

Nelson Peery: American Revolutionary

June 22, 1923-September 6, 2015

At particular moments, history creates possibilities for humanity to progress toward its liberation. But those possibilities can become reality only if masses of people recognize them and act on them. In such periods, outstanding individuals who understand what history has made necessary and possible can make a decisive contribution to liberating humanity. Nelson Peery was such a person.

We celebrate the life and contribution of comrade Nelson Peery. His experience, his deep, life-long commitment to the revolutionary movement, and his grasp of the meaning and content of these times enabled him to make the kind of contribution that marks him as a great revolutionary thinker of our time.

Nelson was an American revolutionary. He was born of African American parents in St. Joseph, Missouri, the second of seven sons. His mother was the granddaughter of Kentucky slaves. Nelson's father was a World War I veteran, and his great-grandfather joined the Union Army during the Civil War. Nelson was himself a World War II veteran with three campaign ribbons and four battle stars, having enlisted in the army in 1941 to fight fascism. After the war, Black veterans became the foundation of the modern Freedom movement, and Nelson was among them. Nelson had some 75 years experience in the communist movement, and was a member at different times of a number of revolutionary organizations. He was a founding member of the League of Revolutionaries for a New America.

We cannot separate Nelson from the historical epoch that gave rise to him. He was shaped by, and helped shape, the times in which he lived. The world in his lifetime was marked by the transition from production based on electro-mechanical industry to production based on electronics. This profound economic change, which he and others compared to the discovery of fire, was reflected in an equally profound change in the nature of the communist movement. Where the movement had been based primarily on ideology in the industrial period, electronics – which is labor-replacing technology – has given rise to an objective communist movement embodied by millions of workers who have been pushed out of the economy as jobs have been eliminated. The problems of this new class of workers created by electronics can only be resolved by creating a cooperative society.

Although Nelson joined the communist movement in a qualitatively different historical epoch, his response to the advent of electronics demonstrated his ability to change with changing times. He was among the first to recognize the earthshaking historical significance of electronics and the formation of this new class, and its implications for humanity. He understood that electronics not only makes communism possible, but makes it absolutely necessary if humanity is to save itself.

What enabled him to make the contributions he made? Above all, Nelson was both a collectivist and a scientist. His mastery of the science of society – dialectical and histor-

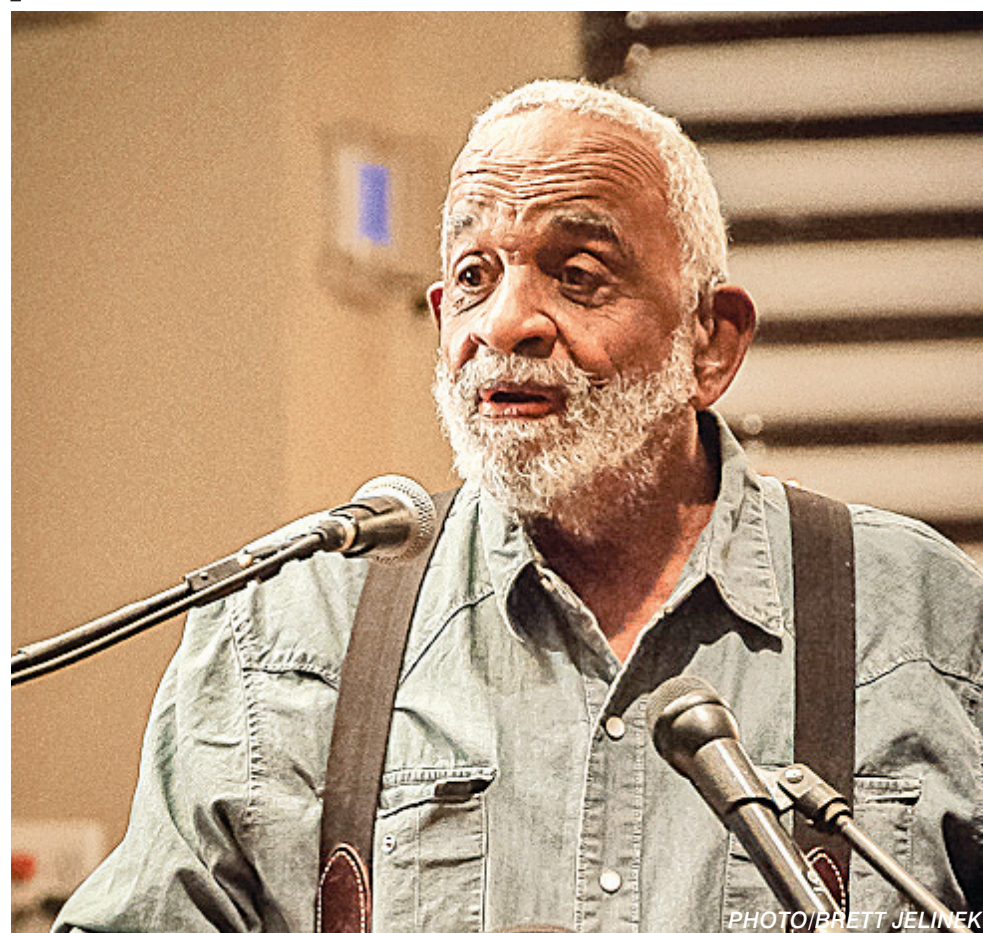
ical materialism – allowed him to grasp how and why society changes, and how and why revolutions occur. Understanding this process of change and becoming conscious of it allows revolutionaries and the revolutionary class to find the way forward. Nelson knew that the world has a reality independent of our thoughts, and he understood the necessity of revolutionaries using the science of society to grasp that reality and then act on the resulting knowledge. He would insist that the starting point for any political analysis and conclusions about the current tasks of revolutionaries be the simple question: “What is the real world?”

