some community organizing, and we were also interested in supporting anti-fascist campaigns.

KW: Was the anarchist milieu of the 1980s more relaxed, and friendlier, than the Marxist milieu of the 1970s? Were the folks who were around anarchist politics nicer than the Marxists, or were they the same sorts of people but with different political views?

WP: It was a mixed bag. On the one hand, there was the shared sense in both instances that we wanted to change the world, and if we don't change the world then we are all doomed. Both movements attracted a variety of social types, including people with serious emotional issues.

In the case of the anarchist movement, a good number of people, perhaps the majority, can be described as "lifestyle anarchists," which places a heavy emphasis on living your own life and doing your own thing, and that in and of itself will change the world. Those people had the advantage of being politically nonsectarian, although they were sometimes very snooty about it. On the other hand, there were the explicitly revolutionary anarchists, who sometimes turned out to be rather authoritarian in their approach. There are definitely people in the world of anarchism who believe that they know all the answers. I have the sense, for example, that Paul Goodman, whom I learned a lot from, held the view that if you didn't agree with him then you just didn't understand what he was saying.

KW: In other words, you don't need a Leninist vocabulary, or Leninist theory, to behave in ways that are deeply sectarian and even cultish.

the same time the group was getting smaller and smaller, and once we no longer saw ourselves as Trotskyists, we decided to orient ourselves toward the anarchists.

By the time we dissolved the RSL and had decided to fuse with other anarchists to form Love and Rage, we had lost a good majority of the membership. A minority of us continued onto Love and Rage, merging with other people, including the group around Chris Gunderson, which was based in Minneapolis – the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League, or RABL. At one point they threw a bowling ball through a plate glass window, which inspired their name. Most of the anarchists we worked with were younger than we were, which was part of the appeal. We had been attending various anarchist meetings throughout the 1980s, and we were on the lookout for the people who were interested in building some sort of organization, as well as putting out a newspaper. We still wanted to get the word out, even though we were no longer operating from a Leninist perspective. Only a minority of the anarchists we met were interested in working within any sort of organization.

KW: Were there anarchists who thought it was suspicious that a group of former Trotskyists were turning up at their meetings?

WP: Oh yes. We were viciously attacked. There was a widespread sense that the RSL was engaged in some sort of entryism inside the anarchist milieu in order to win them over to Leninism. The funny thing was that, later on, when Love and Rage came apart, it was precisely the ex-RSLers who were most committed to anarchist ideals, whereas the folks from the other side, who had started out as anarchists, were in the process of giving up on anarchism and taking up Maoism. It turns out that we were going in different directions but for a short period our paths crossed. We all thought we were headed in the same direction, but this proved not to be the case. This happens more than people realize, in life as well as in politics.

KW: Once Love and Rage got off the ground, what did the group do? Did you put up posters? Organize concerts? In the 1980s at

I was heavily influenced by his ideas when I first started reading him. And I once went to a forum in Manhattan where Macdonald and Goodman spoke. This was the only time I got to see them in real life. It was an inspiring evening.

KW: Neither the Communist Party nor the Soviet Union figures in the story you're telling.

WP: I was always hostile to any variety of Stalinism. Even when I ran into a Trotskyist who talked me out of anarchist-pacifism I couldn't accept his take on the Soviet Union, which was that the USSR was a workers' state despite the fact that the workers had no power whatsoever. From the orthodox Trotskyist perspective, the Russian Revolution had decayed, but since the state had nationalized property that meant that it was still a workers' state. Countries in Eastern Europe, where there was never a workers' revolution, were controlled by the U.S.S.R., were regarded as deformed workers' states. This struck me as absolutely absurd. The orthodox Trotskyist position never held any attraction for me.

KW: Were there particular magazines, such as *Liberation*, that you read as a teenager?

WP: Yes, I read *Liberation*, as well as other anarchist and pacifist publications, but I was never sympathetic to the pro-Castro and pro-Ho Chi Min articles that appeared in *Liberation*. But it was through reading *Liberation* that I became a big fan of A.J. Muste. I also stumbled across an early issue of *New Politics*, which had a major impact on me. This was just before the 1964 presidential election, and I was still too young to vote. It was probably my last year in high school.

