

## **PETER SHAPIRO INTERVIEW**

### **Peter Shapiro Interview: PART 1**

Narrator: Peter Shapiro

Interviewer: Eva Martinez

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Location: San Francisco, California

**PETER:** Hi, I'm Peter Shapiro and I'm 68 years old. I was born in San Francisco June 15th, 1948.

**EVA:** Today is February 20th, 2016. My name is Eva Martinez and I am the interviewer. This interview is taking place in San Francisco, California. So Peter, can you tell me about your family life starting when and where you were born?

**PETER:** Sure, my parents were both psychiatrists, they were both people with left politics. They were both the American born children of immigrant Jewish families from Lithuania, who came up during the depression, and uh, my mother died when I was pretty young so I can't really speak of her with an adults perspective very much except what I've put together myself, uh except that my sense is that she was a hell of an organizer. She was very outgoing, verbal person who made friends easily. When I was little our house was always full of people, not only their headshrinker friends but people that I realize now were their political contacts and friends and stuff. Relatives would come, we'd have these big Thanksgiving dinners and you know, the house would be full of people. Um that was her style. My dad was a much quieter, more introverted kind of person until he got old and then you couldn't shut him up. He came from a much poorer family, most of my moms siblings kind of made it in one way or another. Their father was a Rabi in the old country and I think they, the kids were expected to do well. My dad is really the only one in his family who made it into the middle class and consequently even though he was

one of the younger siblings, he was the one they all looked up to when they asked for advice and stuff. When somebody's marriage was breaking up or somebody has some terrible illness or somebody who had a kid who was out of control they'd call our house at dinnertime and he'd spend about an hour on the phone giving them advice. I think, I suspect they belonged to the Communist Party in the thirties when they were young. My dad was at the University of Minnesota and he chaired the Friends of the Soviet Union chapter on the campus. The only thing I know about my mom is that there is a picture of her on a rooftop in New York with her older brother Michael who is, I know is in the communist party because he said so and one of my cousins who was there when the picture was taken told me, "Oh I remember when that was taken, they would come out of their [inaudible] meeting". And that is the only indication that I ever had about my mother. But, my dad when I was in my twenties I was reading a book by Steve Nelson who was a leading member of the American Communist Party, and one of the few people I think in it, in leadership who wasn't this sort of (scoffs) he was you know he was truly a working-class guy who was I think a Serbian immigrant who worked in the steel mills in around Pittsburg. He was the, I guess the west coast district organizer for the CP, and dad comes out in the backyard and sees me reading this book and says, "Oh yea, Steve Nelson!". I remember Sofie and I sitting in the Jackson Cafe in Chinatown and he was explaining to us why our applications had been rejected when we first came west. And I stopped and I said, "So, you, why?" (laughs) and he said "Well, it was because we were both in analysis." And uh, that's part of the normal training for you know, if you're going to be a psycho-analyst, you have to be analyzed yourself. And I said, "so what, were they afraid you were going to reveal party secrets while you were free associating on the couch?" He said, "I don't know, I wasn't entirely clear on that". And I said, "yea well their loss pop". Um, My parents made a decision I think when my sister and I came along that they didn't want to raise a couple red diaper babies so they were going to put their politics in the closet in any way. But when the Vietnam War started, like a lot of people, my dad was upset and he decided he needed to do something, and he got more and more involved in things. And he (inaudible) and seeing my sister and I get involved. And I think it gave him a great deal of pleasure. Uh my sister was four years older than me and uh when she was busted in the Free Speech movement at Berkeley it was like the old man

was on cloud nine for weeks, you know. It had this deep emotional significance for him because he hadn't been doing anything for a long time except you know, he'd read Eye of Stones Weekly every week when it came in the mail and you know if Masha and I went to him with questions he always had the right answers for us but mainly he didn't do that kind of stuff. Uh, once he got in, back in a real big way..

**EVA:** Okay, let's hold on that because I still want to go back a little bit to your childhood because this is when you got a little bit older I think. So you were raised in this kind of semi-political environment and were you a kid or junior high or high school age, was there one significant incident that happened that made you take that political leap by your standing?

**PETER:** I think there were two things that, I mean first of all, one thing you have to realize about my family is that although from an economic point of view, you know its a medical family and we lived pretty comfortably, pretty sheltered, but we had a lot of serious health issue in our family. My sister and I both came down with TB when we were quite young and in my case it became Meningitis, and my parents almost lost me, and my dad had a botched appendectomy which almost killed him, and then, uh when I was five years old my mother developed breast cancer. She went into remission for a few years and then it came back and killed her. So, ya know, psychologically I think it made me really kind of a anxious kid. At the same time I think I was very much aware of the fact, pretty early on, two things. One was the threat of nuclear war. I remember when my sister was a teenager she refused to drink milk because she knew about the atmospheric tests and all the [(straunchum-90?)inaubible] that was releasing into the atmosphere. And she was really freaked out about it. The other thing was the McCarthy era. My parents knew people who had been targeted. As far as I know, the FBI never came around our place until later when my dad started messing around with the Panthers and stuff, but I had an uncle who was attorney who had filed a lawsuit on behalf of a biology professor of ecology who sued the atomic energy commission because he wanted to declassify the documents which told how much

Straunchum-90 was being released into the atmosphere by these nuclear tests. Well, the IRS promptly launched an investigation of my uncle and found out that sure enough they had a whole slur of things on him in term of taxes he hadn't paid and stuff like that. He came that close to going to jail.

**EVA:** And how old were you when this was...?

**PETER:** I was about, when all this stuff started, I remember the first time I was every in a courtroom was watching my uncle argue the case. I was eleven and I just thought, wow how heroic, and uh, he paid for it in time. To some extent, it was a problem of his own making because his business practices. He was a real estate speculator as well and his business practice were not particularly ethical, but thats another story. Uh, I'd take up the whole interview if I told the whole thing.

**EVA:** So, in an earlier pre-interview you had talked about Birmingham.

**PETER:** Oh yeah. That was when I was fifteen

**EVA:** Had that had an impact on you? Can you talk about that? What year was that?

**PETER:** That was in sixty-three, but before that happened I had a cousin who was a student activist a Berkeley and uh, he's an anarchist now (inaudible). But back then he was more conventional in his left politics. He helped organize the City Hall Riots as they came to be called. House and American Activities Committee came to San Francisco for hearings in May of 1960. And a bunch of students from Berkeley and San Francisco State turned out to show solidarity for the unfriendly witnesses and they weren't allowed into the hearing room. And they started, they were out there in the hall chanting, "Let us in, Let us in!". The police showed up and turned the fire hoses on them. It was all over the news that night. There was my cousin in his horn-rimmed glasses and his little sports coat, hands shoved into the jacket. Well these four cops just drenched with, you know,

with water from the water hoses and they were dragging him down the long stair case, marble staircase, to the bottom of the stairs and the city hall rotunda and he was just looking as cool as could possibly be and it was a big deal because in those days you were supposed to be terrified if you got a subpoena from the UnAmerican Activities Committee, your life was over. You know, you'd lose your job, your neighbors would turn their backs when you walked down the street, and I mean, you were a pariah. To have these college kids show up and get in their face like that was a huge deal. And uh, there was my cousin and he organized the whole thing. So that was the first thing and then I remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, that was in sixty-two, and I was petrified. I really thought, you know, kids walking up and down the halls of the high school saying they didn't want to die. People really thought that was it, you know, this was it. People talking about the nuclear annihilation, we came that close to it. This is why I was never romantic about Jack Kennedy the way some people, he came closer than anybody else, you

know, to getting us all blown up. So, you know, I was tired and frightened and the following Spring I watch the demonstrations in Birmingham. A bunch of kids my age, high school kids, standing up to these fire hoses and police dogs and I just thought, wow, you know, people can really, to sort of, have to sit back and cringe with fear. You can stand up, you can fight back. There was a San Francisco Congress of Racial Equality had a student chapter in which i joined and started going to their meetings in the Fillmore District. Very early on there was a series of sit-ins. The first big one was a the Sheraton Palace and Hotel. I remember dad driving me down there to join the picket line. I don't know what New Montgomery Street looks like now, I don't get over to the city much but, it was like a cavern there. You had the hotel there and these high rises, and people marching up and down the sidewalk chanting and the voice just bouncing off the walls, and about midnight, the announcement went out, "If you're under 18, please leave now the police are gonna come". So I went to a payphone and called dad and told him to get out of bed and come pick me up. A bunch of people were busted that night and went back the next day and people were still sitting in on the lobby. Actually, I don't think they actually arrested people there. I think they just let them sit but I went back the next day

about two in the afternoon with the organizer of the demonstration, was this nineteen year old black woman named Tracy Simms. I think she had some connection with the W.E.B. Dubois Club which was the Communist Party youth group. I think they probably were the most important organizing force behind those demonstrations. She came in and said “we set up this picket line to get the Sheraton Palace Hotel to hire more black people. We coming away with an agreement for thirty-three hotels and everyone just leaped to their feet cheering. And it was this huge victory. Then I took on the car dealers along auto row and that went on week after week.

**EVA:** And were you involved in that?

**PETER:** I was, and I brought some of the kids from my high school to join the picket line. One of the things I remember about those arrests was Sterling Haight, the actor, got busted at one of them. He was a big man, he was about 6’4”, 6’5” and two hundred pounds at least. I remember feeling sorry for these sweating cops as they tried to haul him off to the paddy-wagon. He was just there resting his head in his hands with a big grin on his face. And you know, again they got their demands, but what happened was that all the people that had been busted were tried and the trial went on for months. People had to drop out of school, they lost their jobs, and the movement just kind of fizzled out. At that point, my group of kids we were in the student CORE chapter, but we were getting interested in other things especially the Vietnam War and CORE wasn't really into having their name associated with other causes. So we started our own little group which called The Student Organized Education and Action League, and we put out a little, sold, and we put out a little mimeograph newspaper which we used to run off at the Dubois Club office, they were always trying to recruit us. They never got anywhere, at least not with me. I wasn't too interested. We sold it for I think for two bits or something in various high schools around the city until the superintendent of the schools got wind of it and banned the paper. So after that we had to do it surreptitiously and we threw up a couple of picket lines in front of the

school board. We went to their meetings and angrily protested and got our pictures in the paper and stuff. In my senior year of high school actually I edited the paper. But I look back now and man, we really didn't know what we were doing, you know. I think the whole hippy thing was starting to come in then and we were trying to figure out how with connect with it. At one point we got an interview with Alan Ginsburg. And the first question our reporter asked him was "Has Bob Dylan sold out?" And Ginsberg said Bob Dylan has sold out to God. His command was to spread beauty as widely as possible. It was an artistic challenge to show that great art can be done on a jukebox, and he proved that it can". So, anyway, that was high school.

**EVA:** So then you graduated and you decided to go to college and you went to Berkeley. Why Berkeley and what did you intend to do there?

**PETER:** Well, I mean part of it was just because I this very romanticized notion of my sisters life there. You know, after she was arrested and I would go over and her roommate was a classmate of mine too. We'd go over there and spend the weekend splinting on the couches there in the front room of her apartment and then we'd go over to hang out on Telegraph Avenue and sort of soak up all the ambiance and everything. I just thought of it as the coolest place in the world and I started there in fall of sixty-six and was quickly disillusioned, not only because it was this big ugly impressionable place and the classes were huge, but also because the movement of campus was like a lot of free speech movement veterans who just were really in a rut. I mean they really could not see beyond the experience they'd had two years before as far as I could see. And they were fighting the same battles with the administration, and I wasn't that interested. I heard that over at San Francisco State they all these groovy student programs. They had started an experimental college. You could get academic credit there for doing community work and organizing. They'd hired Paul Goodman who when I was in high school was one of my heroes. He was I guess politically, he was an anarchist but he was a critic of education and mass education and how it regimented and was and stuff like that. He wrote a book called "Growing up Absurd" which everybody was reading in those days. They hired him as an visiting prof with student body funds. Later they hired (inaudible) at

the urgings of the Black Student Union and I suspect that presence was a little more useful and productive than Paul Goodman's once. But I didn't know that at the time. So I went to San Francisco State. They had a film school there. I was interested in film.

**EVA:** And what year was this?

**PETER:** This was sixty-seven.

**EVA:** sixty-seven

**PETER:** And, they had a creative writing program there and I took a bunch of poetry classes. I mean I was really this insufferable arty-farty kid, you know, who was trying to figure out a way

to reconcile my political views with this sort of Bohemian impulse and not being very successful. There was a paper there that was started there by the student government. The campus paper was run by the journalism department and was generally quite hostile toward what the student government was doing. So the student government funded another paper which was kinda like one of those underground papers that used to circulate so much in those days, like the Berkeley Bark or something. Lots of salacious photos and regular column by Jefferson Poland who was the founder of the Sexual Freedom League. He was actually an excellent writer. I can still recite portions of his columns from memory. But he got us into a lot of trouble. A couple of times the paper was basically suspended because he wrote something that crossed the line.

**EVA:** And what was the name of this paper?

**PETER:** Open Process. It actually, I was kind of proud of what we did because when the black students started the strike, we did a lot of the research and the writing and the propagandizing that was necessary to I think help rally white students behind the strike because, you have to realize at that point, part of it was the BSU as when they started out,

they were pretty much in a nationalist kind of phase. The other side of it though is that, in nineteen-sixty the state college system changed the admission requirements to incorporate standardized tests, and when that happened the percentage of black enrollment at San Francisco State fell off seventy-five percent. So the black students who were on that campus felt like they were in a state of siege. I think that the whole way they approached political activism kind of reflected that. At one point, several of them went up to the office of the Daily Gator which is the journalism department paper, and you know, beat the crap out of the editor, which I didn't feel comfortable with at the time but I was damned if I was going to criticize it because God knows that the guy was begging for it. But it still, in retrospect it was kind of a chicken-shit kind of thing to do. The guy weighed one-hundred and twenty-five pounds, any one of them could have taken him, they didn't need eight guys to do it.

