

INTERVIEW

History of the US radical Left: Turning to the Working Class

Tuesday 10 July 2018, by [MAISANO Chris](#), [MOODY Kim](#) (Date first published: 8 July 2018).

Kim Moody reflects on his time in the New Left, turning to the working class, and opportunities for socialists in the labor movement today.

Kim Moody is one of the most influential left-wing labor activists of the last forty years. He was among the founders of the International Socialists, *Labor Notes*, and Solidarity, and is the author of a number of important books on the labor movement including *An Injury to All*, *Workers in a Lean World*, and the recently published *On New Terrain* (as well as a contributor to *Jacobin* and *Catalyst*).

Perhaps less well known is the important role that Moody played in the early days of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) [[1](#)]. He was a participant in the historic Port Huron convention of 1962, and served in the organization's national leadership. He was also one of the leaders of an SDS community organizing project in Baltimore from 1963 to 1965.

Here, Moody speaks with *Jacobin* contributing editor Chris Maisano about his time in SDS, the possibilities and limitations of community organizing, and why radicals should prioritize working within the labor movement.

Chris Maisano (CM)

How did you first get involved in the New Left and SDS?

Kim Moody (KM)

When I went to university in 1960 at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, when it was basically a segregated city, I was involved in the civil rights movement. We had a chapter of the Student Peace Union (SPU), and we organized some marches — Ban the Bomb-type things. But that's where I met people in the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), people on the left wing of YPSL like Mike Parker. So I picked up those politics.

SPU was run by YPSL, and rather bureaucratically. It was a narrow, one-issue organization. My experience in the civil rights movement was with both the student side of it — there was a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chapter in Baltimore at an historically black university there, Morgan State, that supplied the bulk of the movement — but also with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), kind of the adult side of the movement, you might say.

At the time, almost all of the people active in CORE were black trade unionists. That made an impression on me in terms of my political thinking about class and race.

The civil rights movement was by far the most important thing. But I began to think, “don’t we need something broader?” My view of YPSL was that it was impossibly sectarian. The kinds of nasty debates that went on in YPSL, like people writing these fifty-page debate documents, was sort of absurd to me. So when someone at Hopkins told me about the Port Huron convention in the summer of 1962, a couple of us from Baltimore drove to the convention.

I was very impressed. There were a lot of people at the time who were into the Democratic Party realignment strategy [2], but not everybody. The thing about Port Huron and the next couple of SDS conventions was that you could debate things, you could disagree, but it wasn’t done in a nasty, sectarian way. The only nasty thing at Port Huron was the famous intervention of Michael Harrington and Don Slaiman from the AFL-CIO accusing everybody of being insufficiently anti-Communist.

Although I had a view of the Soviet Union that was probably not very different from Harrington’s, I thought the idea of emphasizing this kind of anti-Communism was ridiculous. The CP was not a big force at that time, and we weren’t in Russia or anything. I agreed with the general atmosphere in SDS that was pretty critical of the Soviet Union, but this kind of extreme obsession with anti-Communism was not helpful.

CM

What do you think accounts for the differences in political culture between YPSL and the milieu it came out of and what you saw at Port Huron and in SDS?

KM

We had a lot of ridiculous illusions about what it meant to be a New Left. My politics were not really New Left, but there was a sense that we didn’t want to recreate that kind of nasty internal atmosphere we saw in YPSL. Political debates were conducted in a more comradely way, at least for the first three or four years of SDS. Of course, it all changed later on. Also, there were people there who were interested in the labor movement, which I was interested in by that time. I couldn’t do much about it, but I saw that as important. So it was an attractive milieu.

Why people were able to behave in that sort of more congenial way, I don’t exactly know. But I think it was a self-conscious effort not to repeat some of the mistakes of what we saw as the Old Left, which was mainly the Communist Party (CP) and the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and so forth.

CM

Did you come into the New Left and SDS already with an interest in the labor movement?

KM

I was already a socialist and even a Marxist, if not a particularly well-educated one, at that point. I thought in terms of the importance of class, but also because of my experience in the civil rights movement, in terms of race and the intersection of the two. So yes, I was already interested in that. The person who sent me to Port Huron said “you’re going to like this because there are a bunch of laborites there.” That was inaccurate, but it was one reason why I went and tried to play a role.

There was no labor section in the Port Huron Statement [3], but there was an economic section done mainly by Robb Burlage [4], who I was very impressed by. So we tried to have some influence on statement about labor, which wasn’t all that much, and in retrospect wasn’t all that great. But it was there.