I was particularly impressed by the debate that *New Politics* featured on the question of whether or not to support Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party. Two of the writers who favored voting for the Democrats were Dave McReynolds, who was reluctant about supporting Democrats, and Michael Harrington, who was much more enthusiastic. At the time I was persuaded by their arguments, and of course Barry Goldwater was terrible – he was a real

fright. Afterwards, when Johnson expanded the war in Vietnam, I decided that I had been mistaken, and that it was the anti-Johnson radicals who had the better argument. That affected my political development.

College Years

KW: The editors of *New Politics*, Phyllis and Julius Jacobson, are some of the only radicals I've ever met who used the word "pluralism" in a positive fashion. In any event, was politics at the center of your thinking when you were deciding where to go to college?

WP: Not really. I started going to Queens College in fall 1964, partly because it was cheaper than the alternatives. Also, it was convenient. A whole bunch of my friends went there for the same reason. I majored in Psychology and minored in Education, and my plan was to become a psychologist. It was not an especially political campus when I arrived there, and there was only one radical on the faculty that I was aware of. He was a sociologist who wrote about workers control. I still remember his pointing out that in the field of social psychology, virtually every study showed that if you gave workers more control over their work the result was higher productivity, less turnover, and so on – all positive. And he was quite right. Most of the time in a field like Psychology it is impossible to get the same results from different studies.

KW: The atmosphere at Queens College must have changed dramatically during the four years that you were there.

WP: It certainly did. I was involved in SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. I didn't do very much, but I was part of the local chapter. I wasn't active at the national level. We organized meetings and other events. The most important development for me personally was that I ran into a guy named Jeff Mackler who was active in the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), which was affiliated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He's now the leader of the Socialist

people around him were determined to stick to the original formula – a fairly orthodox Trotskyism with a state-capitalist analysis of Soviet-style regimes. The group around Landy also disagreed with the fact that we were calling for a labor party in the United States. Looking back, I think they were quite right about that.

KW: Did this affect your relationship with Sy Landy, who had been a friend of yours for at least a decade?

WP: Yes, sadly, it did. Even though I was closer to Sy I sided with the majority, which was led by Ron Tabor. Once Sy left Ron was the key figure. As I mentioned earlier, he had brought a group of SDSers into the IS and he continued to have a group around him during the 1970s-1980s. Ron was very sharp and very dedicated. I always respected and admired him.

KW: The RSL's shift toward anarchism is interesting, especially given that the leadership of the group played such a major role. There must be tremendous pressure, I would imagine, for the leadership of a small leftwing group to stick to the original formula. It's the group's "brand," after all. To tell your membership that you're willing to reopen fundamental political questions seems like a risky strategy from the perspective of brand management. If anything, the more typical trajectory is for the leadership to become frozen in their thinking.

WP: You're right – it was unusual. I remember a comrade saying to me, "We are the *damnedest* sort of Trotskyists," because we kept on reevaluating our perspective. We didn't just reexamine our tactics and our strategy, but the broad background. But I found the process exciting, in part because I had started out as an anarchist-pacifist and was already familiar with non-Marxist varieties of radicalism. My values had never really changed, even though I allowed myself to imagine that there was a democratic form of Leninism that emphasized workers councils, assemblies, and so forth.

It was in this period that Ron started writing major articles on Trotskyism, Leninism, Marxism, and anarchism. I also contributed to these discussions, which we featured in our newspaper. But at

WP: Of course, our initial expectation had been that we would be able to attract a new, younger layer of members, but we were not able to do so to the extent that we needed to. And that was true across the left.

In the same period, we were also beginning to rethink our basic positions vis-à-vis Trotskyism and Leninism. We had always faced the question of, well, if Trotsky is so good then why did Trotsky continue to believe that the Soviet Union was some kind of workers state?

KW: And if orthodox Trotskyism wasn't your organizing principle then what was?

WP: Exactly. So then we started to reexamine the writings of Lenin, and we discovered that there were problems with Lenin's approach as well as Trotsky's. Why *did* Lenin establish a one-party police state? We now know that even before the civil war of 1919–1921 broke out that the Bolsheviks engaged in things like gerrymandering, censorship, using the state apparatus to imprison and kill political opponents without anything resembling due process, and so on.