**EVA:** When did the activity round the strike start to happen?

**PETER:** The strike started in November of sixty-eight. Of course sixty-eight, it was a huge year on campuses across the country. That May Open Process had sent me back to New York to cover the strike at Columbia (University). Im glad I went because as impressive as it was, what struck me as this huge convulsive uprising with cops and busted heads and just a ton of publicity and the media, and Hollywood made a couple of movies about it. You know, Mark Rudd became this big media figure. And yet, the issues they were striking over at Colombia were so insignificant compared to what was exactly happening. it was like they needed an excuse to go riot, you know.

**EVA:** Do you remember what some of those issue were at Colombia?

**PETER:** Yeah, one of them was to get rid of, to sever Colombia's relationship with this program called The Institute for Defense and Analysis, which was I guess was a legitimate issue but it was rather small potatoes. There was a whole thing on college

campuses in those days to end college complicity with the Vietnam War, as if somehow the colleges were sort of sullyng their integrity by having an association with the war. To me, even then I sort of thought, well you know, colleges are sullyng themselves in so many different ways, its not like they're not going to purify themselves. At San Francisco State we had an ROTC program and the SDS chapter was always agitating against it. Well there were twenty-seven students in it and it was not worth all that energy. There were so many more important things going on I think. The other issue going on at Colombia had to do with the university buying up some land in Harlem to build a gym and evicting some local people. The thing is the SDS people didn't even know about it until two days before everything broke out. it was something they tacked on as an afterthought. They felt bad about it and thought, well maybe we can get the black student support if we stick this into our demands. The thing is it was all about making trouble, it wasn't about fighting for something concrete and real. Even then I was troubled by it. What impressed me so much about the BSU, the black student union is, they had a tutorial program in the black community. Actually was started originally by the student government and it was mainly like white kids, white students going to the Fillmore District and tutoring black kids. And it was a very missionary kind of a thing and the black students came along and said this is really messed up, we should be teaching those kids. And they pretty much took over the program and eased the white students out and there was some bad feeling about it but I think they did the right thing. You know, we were talking about Roger Alvarado, he had actually been running the tutorial program originally and he supported the black students all the way through it. He knew right away that they were right. So they, what they did was they recruited a lot of people who had high school kids who had worked as tutors in the program and they got them into SF State, and one of their demands was like, they wanted the special admissions quota where they would allow students in who didn't meet the academic requirements. Mainly the special admissions quotas went to football players and stuff and they said, no, they should go to some of these kids who have been tutoring in the black community. They didn't get anywhere so they finally raised the demand for open admissions. All third world people who apply to this college should be admitted. Our tax dollars pay for this place, we're not getting a damn thing out of it. They were joined by the other groups which eventually

lead the Third World Liberation Front. There was the Latin-American Student Organization, Mexican-American Political Alliance, Intercollegiate Chinese Association for Social Action which had just become radicalized in the last six or eight months. I think the Red Guard Party had a lot to do with that probably, in San Francisco Chinatown. And then there's an organization called Filipino-American Collegiate Endeavor or something like that. But they all joined the BSU, they raised their own demands, and these were organizations that were actually working in the community, that had built up a base there. They were working around issues that were of concern to people off the campus. They weren't just throwing a fuss to show they could fight the cops that were against the system. They were actually organizing and the demands

they were raising had an impact in the community. That was tremendously important for me I think, seeing that.

**EVA:** Your role at that time, was it strictly as a reporter for Open Process?

**PETER:** I did my fair share of running from the cops, I mean you have to realize that day after day for several months people would go to the campus in the morning and they would just face off against hundreds and hundreds of police armed to the teeth. It wasn't just over and done in one day, you know. It was like a typical scenario that the cops would show up, they'll bust some heads, everybody's shocked and people boycott classes for a few days and then everything dies down. Well this was like day after day after day. When the existing administration couldn't keep a lid on things, couldn't find a way out, to resolve it. Actually the college president probably would've liked to grant some of the black student demands but he had it out that they didn't have the money to do it. Then the trustees were on the verge of firing him, it was a very reactionary group. So he just said, Well I'm going to save you guys the trouble, I quit. He quit, and they put S.I. Hayakawa in his place. There was one of the strangest cats I've ever met in my life. He was really (chuckles) sewage in there, and I met him a couple of times. Once when he suspended

Open Process, he actually froze the student body funds and suspended Open Process. I was supposed to go in there and negotiate with him, play with him to be nice to us. One of our faculty and advisors seemed to think, oh it would be a good idea. Lo and behold, i mean, during the whole session he didn't say a word. He all his PR (Public Relations) men there and they did all the negotiating. Except it wasn't negotiating, they weren't giving up a thing. The one thing he did was he was sort of padding around his office in his stocking feet and there were these huge African masks, you know, up against the wall, he like to collect them. At one point he went to the liquor cabinet and took out a couple of oranges, tossed one across the room to me. He ate his orange and I ate mine and that was about as close as we got. I never say no to vitamin C, right? (chuckles) But that was it. The other time I met him was, Bill Barlow, he and I had collaborated a lot of articles in Open Process. We'd decided to write a book because we really thought that what was happening at San Francisco State represented the breakthrough for the student movement around the country and we wanted to spread the word. So we wrote a book, which didn't get much circulation.

**EVA:** What's the name of the book?

**PETER:** It's called "An End of Silence" and don't try looking for it because you won't find it. You might be able to buy a copy online for several hundred bucks or something. (chuckling) But there was a quote from Hayakawa that we wanted to use and we had to get his permission to do it. Here again, its just pure Hayakawa, he was being interview by the President's commission on the causes and prevention of violence which was doing a report on San Francisco State. He said, you know, central to the problem of violence on campus is you've got all these young people who

are just alienated against everything, you know, they hate society, they hate this, they hate that. He says, well there are the usual psychological reasons for this but I think the real reason for this is they're being taught this alienation by their professors. There all these people in the Humanities and Creative Arts that are just like plato. They want to be

philosopher kings, they think they're so much smarter than the politicians, businessmen generals, you know They think it is a terrible world and they ought to be running instead. So he says, they give haze to students who have been alienated and those students become professors and then pass it on to the next generation. In no time at all, the University should be a place that passes on the values of our society, and these half-assed plato's are turning them into centers of sedition and destruction. I showed him this passage and said, "we'd like permission to run this". He starts to read it and he starts to giggle and then at the end he said, "this is rather well put, isn't it?! Especially this half-assed plato's". So I said, "yeah that's why we wanted to use it". And he said, "Well, it will be a pleasure to sign this Mr. Shapiro". And that was my contact with S.I. Hayakawa. He was a loathsome man in a lot of ways. I mean, people hated his guts, not only because he was destructive to everything that was worthwhile on that campus. He'd pretty much destroyed, but he went on to be the lead spokesman for English Only. When they were having the hearings on the address and reparations, he said that he was embarrassed and ashamed that the Japanese would get up and expect handouts from the government which was the three years paid vacations at the taxpayers expense. Of course he was never in a camp himself so he could talk that way. But, you know, he was a bizarre man. Enough about him!

**EVA:** When did the strike end?

**PETER:** The strike, it started in November of sixty-eight and it pretty much fizzled out in about March. It simply wasn't, the black students talked a lot about a protracted struggle and they understood the necessity for it, they didn't really have the strength to carry it on that long I don't think, they would have had to spread it to other campuses. I think more community involvement. I mean they actually did get a lot of black people coming out from the community and to speak at the rallies and stuff like that. But you need much more substantial organization off campus to do that.

**EVA:** That's the College of Ethnic Studies that was established?

**PETER:** It did get started. It did get started. It was underfunded for a long time, it was harassed by the administration. They had a very rough time in those first two years. I guess it's established now. What matters is they did establish it and it was taken up on campuses across the country. In that sense I think the strike was a success. At the time we felt we'd gotten our butts kicked.

**EVA:** When did you graduate from State?

**PETER:** I graduated in January of seventy-one.

**EVA:** Okay. So you were still at State when you attended the SDS convention in Chicago?

**PETER:** Oh. yeah.

**EVA:** So can you tell how you got involved with SDS?

**PETER:** Well, I avoided them like the plague most of the time I was on the campus.

**EVA:** Were they involved in the strike?

**PETER:** Oh yeah. They were very involved in the strike. The problem was that the SDS chapter on campus was pretty much dominated by the Progressive Labor Party, which was a pretty big deal back then. They're still around but they are a shadow of their former selves I think. They were the original anti-revisionist Communist organization. I think they were started by people who, when the Communist Party USA was really splitting up in the late fifties, they decided the Chinese had the best of the argument in the whole Sino-Soviet dispute. They had also decided that they were right that it was a huge liability for communists not own up to their politics, to operate as a secret organization. So, the two big things was they were Pro-China, and number two they were open about their politics. All for the good in my

opinion. But they very quickly became frozen in this really ridiculous kind of dogmatic, rigid, not very intelligent politics. By the time there, you know. The people who were in their orbit, they were like school yard bullies. They weren't very bright. They had an inflated sense of their importance. They basically settled political differences with their fists. They were really macho, you were really revolutionary out there. I remember when the strike was first starting, I went to one of those big open strike support meetings. The head of PL was saying, if this was labor dispute, anyone who tried to cross our picket line, we'd beat the crap out of them. It's time we taught the students who were scabbing what their consequences were, that kind of thing. They hadn't even begun to try to explain to the white student body what the black students had been going through, trying to set up a black studies program. What the demands were, why they were important, they hadn't even tried, all they ever said was smash racism it divides black and white workers. I doubt that they could have explained those demands because I don't think they really agreed with them.

**EVA:** Were they students?

**PETER:** They were students, yeah.

**EVA:** So, did you start going to their meetings regularly?

**PETER:** Well, what happened was in the last month or so in the strike, somebody up at the National Headquarters of Progressive Labor decided that all nationalism is reactionary. And, they turned against the BSU, they said these guys just want to create some cushy faculty jobs for

themselves, their petty bourgeois opportunists and blah blah. They turned against the strike. And at that point there was a revolt in the SDS chapter because people had been risking their butts fighting the police and stuff, for weeks and weeks and weeks. They couldn't swallow it, I think it was hard even for some of PL's compadres to swallow it. I read an interview of one of them some years later and his comment was "Ah, you know

how these democratic-centralists organizations are, they're all centralism and no democracy. It came as a complete surprise to me when this came down". This is important, I think because in terms of my later political development, it was difficult for me at first to accept the idea of joining a Marxist-Leninist organization. Because my first contact with them was PL, and they were just like, they were dumb as rocks, you know. I thought very destructive. And then later on I had contact with the Revolutionary Union which was a little bit better, they supported the Panthers at least. But they had the same style, they had the same kind of totally romanticized notion of the working class. They all dressed and wore their hair the way thought workers did. They all tried to talk like Archie Bunker, the little mustaches and the little sideburns and stuff, you know. And they had the same kind of...(grunts), macho rhetoric and they talked like they had all the answers, and they didn't even have fraction of the answers as far as I could see.

**EVA:** Okay, so my understanding is that at the 1969 SDS convention in Chicago, a big split occurred, maybe with even three fractions. How did you find yourself there? What was your purpose there?

**PETER:** Well, I joined the Anti-PL faction at San Francisco State.

**EVA:** Of the SDS?

**PETER:** Of SDS. I joined SDS specifically to go to that convention, fight PL, you know because I was angry at what they had done. I thought, I shouldn't just be sitting on the sidelines pissing and moaning, I should be doing something constructive. So I went to this convention and on one side you had PL, on the other side you had the people who eventually degenerated into the weather underground, they became like terrorists. And I guess there was some other people who had their feet on the ground a little bit more. I remember one of them getting up at the meeting of the Anti-PL caucus and saying, "Look, my father's a truck driver. He's not going to come home after doing a twelve hour shift and picket for the Panthers". And some kid from Ann Arbor, Michigan says, "Fuck

em!”. And I just thought, well, nuts to this, you know? I mean I’m not a truck driver or anything like that but you just don’t dismiss people like that, especially if you propret to be a socialist which I’ve already considered myself at that point. So, I was disgusted with the weathermen, I couldn't stand PL and I got home from the convention, discovered that the check with which I had paid my membership dues had bounced. So that was the end of my relationship with SDS.

**EVA:** Was it around this time that you got involved with the San Francisco Liberation School?

**PETER:** That came a little bit later. Um, I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life when I graduated, and I had a book under my belt, I was twenty-one years old, but I didn't know where to go from that. I did what people from my class background frequently do when they don't know what to do with their lives, which I applied to graduate school at Berkeley. And I told myself that I wanted to, the trouble with the lefts didn't have any theory. People were just sort of spouting off whatever ideas that came in their head, they didn't really know stuff. I just thought, I wanted to study labor history. So I applied to Berkeley even though I had never had an undergraduate history course at SF State. And I suspect I got in on the strength that I had written this book. Graduate school was pretty awful. I was wretchedly unhappy. I think if I had to sum it up I’d say that most of the students in my seminars were losing their hair before they had ever had chance to lose their pimples. It’s like it was a really infantilizing experience, it was competitive as hell. Everybody worried that they weren't smart enough, that they weren't impressing the professor enough. They’s be pulling hairs of these fine points of whatever that had very little significance outside of that little particular room. I wanted to do something. At the time there was a bunch of professed left-wing professors around the Bay Area who had lost their jobs because their politics are at the time, denied tenure. They wanted to start an alternative university which they called the Bay Area School. There were some fairly heavy hitters in there if you were into that kind of thing. There was a philosophy prof. from Berkeley named Dick Litman. There was James O’Connor from San Jose State who was at the time considered really one of the bright lights of creative Marxist economics.

Ronnie Davis from the San Francisco Mime Troop was there. Doug Dowd who was another left-wing economist. I went to one of their meetings and basically he goes in collision. It was like these guys, all of whom were like probably feeling professionally insecure and resentful, taking their frustrations out on each other. I'd sit in these meetings and they'd sort of scream at each other over nothing, and I thought.. "You know this is crazy, I mean I came here to work right, to get some stuff done. And there were some women who were associated with the Bay Area School who basically found that when they came, they were expected to sort of function as the academic secretaries for these professors. You know, type their manifestos or whatever and do their paperwork for them and so forth. They, a couple of them broke away, two or three of them broke away and started their own thing called the Liberation School, which was supposed to be more feminist, more working class, more anti-elitist orientation. And I liked that, and I sort of waited until they felt they had a sufficient balance of men and women that they were willing to let another guy onto their collective. And I joined, and we had a storefront on Market Street. At its peak it had a good three-hundred students I think, it was pretty successful.