So I came to the convention with that idea, and I met people who were thinking about the labor

movement in a number of different ways, including some who were at the 1963 Pine Hill convention like Stanley Aronowitz. At that time he was an organizer with the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers in Puerto Rico. This was very impressive to me — he had a lot of stories about what they did there.

Obviously not everybody in SDS, certainly not Tom Hayden, had a class view or even particularly liked the labor movement, but many did.

CM

Why was that? What was the perspective of Hayden and his wing on the labor movement and class politics?

KM

Hayden was very influenced by C. Wright Mills. We all were to some extent, but Hayden really got into what Mills called the “labor metaphysic.” [5] Mills had been through a Marxist organization but he rejected it. Hayden was very influenced by the notion that this idea of the working class as the agent of social change was outmoded and wrong, and that the working class in the early 1960s was complacent — part of the American establishment, in a sense.

Everybody who was there was affected by the civil rights movement, that’s the one thing that united everybody. Hayden had been deeply impacted by when he was in Mississippi and all that. So he saw social change more as a coalition project, which is why he was so much for the Democratic Party realignment view of that time.

He didn’t see class as important. Some did, and that was always something that got debated over and over. Why Hayden came to that view I can’t really say, except all of us felt that the organizations of the Old Left had all failed.

If you looked at what the organized left was in 1962, it was pretty pathetic. The CP was there, but it certainly wasn’t every strong. The SP was by that time quite weak. YPSL was growing — it was probably bigger than SDS at that particular moment — but you could sense that the way it was working wasn’t good.

So for people like Hayden and many others who formed the core leadership of SDS, they were looking at what the Left had done and decided “well, this hasn’t worked.” and we had to build up what was happening, which was mainly the civil rights movement, civil liberties work in the wake of McCarthyism and all that, and on general economic issues - not so much class issues per se but poverty.

This influenced Hayden and many others, ironically because Harrington wrote the book *The Other America* that exposed poverty to a wide audience. How could this prosperous nation have such a huge poor population? The politics were highly moralistic. They were looking at the civil rights movement, poverty, racism and so forth and the failure of the Old Left with its class analysis.

They drew these more liberal or left-liberal conclusions, though they did not think of themselves as liberals, of course. They thought of themselves as radicals.

CM

This finds expression in the form of the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) [6]. What was the main purpose or goal of that project, what was the underlying theory of social change or political orientation?

KM

ERAP started out in 1963 as a research project. Al Haber and some others set it up to do research on

questions of poverty. But again, Hayden was really the mover of so much of this stuff, in both its good and not-so-good ways.

He came up with the critique that we can research all this stuff, we can be academics, we can be students, but we're not going to change anything. We have to take these ideas to the poor.

And again, the focus was not the working class as a whole but the poor — participatory democracy, social movement activism, borrowing the model of the civil rights movement to some extent and actually going into these communities to help people there organize to change their life circumstances, to fight poverty and eventually turn this into some kind of political movement.

What that would be in practice was a matter of considerable disagreement. The main thing when ERAP took this turn in late 1963 toward community organizing was the idea that we were going to pick several cities and launch this project. I think it was Hayden who got the idea that he could get money from the United Auto Workers (UAW) to help launch it, and he did in fact succeed in getting some money from Walter Reuther, who was apparently very enthusiastic.

So the idea evolved of what we called the "interracial movement of the poor." The idea was to organize in both black and white poor communities and to create a unified movement of poor people across racial lines that could impact American politics — not so much electorally but more in the way that the civil rights movement had an impact through direct action and mass mobilization and organization and and so forth.

There a number of different approaches. We had debates between what we called the "JOIN vs. GROIN" wings.

JOIN was the "jobs or income now" wing, arguing to organize the unemployed and perhaps unemployed youth, in the case of the Chicago project. The Baltimore project that I was part of had the same orientation toward organizing the unemployed.

GROIN stood for "garbage removal or income now" which was more of the Alinsky-style multi-issue community organizing. Your own project was free to do whatever approach you wanted — nobody told you what to do.

CM

You said that you were one of the leaders or Baltimore ERAP project. What were you trying to accomplish there?

KM

I thought, "OK, here's a way to get into the working class." We were looking mostly at the unemployed, but we also wanted to reach union people who could help organize this kind of thing. That's what we tried to do, which is why we set it up as the Union for Jobs or Income Now (U-JOIN).

We had two offices, one in a poor, white, mostly Appalachian community bordering a large working class Polish community. The other office was in the black community. The staff of the black office were young black activists from the civil rights movement, and in the white office it was young whites, mostly guys at first and then women as well.

