

Killing the Messenger

AFL-CIO's Attack on Harry Kelber, the 90-Year Old Editor of The Labor Educator

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As a rank and file trade unionist for more than 37 years, I have born witness to events perpetrated by our so-called leaders that range from amazingly corrupt to outlandishly stupid; but the attack on a ninety year old elder statesman is proof that no matter how low you can believe they will stoop, we continue to underestimate their resolve to find the ultimate depth. If the realm somewhere between slug slime and pond scum comes to mind, we are on a parallel thought path. The removal of DR. Harry Kelber from membership in Typographical Union Local 6, upheld by Communications Workers Of America [CWA] International Union President, Morton Bahr, is but another example of how desperate top labor leaders are to crush dissent and silence criticism, no matter how well deserved. Leadership so defunct and impotent, they can only rise to struggle against those in their membership who are defenseless against a misleadership willing to use their ill-gotten power and violate their own constitution to win at any cost.

One might wonder what dire threat a ninety-year-old writer and labor educator might be to the mighty AFL-CIO. As a labor reporter with press credentials, Harry had access to AFL-CIO Executive Council meetings and conventions, a seat in the press box and an uncanny understanding of the workings of labor's hierarchy. From that understanding and inside information, Harry was able to offer legitimate criticism and even dared to offer alternative solutions to ease labor's woes. Most damning, Harry wrote about union corruption, in particular, the ULLICO scandal involving Morton

Bahr, CWA President. What made the assault on Harry difficult were his impeccable credentials, his honesty and integrity. Decades of service to the labor movement, including years of educational service to the New York AFL-CIO, made it difficult to discredit the often-chiding senior statesman of the rank and file. They stooped to use a past due dues payment to remove his union membership even though he sought to pay them. Will Harry Kelber be allowed to return to the AFL-CIO press box? I think not.

There are a number of transgressions Harry Kelber is guilty of; ones that make me extremely proud to be his friend, co-conspirator, and fellow trade unionist. This past September in Chicago IL, the AFL-CIO held its Executive Council meeting. Trade unionists from around the country gathered in front of the lavish Drake Hotel to protest the lack of democracy in the AFL-CIO and demanded an end to corruption. The main source of contention was the ULLICO scandal and the AFL-CIO's failure to hold accountable, many members of the Council involved. When I saw my old friend lumbering down the street attempting to cross over to the AFL-CIO meeting, his pace had slowed, age had stooped him, but the devilish twinkle in his eyes was unmistakable. The ancient warrior was still prepared for battle. The lively demonstration was clearly a source of public pain to labor's bureaucracy. There was no question of Harry's involvement and prior to the day of the demonstration, Harry was removed from the Drake under the guise of "security risk" and moved to a hotel across the street. Labor press has for years, been billeted in the same hotel and welcomed by the AFL-CIO. That now appears to be only when they print the news the way the AFL-CIO wants it. Imagine at 90, Harry represents a security risk. Proof the pen is mightier than the sword.

Harry's rebellion to the business union that continues to strangle our precious union movement goes back many years. In 1994, I had the privilege to pick Harry up at the Decatur IL airport and take him to his hotel. Harry had come to the War-Zone to offer his wisdom and counsel to more than four thousand striking and locked out workers at Caterpillar, Staley and Firestone. Harry's insight into the inner workings of the AFL-CIO proved to be a valuable resource in securing assistance to this bitter and protracted labor dispute. At the request of Ray Rodgers, President of Corporate Campaign, a labor-consulting firm from New York, hired by the locked out Staley workers, Harry was the key to overcoming the resistance of the Lane Kirkland AFL-CIO to join in the dispute and put the house of labor behind the Decatur struggles. We knew that our international unions were resisting the solidarity between the UAW, Paperworkers, and the Steelworkers, as it made it difficult for them to initiate any kind of "Exit Strategy"[sell us out]. Harry, at 80, had the appearance of a member of the royal family, immaculately groomed, a thick white moustache, dressed in tweed, and in an instant, set