**EVA:** So there was the school and then there was the collective that ran the school?

**PETER:** Yea, it was a collective. And, you know, we all called ourselves Socialists, we never talked at any great length about what that meant.

**EVA:** What did it mean to you? What did Socialism, being a Socialist mean to you at that time?

**PETER:** Well, I... That's a really good question. I mean I'd been calling myself a Socialist since I was twelve years old. Actually you know what it was, I was listening to a radio broadcast of "Death of a Salesman". With Lee J. Copland and Willie Loman. You remember that scene where his boss fires him? When he says..."Howard, I've put thirty years into this firm and now I can't pay the insurance. You can't eat the orange and throw away the peel, a man is not a piece of fruit". I just turned to my father and said... "Does

that stuff really happen?” He says... “All the time”. He says... “that’s what Capitalism is, you are useful only as long as you can make a profit for somebody else”. The old man never, he didn't force his politics on me but if I came there with questions man, he had the right answers (chuckles). And, right then and there I thought Capitalism is cruel, I don’t want to be apart of it. I read a little Marx, I read in my high school civics class. I had a good teacher, and I tried to understand it. When I was in SOLE, because we hung around the Dubois Club they were always doing little study groups and stuff, so I was exposed to it. I don’t think I ever though very hard about it except I knew I was anti-capitalist. And I believed that the Vietnam War was an Imperialist war. It wasn't an accident, it wasn't just a bad policy decision, it was a systematic thing, you know. I think I reached conclusion even my senior year of high school. But in terms of what it meant to be a Socialist, I didn't know.

**EVA:** Okay, so you joined the Liberations School collective.

**PETER:** I taught a class in labor history where I tried to apply what I was learning at Berkeley and pass it on to people who would never go near a class at Berkeley. I met Faye there, she joined the collective about six or eight months after I did, um my wife (chuckles). She was working at a bank downtown at that point, she had also worked as a telephone operator. Came from a working class Chinese family in East Oakland and she was gobbling up our leaflets, you know, decided to check out the school, took a class in Marxism and was recruited onto the collective. And, we started going together, fortuitous you know. We were eventually married and I think even before that happened she was really influencing the way I looked at the world a lot. She gets interviewed tomorrow right (chuckles)? Stay tuned. But she taught a class on the Chinese revolution and was really into it, and I almost felt like when she called herself a Socialist it wasn't just an intellectual thing. You asked her why? She’d say... “I look at my parents and I see the old China. Theirs was an arranged marriage, they didn't get along”. So many of the traumas of her childhood were due to like both what China was like before liberation and also just the whole experience of immigration and poverty and racism in this country. So I felt like well her Socialism is

real, she comes by it honestly, it's not something she got out of a book. And, well, what happened was, I should say that one thing I did do in liberation school was, when I was doing research, cause I was going to write my dissertation on the Communist Party and its labor work in the 1930's, its role in building the CIO, because I had discovered that really it's like the United Auto Workers, which was a very powerful union in those days, practically owed its existence to some very dedicated, capable Communist Party organizers. One of whom was Vice President of the union, one of them provided the tactical leadership for the Flint sit-down strike. I actually interviewed him when I was working on what would have been my

dissertation had I stayed in school. Actually, I'm going to digress a little but and tell you about that interview. When I went to talk to him, turns out he was recovering from a stroke and he was very depressed. His memory was kind of spotty and I was trying to jog his memory. Remind him of certain things that would help him answer my questions, and all of a sudden he was convinced that I was an FBI agent. And it took me about about half an hour to convince him that I wasn't. I had to give him the name of my professor and this and that and the other. And I remember just being incredibly depressed when I left. This guy as far as I'm concerned, he's a hero. He ought to be, they ought of have a monument to him right next to the Lincoln Memorial for what he did. And really thinks that nobody but the FBI cares about what he did. As God knows, the FBI made his life miserable. So anyway, the other person I met when I was doing my research was Darrell Richmond, who had edited *The People's World* which was the west coast Communist Party weekly, and he was in the process of sort of being driven out of CP at that point and he was writing a book. His own memoirs, which I don't know if anybody still reads it but I think it was a terrific book. Not only his memoirs about basically the San Francisco left, cutting up his whole experience as the son of a Russian, Jewish immigrant who had been active in the Bund, the Soviet Union Jewish Bund. But also, he one chapter where he talked about, its called "Notes from the Revolution in the Thirties", where he tried to figure out what went haywire, why is it that the Communist Party played such a huge role in launching the CIO drives, the industrial union drives in the thirties and they wound up with nothing, they just were driven out of the whole movement ten years later. How

could that have happened? He actually pinpointed the speech that Earl Browder, the head of the party in May of 1937, which showed how they were so excited to be kind of included in part of this big coalition that they suddenly didn't want to rock the boat. They felt that it doesn't, the workers in the plant don't want this to happen but John L. Lewis does; and whose more important? We have to keep our coalition alive and stuff like that. And he said... "We lost sight of the large hawks to represent those guys in the shops, not to maintain a good relationship with Lewis". And I recruited him to teach a class at the school and it was our most popular class, we had practically filled up the whole big front room off our storefront and even so it was like standing room only. And he talked a lot about the whole notion that the vanguard party, what the dangers of it are, why it's necessary, why the pitfalls are, and looking back most of what he said still makes sense to me.

**EVA:** I want to go back a few years because I actually want to come back to your father during the late sixties because I know he continued to be, you had told me early that once you and your sister left the house, that's when he started to getting re-involved. So can you talk about what he did during that period and how it impacted you?

**PETER:** Sure, oh yeah. This goes without saying that the Panthers impacted everybody on the left. I mean they were a huge influence on a lot of people. I think they were the first group to come down the pike that really had figured out a way to integrate Marxism with the whole Black national movement, and understood the need for a broad front for making alliances not simply pushing an African-American agenda. Plus they had a huge following among young Black

people. The whole idea the cops show up with guns, you bring your own gun and stand up to them and see all the ways that they screwed up. Now you can look back and see their mistakes but I think you can decipher the fact that, I think they were a huge positive influence on the left in so many ways. Well, my dad initially decided to get involved in launching the Bay Area Chapter of Medical Committee for Human Rights, which was a national organization of doctors which came out of the Civil Right Movement. Its

founder was Clinton Young who was Martin Luther King's personal physician when he was in Chicago. He was also Obama's physician for whatever that's worth (chuckles). But when Obama was having a White House summit on health care reform, Clinton Young was not invited because he supported single payer. But, what happened was my dad and a young activist named Dick Fine who I think was, well he went on to SF General Hospital as head of the outpatient I think, but when I knew him, he just died recently, he bonked around town on a motorcycle. He had a full beard and wore daisies in his beard, he had a dog named Ché (chuckles) kind of thing. I mean he really had this kind of, he worked on a pamphlet with some other doctors which had a picture of Ché on the cover and the title of the pamphlet was "Medical Cadre", and it showed you how to do first aid during violent street demonstrations (chuckles) you know, that was Dick. But he also was a physician and knew how to work the system and he knew sheriff Dick Congisto, who was the sheriff of San Francisco at the time. He wound up basically having a very respectable career without ever completely abandoning his politics. So he and dad were co-chairs of The Medical Committee for Human Rights, and they got the idea when the Panthers, after Huey Newton had a shootout with the police, that they wanted to help. So what they offered to do was, to offer the Panthers some protection by having one white professional go around on their patrols. They figured the cops would be less likely to shoot if there was a respectable white person sitting in the passenger seat next to the black person driving the car. Well the Panthers said... "Well, that's not what we need but there are some other things you could do for us. And that was the start of it. Dad did plenty for them, he helped bail Aldridge Cleaver out of jail. When Cleaver jumped bail he turned to me and said... "Well son, there goes your patrimony, you'd better get a job" (chuckles). When Aldridge left the country, his wife Kathleen was pregnant so she came and stayed with my parent for most of her pregnancy until Aldridge sent for her and she joined him in Algiers. Looking back I think she would probably concede the point too she was rather young and immature and a bit of a pain in the ass, and I think she realized later on how much she was imposing upon my parents (chuckles), but you know, she was a big media star then and that big afro and those gorgeous green eyes and everything.

**EVA:** Were you and your dad communicating a lot during this period?

**PETER:** Oh yeah, yeah yeah yeah. We talked a lot. He was very interested in, actually the MCHR sent people put to SF State during the strike. Dad never went out there but a bunch of the younger people, the med students and the interns and stuff, they would put on these motorcycle helmets with red crosses on them and try to get in there and help the people that were injured. They got beat up too. Dad organized a demo in UC Med Center, an anti-war demonstration. I

remember he had a press conference and some smart-ass reporter asked him if he'd like to have L.B.J. on his couch, and he said... "Well, my time is taken up". Which was the perfect answer I think. Yeah, we talked all the time. We used to argue too, because he was really uptight about young people taking drugs. He thought Tim Leary was an apostate, and a disgrace to the psychiatric profession. And even though I never touched pot, at least not until later, I liked to bait him about it. I'd say... "What about pot dad? That doesn't do any harm, that's not addictive". He say... "No, but it's a gateway drug". And I said... "Oh, you believe in the domino theory huh? But yeah, we talked a lot and I think when I got involved with IWK and the League, he was as proud of me as he had been when my sister was busted in the Free Speech Movement.

**EVA:** So let's talk about IWK. How did they come into your orbit?

**PETER:** Well, we have a guy named Max Elbaum to thank for that. He joined the Liberation School Collective. We didn't know it at the time but he was associated with a group of people who were busy organizing what later became Line of March. At the same time he was joining our collective some of his comrades or whatever, I don't know what they called each other at that point but they were joining other left collectives around town and doing the same thing there. They wanted to take these independent collectives and kind of draw off as many people as they could into what they called a mass intermediate social organization, which was, I think intended to become a holding tank for the Communist organization they wanted to start. Well, Max made what he'd

probably say now were some serious tactical errors which freaked out a lot of the collective members. We thought he was being very manipulative and dishonest with us. And, we had this wonderfully successful project which was suddenly in shambles because of this big faction of the collective. And we split down the middle. Meanwhile, Faye, she was the only non-white person on the collective, and she didn't like it, and she really wanted us to start reaching out to some of the black, latino, asian community. She started going to the Chinese Progressive Association to check it out.

**EVA:** What year was this?

**PETER:** This would have been '74, '75. She and one of the other collective members joined the October 1st, Chinese National Day celebration that they had in Chinatown and worked on that coalition a little bit.

**EVA:** What was the purpose of that celebration?

**PETER:** It was a big deal in Chinatown especially I think because you had people in Chinatown who sympathized with the Chinese Revolution but basically couldn't say anything because the Mong and Dong's were very powerful in Chinatown. There was a little guy, had a card table where he sold books from China, Mao's works and so forth. The KMT sent goon squads to beat

him up, the cops busted him and CPA rallied around his defense. There were a lot of people I think, working class people who'd come out of working class organizations in Chinatown in the 1930's and 40's. And when the Chinese Revolution happened, they were just stranded. As it was because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, they couldn't reunite with their families back in China. They'd go down to CPA, that was their kind of cultural center, political center. It was kind of a surrogate family kind of thing. I'd go there with Faye and I'd never seen anything like it, I mean nothing like that. The Liberation School was very nice

but it was almost all white and almost all young. It wasn't as snooty or elitist as a lot of the left organizations were. We made a big point of that. Not tolerating anything like that. It was a lot of feminist rhetoric that guided that. Don't engage in male dominant behavior. It's all young people, largely people who have some exposure to higher education. You'd go down to CPA and it was like a whole different world. I was impressed. Faye felt more at home there than she ever did at the collective. And when the shit hit the fan with the collective with Max and his allies, I actually was supposed to deliver some leaflets to one of the leading people in the IWK who was working on the coalition. I knocked on her door and she opened the door and took one look at me and saw the expression on my face because I was just super depressed and unhappy at that point. I was appalled at what was happening at the collective. She just sort of decided that maybe she had some sort of advance intelligence about it. I said, bet she did. But she said... "Come in and sit down". She said,... "You want some wine?" She said... "What's bugging you?" And she basically drew the whole hard luck story out of me. I say... "Oh our collective is being taken over by these secret cadre with a hidden and all this kind of stuff". She said... "Why do you call them a secret cadre?" And I said... "Well, because they have this agenda, this stuff they want to push but their not telling us what it is". She says... "Well maybe, I would try to find out and see what your objections to it are. And we wouldn't call them a secret cadre. We'd say they have people with a level of political unity around some ideas which we don't share, and if you don't like them, you don't like what they are doing, you don't feel like you trust them, you need to understand what's wrong with their ideas". It was a Ah-hah moment for me. I think I said earlier that I was very suspicious of Marxist-Leninist organizations because I had seen PL at San Francisco State and seen RIU later on. The people from IWK, they felt, the ones I met, they were much more humble. Mainly women in leadership at the organization. There were a lot of guys there but they kind of had to be kept housebroken. A lot of them were Chinatown street kid who were all kind of tough and wore black jackets and talked like this (lowers voice)! The leadership was mainly women, I just felt like I could trust them. They were committed, they were dedicated, they knew who their base was, who they were responsible to. The CPA, they had provided a lot of the leadership in the CPA and they really listened to the old people like they had something to learn from them. It was an

attitude that was just so absent from the left that I had grown up with. After our collective broke up, we basically wound up being recruited, five of us into IWK, which had just started taking white people a fairly short time before. I think it was harder for me to join than some of the other people in the collective because I had this kind of allergic reaction I think to the idea of belonging to a vanguard organization or whatever as; who the hell am I? I don't have any answers, I'm not a proletarian tribune. I've seen too many people who don't know their asses

from a hole in the ground claiming to play that role. I don't want to be like that. And the other thing that troubled me was that the whole thing with the Liberation School was we were right in the Castro, located, and the whole gay scene was just starting to develop there. Harvey Milk and everything. I didn't really relate to it that well but I thought it was something you have a responsibility to support. People in IWK were not favorably disposed to it. It was never a formal position or anything like that. It was something that they frowned on and that made me uncomfortable. I think I had to reach a decision where, you know what, you're never going to find an organization that you agree with about everything. That's just an excuse not to do anything. If you're comfortable with these people, join. If they are open to change maybe they'll change this, that kind of thing.