The idea was that we would organize in these communities and bring people together on a regular basis in interracial meetings to discuss strategy. We did do that for a good deal of that summer of 1964. The fundamental problem was with the whole ERAP idea. To be honest, I think it was all a mistake.

CM

Why do you think it was a mistake?

KM

The idea that college students or recent graduates could go into these poor communities and become part of them and organize and attempt to lead or develop a leadership was basically wrong. It was proved wrong by the fact that none of these projects survived for more than a few years. Ours in Baltimore survived for about two years, and really was not terribly successful in our original idea of organizing the unemployed. So we eventually turned to doing all of the other things that community organizing projects do like housing organizing.

One of our analytical mistakes was about unemployment. This was the early 1960s: unemployment was dropping at the time, not rising! There were obviously still unemployed people in both of these communities, and at higher rates in the black community. Nonetheless, it probably wasn't the issue we should've focused on. We did a lot interesting things and I learned a lot out of the experience, but as an organizing idea I think there was something artificial about it.

In the debates before ERAP became a community organizing project, a lot of the old SDS people like Haber said this was a ludicrous idea. They were probably right, even though I would say the experience was an important one and good for most of us who did it — actually living in a working-class community without having much money. But of course, you're not really part of it, because you know you can go back and finish your degree, which is what I did because I got married and had a kid, so I had to earn some money.

It was a moralistic idea, that we were the ones who could organize the poor, with the unspoken codicil that maybe the poor can't organize themselves. It was a kind of arrogant idea, really. None of us explicitly would have thought that or said that but I think that was in the back of one's mind.

All these students were going create the interracial movement of the poor. Well, we didn't and couldn't. It would take somebody like Martin Luther King to do something like the Poor People's Campaign.

But it was a good experience for many of us. In the case of the Baltimore project and some of the others, we didn't just meet unemployed people. We engaged with all these rank-and-file union members who would come to the meetings even though they were employed, feeling that the unions had some role in helping the unemployed, which was the idea we had. We tried to get the Baltimore AFL-CIO to support a rally (which in the end they didn't want to do, though we had some meetings with some really bizarre building trades union-bureaucrat characters). That didn't work out. But we did have some relations with people in the UAW rank-and-file, and people from other unions.

That was quite an experience for me. It gave me another view of how shop floor work was organized.

We had a relationship with workers at a big Martin-Marietta defense plant just outside of Baltimore. They were UAW members, black and white, women and men. It was interesting to see how these different groups functioned in relationship with each other — which they did. Despite prejudice, they were able to function in the workplace and in the union as a pretty militant local union. So we saw a lot of these things as well as what went on in the community itself.

We would take neighborhood people down to the city council to show them how politicians do things. That was hysterical, a wonderful experience for everybody because the poor people who became active for a while got to see these politicians more or less making fools of themselves over what they were going to do with the new poverty program starting at that time.

So I had quite a few interesting experiences, but as a project it really was not successful.

CM

By the mid-1960s, the ERAP projects in Baltimore and elsewhere faded out. SDS was embroiled in internal political and strategic debates.

You were part of a group that wrote a paper in 1966 called “Toward the Working Class.” What was that orientation all about, and how did you view the difference between that kind of working-class politics and the orientation toward the poor that was embedded in the ERAP idea?

KM

After ERAP, I got a job as a social worker in a Baltimore welfare department office. We organized a union there. That was interesting too because the department was full of veterans of the civil rights movement, so we had an integrated black and white, male and female leadership of this independent union. We got no help from the labor movement.

CM

This sounds a lot like the Social Service Employees Union in New York City [7].

KM

That was our model. In fact we called ourselves the Baltimore Social Service Employees Union, and eventually when I moved to New York they hired me as an organizer on the basis of what we did in Baltimore.

By that time I was really not so much in SDS in an active way. I was already moving towards what the Independent Socialist Clubs (ISCs). Berkeley was the biggest one with the Free Speech Movement and that whole thing.

In 1964, YPSL exploded and disappeared because of the factionalism. One group that came out of it was around Hal Draper, who I think was one of the best American Marxists there were. They were what we called third camp socialists, “neither Washington nor Moscow,” and revolutionary Marxists.

Draper was very cautious, though. He didn’t want to set up a new organization. He encouraged people to set up local independent socialist clubs. We did that in Baltimore and were still involved to some extent in the community organizing project and what became the final phase of the civil rights movement there.

I wasn’t directly involved in the leadership or the conventions of SDS, but we developed a group of people out of which that pamphlet, “Toward the Working Class,” came. Actually one of the authors of it (Mike Pflug) was in *News and Letters* [8], which was another third campish socialist group — followers of C.L.R. James [9], who we also liked. When you’re in a place like Baltimore, you can’t afford the sectarianism that you could in New York, so we were all friends and worked together on things.

