

MY EARLY RECOLLECTIONS OF NOEL IGNATIN

By Don Hamerquist

I thought I might write a few things about some of my late 1960s interactions with Noel in the period before I moved to Chicago. Down the road, I may write something a little more currently relevant, but I'm finding it hard to get to those questions.

It's been more than half a century since the incidents that I'm raising. While I think my memory is generally accurate, I don't have the energy to check out the details, dates, etc., that I'm not completely certain about.

Neither Noel nor I realized it at the time, but our political positions – and those of many others – were rapidly changing in response to a complicated set of political crises in this country and internationally. I would argue that my political development followed a right to left trajectory a bit more typical than Noel's rapid transition from hyper-doctrinaire Marxism-Leninism to an anti-party/state workerism.

My relationship with Noel began during the winter and early spring of '67-'68. At the end of 1967, the CP National Executive Board assigned me to Chicago to work on a challenge to the 1968 Democratic Convention. At that moment, the CP's "agreed objective" was to fragment the social base of the Democratic Party and promote a range of radical political initiatives that could unify and expand already existing mass struggles and movements.

No one here will be surprised that both this objective and my CP assignment were conclusively dead within weeks – well before the onset of summer – victims of Soviet tanks in Czechoslovakia; the CP's reactionary reformism in the French May; not to forget the pervasive reformist conservatism and incompetence of the US CP structure and membership.

I quickly realized my assignment (and probably my time in the CP) was time limited, so I consciously used it as an opportunity to do some heavy-duty consorting with various 'New Left' elements – in Chicago and elsewhere in the country. This was factional behavior in the eyes of the CP

apparatchniks, eyes that seldom saw anything as clearly as they saw factionalism, and it would not be tolerated for long.

For those few months in Chicago in early 1968, I worked closely with Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, the main public faces of the anti-Convention preparation. They hoped to use me to tap into CP money and political contacts and to help deal with some political disputes that obstructed their projections for the Democratic convention protest – while remaining in the background.

One such dispute involved a substantial segment of Chicago New Leftists that were aggressively advancing 'local organizing' as an alternative to the Democratic Convention protest – and to all of the national actions that Abby Hoffman termed quite accurately; *"immobilizations and demoralizations"*.

Noel was a major leader of the Chicago 'local organizing' crew; along with Staughton Lynd, the SDS National office collective, and a good number of other Chicago radicals – many of whom have substantial, if not necessarily laudable, political records. A few months earlier Noel had written "White Blindspot" with Ted Allan and versions of this argument were becoming central themes in the internal SDS struggle against the PLP. Noel, a factory worker in a framework that was overwhelmingly dominated by self-selected student-based movement activists, had become a very non-typical member of the SDS National Council and the Chicago National Office collective.

Hayden and Davis thought I might be able to change Noel's position and weaken the local organizer's boycott of a large national planning meeting for the Chicago action that was scheduled for late spring. A dinner meeting with Noel and his wife Hilda – actually more of an audience – was set up for Carole Travis and me.

At this time, Noel was a few years removed from the POC (Provisional Organizing Committee). The POC was a small, semi-clandestine, explicitly Stalinist group, that broke from the CP before the U.S. left was aware of the impending Sino-Soviet split. The POC didn't really exist on the West Coast, so my knowledge of it is second-hand, picked up later from Noel and Hilda, Ted Allan, Nelson Peery and Harry Haywood who had all been members. While it was small, the POC had a fairly impressive cadre of experienced

Black and Latin working class cadre, including those I mentioned above. The organization was highly sectarian, doctrinaire and ingrown and it rapidly imploded in some nasty in-fighting around charges of police penetration.

In any case, we went over to Noel's place on Claremont Street, near the old Tuley High School, for dinner. The apartment was fitted out in high proletarian fashion – austere, with an emphasis on Soviet heroic propaganda posters and miscellaneous work clothes. At the time Noel affected a Lenin cap and pipe, a posture which we ridiculed him out of shortly after STO formed two years later .I'd seen a good deal of such atmospherics from CP functionaries who had consorted with Stalin and Zinoviev in the Comintern, so I wasn't impressed.

Noel was doing the cooking, but early in the evening he made an entrance to ask a gate-keeping litmus question that I will never forget (and I never let him forget it either): *"Do you agree with Enver Hoxha that the Cubans should eat grass before asking for aid from the Soviets?"*

I don't remember making any particularly clear and principled response, although I managed to express some measure of disagreement. I do remember thinking that this relationship was going to be a short one – and wondering how we could escape quickly and perhaps avoid Noel's oyster stew.