**EVA:** So had you joined a formal study group with them before?

**PETER:** Yeah. Yeah, I was in the study group. They had what they called work teams for people who were contacts that they were trying to recruit.

**EVA:** And were you assigned to work on that?

**PETER:** I was on the work team, I believe to work on the October 1st Coalition in '76. Then, we had the usual struggles with the RU, as the Revolutionary Union had become the Revolutionary Communist Party at that point which simply meant that their level of obnoxiousness had geometrically increased.

**EVA:** And this was in Chinatown?

**PETER:** This was in Chinatown, yeah. What had happened was, right before the event Mao died, so the event was postponed for three weeks to observe a period of mourning. Faye and I had scheduled our wedding to happen right after the event so. What happened was, we couldn't reschedule the wedding. So everybody on the logistics and finance committee of the coalition, which I wasn't responsible for had to be invited to the wedding. Otherwise we were afraid there would be some kind of political repercussions if some people were left out. People I had to go to meetings with who I couldn't really stand (chuckles) came to my wedding to Faye. On our wedding night, we were honeymooning in Dick Fine's cabin up in Inverness, he had a summer house up there in Point Reyes. In the middle of the night, I got out of bed and started wandering across the room, one of the few times in my life that I've sleepwalked, and I said... "Where's the phone? I've got to call Butch". He was the guy who was in charge of our work team, he had to pack the bag (chuckling) haha! So that was a sign of things to come (chuckling).

**EVA:** So now you finally agreed to be recruited into IWK. What was life like in IWK? How was it structured, what type of body were you in, did you continue to do the October 1st work?

**PETER:** No, I worked on the paper initially. It was getting together the publication of IWK, it later became Unity after the merger with the August 29th movement. I was supposed to be a writer and I was supposed to know something about labor because I had studied it at Berkeley for christ's sake. I hadn't had a job until I got out of school. I remember doing some writing for Unity, for Getting Together rather. The bug thing when I first got in was the International Hotel Struggle. Which again, was just hugely important. Actually that happened just about the time I was about to be recruited. I don't know if anyone you've interviewed has talked at length about that. The CPA office was in the basement of the I-Hotel, and what used to be the Hungry Eye, San Francisco's

most famous nightclub. I remember when Mao died there was a memorial for him. There was a big portrait of Mao over that brick wall where Mort Saul used to do his monologue and the Kingston trio used to do little folk songs. And that was where they had their Sunday evening dinners and stuff. They'd spread butcher paper out on the table where the bar used to be and everything and they'd serve up these huge pots of rice and stir-fry and stuff. So the CPA was in the basement of the hotel. The RCP had their own Asian organization called Wei Ming Shang on the other end of the building. There was a second hand store. There was an outfit called the Kerney Street Workshop which did murals and trippy artists types. These were all the storefronts in the basement and then the hotel property was upstairs and there were really three distinct factions working on that struggle. People from KP, which is a Filipino revolutionary organization which was closely aligned with Line of March. I think they actually wound up joining it. But they kind of insinuated themselves into the tenants association and were doing their best to put out their own view of the struggle. Their idea was to have the city exercise its right of eminent domain, take over the hotel and then have the tenants buy it back and maintain it. To basically meet the expense of doing it, the tenants were going to rent out the storefront space downstairs which was prime real estate. Of course that would mean evicting the RCP's group, evicting the CPA, evicting the second hand store and evicting the Kerney Street Workshop. The RCP had their own take on the thing. They did not recognize any kind of national component of that struggle. They say... "Stop attacks on workers housing". That was their take. They are entitled to their own opinion, the problem was they were impossible to work with. They would make commitments to work with you on some particular strategy and then they would just do whatever they felt like doing. I remember in particular after the eviction there was a rally, we wanted to have a rally to protest the eviction, and there was actually some talk about trying to repossess the hotel. The RCP said... "We're having a rally at ten o'clock". And we said... "Okay that's fine, we'll have ours at eleven, just turn the microphones over to us". Well of course, they didn't. Their speakers went on and on and on and on saying the same stuff over and over again. It was like Ted Cruz filibustering on the senate floor by reading from The Cat in The Hat. We were finally reduced to chanting... "RCP, shut up!, RCP, shut up!" Stuff like that happened. On eviction night they were supposed to be apart of

the human barricade. They didn't believe in nonviolent civil disobedience once again and they were entitled to their own opinion but the problem is they joined the human barricade, but when the cops charged, they split. Their view was, we don't go for the stuff about linking arms and passive resistance. If the cops charge us we're going to fight them, if the other people don't want to fight, we're going to get the hell

out of there. And they did. That was how the cops basically broke through the line. That's the kind of thing that used to just bug me about them more than anything. There was a lot of stuff wrong with their line too but it came out in those ways.

**EVA:** When you were recruited to IWK, do you remember that process, how they explained it to you? Was it democratic party building?

**PETER:** I don't remember the details very well. I do remember the sister who recruited Faye and I sitting in a bar somewhere. She was explaining it to us, somebody who I continue to have a huge amount of respect for. One of the smartest people I've met in my entire life, but very little in the form of formal education. She was kind of a gang-banger at Galileo High I think when she was coming up. Grew up in the projects. She said really the essence of being a Communist is selflessness. There's really another Ah-hah moment. If you think you're hot stuff, you have no business running an organization like that. It's all about kind of getting past your ego or whatever. I think we would do some self-criticism stuff in our unit meetings. If somebody is out of line, if you talked out or you said something inappropriate, or you weren't listening people would struggle with you. Not in a hostile way, not to put you down but to straighten you out. Cure the disease and save the patient right? And I think I needed a lot of struggling with. I found it helpful. I felt like people would look out for each other. You were demanding a lot of each other but we were also there to watch out for each other's back. I know that I was talking about the I-Hotel, it's like the RCP had their outfit and KDP was up there in the tenants association, but there was a much broader support committee, which I think IWK exerted a lot of leadership in that was huge, it was much broader. Anybody that was interested in the struggle form around the city came and joined that support committee. There were

fairly weird characters in that support committee. It took a real understanding of how to work with different kinds of forces and respect people for what they were willing to give, to be able to hold that group together. And here again, I was very impressed. Don't write people off because they're not like you, they might actually have something to contribute.

**EVA:** So this about?

**PETER:** Seventy-seven.

**EVA:** Seventy-seven. So it's the year before IWK formerly merged with ATM?

**PETER:** Yeah that came a little later. In fact, I remember the merger meeting because I got up and played the banjo at it. There were a group of us who would get up and sing and rallies and stuff. We had a little thing called the I-Hotel song, which was actually a parody of Banksby, Ohio. The woman who wrote it was kind of a folksy. She does swing band music now but back then she'd write parodies of folk songs with politically correct lyrics. But I remember we got up and I did a little stick at the beginning where we dedicated the song to Felix (last name inaudible)

who had just passed away, who I think was one of the more politically, not one of the, he was by far and away most politically with it of the tenants and there were some pretty sophisticated people living in that hotel. The way I saw it, the eviction had probably shortened his life, he died in some hotel in the Tenderloin. I couldn't have helped thinking if we had been little more together, a little stronger, a little more united maybe we could have stopped the eviction from happening and he'd still be with us. I kind of said as much as I launched into my banjo solo. So to me it was a huge deal that that merger happened and even more so I think a few years later when the Revolutionary Communist, they came in and Mary Barraca came in, that was I think just politically, very significant because I still think he was kind of the big, one of the most interesting, and original, and creative and bright thinkers came down path of Marxism and Leninism in the eighties and he also had a gift for explaining it to late people. If I could digress for one moment. There

was a cultural program that we had put on to raise money for the paper at one point and there was a group called Ancestral Rhythms which was really into sort of the African stuff, they got into the dancing and drums and all that. They were what the Panthers used to refer to as cultural nationalists and I remember during the question and answer when Mary spoke after they were down. They were just peppering him with questions and he was explaining to them what the limitations were of their politics and why they needed to understand Marxism better. He really had their attention, I mean he was explaining it in terms that they would understand, that related to their experience, that showed that he was familiar with their politics. He respected it even though he didn't disagree with it. It was good, it was great stuff. I think his coming on board was a huge deal too.

**EVA:** So it sounded like it was a pretty heavy time in terms with the mergers, the organization growing. Did you see a change when it became the League for Revolutionary Struggle?

**PETER:** Well Yeah, it wasn't a predominantly Asian group anymore. I mean, all these people from ATM came in. Reese Derrilick took over the editorship of the paper and the previous editor went back to New York to do labor work. Reese had a much more mass approach I think to it.

The paper was very didactic and difficult to read. Lots of red and black ink, and big headlines. People would clench this from the masthead and I think Reese had enough background in regular journalism to know that that's not how you attract an audience. He livened it up some. I used to feel he livened it up a little too much and wasn't quite serious enough but that was a personal opinion.

**EVA:** And you were a writer covering labor or what exactly were you?

**PETER:** What happened was, in '78 I was assigned to work in the US-China Friendship Association. You have to know something about the pro-China movement to understand why that was important, it was not something that we wanted to do. We kind of had to do it because all of these anti-revisionists ML groups were kind of competing for the China

franchise at that point. Everybody wanted to come off like they were the ones who were anointed by the Chinese to lead

the American revolution and it was a mugs game frankly. IWK and the League, we were doing our pro-China work in San Francisco Chinatown and around the country actually. These groups would come in and they'd gum up the works. They would make alliances with anybody they would talk to. A lot of times they would do it by red baiting us and they did it frequently in the name of the US-China Friendship Association, which by the way was started by the RU I think, originally. So I was a white guy from a middle class lefty background. I was supposed to know how to talk to the people, at least the middle forces. So I got assigned to it. Did it for two years and hated every minute of it mainly because there was so much pointless factionalism. So much energy expended on what were basically very trivial issues. It had not meaning to anybody outside but it was necessary so I kind of gritted my teeth and went along with it. I was frankly relieved when I got taken out of there and got put in charge of the labor news for Unity which is what I did really for the rest of the time I was in the organization. That was what I really wanted to do, I think maybe one reason that I remember my time in the League more warmer than some people do was that most of the time I didn't feel like I was making that big of a sacrifice. The work I was assigned to do was work I wanted to do. I wanted to do journalism and I was interested in the labor movement. Actually, I didn't mention this when I talked to you before but in addition to the newspaper, I would go to meetings at the plant closures project. Which was one of the number of coalitions cropping up around the country. This was when the whole big wave of deindustrialization was taking place. They were shutting down the steel mills in the Pittsburgh area. Thousands and thousands and thousands of union jobs were being lost. There were these massive layoffs and I think nobody on the left really had an answer. Everybody was struggling. A lot of people to pot shots at the union bureaucrats for not fighting hard enough to stop it. In retrospect, I don't think anybody knew how to stop it. We did our share of that stuff too but working in that actually kind of formed a lot of coverage of the newspaper too. I learned a lot about different strategies that people were experimenting with. I learned a lot about what was happening in the economy, why these plants were shutting down. One thing that we were

really really concerned about was the whole notion, popular in a lot of union circles were that Japanese workers were stealing our jobs or whatever. The UAW back in Michigan used to organize people to take sledge hammers and destroy Toyota in the union parking lot and film it. And of course there was this notorious incident where a young Chinese guy who was about to be married was beaten to death by a couple of Chrysler workers in Detroit. Got into an argument with him in a bar.

**EVA:** And his name was?

**PETER:** Vincent Chen. It's funny, there is still a publication called Labor Notes which I read regular, probably the one national publication that's trying to keep track of all the various opposition currents in the labor movement. The people who started it came out of the international socialist which I guess you could call it Trotskyist. It ceased to exist in the mid-seventies but I think its whole approach to union work, they would form opposition caucuses wherever they were. They would put people into what they considered the key industrial unions

like the teamsters, the UAW, and so on. They would find somebody who would sort of represent the opposition. They would try to win the unions over in the class struggle, you don't want to run away from business unionism. It took me a long time to figure out the limitations of that, what they were. One thing that was very obvious was that it was, in those day at least, was it was almost a completely white thing. They didn't know how to deal with oppressed nationality workers who were of course the first ones to be laid off. I went to a west coast conference that Labor Notes had, I think in '85. It was fairly soon after the Vincent Chen murder and a guy named Bill Parker who had come out of IS and was I think, one of their leading people in the auto plants in Detroit, gave a very good speech about the whole issue of international solidarity and why the migration of jobs over seas was apart of capitalism and so on. He concluded his speech by saying... "And by the way, it wasn't a Chrysler worker who murdered Vincent Chen, it was a lousy stinking Chrysler foreman". I thought, well how reassuring it is to think that nobody but a lousy stinking Chrysler foreman would be capable of doing something like that, but we

all know it's not true. We'd work alongside people like that everyday. I was working at the post office at that point. Actually the Oakland post office was predominantly black when I was there but remember when they brought in a bunch of Hispanics on from the Affirmative Action lawsuit and the black workers tended to resent the hell out of them. Somehow just thinking that only management would promote this kind of tension and this kind of racism was, they were living in a dream world. A lot of what I did, because I wasn't just writing articles, I was also supposed to be researching them and reading up on issues that weren't that clear. I wound up doing some writing, something about the whole question of trade and what's a program to deal with the whole issue of trade and the export of jobs and stuff like that doesn't just fall into the old racist bag of getting us into competition with Japanese workers. A lot of that was motivated by thinking, well what are those Labor Notes guys missing? There's something they're not doing. The more I read up on the Japanese labor movement, the more I realized how many parallels there were between the way Japanese capitalism was functioning at that point. They used the same kind of strategies. They had kind of a two teared workforce just like we did only in Japan it was mainly women. You had these big companies that would contract out the jobs that were more irregular, traditional small scale operators, and they would pay decent wages to the people who were working year round. Very similar to what happens in this country. The history of their labor movement was very similar to and I got to write about that.