Nelson also understood that individuals can accomplish nothing acting alone, and he worked constantly with others to help train people as scientists, to help create collectives based on a scientific outlook, and to help build revolutionary organizations aimed at making the workers conscious of their revolutionary role. In whatever revolutionary organization he belonged to, he consistently put the unity and integrity of the organization first. He always said that organization and consciousness are the only weapons the workers have in their struggle for a new world. And if an organization he belonged to needed to change to conform to what history demanded at that moment, he was among the first to argue for the change.

Nelson stressed the importance of workers studying and learning how to analyze the world in order to change it, and he felt any worker could do this. He once wrote, “Nobody can tell me that a worker, a person of normal intelligence, can't become a proletarian intellectual. They can and they must.” He focused on making every member of the organization a leader. “We need to create an organization where every member feels responsible,” he wrote. “Being a leader is a division of labor. It is not any special thing.” He also said that “leaders are judged by how many new leaders they develop.”

His study of history and of the movement taught him that the essential role of the communist is to be a propagandist with the aim of making the workers class conscious so they can carry out their historical role in a changing society. He knew that humanity cannot liberate itself without the introduction of this consciousness, and he knew that the experience of the movement has confirmed that a revolutionary press is essential to the task of arousing and educating the people. “A movement,” he said, “is a cause and a press.” Thus he always placed tremendous importance on creating such a press in various forms.

While Nelson's contributions to advancing the theoretical, philosophical, and organizational foundations of the movement are too numerous to list, some should be mentioned specifically. He contributed enormously to groundbreaking works on the color (race) question, and was among the first to recognize that the economic changes wrought by electronics are making growing sections of workers equally impoverished and able to unite,



thus for the first time undercutting the rulers' ability to use color to divide workers. “I don't care whether you are Black or white or Latino. When the robot comes into your factory, you are laid off,” he said. But he also understood that while economic changes set the stage for working class unity, such unity would not come automatically and must be fought for.

In addition, his participation in producing the pamphlet *Entering an Epoch of Social Revolution* helped create a document that was also groundbreaking, both in its conclusions and in the way it applied the science of society to answer major philosophical questions about social and economic change and the revolutionary process.

The combination of organization, collectivity, Nelson's particular features, characteristics, and burning commitment, and the possibilities created by history enabled him to make the contribution he did. We herald the tremendous contribution of Nelson Peery, but we do so echoing his own words about the necessity of building an organization of revolutionaries. He said, “I give credit to the collectives of which I have been a part. Individuals make history in unity with others.”

Nelson was a living example of the highest form of consciousness: self-consciousness, meaning understanding not simply that “something must be done,” but knowing that “I must do it. I am responsible.” He sacrificed everything for the revolutionary movement.

Despite the dark side of American history, Nelson believed that the American people are at bottom a moral people, and that under the right conditions they could be awakened. He recently wrote, “We are heading into revolution. The objective side of the revolution is way advanced and the subjective side is

way behind. The role of a revolutionary organization is to arouse, organize and develop that subjective side.”

Nelson has walked with us up to this point, but the work is not yet done, and his example challenges every revolutionary to do what is necessary to complete the task, challenges each of us to become self-conscious. Revolutionaries need collective study and discussion, a mastery of the science of society, a deep knowledge of history, a willingness to sacrifice, and a common understanding of the world and what must be done. In a word, revolutionaries need to belong to an organization of revolutionaries in order to make a real contribution, and we call on those in our country who are fighting to end oppression and poverty, and who are committed to educating the people, to join the League of Revolutionaries for a New America. Just as history called Nelson forth, so history is today posing the question squarely to all revolutionaries – who is going to step forward at this moment to fight forward to the bright new world we can actually see on the horizon? Millions of revolutionaries are needed today to do what is necessary.

Nelson, we will miss your warmth, your wisdom, your humor, your humanity, your integrity, and your unfailing commitment to the working class and to the revolution. Rest well, beloved comrade. The fight will go on 'til we've won.

Donations in celebration of Nelson Peery's life can be sent to LRNA, PO Box 477113, Chicago, IL 60647 or donate via Paypal at rallycomrades.lrna.org/donate. Contact the League of Revolutionaries for a New America at 773-486-0028.