However, some additional factors quickly smoothed out the evening. For one thing, like Noel, I wasn't a student but had worked as a logger and teamster for more than a decade and was as critical of official leftism's reformist approach to trade unions and trade unionism as he was. It was also helpful that Carole Travis' father had been a leader of the successful FE/UAW organizing drive at the historic (think 8 hr. day and Haymarket) McCormack Reaper/Harvester Tractor Works complex. The McCormack plant had been closed for some time, but the adjacent International Harvester Tractor Works plant was still functioning with a couple of thousand workers until the early seventies. Noel was working as a tool and die maker at Tractor Works

He was dealing with International Harvester's plans to close down that plant. (For those who know Chicago, Tractor Works was on the East side of the Cook County Jail/Courthouse complex. When we left Chicago in 2001, it was the parking lot for the jail.) The Tractor Works situation raised questions

where Noel and I had some substantial agreement that neither of us really expected. Tractor works had a militant largely independent organization of Black workers that eventually merged with the Detroit League. It had a sell-out 'left' union leadership that was periodically close to the CP. Although the plant was facing a complete closure, the local union leadership and its various oppositions were enmeshed in their normal games, even while some of them were taking advantage of Harvester's selective offers of transfers to other plants – in segregated white suburbs with much whiter workforces.

The activity around Tractor Works continued past the formation of STO in December of 1969. It was a major focus of RYMII's alternative actions to Weather's Days of Rage. Eventually Noel's work helped lead to a Wildcat strike that shut the plant down and seized the union hall and a few local bars – unfortunately it was substantially too late to affect the trajectory of events.

There is a good deal more of interest in this struggle and its place in the de-industrialization of Chicago, but for these recollections, its importance is that it produced some initial affinity between myself and Noel. Not a great relationship, and Noel still held to his 'local organizing' view – not surprisingly since Tractor Works was his 'local organizing'. But it was clear that I also thought production organizing was more important, if not necessarily contradictory, to another gathering of movement luminaries. We also agreed that most of the rest of the Alinsky-flavored "local organizing" was not such a priority.

There were a couple of other factors. I had already managed to convince Slim Coleman and Kathy Archibald, a scroungy pair that were the de facto leadership of SDS and the Chicago National Office Collective, to participate – largely on opportunistic grounds – in the planning meeting, so Noel's reluctance was less significant.

Much more important, King was assassinated a few weeks later; the entire West side of Chicago was on fire, demolishing the Roosevelt Road and Madison Street corridors and narrowly missing SDS's office on Madison and Paulina. The National Guard, and, as I remember, some elements of the regular military had been called out and the senior Daley had issued his 'shoot to kill' order. It became embarrassingly evident that most 'local organizing' was pretty irrelevant and much the same was true of national protest politics.

In a reaction against the lemming-like movement protest where some thousands of activists confronted the National Guard on the lakefront and attempted to impale themselves on waiting bayonets, a small group that included Noel and myself, attempted to develop a general strike response as an alternative. This involved a completely futile attempt on my part to convince the CP's trade union section, primarily concentrated in steel, auto, and ex-packinghouse, that accidentally was meeting in Chicago at the time, to get off their ass. It became clear that these folks were as prone to identify with the forces of order as the insurgency – of course I should have known.

At that moment, I was called back to New York for some party chastising and only spent a little time in Chicago around the Convention Planning meeting – a disaster of epic proportions. I wasn't involved in anything that included Noel for more than a year except for some nonsense at SDS NCs concerning our factional CP presidential campaign – another story and one where I have more trouble justifying what I was doing.

At the end of the following year, 1969, having quit/been expelled from the CP for over a year, I left for Chicago and the 'Days of Rage'. I stayed there for 30 years, during half of which worked with Noel on essentially a daily basis in STO – but not without a good deal of friction.

During the '68-'69 period, Noel's politics had changed dramatically. In particular, this involved the adoption of major elements of the CLR James/Martin Glaberman Facing Reality/state capitalism/workerist approach. Ken Lawrence, who had been in Facing Reality, was very instrumental in this development although Noel took it much further than Ken. I also had some agreement with this stance – although over time I became much closer to Ken's variant than Noel's. However, early in the period, this affinity resting on a combination of CLR and Gramsci – which neither of the principles probably would have endorsed – kept us in the same organizational framework. Of course, a healthy contempt for the rest of the organized left helped.