**EVA:** I want to suggest that stop here because we're almost at an hour and a half.

**PETER:** Really?

**EVA:** Yeah, and well we've started to touch on your experience in The League. So, I think this a good place to stop and then we could continue tomorrow if you have the time.

## **Peter Shapiro Interview: PART 2**

Narrator: Peter Shapiro

Interviewer: Eva Martinez

Interview date: February 21, 2016

Location: Oakland, California

**EVA:** So Peter, yesterday we were starting to talk about your work as the labor person on Unity,

**PETER:** Yeah

**EVA:** I wanted to continue that.

**PETER:** Yeah, actually I would like to a little bit about that because I think it's interesting how the content of the paper was developed at least as I understood it. I mean I did the labor news and stuff but other people had other sections they were responsible for.

**EVA:** Well I did want to talk a little bit about the structure because the mass work had units who were organized around the mass work area. So, what was the internal structure of the people that worked on Unity?

**PETER:** Well, there wasn't a newspaper unit, it just didn't work like that. I was in more units than I can remember frankly. For a while I was in a postal workers unit. I think especially toward the end, because our work in the post office had developed quite a bit, and I was working as a mail handler at the Oakland main post office the whole time I was in the organization. Except for one brief period when the editor was concerned about me because I was so tired from tossing bags on the customs dock which was about the heaviest job there, but I was also off on weekends so I got to see my kids. It was wearing me out so much that I kind of had this meltdown in this staff meeting. I started saying all

sorts of inappropriate things and I was taken aside and said... "Look Peter, you need to ease up a little. Can you take a break from your job or something?" So I told the human resources people that my mother had a stroke and I had to take care of her for six months. Then I took a job part time as a customer service rep. for the Oakland Tribune. People that didn't get their paper, I would get their angry phone calls. Much more restful but by and large I was in the postal unit. We had people in the Oakland main office. One of them was a officer in the local. We had two people who were officers in the San Francisco local. There were I think two or three more, but that was really I think, a pretty tight group of people. I stayed close to just about all of them. One of them unfortunately got brain tumor a few years later and died and I just remember the frustration I felt at his funeral that I couldn't talk about, frankly about circumstances under which I knew him. Anyway, I was also in a unit that did have newspaper people in it if I'm not mistaken. It was more of a hodgepodge group. These were not people who were, I don't know if there was any kind of hierarchy around the paper that was built into the unit

but it was like these were people who need a place to work and so forth. I don't remember whether what I had when I was in the US-China Friendship was a fraction or a unit but there were five of us. Once again, we were under great stress, it's a difficult job we were doing. I became, I have to say this again, close to two compared who are no longer with us who I really liked, and well I got a chance to work with them.

**EVA:** Can you explain what a fraction was?

**PETER:** A fraction is if you are in a particular area of work in one organization and you're trying to coordinate your efforts within the organization so you go to a meeting, you know what you want to accomplish and so forth. If there's an election, you decide who to vote for, that kind of thing. It's a much more low level kind of thing. I think in a unit you take up all of the issues of the organizations as best you can although you do talk about your work area. At least that's the best I can do in terms of explaining it, I don't know how accurate it is. I generally did not pay close enough attention to the reasoning I think behind a lot of these structural things. And I think what I should mention which is

really important, was my older son was born in '79, the year after The League was founded. There were already several kids in the organization in our neck of the woods. A bunch more came along later including my younger son. It was super important I think, that as more kids kept coming we had to set up a childcare system and it was very sophisticated. Several people tried to organize it and were not very successful and there were all sorts of problems going on. The people doing it, I heard one of them complaining to the district organizer; we've got to do something about this, this is a mess. And she kind of got the brush off from him. But then a guy came along who was a difficult person in a lot of ways. I think he was quarrelsome and opinionated and a hard guy to have in your unit, but he like kids and he made it his business to set up this system. He'd print up a calendar every month and it would have the shifts on it. He would assign morning and afternoon shifts on the weekends and evening shifts at each evening. He'd have the appropriate number of people on each and a house where he could do it. It was very sophisticated. Everybody was expected to take part on one level or another, not just the people with kids. A lot of people dragged their feet, they had to learn this is something you have to do. It's important to promote a quality in the organization. To me what is especially significant about that whole thing is, it's like my two sons, their closest friends are still kids they came up in the childcare system with. They didn't know exactly what it was that Faye and I were up to necessarily. We didn't talk a whole lot about it with them. But the people in the organization, they knew they knew them because they did childcare. They sensed, and my younger son talks about it like an extended family, that's the way her refers to it now. He's thirty one years old. I think this was hugely important. Because I was the labor editor of the paper I would sit in on meetings of the labor commission. There was a lot of brainstorming that went on there. I joined, took a lower profile but it was important for me to listen to those discussions so I'd get a sense of how are labor work was developing and every now and then I'd figure something out that others hadn't thought of.

**EVA:** So were you a formal part of the commission or you were sitting in as a Unity representative?

**PETER:** Yeah I don't know! I don't know I think I was, I was just told... "Hey the labor commission is meeting at such and such a time and place, be there". It's not like there were votes or anything like that but yeah I think I was. Again, I wasn't that conscious of this stuff. I just basically did what I was told or asked to do! And I did my best to do it well.

**EVA:** That's kind of funny after being so hesitant to join in the very beginning.

**PETER:** Well yeah, maybe that was part of the reason why I think. That whole thing kind of made me uncomfortable, the idea of how you structure an organization like this and I think there's something else too. Which is the whole idea of leadership, kind of freaked me out. Still does. I'm perfectly happy when other people do it. I don't want to be put in that position myself. I'll shoot my mouth off until the cows come home but don't give me any responsibly, you know. I admire people. I still do, that take that on. I respect them and I have some sense of the burden that goes with it.

**EVA:** Let's go back a bit because I think I skipped over between yesterday and today.

**PETER:** Yeah

**EVA:** When IWK merged with ATM to form The League, do you remember that process and reading the founding statement and things like that?

**PETER:** You know, not real super carefully. I thought it was real cool. I thought it was exciting. I didn't know quite what to expect from the ATM people.

**EVA:** Had you met any of them or worked with any of them in any capacity?

**PETER:** I don't think so, I don't think so. I thought of IWKs mass work, I thought of San Francisco Chinatown.

**EVA:** Uh-huh

**PETER:** Which I was, I think I said yesterday, was really impressed with. It was really mass work. I knew ATM probably had a much more developed labor work. I knew that ATM had been doing a lot of organizing. I knew that Joe Navarro was an open member of ATM and he was the President of the Molders Union in the Bay Area, which I found very impressive. I knew that there was all this work going on in some of the bucket shops in the San Fernando Valley and the L.A. area. That was impressive and I supposed to be interested in this stuff because I was

supposed to be a labor person. But I didn't really know what to expect and actually, I think I had met some of the people who were in the precursor organizations of ATM, way back in the late sixties, early seventies.

**EVA:** Like the East Bay Labor Collective?

**PETER:** Actually no. I knew who Oscar Rios was because I knew about the Los Sietes case, and actually that was a really big deal when I was at San Francisco State. I used to hang out at the coffee house or whatever it was called. Was it on Valencia Street in San Francisco?

**EVA:** Yea

**PETER:** That was my little anti-PL faction of SDS had its meetings there in their little back room. We were doing a study group one day and a PL goon squad showed up to disperse us. "Is this an SDS meeting?" "No this is a Joe Hill study group." "Oh somebody told us this is an SDS meeting." "No you heard wrong, take your goon squad somewhere else guys!" And as they were leaving the room one of started whistling from "The Bridge on the River Kwai"(humming tune). It was disturbing.

**EVA:** In terms of Los Siete, didn't you say that your father knew the Martinez family?

**PETER:** Well I went home, back to my parents house one day and there were... Was it Tony and Oscar?

**EVA:** Tony

**PETER:** Tony and Oscar were sitting there and I think they wanted out. They were trying to get out of the country because ever since the acquittal verdict had come down, just the San Francisco Police were just making their lives miserable. Oscar's brother of course was, they caught him and took him aside and broke his jaw, and put him in the hospital. Just spite. They were going to extract their pound of flesh, they didn't like that verdict went. I read the newspaper, I knew about El Tecélote. Roger Alvarado of course was one of the leaders of the strike at San Francisco State. I knew that he organized in the Mission. Actually I think during that period, a lot of the work at the Liberation School Collective took place in the Mission. Our storefront was on Market Street but I remember we would have meetings and rallies and classes kind of scattered around there. Most of us lived there.

**EVA:** Well, let's go back to the founding of The League. On the national question, do you remember your thoughts about that, how that was perhaps different from your previous left experience?

**PETER:** Oh well, that was something that I think was really one reason why I decided I belonged at IWK. I felt for a long time, as long as the early seventies that you couldn't talk. I wasn't satisfied with the way the issue was dealt with on what was called the white left in those days. I wasn't even happy with the Liberation School because everybody who came to them was white practically. I didn't want to work in that kind of a situation. I didn't think there was ever going to be a revolution in this country unless there was some way that was found to deal with it other than this kind of tokenistic or paternalistic

way that it was usually dealt with. Or simply by saying, oh well we're all workers so it doesn't matter anyway, which I thought was horse manure. I'll give myself credit, I figured that out pretty early on that I didn't really understand what the actual relationship was, and along came IWK and I think ATM too. They both came up with the idea of the strategic alliance of the working class and the oppressed nationalities and that to me was, I thought bullseye. That answers it and it doesn't privilege one struggle at the expense of the other. It recognizes that they're equal and of equal importance and significance. Either one can't succeed without the other. I still think that is a sound formulation. I think I mentioned yesterday how kind of disgusted I was with some of the other Communist groups that dealt with it in a very trivialized kind of a way. So yeah, the ATM merger was a big deal. I don't know if Bruce Franklin was ever actually in ATM but I know that there was a group called Bien Sureños in the Palo Alto area that he had started. And I had met him I think in anti-war stuff in the early seventies and honestly I thought he was a nutcase. I know he was supposed to be the foremost Herman Melville scholar in academia. But I didn't read his work on Melville, what I did was I saw his addition of the Essential Stalin. Since at the time I didn't really think Stalin was all that essential I wasn't terribly impressed and I wasn't impressed with what I saw in the meeting either. I knew that this was one of the antecedent organizations of ATM and it made me a little apprehensive. On the other hand I knew a lot of people who had come out of the whole struggle around Los Siete. I didn't know about the East Bay Labor Collective but it didn't surprise me to hear any of it. So, I was excited. Other organizations joined after, one after the other. There were all organization I had thought were doing significant work in the national struggles. I think the crowning thing was when Mary Barraca brought his organization in. It's funny, when I was at San Francisco State I'd go down to the gallery lounge where they had the poetry reading and cultural events and stuff. I remember he did a Black arts program there and he had me just speechless. It was incredibly powerful and he was also a really in your face Black nationalist in those days. If you told me then that I'd be in the same organization with him in another eight or nine years I wouldn't have believed you. But he impressed me even then. I think that was one of the real triumphs of The League was that it did succeed in bringing different nationalities together in a good principled,

trusting, working relationship where people were actually able to develop their ideas and figure out what their relations with these struggles were. That's a tough one. I look at Bernie Sanders, okay. He's a Socialist, great! But he just has no clue about this stuff. I guess he's a little older than me but he comes out of that whole kind of sixties, white radical background. On a certain level, I don't think ever got away from it. He could have been in the Democratic-Socialists of America, maybe he was, I don't know. But here he is, he's the big left candidate in the elections this year that the left is supposed to support and he doesn't know

how to talk to Black people, he doesn't know how to talk to Latinos. So there's unfinished business here.

**EVA:** So, okay you spoke a little bit about family life and the childcare system and how that was helpful. Was there any other challenges you found because now you were married, you had one and then two sons? You were a postal worker and you were pretty important on the paper doing a lot of work there.

**PETER:** Looking back, I think what was toughest for me was that by and large I did not develop strong relationships with the people I was working with at the post office. I think part of it was because of my own immaturity and the fact that I didn't really know so well then how to listen to people, how to figure out where they were coming from, that kind of thing. But I think I was also very conscious of the fact that I was leading a dual life. I couldn't tell them what I did with my off time. The paper in the early days was not the sort of thing you could just sell to ordinary folks. It was just way too didactic, and it wasn't pleasant to read. I went back and I read some of the old issues of Getting Together and some of the first issues at Unity and I just found myself wincing. It got much better over time and by the time I was working on the customs dock in the late eighties, I used to get rid of a good eight or ten papers every couple of weeks. I had no qualms about selling it to people and they were curious, they'd ask me questions. It's like on my breaks at work, instead of hanging out in the swing room and talking to people I'd got to the phone and I'd call into the Unity office and report on how far along my article was. I'd

go straight home, I'd deal with the kids and then at seven thirty at night I'd run down to the office and spend two hours trying to write something. I'd spend my days off down there calling people up on the phone long distance and doing interviews or reading up on stuff. I think it's that compartmentalization. I really didn't start to be a good postal activist until after I left The League or The League broke up. That to me is kind of sad. I don't think it had to be that way, I think if I had been assigned to do Union work as my main thing I would have figured out a way to do it, although the secrecy still would have been a problem for me. I never did get used to it frankly.

**EVA:** Why was it necessary to be secret in The League?

**PETER:** Well I know it happened to The Panthers. I know they had sorts of provocateurs going in there setting them up. An FBI agent was Fred Hampton's personal bodyguard and basically gave the Chicago Police the floor plan of his apartment so they'd know exactly which direction to fire their guns in when he was sleeping. There's no question that if you tweet the nose of the ruling class and they really perceive you as a serious threat you could be putting yourself in danger and you have to be secret. On the other to me the whole point of doing political work is to win people over. To win people over you have to be able to talk to them and establish relationships with them and it's a huge handicap. I think it's a tradeoff and you have to base it on the circumstances. If you're in a situation where you're facing real serious oppression like they were in czarist Russia or for that matter what The Panthers were facing, you have to be careful. If

you're doing open mass work and doing it relatively freely as I think we were most of the time, I don't know that maybe there were people infiltrating us or trying to pull stuff with us, but I was never aware of it. In terms of my own experience it was more of an impediment than something that we did for good purpose and I wish I had an answer as to how we should have handled it.