And this took us back to Marxism – what was there about Marx's own approach that helped make sense of subsequent events? After all, the first wave of Marxists ended up in the camp of pro-imperialist social democracy, and the second wave ended up with Stalinist totalitarianism. If, as Engels used to say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then what was the evidence telling us? Clearly there was a problem. You can point to certain objective forces, which is undoubtedly important, but there has to be more at stake than simply the "backwardness" of the Russian economy and so on. As a result of these conversations we became interested in what anarchism had to offer.

KW: Was there an individual who raised the sharpest questions about this issue of political traditions?

WP: Yes – Ron Tabor. Sy Landy had already formed his own group, the League for a Revolutionary Party, in 1976. He and the

Action group. He talked me out of anarchist-pacifism. He argued me out of pacifism on the grounds that there are some conflicts that have to be fought out. Compromise is sometimes possible, but no dominant social class is simply going to give up its power. In terms of anarchism he lent me books on the Spanish Civil War by Felix Morrow [*Revolution and Counter Revolution in Spain*, 1938], and a book by Shane Mage on Hungary [*The Hungarian Revolution: Documents*, 1960].

These books made the case that what Lenin meant by a socialist state was a state that is controlled by the workers. I had already read *State and Revolution* and was not at all convinced by Lenin's argument that socialists should seize state power, and that the state would then somehow wither away. He also seemed to be saying that anyone who disagreed with his conception of socialism and Marxism was a traitor, renegade, and so on.

The books by Morrow and Mage said that what Lenin meant by the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was that workers should form workers councils, that peasants should form peasant councils, and that soldiers should form their own councils, and that all of these different councils should form a larger association of councils that would represent an alternative form of power to the capitalist state, even in its liberal form. I thought, "Hey! I believe in that." It seemed to fit with my anarchoid beliefs. In fact, I still believe in this form of political organization, although I wouldn't call it a "state." Mackler helped push me in the direction of becoming some sort of Trotskyist. Of course, now I know more about what Lenin actually did during the early years of the Revolution. It was much later that I would start to read the critics of Lenin, such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Not that Lenin was Stalin. I don't think he intended to create a totalitarian system.

Hal Draper wrote an interesting book about the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat [*The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin*, 1987]. He makes it clear that Marx and Engels were referring to the rule of the working class, while later Marx-

ists, with the one exception of Rosa Luxemburg, had something more authoritarian in mind. Plekhanov, Lenin…they all had an authoritarian conception of a proletarian dictatorship. One of my criticisms of Draper is that it is all very well to view Marx and Engels as radical democrats, but how come almost every one of their followers were authoritarians? There must have been a deeper problem that Draper was unwilling to see.

KW: Why treat these kinds of writers as unimpeachable sources of instruction rather than as interesting thinkers?

WP: Well, the basic system hasn't changed all that much since Marx's day. The basic analysis still holds. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. On the other hand, most Marxists don't know how badly Marx treated his comrades in the First International. He and his followers would pack meetings and so on. They really played hardball. Marx thought that he knew all of the answers, and that attitude filtered down into Marxism. So, when Marxists came to power, they thought they could step on anybody who got in their way, because they had access to the absolute truth. The greater good and all that.

KW: Let's return to your experiences at Queens College.

WP: Our SDS chapter grew during my time at Queens, but I wanted to be involved in something that was a little less vague in its approach. We went to various demonstrations and so on, but it wasn't very cohesive. There was also the problem at the national level in that many of the people in SDS were moving in a Maoist direction. I stayed in SDS through college, but at some point, I also decided to join the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISC), which was both anti-authoritarian and revolutionary in its outlook.

KW: I assume that the ISC meetings were held in Manhattan.

WP: Yes. And it was at one of those meetings that I met Sy Landy.

KW: The ISC chapter in the Bay Area was mostly made up of students and recent graduates – with the obvious exception of Hal and Anne Draper – whereas the New York City chapter presumably

inside the labor movement. Draper said that the main thing was to get the working class moving. And this is why the IS majority was much less critical of groups like Miners for Democracy, or Teamsters for Democracy, than we were. And this meant that they were much more comfortable working in coalition with people whose orientation was non-revolutionary.

KW: From what I can tell about a hundred people left the International Socialists in 1973 with your faction, many of whom went on to join the Revolutionary Socialist League. Where were most of these people based?

WP: Well, several of the leaders lived in Detroit, and there were sizable branches in New York City and Los Angeles.

KW: Did the RSL ever experience a period of growth?