you at ease with the charm of a true gentleman. It was a pleasure to benefit from his conventional wisdom and share personal moments with my family in my home. After Harry returned to New York rank and file organizers in the Staley local hatched a plan to confront the AFL-CIO for their distancing themselves from the Decatur disputes. After maneuvering local leaders, busses and vans were loaded for Bal Harbor, Fla. to confront the AFL-CIO Executive Council. Harry, a reporter at the council meeting sprang into action and formulized a plan to force the struggles to their attention. While some Decatur activists were of the mind to kick in the doors, Harry suggested a more conservative approach, one that resulted in the Executive Council organizing a rally and show of support in Decatur early in the spring of 1995. When they came to our union hall and addressed the battle weary multitudes, you could not mistake the shock of the enormity of the battle taking place in Decatur IL. One leader told me of his surprise at seeing such a great effort by rank and file workers, he was never made aware of the circumstances unfolding in Decatur IL. That was Morton Bahr, President of the CWA. Those one on one conversations contradicted assurances by Wayne Glenn, President of the Paperworkers, that he was seeking the support of the AFL-CIO for our struggle and it explains why Glenn was so angry at our surprise visit in Bal Harbor. So angry that he poked his finger in the chest of our local president, Dave Watts, but only once!

The criteria for AFL-CIO support would come at a high price. Ray Rogers and Corporate Campaign would have to go. Understanding this would throw us at the mercy of the Paperworkers, I strongly opposed that directive, as did my local president. But with waning support and an unmistakable roadblock denying AFL-CIO assistance, the local executive board ruled. Months after the AFL-CIO dog and pony show in Decatur and after it became clear that our struggles were being held hostage to the dues per capita paid to the AFL-CIO by the international union, it was time to change the game plan. Rank and file organizers devised a plan to indict Kirkland's poor leadership and we took it to the regional AFL-CIO meetings in the form of protest from the floor about the lack of support of striking and locked-out workers in Decatur. As Kirkland traveled using the meetings to stump for re-election, he was constantly haunted by the struggles in Decatur. That effort culminated in Chicago when Kirkland stepped down, giving the reins to Tom Donohue, Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO. As Sweeny and Trumka geared up to take control of the AFL-CIO, the Staley local used their outreach to verify the need for change with the full knowledge of the leadership of the United Mineworkers of America, Trumka's union.

Again, Harry Kelber was pressed into service. Rank and file workers from Decatur had resolutions passed at State Federation conventions and central labor councils. Harry ran as a rank and file candidate for the Presidency of

the AFL-CIO. So disturbing was the thought of real democracy in the AFL-CIO, that when an AFSCME official seconded Harry's nomination, top AFSCME leadership pounced on the errant member. Harry sent a note to AFSCME leaders threatening to expose the intimidation before the entire convention, they backed off and Harry became the first rank and file candidate for President of the AFL-CIO. The Decatur struggles permeated the 1995 convention with dozens of Decatur unionists attending and speaking at different meetings. After promises of enormous support by the New Voice of Sweeney and Trumka, the Decatur struggles were ultimately betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, the dues per capita paid by the international unions.

The struggles that gathered worldwide support and lasted more than three years, would never had made it that far without Harry Kelber, Ray Rodgers, and Jerry Tucker, UAW dissident and in-plant strategist to the Staley local. All three represent the best of leadership the union has to offer and none have positions other than rank and file members. The thousands of members across America, Canada and Europe provided the bulk of support to these struggles, not the massive bureaucracy choking our union into oblivion.

As you can see, Harry's transgressions are many, but I am grateful for all of them. In the times that we worked closely, Harry's counsel was invaluable and I learned much from him. Occasionally we crossed swords over how we presented our strategy; Harry always the gentleman, and me, impatient and blunt. I was for kicking down the door in Bal Harbor. Judging by Harry's somewhat militant tactics of late, I choose to believe he has taken a few cues from me; maybe not. Still, it took him 90 years to get kicked out of his union. Does that mean that Morty Bahr and AFL-CIO leaders are coming after our grandmothers next?

You would never hear Harry refer to top leaders as slug slime or pond scum, but give him a few more years: he is maturing well. When it comes to the misleadership in this union today, I must make one simple mid-western analogy. When the cows have grazed all day and they go to the pond for a drink and digest their intake, you will know that it is not just cream that rises to the top.

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