

Building on a Winning Legacy at the St. Louis Labor Conference

The upstart wing of labor was on full display at a special conference on Oct. 12-13 in St. Louis, Missouri to honor Jerry Tucker, a labor leader who died one year ago. Tucker was a leader in the New Directions Movement of the United Auto Workers (UAW), and played a key role in dozens of labor struggles in many industries over his 73 years. Over two hundred attended the conference, mostly Midwesterners, many intimate allies of Tucker in labor struggle. Wisconsin has a special connection to Jerry Tucker. As one of his last acts, Jerry Tucker traveled to Wisconsin several times to support the Wisconsin uprising, holding strategy sessions and counseling labor activists over the phone as well.

Stories of winning, and the ingredients for future wins, were the important take-aways from this conference. For example, wearing a T-shirt of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), St. Louisan Lew Moye rose on the conference floor to announce another labor victory to all assembled: a settlement finalized a few days before in the Peabody Coal case. Peabody, the largest private coal company in the world, sunk to a new low in corporate responsibility in 2007 when it offloaded pension and healthcare obligations to a subsidiary and later declared that company bankrupt with the court's blessing. UMWA and their allies protested for a full year outside the headquarters of Peabody Coal in St. Louis, sometimes involving over 5,000 people at a time, and ultimately clawed back some of the healthcare benefits for retirees when the company "quietly" settled with the union a few days before the conference. Twenty thousand miners' and their dependents' benefits were preserved in part. The settlement was unusual for the highly specific non-disparagement clause, suggesting the corporation largely capitulated to the union. If you have not heard of this victory it may be because labor's wins are often concealed through the failure of corporate media. One lesson learned in the Peabody affair: the courts are not the last word, and direct action gets the goods.

Many of the most exciting labor struggles of today had representation at the St. Louis conference, including the Chicago Teachers Union, UE Warehouse Workers for Justice, fast food workers, and a representative of the Los Angeles bus rider's union who is also active in initiatives to defeat the school-to-prison pipeline. Many veterans of Jerry's fights from the '80s through 2012 provided fascinating, first-hand accounts and analysis. Information shared was applicable to Wisconsin's current struggle. For example, how many times have you heard, "A strike wouldn't work at my workplace"?

Tucker pioneered "inside strategies" to address just such a problem. By the 1970s and 80s, strikes had become less effective because of threats of plant closings and employers' large scale use of strike-breakers (aka permanent replacement workers). While many labor leaders thought survival demanded cooperation or "jointness" with the employer and accepting massive concessions, Tucker showed that work-to-rule and other inside strategies were effective in getting good contracts. Inside strategies were hard work involving trial and error. Most importantly, they required unique knowledge held only by rank-and-file workers. No great leader could create a success alone with this method. The workers had to buy in to the approach, supply insider knowledge, and participate actively. However, labor leaders who listened to workers, motivated them, and trusted them were also an important ingredient. More is written about this approach in *Labor Notes' Troublemaker's Handbook* and elsewhere. Inside strategies were crucial to Tucker's wins at the Moog auto parts plant in 1981, and other plants, even in anti-union Texas. Tucker also used these approaches in the A.E. Staley fight in Decatur, Illinois in the 1990s and in other struggles.

Labor education was a special interest for Jerry Tucker. He was a co-founder of the Center for Labor Renewal and the Solidarity Education Center. Using approaches similar to the famed Highlander Center, he and his allies formed "Solidarity Schools." This approach eschewed top-down passive learning and encouraged sharing of students' own experiences. Critical analysis and reflection on this experience was then married to a more global

view of our economy. Listening and learning from others' experiences was a big part of this approach. Developing strategies for action was also very important.

The bookends of Tucker's career were the 1978 Right to Work struggle in Missouri and the Wisconsin labor uprising in 2011. Each of these struggles goes on in its own way today. In 1978, Tucker used a coalition strategy to connect labor to other community groups. Together, they turned public opinion around in just six weeks to defeat Missouri's Right-to-Work ballot initiative by a 3-2 margin. This decisive victory has benefitted the region for decades. However, conference attendees reported that they expect a new Tea Party-led Right-to-Work proposal in Missouri soon, and winning will be more difficult than in 1978. Wisconsin labor is of course still in the process of achieving its victory.

Tucker viewed labor broadly. He was a founder of St. Louis Jobs with Justice, U.S. Labor Against the War, the Labor Campaign for Single-Payer, and Medicare for All. Tucker and his allies made a special effort to support women to become more empowered through the labor movement. For example, Sharon Penrod, a surgical nurse, gave a brief history of her ten years of struggle to unionize St. Louis' hospitals with a wall-to-wall approach. Several NLRB elections were narrowly lost and so this task is not complete, but Penrod illustrated by describing her own experience how Tucker nurtured a brand-new labor leader from day one, and how they became permanent comrades in struggle.

The struggle against white supremacy both within and outside the labor movement came up in several ways at the conference. Tucker associate and former UAW local president Lew Moye, who is also a leader in the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, provided key insights and could have had a conference about his own lifetime achievements and legacy in labor. Moye remembered when not only were blacks denied better jobs in the auto plant, the UAW regional office covering 17 states had no African-Americans on staff! Moye reminded the group that St. Louis is now a majority African-American city but only a small fraction of jobs in the construction trades go to African-Americans. Young African-American workers from the fast food and retail Fight for Fifteen campaign and Jobs with Justice in St. Louis provided riveting stories from recent struggles on panels and from the audience. An African-American organizer from United Electrical (UE) in North Carolina told the assembly about Moral Mondays and other observations from organizing in the South. The southern reference is especially apt for Wisconsin today: participants from Texas and Tennessee provided useful insights on fighting the same government contractors preying on Wisconsin and the challenges of organizing in anti-union states.

Participants discussed the role of socialism in their thinking about labor, and the fact that polls show increasingly that young people have a favorable view of socialism. Small work groups focuses on attendees' own daily work in labor organizing. One observation was the need to question the logic of capitalism in our economy, but also to go beyond economic language to talk explicitly about the struggle for democracy and equality. One comment was that coworkers get excited about joining labor projects in motion, and are often unfussy about ideology. Other themes were the need for broader coalitions, addressing the crisis of black unemployment, and stepping up the efforts of labor to join key global struggles such as Climate Change.

It is sobering to reflect on Jerry Tucker's life of struggle and to realize that he and his associates experienced ostracism not only from anti-union employers but sometimes even from their own labor unions and councils. However, the conference demonstrated the powerful nationwide network that supported Tucker and developed ideas together and spread them. These iconoclastic labor voices are far from alone, and this conference proved it. One lesson of the conference is that we need to find allies in struggle, hold on to them tightly, and support them in down periods. Jerry Tucker supported Labor Notes magazine, and its trouble-making tradition and was even on the board for a time. Attendees suggested that everyone should encourage people to attend the next Labor Notes Convention in Chicago on April 4-6. Registration is open now at www.labornotes.org.

By Barbara Smith