WP: At first it did, and for a few years we were excited about where things were going. The problem was that we were overly optimistic about the period. We expected that there would be further waves of radicalization, but instead it soon became apparent that things were moving in a conservative direction. The Vietnam War was no longer an issue, and even the civil rights movement was winding down. Not that black people were liberated, or U.S. imperialism ended. But as a result of these external developments some of the people who had taken part in the faction fight, and had then either joined the RSL, or who had been close to our group, drifted away from politics.

KW: So, by the early 1980s the group was smaller than it had been.

WP: Yes, it got smaller, even though we continued to put out our paper – *Torch* – and held educational meetings that were open to the public. But at some point, we got tired of being the tenth smallest group on the Trotskyist left. There didn't seem to be much of a point.

KW: And, presumably, people who had been in their teens and twenties during the 1960s were now a bit older and were starting families and so on.

For the most part the orthodox Trotskyists remained on the margins, and their theoretical analysis of the Soviet Union and other Stalinist regimes was terrible.

KW: When the RSL referred to itself as Trotskyist did that mean that the group emphasized the importance of transitional demands, as Trotsky himself argued for in the late 1930s?

WP: Yes, exactly. We were in favor of bringing the transitional program into the workers movement as a way of educating workers about the nature of capitalism. We were also impressed by Trotsky's ideas about the importance of the United Front, about the permanent revolution, and so on. We tried to apply these ideas in our day-to-day work, but not always with much success. We didn't necessarily believe that we would be able to necessarily appeal to the entire working class, but we hoped that we could reach what we referred to as the "advanced layer." The notion was that there were "advanced" individuals and groupings of workers, and youth, and that if we could attract *them* then we could begin to build what could become the nucleus of a true revolutionary party. We did not think that our program alone would allow us to win over the working class, but we did hope to win over a layer of militants that would allow us to build a much larger organization.

KW: Were the folks who stayed in the IS more "experimental" in their approach, less programmatically oriented? I can't imagine that someone like Kim Moody was necessarily against transitional demands, or against having a well-run organization. In some ways I still find it difficult to understand what was at stake in the 1973 split.

WP: A small part of it had to do with the fact that we had come to the conclusion that the group around Max Shachtman was wrong to split from the US Socialist Workers Party in 1940, whereas the IS was still fundamentally Shachtmanite in its approach. But that is a little abstract. The main issue was that our aim was to organize self-identified revolutionaries around a specific political program, whereas the goal of the IS was to work alongside rank-and-filers

included a number of folks who had been active in the 1940s and 1950s.

WP: That's right. A number of the people who were involved knew a lot about the history of the radical movement, whereas I still had a lot to learn. But they treated me well. I became especially friendly with Sy. I put aside my beliefs in decentralism, and my only disagreement was that I never accepted the idea that the Soviet Union was bureaucratic collectivist, which was the group's official position. I thought of the Soviet Union as state capitalist, although I never figured out the difference between Raya Dunayevskaya's version of state capitalism and Tony Cliff's position.

KW: Did you find the idea of building a party enjoyable? Did you like the idea of selling a newspaper and recruiting new members?

WP: I don't know that I thought of it as fun, but it seemed obvious to me at the time that if you have a political perspective you need an organization of some kind. This still seems obvious to me. That's why, when I became an anarchist, I gravitated to the "platformists." Of course, the organization should be democratic and so on, but you need some sort of group to get your message out there.

KW: How come Jeff Mackler wasn't able to recruit you to the YSA/SWP?

WP: As I said, the orthodox Trotskyist perspective – that countries like the Soviet Union were workers states of some type – seemed utterly idiotic, not to mention morally heinous. In particular, they gave uncritical support to the Castro dictatorship.

The Sixties

KW: What about the counter-cultural aspects of the sixties?

WP: I was pretty much what we would now call straight-edge. Didn't drink or do drugs, didn't go to rock concerts. I was just a guy going to college. And I remember in college reading a guy named Robert Linder, a Sociologist, who said that being gay was an illness.

And at the time I accepted that. I knew that Paul Goodman had been bisexual, but it didn't make much of an impression. By the 1970s of course I knew a lot of people who were gay and lesbian.

Later on, young people would sometimes ask me, "Was Wayne a hippie?" And I would always say, "no." There was a big distinction between the "politicals" and the hippies, and I was always in the political camp.

KW: Were you put off by some of the frenzied rhetoric of the period? Some people seemed to imagine that the revolution was around the corner.