The three of us wrote that pamphlet with the idea of making one last intervention in SDS at the 1966 convention in Clear Lake, Iowa [10]. We were also in touch with other people who came slightly behind us in SDS — Steve Kindred [11], Dave Finkel [12], people at the University of Chicago, who were also interested in this ISC development. They also wanted to orient toward the working class, so we wrote the pamphlet and went to Clear Lake. And basically got nowhere. So most of us who went through that got active through the ISCs, which by 1970 became the International Socialists (IS).

By 1966 I had been out of ERAP for many months. I had been in the welfare department helping to

organize the union there, and so was oriented in a different way from a lot of the people who were coming into SDS at that time, particularly the Maoists. It was not a particularly organized intervention. We didn't have some kind of caucus at Clear Lake. It was more of a literary intervention than anything else.

We didn't have the illusion that we were going to win, but we thought with all these new people coming into SDS, maybe there's a chance of influencing some of them. Maybe we did, but that was about it.

After that, I hadn't been a student for a long time so there wasn't much point in being in SDS, and the ISCs became a federation around 1967, so it was moving toward being a national organization. So I turned toward that.

CM

Why did you think the viewpoint you put forth in that document was more promising than working with the poorest of the poor through community organizing? If students or former students organizing in poor communities was hopeless, then why would organizing among unionized workers be more fruitful?

KM

That's a good question. One of the lessons I drew from working in U-JOIN in Baltimore and meeting these trade union people and the unorganized poor, was just the profound difference between those two groups. That was my experience in CORE too, where almost all of the adults were union people.

I eventually realized that one of the things the union provides that a poor community does not is a political context, an organized context where people learn organizational and political skills. This is unlike a poor community, where there's a lot of turnover, it's harder for people who are unemployed and don't really have any money to do the kinds of things that you can if you have resources like in a union. Looking at the labor movement at a closer range and organizing with the workers in the welfare department in Baltimore showed me yes, here is a political context from which we can accomplish things.

When we organized the union in the welfare department, we didn't just organize them as a collective bargaining agent. There was no legal collective bargaining in Maryland for us at that time. We organized them on the basis of direct action and in an alliance with the welfare clients' organization.

We were educating our union members there on the need to take up the issues of the welfare recipients, not just our own issues. We had a kind of social unionist outlook.

The political experience of doing all that in an organized context was so different, and much more effective and satisfying. The next step was to say, "okay, maybe people can go into some of these jobs be union activists, and eventually have some political influence and win people to left ideas and broader social ideas."

That is what the IS and other groups eventually did in the late 1960s and early 1970s — people went into different industrial jobs. I went into the telephone industry. And it turned out you could do things in this organized context. It was completely different from what we had done in SDS.

You have to be reasonable about what you can do. I was very lucky — one of our mentors in the early ISCs and then the IS was Stan Weir. He was a socialist who had been an auto worker and a longshoreman, very politically experienced in terms of working inside the unions. He taught us that you can't just go in there and start converting people — you have to go in there and listen and learn.

People like him helped us develop our trade union work as socialists.

We were, yes, middle-class people getting working-class jobs. But the cultural differences in the United States between the working class and middle class are not that enormous, unless you're from a really posh, upper-class background.

Most of us weren't from that. We needed jobs anyway, and these jobs actually paid better than some of the other ones we might have gotten. So people did it. I didn't stick with it as long as some people did, because I eventually went to work for the IS and then Labor Notes, but some people stayed there for their whole careers and were very effective.

CM

Aside from providing a political context that community organizing doesn't, rank-and-file work in the workplace and union means both that you are working at the heart of the social relations of capital, where people experience the first pressures and realities of working-class life, and you are not an outside "professional" organizer, but another rank-and-file activists on an equal footing with other workers. In the later 1960s and early 1970s, there was a big shift from the early New Left when groups of various political stripes, whether the Trotskyist groups like the IS or Maoist organizations, did their own turns toward the working class, taking jobs to do political work in the unions and win workers over to their perspectives.

What's your general balance sheet of that period and that experience? What do you think it accomplished? What has lasted from that time?

KM

If you had to look at the big picture, you can't say it was a dazzling success, because look at the state of the labor movement today. Obviously a lot of our ideas about how you organize, how you spread the labor movement, how a union should act in the context of a changing economy were not taken up by most union leaders.

Nonetheless, we were certainly able to influence a lot of rank-and-file workers and develop rank-and-file organizations over time. Most of them didn't last forever and didn't take over national or international unions, of course. But they did sometimes take over large local unions, and you could recruit a small number of working-class people to socialist ideas. It was not impossible.