**EVA:** Okay, so you worked on the paper the first two years of The League, '78, '79 roughly. Then you went off and did this US-China Friendship Association.

**PETER:** Yeah, I did US-China Friendship in '78, '79. I was working for Getting Together at the beginning.

**EVA:** Oh, okay.

**PETER:** I'm a little hazy about the time but I know I was in the San Francisco chapter of US-China Friendship when normalization happened and that was January 1st of '79. I hung around for another year or so, so I think it was about 1980 or '81 that I went back on the paper. I do want to talk about that a little bit because we had areas of labor work around the country and people were supposed to phone in articles or reports. Sometimes I'd do blue pencil work and try to clean them up depending on how proficient of writers they had on the scene there. If there was an area where we didn't have people but we knew it was important, I'd try to do research, I'd get on the phone, I'd try to contact people. I did a lot of reading. I used to read The Wall Street Journal and Business Week regularly because generally they had better labor coverage than any of the other media did. I read what other left groups were up to. In terms of the other left groups I had to write up reports and how they were handling a particular struggle. I remember during the Hormel Strike, which we supported very strongly at the beginning. We had a reporter on the scene who went out there and their corporate campaign involved a lot of leafleting and urging people not to patronize the bank that was funding Hormel.

**EVA:** Can you explain a little background on that?

**PETER:** Oh sure yeah, I'm sorry. That was actually one of the more important labor struggles of the eighties. It ended very badly. The Packing House Workers Union was an old CIO Union with a left history, and Chicago was a big Communist Party stronghold. A lot of them were purged during the McCarthy era but there was still that tradition in the Union. The whole industry started decentralizing, they shut down the stock yards in

Chicago. The meat packers all moved to the boondocks. They started locating their plants in the middle of Colorado to be right near the supply of beef and of course away from the Union. Hormel had a state of the art plant and there was this huge assault on the Union. The wages kept falling and the Union was losing members. They basically joined United Food and Commercial Workers as a lot of Unions who are losing

members have to do, is find a big Union to protect them. It was a mistake because the people running the United Food and Commercial Workers couldn't have cared less about their situation. Their whole approach to what was happening in the meatpacking industry was to maintain what they call pattern bargaining, where you don't allow the different employers to compete against each other to see who can lower wages. You maintain the uniform wage level. That's fine as long as wages are going up. When they start to fall it's questionable whether it's a useful strategy anymore, that's all I'll say about it. The people in the Hormel plant had already made wage concessions. This was the plant in Austin, Minnesota. I think they had some anarchist, cynical tendencies in their politics. They didn't want to make anymore wage concessions, they'd done it. They had just gotten the shaft for it, it didn't give them any protection, they were working in a state of the art plant and they weren't sharing any of the extra profits that they were making. They said, the hell with this noise. I think the head of the Union, he came in as an insurgent because he was opposed to the old leadership which had greeted the concessions. A guy named Jim Guyet. He said... "You know, if concessions are going to have to stop, they are going to have to stop at the most profitable plant or most profitable company. That's us, it's up to us to hold the line for the rest of them. Well, I actually found out about this whole struggle by reading Business Week. I read it and thought this is really important, we need to get somebody there. We had a reporter in Chicago that we sent up there and worked with them for awhile, covered it regularly.

**EVA:** There was an article in Forward about it where there was a panel.

**PETER:** Yeah, we did a round table discussion and forward. The problem with the strike was they were really fighting not only the company, and eventually the Governor and The National Guard, and the media. They were fighting the Union too. After initial indecisions, I think the AFLCIO closed ranks against that local. I think there were a lot of people probably in organized labor disturbed by the whole situation, but they went along with it. I remember writing something in Unity saying there are a lot of Union people who are wavering on this and we really have to get them off the fence because if the strike is broken it's going to be bad for everybody, which is exactly what happened. The UFCW put the local in trusteeship and broke the strike. There's a movie about that strike I think called American Dreamers or something like that that won an Oscar. I wasn't crazy about the movie because it made the workers look like tragic figure who were noble idealists who were misguided. I think Jim Guyet was furious when he saw the movie and I don't really blame him. But I also think that we had this feeling when we discussed on the labor commission that the local in Austin had taken on a little bit too much, they had bitten little more than they could chew. I don't know if they could have avoided that confrontation with the Union but they really did not shy away from it. That strike was as much to show the bankruptcy of the whole pattern bargaining strategy as it was to fight the concessions at Hormel. They were right, absolutely and I think it was the responsibility of everybody on the left to support them but from a tactical point of view, the longer that the strike went on the more

doubts we had. I think it's worth noting that the same time the Hormel Strike was happening, the strike broke out in Watsonville.

**EVA:** Right. See, that presents two interesting things because the Hormel Strike was something where we didn't have cadre there.

**PETER:** No.

**EVA:** We mainly supported it and had contacts through our publications.

**PETER:** Yeah, we had a reporter on the scene who became pretty close to the strike.

**EVA:** And then Watsonville was where we had people?

**PETER:** Well the thing about Watsonville is, there was some people from Seeds of Time actually which was one of the collectives that joined The League in the early eighties. They were based in East Palo Alto I think. They had been working in the canneries for a long time in the Santa Clara Valley, Sacramento and so forth and they had a statewide network they had organized. Mainly around things like language equality and discrimination. The thing about the canneries is like they were originally going to be organized by the United Packing House Agriculture, Cannery Packing House Agriculture and Allied Workers which was an old CIO Union which had a huge big Communist Party component in it in Southern California. They actually were prepared to move north and organize the northern California canneries. Right after World War II, they'd built up a pretty good organization in southern California. This is all covered in a book called "Cannery Women, Cannery Lies" by Vicky Ruiz. What happened was that the Taft-Hardly Act had passed which had made it illegal to be a Communist and hold Union office. The cannery owner just saw the opportunity to get this Union out of their plants before they even got a foothold. There was one plant I think in Oakland, or maybe it was Sacramento I forget which, but they had actually organized it. They won a Union election that plant, and the results were thrown out because there were questions of Communist leadership involved. What happened was in Watsonville, the plants were not organized until the CIO Union was a used firecracker in the area. It was never a question of organizing the plant but they would have organized it I think had they still been around. What had happened was the teamsters moved in. In most of the canneries, most of the teamsters could justifiably called. They moved in and signed sweetheart contracts. I'm not sure that was the case in Watsonville because nothing was going on there at the time in terms of other Unions. The frozen food industry was expanding very very rapidly after the war and they were desperate for workers. Bozo the Clown could have gone in there and organized and gotten a decent contract. The guy who ran the local in Watsonville was

this old merchant seamen who had become a kind of Union guy during World War II in the Sailor's Union of the Pacific which was a very militant Union but also very anti-Communist. He went to work in Watsonville, he ran that Union with an iron hand for eighteen years. He didn't

speaking a word of Spanish. Starting in the 60's, I think when the Bracero Program ended, more and more of the workers in the plant were Spanish speaking and a lot of them were women when they introduced the forklift. It opened up a whole lot of jobs in those plants to women because it didn't involve lifting huge weights anymore. You had guys running around with the machines to do it. So the demographics of that Union really changed drastically, the demographics of the town changed drastically. There were a whole bunch of people coming across the border and settling in Watsonville to work in the frozen food plants. Then all of a sudden in the mid-eighties the industry started to slow down a bit. Competition got a little stiffer. One owner decided he wanted to bust the Union. He had a cocaine habit to support from what I understand and he needed the extra money! That's probably liberalist but he's dead now so no one is going to sue me for saying it. Well, the people in Seeds of Time of these cannery workers now included the frozen food plants in Watsonville and they had regular contact with the people, left organizers in the Watsonville area. One of whom was a Mexican anarchist named José Lopez, another was a Berkeley transplant named Frank Barteby who went down there to proletarianize himself after he got sick of Berkeley. When the strike broke out the Union was in shambles. The head of the Union went off on a drunken binge and was never seen or heard from again hardly. There was no leadership, there was no nothing. The people who we were in contact with had a chapter, The Teamsters for Democratic Union they had set up, but they had not really established a base in the plants. So we had a comrade who was in San Jose that had been working in the canneries for awhile, and his mother even longer. They both went to Watsonville, checked the situation out, realized that most of these workers were women and none of them were in TDU hardly. They just encouraged the strikers... "You really need to get your own organization going here. You need to take responsibility for running this thing because the Union is not going to do it. If you don't feel comfortable with TDU, don't take orders from anybody just do it yourselves".

That was kind of how we got involved there, and subsequently Oscar Ríos volunteered to go down there too. He did a bang up job. He became very close to some of the key strikers, and the strike lasted eighteen months. What was remarkable about it was, this was going on at the same time as the Hormel Strike bear in mind. The teamsters, one would expect to have just abandoned the strike right away. It looked like a losing proposition. The owner of the plant had an eighteen million dollar credit line with Wells Fargo bank. The Union was virtually nonfunctional at that point. Workers had no experience organizing or leading the strike or anything like that. But joint council seven of the teamsters sent a guy down there to check the situation out and he realized... “Well, whatever else you can say, the Union’s a mess but the workers really have their act together. If the international Union will support them, this strike is winnable”. So he just tried to keep the higher levels of the Union engaged. The workers basically held their ranks together. They organized a strikers committee and our people continued to work with them, to try to help them. What is remarkable I think is that at the end of the day there were a couple of turning points in the strike. One was that the idea of the owner of the plant was to basically make such an outrageous contract offer that he’d force people out on strike and then he’d keep them out for twelve months at which point he could move to decertify the Union under the National Labor Relations Act. What happens is you have a vote to decertify and after twelve months the Union

workers are no longer eligible to vote because they’ve been on strike so they are not considered employees anymore. Well, the teamster lawyer had a brainstorm and said... “Well, the teamsters were not voted into this plant, they just came in there and made a deal with the bosses. There has never been an election in this plant, let’s call for one after eleven months”. It was a brilliant move but basically it meant was that the workers, the strikers had to get everybody back to town. They were scattered all over the map at that point. A bunch of them had gone back to Mexico to wait out the strike, some of them were in Texas, they were moving up and down the San Joaquin valley following the crops. They managed to get damn near everybody back to Watsonville for the day of the vote. Even though the owner of the plant had packed his employment roles with a bunch of part-timers to try to inflate his own total, they still won the vote. At that point it was

going to take at least another year before he could drive the Union out and he was running out of money. The second turning point was, the teamsters had over one billion dollars in their Wells Fargo accounts and their pension funds. Jackie Presser, the head of the Union was persuaded by the people from joint council seven. Even the treat to take their money out of those accounts ought to persuade Wells Fargo to cut this guy off. He's going to go broke anyway for God's sakes. He was deep in debt to I think something like twenty million dollars to local growers who had never been paid for their produce. And they did, Wells Fargo cut him off. To avoid going into bankruptcy he had to sell the plant to one of the growers. I guess what I'm driving at with all of this long story is that, God knows the teamsters were a horrible Union and they had a horrible history in the California canneries and it would be very easy to see them as the enemy. A lot of the radical and lefty types in the Watsonville did see them that way. There's a documentary film actually about the strike which, to watch you would think it was like struggle of the workers against the Union. The owner of the plant kind of fades into the background. We were criticized by some of those folks who thought we were too chummy with the Union because we were trying to figure out how to keep them engaged. How do we keep the militancy of the strike up without creating a situation with the teamsters where they have an excuse to abandon it? You want to know what united front politics says, unity, struggle, unity. You don't want to break of relations with them, you do want to keep the pressure on them. You want to encourage them to do the right thing, get on their case when they do the wrong thing, but it's a back and forth process. This is where I think we really came to an understanding that this simple kind of oppositional attitude that people on the left tended to have and when they did labor work, down with the bureaucrats. We didn't look at it quite that simply, not because we had any illusions about the bureaucrats but we understood these guys represent a potential ally, a tactical ally. If we play our cards right, we can't trust them, neither can we dismiss them and we have to figure out how to work out a relationship with them that maximizes what they have to offer and minimizes the destruct effect of what they do. For that I think people went after us for being too chummy with the Union, but to me that was a real breakthrough on how we saw our labor work.

**EVA:** So where were these discussion going on? I know there was people down in Watsonville.

**PETER:** I was watching that strike real closely.

**EVA:** How was the labor commission involved?

**PETER:** Well the strike became a huge priority for the organization. It preoccupied us a lot and there were a lot of discussions on a daily basis. Oscar was in constant contact with the leadership at the organization about it. The head of the labor commission as he puts it, would helicopter down to Watsonville every two or three times a week and sit in on strikers committee meetings because they had this independent body of strikers that had elected about six weeks into the strike and was doing work that the Union should have been doing. In terms of holding the strike together. He's sit in on the meetings and we would drive back the coast to San Francisco at two o'clock in the morning and try not to drive off the road. It was given really close attention and then towards the end of the strike it was clear that this was a very significant victory. Not only in terms of our labor work but what we tried to do. We thought the key to winning the strike was to make it an issue in the Latino and Chicano national movement. We wanted to see a boycott of product coming out of the plant that would have the same impact that the great boycott did for the farm workers. It wasn't quite that easy because frozen foods, you almost have to kind of take the label off and look at the barcode to look at where the stuff came from. At the end the teamsters actually considered doing it. We actually had a couple of our people go down there and meet with them and write up a written proposal. They gave it serious thought, they even had their lawyer vet it, but eventually they decided it would be easier simply to put pressure on the bank and threaten to take their money out of the bank. From the point of view of mass organizing it wasn't the way to go because nobody knew what was going on, it was all behind the scenes but in terms of economic leverage it was much more effective than a boycott would have been, a consumer boycott.