WP: I was never attracted to the overheated rhetoric and imagery of violence that was popular in that time. I thought that groups like the Weather Underground were pretty terrible. Remember that for a while I was a pacifist, and I continued to abhor violence. My activities at the time were mostly focused on the antiwar movement – I attended most of the large demonstrations, as well as the national antiwar conferences. I fought for our politics, which were revolutionary, but I was never in favor of blowing things up. I remember the US-SWP leader Peter Camejo once saying that the IS was the "least crazy" of the ultra-left. And aside from that I was involved in the teachers union, at the local and national level.

I certainly never thought that the revolution was around the corner. I remember having an argument with my girlfriend at the time – she expected that the revolution would happen during her lifetime, and I did not. The most I expected to see was a continued upswing in the left, growing militancy and so on. Now more than ever my hope is to see the growth of a left, and a radical wing of the left.

KW: Did you attend the famous SDS convention in 1969, which more or less destroyed the organization?

WP: No, but I attended the founding convention of the International Socialists in the same year, which was formed out of the ISC. It was an exciting convention, in part because the group had recruited a group of SDSers who were based in Chicago. A member

the IS had not done enough to purge itself of its Shachtmanite baggage.

KW: Let's talk about what your group meant by developing a "revolutionary Trotskyist perspective." Did that mean that you placed a heavy emphasis on what Trotsky referred to as "the coming economic crisis"?

WP: Yes. Trotsky and Lenin both assumed that after World War I capitalism would enter a period of long-term decline and that the period would be characterized by increasingly deep economic crises. This led us to believe that the prosperity of the post-WWII period would be short lived, and that it was giving way to a new era of extended crisis. We argued that the postwar boom was based on the political defeat of the international working class as well as the massive destruction wrought by the two world wars, particularly the Second World War. We did not think that these developments would in any way undermine the fundamental tendency of the falling rate of profit. We also took note of the fact that the prolonged period of crisis would wreak havoc on the natural environment. We certainly disagreed with those who insisted that capitalism had found a way – through state spending or whatever other means – to stave off its inherent tendency toward crisis.

While we were broadly correct about the nature of the period we were living in – about the end of the postwar boom, and the growing ecological crisis – we overstated the degree to which the crisis of the mid-1970s would preclude further periods of economic expansion. We underestimated the degree to which there would still be cycles of boom and bust. On the other hand, we were absolutely right when we emphasized the calamitous impact that capitalism was having and would continue to have on the environment.

This was a period when the far left in the United States continued to be attracted to Stalinist regimes, since these were the governments that seemed to be fighting U.S. imperialism. Ho Chi Min, Chairman Mao, and Fidel Castro were attractive figures for many of the people who became politicized during the 1960s and 1970s.

KW: I have the impression that you were going to a lot of meetings during this period.

WP: So many meetings! If there was an important union meeting we would first meet among ourselves, then we'd go to the meeting, and then we would meet afterwards to discuss the meeting. It was ridiculous. There was hardly time for anything else. And I hated meetings! Political discussions I liked, but not meetings.

When the fight that led to the formation of the Revolutionary Socialist League broke out there was a step by step process. At first, we attempted to reorient the IS, to prod it in a revolutionary direction. I had been attracted to the ISC/IS in the first place because of its emphasis on what Draper referred to as "socialism from below." But I remember attending a national meeting of the IS and thinking, "these people couldn't bring home cows in the evening, let alone organize a revolution." It was too disorganized, too wishy-washy, too much of a mush-bag.

When Ron Tabor, Sy Landy and others decided to organize a faction, and push for a revolutionary perspective, I joined them. At the time we thought that the answer was to return to a properly Trotskyist approach – with the exception of the Soviet question, since none of us accepted Trotsky's view that the Soviet Union was a degenerated workers state. I was pleased to see the faction emerge, although I didn't enjoy the fact that it cut me off from folks that I had been close to such as Carl Feingold and Steve Zeluck. I liked both of them very much and was disappointed that they opposed our faction.

At first, we made a sincere effort to change the IS. But it soon became apparent that we were not going to be able to reorient the group and instead it splintered. For one thing, we were concerned that the IS was unwilling to criticize reform-minded union leaders like Arnold Miller of the miners union. People like Kim Moody were more much inclined to support progressive union leaders against the corrupt old guard than we were. We also thought that

of the group was Ron Tabor, who I later worked with in the Revolutionary Socialist League. There were some interesting arguments, including over the question of whether and how to support the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Vietnam. There was also some discussion about the ISC's involvement in the Peace and Freedom Party's 1968 presidential campaign, which was a complete disaster.