It was much harder then than it is now. "Socialism" was still a bad word. There was no Bernie Sanders to make it okay. We were up against a political atmosphere that was, in the 1970s, already moving to the right — both Republicans and Democrats. In the early 1970s, the Democrats were already beginning to move away from the New Deal and the War on Poverty into neoliberalism.

In the 1970s there was this huge rank-and-file upsurge across the labor movement. We played a role in it. Some of these projects like *Labor Notes* and Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) [\[13\]](#) still exist, and are still influential — in fact far more influential than they were when we started it in both cases.

Most of the caucuses like New Directions in the UAW in the 1980s became very big. It didn't win and didn't last forever. But you could be part of these movements, play an important educational as well as activist role within them, and because unions are political organizations there is always debate even if the leadership doesn't want it.

There are lots of things that people did and are still doing. You can have a political impact, you can

recruit people to ideas even if you can't get them to join a socialist organization or something. You can influence people's ideas, you can organize actions, you can organize rank-and-file caucuses, and sometimes you can even run a local union. So my experience in all of this was largely a positive one.

I went into telephone and was in the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in New York City, and we had a seven-month strike. I probably spent more time on strike than I did fixing phones, but it was quite an experience. And we probably did have an influence on things, even though it didn't last forever.

CM

Are there lessons from that experience for socialists today?

KM

I know there are people in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other groups who are interested in this. Today, partly because the labor movement is more desperate, people can have an impact. In the 1970s people weren't aware that the movement was about to go into decline. In a certain sense, it had already started to do so, but the awareness wasn't really there.

The places to go today would be different. UPS is an obvious example; also hospital work. Warehouse work is another possibility that I think will explode in the next several years. There are places today where people have an influence, help organize a union or help change a union where one exists.

We didn't do everything right. We made mistakes. When I was in the CWA in New York we had a one-week wildcat strike in January 1971. And we were convinced of course with our analysis of the labor bureaucracy that the leadership would sell out this thing, even though they had called it.

So we had a little caucus and put out a leaflet saying "don't let the leaders sell you out." We go to this meeting, and there were three thousand telephone workers there. It was quite an experience in itself. The leadership gets up and they say, "here's the injunction from the courts telling us to go back to work." And they tore it up and continued the strike! We had totally underestimated their ability to do something like that. So you learn to be a little more subtle about your opponents in the bureaucracy or whatever.

It's something that people can do, particularly because more and more people who come out of university these days are not going to get the kinds of jobs they could have gotten back then. Even university jobs have turned into such a shit show, it's just unbelievable. More people who might have been middle class are ending up in some of these jobs anyway. So I think there are possibilities there.

You've got an organization with 44,000 members in DSA. I know not all of them are going to do anything like what I'm talking about, and I also know that as an organization it doesn't have a coherent center to it that makes it easy for people to do that. But you have some potential.

One thing I would say to anybody who is considering this is that you can't do this as an individual. This is something you do as part of a group of people. You need an organization to support you and back you up and help give you guidance. But it can be done, and I know there are some people who are interested in doing just that.

Overall our experience, at least in my part of the Left that did this in the 1970s and through today, is by and large a positive one, not a negative one, even if we didn't win all the fights that we engaged in.

We certainly didn't influence the overall direction of the labor movement, that's pretty clear. But we accomplished a lot.

P.S.

* Jacobin, 07.08.2018:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/kim-moody-new-left-working-class-labor-notes>

*** ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kim Moody is a co-founder of Labor Notes. He is the author of numerous books about the American labor movement, including *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*.

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Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 45182), [United States: Half the Way with Mao Zedong - The 1960s and the Students for a Democratic Society](#).

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/democratic-party-realignment-civil-rights-mcGovern-me-any-rustin-sanders>

[3] ESSF (article 43179), [United States and the 1960s: Port Huron Statement](#).

[4] <http://www.sds-1960s.org/PEP-JohnsonWithEyesOpen.pdf>

[5] <https://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/letter-new-left.htm>

[6] <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt4k4003k7>

[7] https://www.dc37.net/wp-content/uploads/about/graphics/pdf/Welfare_Strike.pdf

[8] <https://newsandletters.org>

[9] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/index.htm>

[10] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/students-democratic-society-antiwar-vietnam-workers-unions-kim-moody>

[11] <https://jacobinmag.com/2014/02/steve-kindred-teamster-for-a-democratic-union>

[12] <http://newpol.org/category/authors/finkel-david>

[13] <http://www.tdu.org>