**EVA:** In terms of your work on Unity, were there other significant labor struggles that you worked on?

**PETER:** Oh yeah. I think I mentioned yesterday that I worked in the Plant Closures Project.

**EVA:** Right.

**PETER:** There was a lot of coverage given. It's like there were huge layoffs, there were plant shutdowns, and auto plants were shutting down. There was big struggle at GM Van Nuys where we had a bunch of people. One of our people down there who unfortunately, I won't mention his name except that he's famous now. He came up with a very ingenious strategy which was, they made Chevy's in that plant and in the LA area there's a huge market in the Latino community for those Chevy's. He went out and he talked to a bunch of Latino community leaders, it was a very good united front strategy. They were all threatened to have a boycott of GM cars if that plant shut down. I think it had the makings of a really good strategy if it had been carried out, unfortunately it wasn't. So much energy went into the united front work and the community and the people in the plant got neglected. The plant eventually did shut down. I'm probably not the

best person to ask about it because I wasn't there but I had the feeling that there was some unrealized potential there. I spent a lot of time talking to people in the Monongahela Valley in Pennsylvania where the homestead works was, and Staunton Lind was a labor lawyer and historian who had developed this whole elaborate community ownership strategy for the steel industry. He proposed the idea that the government should use its powers of eminent domain and I think he probably got some of his ideas from the I-Hotel struggle because that was the same way the city was supposed to take over the property and then demand that the tenants have it. Staunton Lind was the first person to acknowledge that it wasn't a sure winner, as he put it, it's like throwing bricks at a tank. But a whole movement did consolidate around it and I covered that. I went to meetings at the Plant Closers Project where there was a lot of discussion of what we could do.

You've got the huge corporations that are just divesting on a massive scale. All these lives are being destroyed. I met somebody recently who was working in the MAC truck plant in Hayward. Was it MAC truck or was it Caterpillar? One of the truck plants down there. She described a guy who was fifty some years old and a few years short of retirement. When the place shut down he killed himself. There are all sorts of stories like that, there's was even a crummy made for tv movie about a steel mill with Peter Strauss, but to give it credit, captured very accurately what was going on. To the point of even staging one of the shots so it resembled a photograph of the workers occupying the US Steel headquarters in Pittsburgh, only instead of having Staunton Lind on the bullhorn I think they had Peter Strauss or somebody like that. Of course it had this totally ridiculous Hollywood ending which was schmaltzy and had nothing to do with reality, but inspirational.

**EVA:** So the Unity staff, when Unity newspaper came as a result of the merger and the two papers merging together, for the most part it was people who, if they had done journalism they had only done it for a few years right? It was a young group of journalists who were running the paper would you say?

**PETER:** Yeah, I think most of the people on the paper were about my age you'd say or a little younger. I think probably our oldest contributor would have been Mary Barracca who wrote regularly for the paper and I'd say had about ten or fifteen years on most of us.

**EVA:** It was pretty significant to put out a paper in three languages.

**PETER:** Oh yeah, and it was a huge effort. The people who had to do the translating had to work their butts off. Faye actually edited the Chinese side for awhile and it was a tough tough job. Part of the problem was the people who were educated enough to be sufficiently fluent in both Chinese and English tended to be very intellectual types who had to be struggled with a lot. That wasn't as true I think with the Spanish side. The people I know who did the translations were pretty solid folks. I'm think of one guy in

particular. I won't mention his name but he struck me as a very admirable, serious guy. The Chinese side eventually had to be discontinued too because really the work had moved so far beyond the origins of Getting Together as a bilingual paper in

Chinatown. And Chinatown was changing too. A lot of the old timers who only read Chinese who made up a lot of the core at that older generation of people that worked for IWK, they were dying off. The old folks, they were like the ones who taught the youngsters in Chinatown what working class struggle was all about. I think, this is a whole other subject, but I think their influence on IWK was really profound. A lot of the young Asian activist who happened by Chinatown be it in New York or San Francisco or wherever.

**EVA:** So I want to move towards the dissolution of The League now.

**PETER:** Uh-huh

**EVA:** First of all, the process before we get into the content. Do you remember how the process came down?

**PETER:** Yeah I sure do. I will tell you that when it was first broached it was a complete shock to me. I was just absolutely stunned, I couldn't believe what was happening. Looking back of course I can see all sorts of little warning signs. I think we put a huge emphasis on the Jackson campaign both in '84 and '88 and I think in '84 it was tremendously helpful to us. When he first announced when he was going to run, Jackson understood the need to build a broad coalition. But his first speech where he announced his candidacy he says... "It's our turn now, we need to have a black President". Over the course of that campaign he started arguing in favor of redress and reparations. He argued in favor of plant closings legislation. He started speaking in terms of a lot of issues we were organizing around. I don't think it was just us, there were other left groups involved too, but I like to think we really influenced the political content of his campaign. In '88 it looked like he might actually win the nomination, and I think he probably would had it

not been for the super delegate rule. Because he cleaned up on Super Tuesday and he swept all these states in the South. He had a much more sophisticated organization and we had people working in his national campaign very closely with him. The paper I thought became a little too fixated on the election. The thing about it, Unity evolved from being a very turgid, a left paper in the worst sense of the word to being a paper that was truly a mass paper. I really welcomed that. I wanted a paper that people could read and enjoy and appreciate the layout. It would talk about things they were interested in, and there was a long process of making it a more and more of a mass paper. Toward the end like inviting people who had no direct connection with The League to write for it. Manny Mareble wrote columns, Muriel Hanson who was like the leader of the farmers struggle in the midwest. They all contributed opinion pieces regularly to the paper. That I thought was just terrific as long as we were also putting our own ideas out. Looking back, and some people who were involved with the electoral work might disagree with this. My sense is that the bigger role we were playing in the electoral arena, the less eager we were to emphasize the other stuff that we were doing. Both in terms of how we presented ourselves to the public and also in terms of just what we were concerned with. Every labor article I wrote had to ram something about Jesse Jackson into it. There was one incident which annoyed me. I was writing

an article and I used the word Capitalist in it. It got blue penciled and the phrase "corporate barracudas" got substituted for it. I remember thinking well shoot, I don't talk like this. Have Jesse Jackson write my articles for me, I would never used a phrase like "corporate barracuda" because it's great rhetoric but it doesn't mean anything. It's great on the stump if you're making a stump speech but it doesn't deepen peoples understanding I think of how our economy works, how are system works, and why it needs to be changed. That was just kind of a minor irritation. I don't think I really fathomed what was going on which was that the whole Marxist-Leninist tradition that we came out of was something that a lot of people in leadership were moving away from. I was not prepared for it when it came down. There was a big meeting in our area, the announcement was made. I felt like I had been kicked in the belly by a horse and people told me that's what I looked like when I was walking out of there. We were due to have a

Congress. We had had one in '84 and we were due to have another one to sort of layout our program, and it could have been a very interesting Congress I think. We would have thought; Well how do we deal with this electoral stuff? What's its relationship to the rest of our work? What's our longterm strategy? All of which I think would have been very powerful. But I think what was happening instead was that some people in leadership were burning out. They were starting to wonder about the relevance of all that Marx and Lenin and Mao that we talked about so much in the early eighties. They basically were key people. I think this is something else too. I never felt until the end, I know other people felt differently, but I always felt like, yeah we were a democratic centralist organization, the lower bodies were subordinate to the higher bodies and all that stuff. But I always felt like if I had something to say, I could say it. Nobody would try to shut me up. If it made sense and if it had anything to it, it would be given due consideration. I can think of several instances where some policy came down, and the rank and file objected to it. In '84 for instance when we were preparing for the Congress, we were given the papers of what was going to go into the program. I remember in my unit, and we were just bunch of nobody's who did grunt work on the paper right, we weren't big hotshots but we went over that thing line by line. There were several things were objected to. We passed our objections on. One of them was, we never actually came out with a formal position on the gay question but we didn't have very good politics on it. There was a reference in there to proletarian morality, and everybody in our unit said... "what the hell does proletarian morality mean? What are we saying here, what kind of nonsense is this?" It got cut out. I suspect other people had the same objection. The other thing, and I think this is even more significant is, there was a reference to teachers as apart of the petty bourgeois scene. I thought no, teachers like a lot of professions are becoming proletarianized. Especially with budget cuts and attacks on public education and the teachers Union. That got changed too when the Congress actually met. My feeling was that there was wiggle room. People could question the line when it came down and a lot of changes got made that way. But I felt like the more we became involved in the electoral work, the less of that there was. The less discussion there was. There was always a time in our unit meetings that we set aside to discuss the contents of the paper.

Usually there'd be stuff, some serious political strategic shit that we had to try to understand by discussing, and the paper was the way to do it. Once Unity became a

united front kind of paper, and once we stopped putting our own politics so aggressively forward in there, there was really less and less to talk about.

**EVA:** When did that change happen? Did it happen slowly or?

**PETER:** Oh gosh, I would guess late eighties, '88, '89 maybe.

**EVA:** So around the Jackson campaign.

**PETER:** I remember sitting in our postal unit meetings and saying... "Well, what'd people think of this article? This is an important office". "Yeah I liked it! It was good". "Well what do you think it means?" "Well I don't know, I think it's pretty obvious isn't it!" It's like, yay Jesse. I think the level of internal discussion really suffered. The other thing that had happened is that a whole bunch of young people came into the organization in I think about '88. There was a big wave of anti-apartheid struggles on campuses and a whole bunch of people were recruited out of that. Man, I remember when I was recruited. It was a long grinding process that probably took way longer than it needed to or should have. I know that that seriously inhibited us from bringing in people that should have been brought in. Especially like working class people that we wanted to be recruit in. There was one woman in Watsonville I think who should have been the organization. She was leader of the strikers committee. From what I could see her politics were very closely aligned with ours. She respected, she trusted us. She never referred to us as The League, she referred to us as Oscar and his friends. She knew who we were. I think she had all the makings of a revolutionary but she never joined. I don't really know why, but I think probably it was because the way we had been recruiting people in the past just didn't really fit her life. We didn't know how to change it in a good way that would work so we wound up just making it almost an indiscriminate. Not in terms of who we recruited but

in terms of the whole process people went through of being educated, getting an understanding, getting some sort of theoretical grounding. So people were being brought in pretty much on the basis of our practice. They didn't understand that that practice was a result of a very long process of evolving through trial and error, trying to understand how Marxist theory could be applied to a particular situation. How Mao's notions applied to the united front applied, that kind of thing. I think that stuff is important, I still do. You're groping around in the dark if don't have it. Not because it has all the answers, but at least it gives you the framework to attack the questions in a useful way instead of just reacting to stuff. I think the level of internal political discussion and education went way down in the end. I think the last study group I was in was a bunch of graduate student and we were worried that some of or younger folks who were graduating, who wanted to go to grad school, we wanted to make sure they didn't lose their bearings in grad school. You don't have to be a Communist to lose your bearing in grad school. Because I had been to grad school myself back in the mid-seventies I was supposed to know something about it so I was brought into this group.

**EVA:** What year was that group? What timeframe was that?

**PETER:** Oh I don't remember the year. It's funny, I wasn't keeping a timeline then and I can't conjure it now.

**EVA:** Was this when all these new students came in?

**PETER:** Oh they came in I think around '87 when Mandela got out of jail and everything. The big upsurge. There was a big strike at Hunter College in New York over open admissions which was tremendously important. This was really exciting stuff, this was the new wave. These are people who should have been picking up the banner that we had when we came out in the sixties and early seventies. Because we didn't have the same kind of process of trying to educate ourselves and think in a more systematic way, by that time I just got the sense at

the end this edict came down that; why should we force these students to do childcare? I said... "Well for Christ's sake why not!" In the first place it's hardly this onerous responsibility. One thing I heard was well a lot of them had to take care of the younger brothers and sisters when they were young, they don't want to be burdened with it now. They're trying to move up in the world and get away from all that. I said... "Isn't that precisely the problem?" People didn't struggle with them and I'd be willing to bet that a lot of them would have been more than happy to be struggled with, but nobody did it. At the end when we were questioning the basic assumptions we had been operating under, was only a few [inaudible] like those of us who had been around at the very beginning who even understood what was at stake. Not all of us believed in it anymore. That is why I think it couldn't hold together. To me, I look back now and I still feel a tremendous regret. I remember one woman in my postal unit was just in tears and was so angry she could hardly speak. She said... "What was it all for? What were all those sacrifices for, just to end in this bullshit?" We wanted her to go represent us at the final Congress where the dissolution vote was taken because with one exception everybody in the postal unit was opposed to what was going on. We were all still friends, we all still cared about each other. And she refused to go. Aside from her Union work I think she's pretty much stayed away from politics since then. That didn't happen to me. I was active in the Oakland local, the American Postal Workers Union in the nineties in a way I hadn't been when I was a mail handler. I changed craft and became a window clerk. Then we moved up to Portland when my kids hit their teens basically because East Oakland was a lousy place to be in the nineties. Up there, there was a very progressive branch of the Letter Carriers Union, I was a letter carrier then. I became super active, I edited the paper for six years. I'd get up and shoot my mouth off at the national conventions and I sat on the executive board. So I stayed active, but I was a Union activist.

**EVA:** Okay. I want to go back though because when this idea was put forth by the central committee, or at least the majority of the central committee. It was dissension by a minority group. It was basically moving away from the framework of Marxism and Leninism, and looking

forward to a new type of organization. Then the process was, there was a serious of papers that came out.

**PETER:** Yeah.

**EVA:** I think there were four sets in total.

**PETER:** Five actually. I think, yeah.

**EVA:** Five, okay and people were allowed to write up their positions and there were positions for, there were position against, and there positions in between. And you wrote a paper.

**PETER:** Two of them actually.

**EVA:** Okay. Tell me about what your position is.

[Long Pause]

**PETER:** God.

**EVA:** Your son. (laughs)

**PETER:** You know first of all, I should say that I really had this kind of foolish faith for the I think that there was still room for struggle, for a real exchange of ideas.