KW: Did your parents have any misgivings about your political activism?

WP: Not really. Had I dropped out of college to become a full-time revolutionary that would have upset them. As long as I was attending college, they were fine. We had political discussions, of course. They were left-liberals and I favored some sort of unorthodox Trotskyism. But our underlying values were similar.

KW: At some point after its formation the IS embraced a strategy of industrialization. What was your attitude toward the idea of sending former college students into factories?

WP: I agreed with the policy, but on the other hand I wasn't going to go into industry. Instead, I became a school teacher, and joined the AFT [American Federation of Teachers]. That's where I met Steve Zeluck, who had been active in the SWP for many years and who then joined the IS. He was very knowledgeable, and he was very political in how he dealt with people. A serious person. He was close to a man named Carl Feingold, who had also been in the SWP. We managed to build a small caucus within the AFT, but there were people in the IS who thought that teachers were not all that interesting compared to, say, steel workers.

KW: Did anyone ever browbeat you into leaving the classroom for the shop floor?

WP: Not really. I knew I'd never last in a factory. But in general, the fact that the IS undertook this work was to their credit. There was a labor upsurge in the early 1970s that the IS was able to relate to, and which has been largely overlooked by historians. It was in this period that there was a massive post office wildcat, as well as the unionization of a large section of the public sector workforce.

Indeed, today it's public sector employees who are largely responsible for keeping the union movement going.

The School System

KW: Did you think of your work as a special education teacher in political terms or simply as a job that allowed you to pay the bills?

WP: Well, both. The job itself was political in the very basic sense of doing good to help kids. And in the first year that I became a teacher there was the controversial NYC teachers strike of 1968, which pitted the black community in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area of Brooklyn, who wanted more African-American teachers, and a greater emphasis on black history, and the teachers union. I was sympathetic to the community, and against the strike. It was ironic that in my very first year as a teacher I crossed a picket line, but the strike itself was basically racist. Neither side was perfect, but I thought that it was important to support the community.

KW: When did you make the shift to becoming a school psychologist?

WP: After about ten years or so.

KW: Let's say that a student came to you with a reading problem. Was your approach to help them see things in terms of political and social issues?

WP: No. First of all, I was basically there to do assessments, and I didn't believe in indoctrinating anybody. On the other hand, I had a big picture of Malcolm X hanging in my office. I still remember a little girl who looked at the picture and said, "But he didn't like white people!" And I said to her, "No, he didn't like *bad* white people. I'm a *good* white person." This was terribly oversimplified, of course, but not completely off the mark.

To some extent, as a teacher I tried to help the students gain a wider perspective on things. I was the only teacher at my school

who didn't salute the flag at school assemblies, for example. And I made a point of covering the history of slavery. There was one time that I was asked to organize a school assembly, and my wife, who is a folk singer, sang songs with the kids about abolitionism, runaway slaves, John Brown, and Harriet Tubman. The name of the school is the Harriet Tubman School, so it was considered more or less appropriate by the authorities. But did I discuss Marxism with the students? No. I was there to help them think for themselves.

After I had worked in the assessment unit for a few years I became a liaison between the assessment unit and the teachers union. That allowed me to ramp up my union activity. I was also active in a leftwing caucus within the union that included people from IS and some other groups.

From the IS to the RSL

KW: Were there specific people in the IS whom you gravitated toward?

WP: I was close to Sy Landy for a long time. He was an interesting guy, and there were a number of people who admired him and listened to him. Highly neurotic in many ways. He was a member of the missing generation between the radicals of the 1930s and 1940s, and the radicals of the 1960s. He was very much a New York Jew, and a real raconteur. I remember that at one point he decided to lose some weight, so he ate baked chicken every day. He did not find it easy to write, and he sometimes got in a funk. He and Ron Tabor never became friends, but I liked him a lot.

KW: What you think of Hal Draper?

WP: I met him a few times but did not get to know him. The person from Draper's generation that most impressed me was Stan Weir. He was a lovely human being. He was such a nice guy. A charming and exceptional person. I wish I had got to know him better.