



Thoughts on 'Scholar*Activist'

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Abstract

This essay discusses the concept of “working class intellectual” as outlined by Ernest Thompson, a black union leader and community organizer. Thompson’s guidance on urbanism is described, highlighting his ecological orientation, commitment to being programmatic and use of coalition.

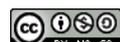
Keywords

Ernest Thompson, Congress of Industrial Organizations, Orange NJ, United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), Community Research Group

My father, Ernest Thompson, was a labor and community organizer. He was part of the movement that built the great industrial unions in the United States in the 1930s and 40s. He was the first black paid organizer for his union, the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America, and headed its Fair Employment Practices Committee. In 1970, shortly before his passing, I asked him if he thought I should drop out of college and go work in a factory to organize, a popular idea among young radicals of my generation.

After reflecting, he shared how important researchers had always been to his work as an organizer. ‘Organizers need working class intellectuals to give them the facts. When I went into negotiations with General Electric, I’d be armed with the facts. The company would try to lie – they didn’t have money for raises – but we knew about the profits they’d reported and could cut that off at the pass.’

He never said – and I only realized it decades later – that he’d watched me organize and therefore knew I had zero talent in that direction. He’d also watched me do research and believed I had a gift for it. When he said, ‘It will help if you do that,’ it affirmed my talent and set me on the path I’m on today.



It took a while before I found myself leading the Community Research Group, in exactly the position he described. The slogan that we adopted for our team was, ‘Facts people need, publications they can use.’ We were closely connected to many people’s movements. I was always very proud when a finding of ours helped organizers win a grant or develop a program.

Here I’d like to reflect on being a ‘working class intellectual,’ the identity I’ve held since that 1970 conversation. My dad was firmly rooted in the class struggle. His union – UE – was and is a leader of workers in their struggles with the owners of the means of production.¹ I grew up on Fred Wright cartoons which always pointed out the absurdity of the greed of the fat cats and underscored the suffering of the workers.² Fred Wright did books for children and those were part of my early reading. My father was also convinced that the struggle for liberation of black people had to be led by the black working class, not the middle class or the bourgeoisie. This is a distinct perspective which drove all of his work and which he described in detail in his book, *Homeboy Came to Orange: A Story of People’s Power*.³ A ‘working class intellectual’ was a particular category in his thinking: it applied to people who did intellectual work but understood themselves to be part of the working class.

I am dedicated to working class and liberation struggles, but I have never seen them as the struggles of others. I work for a living and if I lost my job, I’d soon lose my house, my car and everything else I have. I don’t own any means of production. I have been proud to be a member of a union, the Professional Employees Federation, and very grateful for their help when I was faced with my employer’s version of speed-up. And I know myself to be affected by all aspects of the oppression of black people. These are indelibly imprinted in my mind and body. I grew up in and live in a ghetto community. When I go to another ghetto community, I know myself to be at home.

I say this to say that the term “scholar-activist” is a term I never applied to myself or my work. For me, it signals an apartness from oppression that clashes with my experience. McCarthyism happened to me. Deindustrialization happened to me. Abandonment and destruction of many ghetto neighborhoods happened to me.

This is not to say that *every* horror visited on people in the path of ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ as David Harvey so aptly put it, also happened to me. But the shredding of the networks that had formed me did happen to me and I live with the consequences. Why wouldn’t I yell and scream about the injustice of that?

My father’s work has two other specific influences on my work as an urbanist. First, he understood the many systems that make up the city and was able to use that understanding in a programmatic fashion. The organizers that built the industrial unions were programmatic in their orientation. They organized successfully because they built their campaigns on the needs of the working people, such as the need for a 40-hour work week and workplace safety.

¹ United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, *Them and Us Unionism*, 2020.

² Fred Wright, *So Long, Partner*, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, 2021

³ Ernest Thompson and Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Homeboy Came to Orange: A Story of People’s Power*, New Village Press, Third Edition, 2018.