**EVA:** Because there had been.

**PETER:** Because there had been. Yeah. We are talking about my friends here. Even people in the top leadership were people I liked. I felt I owed them a lot. I was bewildered

by what they were doing, but I didn't bear them any animosity and I still don't. But I thought in particular a couple of them were behaving very very badly during that whole period. Just trashing anyone who disagreed with them. Making what I thought were rather unprincipled and disingenuous arguments. It was just this is what makes me think that people are burned out. They wouldn't have not had acted that way in the old ways. I think they just wanted out and they were trying to rationalize it. I wouldn't begrudge them. These are people who had put in like ten, fifteen, twenty of giving everything they had. They were moving into middle age. They wanted to lead normal lives. I can completely understand that. The problem is that everybody, they wanted to take everybody else with them when they went out. That's what I found hard to accept even now. I think I felt a sense of personal betrayal there. These folks were my friends. You know what I really liked about The League? I was listening to somebody else talking about it this morning. Even if you didn't know people real well, you didn't know their family background, you didn't

know much about them personally, they were your friends. They would watch your back. They'd stop a bullet for you, they'd always be there for you if you got in a jam. And you'd be there for them because we were all involved on this common commitment, we were all making these huge sacrifices. And we depended on each other to be able to do that. After The League broke up, I went to one of the meetings of the minority group. One of the women on the minority faction of the central committee said... "You know, it's like a marriage! You put all this energy into to making the thing work and you find out the s.o.b. has been cheating on you". (laughs)

I thought... well that's a women's perspective, but man I can relate! (laughs)

That was kind of how I felt. There was this sense that people I trusted had let me down in some really fundamental ways and I don't want to harp on it, because reasonable people can disagree and all of us I think, did the best we were capable of doing. There were some things that we never resolved that we should have resolved. I think it led up to the final dissolution. It's a very tough question.

**EVA:** Like what?

**PETER:** Well, I think I mentioned yesterday that I was interested in studying the history of the Communist Party in the '30's and '40's when I was in school. When they were outsiders, they didn't have a lot of influence but they knew exactly what they wanted to. Once they started getting influence they started making gangs, they started bringing new people in, they started getting these wonderful mass movements going. They kind of lost track of what they were doing. It's that Bob Dylan song, "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose". When you got something to lose it's very easy to start worrying about. I think making the transition from revolutionary agitation to being a real force in society, it's a very difficult transition to make especially in this country. With this whole kind of anti-Communist, anti-class struggle culture. We're not the first outfit to get tripped up. Other people have had the same problem so I try not to be too harsh or too judgmental about it, but I think that was the gist of it. The other thing is that whole kind of organization demanded a lot of people. When you're young you can do it. When you get a little older, a little more crotchety, and you have kids, and other responsibilities. You have to earn a living, and you need health insurance. I remember that one woman who worked at the center came down with uterine cancer. She had no health insurance so she used somebody else's Kaiser card to get examined, just thinking I was a stomach ache or something. When they diagnosed what was wrong with her it was just a big mess because she had got in there on false pretenses. I think that scared a lot of people because this is a woman the everyone liked and looked up to, and didn't want anything bad to happen to her. We simply were not equipped to take care of each other in situations like that.

**EVA:** No.

**PETER:** So how do you really build an organization that can really last for the long haul that can operate in a way that it really influence large numbers of people. Influences the course of events

and at the same time keeps a revolutionary perspective. I don't think anyone's really solved that one, we didn't either.

**EVA:** Mhmm. You still have hope that somebody will someday?

**PETER:** One hopes. I think what bothers me about myself is that after The League broke up, you know, I stayed active. I find that I have to be doing something to keep myself sane. There are other organizations I could have gotten associated with. I could have gone into Freedom Road for instance. I didn't want to and I can't justify it, I can't give an explanation for it. It's just this strict kind of gut level thing. I don't want to take that kind of risk anymore. To me, I think in my Union work a lot of the stuff I learned in The League, I was able to put to very good use. I worked with the jobs of the Justice Department. I chaired their healthcare committee and helped start the statewide coalition for single-payer. The executive director at one point, [inaudible] in Portland, told me... "I want you in this leadership position because you really have a good understanding of how to work with different forces". I owe that to The League. I didn't enjoy being put in that position. I did not really want to have all this leadership responsibility. I think it was especially difficult for because I was used to having an organization backing me up, if I had questions I'd raise it in my unit, or raise it in the labor commission. What do you think I should do? I don't know how to handle this situation. I was sort of blundering along on my own from what I can remember. What would have the CC done or whatever? (laughs) It was stressful. I think I worked harder in jobs at the Justice after I retired than I ever did when I was in The League. It took more out of me in some ways because I just felt like I was out on my own and I didn't have a backing of an organization that was helping me. I was just trying to apply lessons I had learned fifteen years earlier. I could have joined Freedom Road. I could join one of the other organizations that are still out there and try to push it in what I thought had needed to be done. I haven't done it. I don't see myself doing it and I'm not particularly proud of that. I wish I could, I can, maybe I'm just too old. (laughs)

**EVA:** Let me ask you. Did your father know that you had joined The League? Had he ever asked you?

**PETER:** I think he figured it out.

**EVA:** So you never formerly talked about it?

**PETER:** I'm sure that he assumed that I was in. I never flat out told him but he understood that too. He never told me that he was in the Communist Party at the University of Minnesota when he was a young punk. But deduced it and I think I told you that when he and my mom came west, I think they tried to join the Party. (laughs) The Party wouldn't take them because they were opposed to Freud. My parents were not only Marxist, they were also Freudians. I actually think it came from the same place. They were raised as Orthodox Jews and like a lot of children

of immigrants who were trying to come up with a way of looking at the world that reflected the circumstances they were in in this country rather than the [inaudible] they were trying to reject. They were trying to reject the poverty and the ignorance of the like that their parents had fled knowing in czarist Russia or in the Jews pale settlement. For my parents it was like rejecting religion. Both Marx and Freud start out, the first thing they did was say, religion is really screwing people up, you need to get away from it. My dad could set foot in the synagogue without muttering under his breath about the old PM and the masses or maybe a line from Freud about the future of an illusion or something like that.

**EVA:** Okay. You've actually started the conversation, but looking back now; What do you want young activists, young revolutionaries to know about The League.

**PETER:** I actually listened to one of those telecommunications. Left Roots has this thing where periodically they all have what they call a "hangout" where you plug into a conference call. Maybe several hundred people are listening. (laughs) If you're lucky

maybe you'd get the floor for two minutes. Mainly these presentations, they were talking about strategy. I went on for a couple hours I think.

**EVA:** Woah.

**PETER:** I said... "Just one evening spent reading one of Mao's essays on the united front would answer so many of your questions". He has that essay I always thought it had a corny title so I never took it seriously, but The Three Magic Weapons. Actually it's right on the money. He says you have to have a mass base. You have to have a party or an organization which tries to fit all the different pieces together. And you have to have the united front so that you can figure out how the mass struggles you're involved in relate to other forces and how you can answer the question. Mao, at the beginning of the Chinese Revolution which is; who are our friends? Who are our enemies? And then he proceeds very systematically to look each of the different classes and political tendencies that it involved and said, fear their strengths, fear their weaknesses. It's all sky talk if you haven't done your basic mass work and built up a base, and you don't really represent somebody. If you go into a united front, you're just somebody shooting your mouth off. You don't count for anything, but if you have an organization behind you, and I don't mean a Communist organization, I mean a mass organization. The people were actually mobilized that could turn out for a demonstration or turn out to vote in an election. If you bring something to the table then you can offer something. My feeling is if you're going to participate in an united front, number one you have a responsibility to represent the people who would not otherwise be represented there. Working class people, oppressed nationalities who weren't represented in the coalition. If you not doing that, you're just there because that's where the action is and you want to be apart of the action. Probably, you're not contributing anything that couldn't be better done by somebody else. You had to figure out; What do I have to offer here that's going to move things forward? For that you have to have some kind of a mass base. Otherwise you're just kind

of pimping off the bigger struggle. That's one thing, and the other thing is something that Jamal O'Rodgers at this talk for she just came out with a book about Ferguson (MO). She spoke at the East Side Arts Alliance last week I guess it was. She said... "The thing about Ferguson is you got a lot of people who do not understand that protest is not the same thing as organizing. You had this outrageous situation in Ferguson, a lot of people were angry about it. Everybody came and wanted to demonstrate. Everybody wanted to get their picture in the paper. Everybody wanted to be part of the struggle. The idea of building up an organization that could actually effectively resist and endure and continue over the long haul rather than simply reacting to the latest outrage, nobody had a clue. My wife Faye had a very interesting comment to make that this is the trouble with internet organizing. Nowadays something happens. Now, it used to be that if you wanted to have a demonstration you'd call a meeting, a coalition would get together, people would argue about what can go into the leaflet about what the demands were going to be and these long, irritating process. But somehow there was some measure of accountability there. Now somebody just posts something on Facebook and everybody shows up, and nobody's in charge, and nobody's responsible for anything. When it's over it just sort of dissipates. In a way that's kind of the story of the Occupy Movement which could have been so much more than what it was. The people doing it not only did not believe in organization, I don't think they really had a concept of what organization was or why it was necessary. I'm not as down on anarchists as I used to be. (laughs) I appreciate a lot of things about them. When I was coming up, the anarchists were the people who stood on the edge of crowds in Sprawl Plaza during a rally and say... "What about the cronstadt?!" (yelling) Nobody knew what the cronstadt was or what they were talking about. It sure came off like they'd spent too much time with their noses in a book in Cafe Mediterranean. I think a lot of young people relate to it because they look at what's happened to Socialist regimes, haven't turned out very well. And they think, well this isn't working, we need to try something else. We need to try to be revolutionaries about sort of falling into these old discredits and traps. Well, I think the problem is that nobody had really sat down and done a thorough analysis of why those regimes turned out the way they did. I don't know either. For a long time, I think those of us in The League, we looked to China kind of as kind of a model. Partly because the role that China

had played in opposing the whole retrograde direction of the Soviet Union went in. Also I think because Mao said stuff about the whole period of the anti-Japanese war. He said stuff that was really really small I think for anybody who wants to do what we now referred to as coalition politics. Of course for people in the Asian movement especially in Chinatown, it was important because it was apart of a mass struggle in this country. The stranglehold that the [inaudible] had over American Chinatowns. The way they imposed the oppression they imposed upon the working people in the Chinese community. When things went haywire in China, I went there in '79 and that was the first inkling I got that maybe things weren't so hunky-dory in the cultural revolution. I met some of my in-laws who are now in the United States because they came from a village where the men had been sending money home from the United States to try to keep the village from starving every time there was a famine. They were considered privileged and basically living off, depending on foreign stuff. They were vulnerable to attacks from the Red Guards who wanted China to be independent. A lot of bad

stuff happened. I think there was a real breakdown in leadership and accountability. You just had people running around doing whatever they felt like doing. Paying off personal grudges and justifying it with a lot of political rhetoric.

**EVA:** In China?

**PETER:** In China, yeah. The reaction against it was the people just rejected that rhetoric all together even the parts that were meaningful. I think in terms of what really finished of The League, I wouldn't downplay the significance that the Tiananmen Massacre had. I was actually really really proud of they way we handled that in Unity. I think everybody on the left that thought we were suck-ups to China was startled because we said this was wrong. PLA is supposed to be there to defend and serve the people of China, not to shoot them down. The people who were responsible for this needed to be called to account. I thought that was spot on, I thought it was great. But it didn't happen. I wasn't gonna happen because we called on it to happen. I think a lot of people just lost faith with that. I look at China and I don't see a whole lot there that I can identify with really politically.

Looks to me like the United States in the eighteen seventies when the robber barons were running amuck and the railroads were robbing people blind. That kind of take no prisoners entrepreneurship. I think sooner or later there's probably going to be a big upheaval there, I don't know when it'll happen. Anyway.

**EVA:** Maybe when it happens here too.

**PETER:** Yeah. That too.

**EVA:** So, any last words?

**PETER:** No, I talk to much anyhow. I think you know in terms of what I'd say to the young folk, one of things I'm kind of gratified about is that both my kids are pretty political. Not in quite the same way that I was. They're going up in a very different environment. One of them is a high school teacher at Oakland High. He really understand what his students are going through. He's supportive, he helps them, gives them guidance. His younger brother is working for a non-profit that basically takes young people that have gotten into the criminal justice system and tries to get them hooked up in employment. It's all about saving the young folks. I think that's exactly what they should be doing. I'm glad they get paid to do it too! Cause I don't have to worry about them quite so much. I think it's funny, when we went up to Portland Faye took a job as a special ed. teacher which is a huge thing. Demanding work. She didn't have any free time on the weekends either, anymore than she did in The League. I tell her... "This is your political work because these kids need your help and if you don't help them nobody is going to do it. Me, I'll just go running in jobs at Justice meetings. Anyway, yeah. People just need to find their own way and their own method, but I hope they won't completely disregard some of that ostensibly irrelevant theory that guided us at least early on. I think that stuff is still very relevant, very

useful. People don't understand Lenin that well I don't think. I could go on into a whole twenty minute rap about why he wrote what he did and what has to be done and has to do

with it. It's put between parliamentary socialists and the people who are just totally fixated on workplace organizing. Just try to look for a way to get reconcile for the contradiction there. I think that was the most important thing about what is to be done. But always gets discussed in terms of; Oh regimentation and democratic centralism and blah blah blah. The real essence of what he was doing doesn't get discussed. I tried to bring some of that stuff up in the papers I wrote for the Congress but I put a lot of effort into them. I really thought that if I phrased everything just right, put all my heart and soul into it that I might be able to have some sort of impact. What I got was... "Oh, very nice Peter but people read it and they said so what". That is the only way I had to struggle anyway. I wasn't on the central committee, I'd never been in leadership. I wasn't suited for it. I probably was way too emotionally involved in what was going on, but what do I do? I write. I wrote these splendid documents that just wound up going into the shredder. And that was that. I actually, a few copies survived, and I reread them recently and thought oh this is pretty good stuff but it was like whistling in the dark. I think if it has any value for me now, it kind of sums up thirteen years in my life, everything I had learned. In like to think the lessons are still there, they're still valuable.

**EVA:** Okay, well I'd like to thank you very much for sharing your story with me over the course of two days.