New Day Platform

- I. REDEVELOPMENT AND RELOCATION
 1. The partial redevelopment plan now under consideration must be implemented to include other sections of the City in order to increase ratables and improve the character of the city.
 2. Study future water needs based on the projected plans.
 3. A Citizens Committee be set up to work side by side with the City Commissioners to bring in private housing capital and industry.
 4. Seriously examine the need to replace the ancient City Hall.
- II. UNEMPLOYMENT
 1. Problems resulting from the current recession and shops leaving our City must be vigorously met by the City officials.
 2. Unemployment Compensation should be extended and increased immediately as was done in the state of New York.
 3. Federal taxes should be immediately reduced to increase the purchasing power of consumers and relief to business.
 4. Maximum distribution of federal surplus food supplies to the unemployed and others in need.
 5. The maximum use of local labor forces in the Redevelopment program and other government projects should be mandatory.
 6. The efficiency of the Welfare Department and its service to the people should be studied for maximum benefits to be obtained.
- III. FREEWAY
 1. It should be the policy of the City Government, which is not now the case, to provide all aid and assistance in relocation of the displaced families.
 2. An official city committee should be established whose duties it shall be to provide relocation and assistance.
 3. Depress the Freeway to protect the properties and beauty of the City.
- VI. SCHOOL SYSTEM
 1. Discriminatory school lines still in existence in Orange and all other forms of discrimination in the school system should be wiped out.
 2. Federal funds should be sought for the purpose of improvement of the physical plants.
 3. Adequate pay for teachers and other city employees.
 4. Strengthen the school system by amending the charter to permit an elected Board of Education.
- V. CIVIL RIGHTS
 1. The City of Orange should have a functioning Civil Rights Committee.
- VI. RECREATION AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY
 1. Develop and implement a year-round recreational program thru-out the City.
 2. Establish a special division in the Police Department manned by trained personnel to develop a program to prevent and manage Juvenile Delinquency.
- VII. REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT
 1. The future of Orange is contingent upon achieving these objectives through representative government made up of Negroes and Whites.

Figure 1

The New Day Platform, developed by Ernest Thompson in 1958.

In turning to community organizing, Ernie listened carefully to the issues people were raising. He found that there were complaints in many systems of the city, from the water system to the educational system. He worked with community leaders to develop an initial platform called “The New Day” Platform (Figure 1). This comprehensive 1958 look at the city was not only useful then but also named problems that, unresolved, would hang over the city when I joined the organizing there in 2007.

Second, in his own reflection on his life’s experiences, Ernie argued that organizing the industrial unions was possible because of coalition, alliances among organizations that shared common goals. Similarly, in his work in organizing in Orange, NJ, he found that it was only possible for the minority black community to win citywide struggles when they entered into coalitions. These empirical tests of coalition convinced him that it was the way forward. In the current crises, we can think of everyone in the world as those with whom we share a common interest. Very large coalitions are possible and necessary as we find our way forward.

As the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, the question of “What next?” looms large. I take three lessons from my father. The first is that I think it is important that each individual locate themselves in the struggle – not on behalf of someone else but on behalf of themselves. The second is that an ecological perspective is the only perspective that will orient us to the solutions to the profound crises we face. The third lesson is that of coalition. I believe the role of the working-class intellectual is to support all three of these areas of work: helping each of us get located in the struggle, translating the ecological perspective into programs and teaching people tools for building the vast coalitions that can turn human societies toward a just and sustainable future.

About the author

Mindy Fulliove is a board-certified psychiatrist who explores the ties between environment and mental health. She received her bachelor’s degree from Bryan Mawr College and her MS and MD degrees from Columbia University. Dedicated to the psychology of place, Mindy’s research started in 1986 when she linked the AIDS epidemic with place of residence and she continues to focus on the health problems caused by inequality. For the past 30 years, Mindy has been investigating how broken connections between different sections of cities harm public health and explores ways to reconnect them. Mindy has published numerous articles and six books including “Urban Alchemy: Restoring Joy in America’s Sorted-Out Cities,” “Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It,” and “House of Joshua: Meditations on Family and Place.” She has received many awards, including inclusion in many “Best Doctors” and two honorary doctorates (Chatham College, 1999, and Bank Street College of Education, 2002).