

THE NEXT AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By Rich Feldman

This classic by James Boggs was written in 1963. That same year Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* were published, and Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the first version of his "I Have a Dream" speech in Detroit.

In 1963 I was fourteen. I can remember my older brother reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the book that helped create the recognition that our Earth was in peril. And I will never forget watching the children of Birmingham, Alabama, being hosed by Bull Conner and attacked by his dogs, on a black and white TV in my parents' bedroom. These events of the early 60s provided the foundation upon which I have lived my life for the last 45 years.

I had graduated from college and was a radical working in the auto plant before I read this book. By then I had had enough political experience to realize that radicals needed to rethink long-held ideas about what it meant to make a revolution and to understand that James Boggs had already done this rethinking. He understood that, in the middle of the 20th century, we were entering a new epoch in human history. He spoke not only to radicals and Marxists, but to the average worker, asking everyone to understand that movements develop contradictions and do not last forever. Like the Labor Movement of the 1930s, they come to an end and new movements, like the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, emerge, and also come to an end. The past does not return and the phrase "History repeats itself" or "We are in a cycle" is just not dialectical thinking.

He believed in a nation of citizens, not just of workers or consumers or people of different identities of race, class, or gender. And he insisted that the continuing and evolving struggle over the centuries and millennia was to keep expanding our humanity and our capacity to love one another and to relate to one another as we would want others to relate to us.

In 1967, I entered the University of Michigan and, within a few months, had become involved with Students for McCarthy and traveled with his National Staff in the primaries. I believed that we could end the war through working within the system and electoral politics. But after participating in the streets at the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago, I became an SDS activist, traveled to Woodstock and, by 1970, had committed myself to the anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, socialist and communist revolutionary movement in the U.S.

So I moved to Detroit with more than thirty other student activists to continue the tradition of college-educated activists going into the plants and cities to organize workers. Driven primarily by my anger towards the American military machine, the brutalization and murders of black liberation fighters, and the injustice and discrimination in our society, I was ready to make a Marxist style, worker-led revolution.

I had no basis for understanding the difference between rebellion and revolution. My only image of revolution was faceless masses taking power in Russia or China. So when I was hired into a Ford Assembly plant in the western suburbs of Detroit, I helped organize a rank and file newsletter with other activists. We initiated walk-outs over health and safety issues and fought sexist and racist discrimination in the plant. To us, being a revolutionist meant being as militant as possible in exposing and protesting against the corruption of the union and the company.

During this time I heard James Boggs speak in Detroit. His speech was entitled "Beyond Militancy." In it he told my generation not to romanticize militancy, protests, and mass mobilizations. He said these were not enough. Being a revolutionist, he said, meant developing and sharing a vision of another more human way to live together, and collective societal gains, not just victories in struggles over individual grievances.

During the next 35 years, as Detroiters and suburbanites drove to their jobs in the suburbs, and factories that once produced steel, rubber, appliances, textiles, and cars kept laying off workers and closing, I could easily see that a way of life was coming to an end. The connection between their community lives and their work place lives that workers enjoyed in pre-World War II years no longer existed. Workers in the plant had become individualists, and there was little or no understanding of solidarity, or of the relationship between the work place and the community.

By the mid-1980s, Jimmy's ideas, emphasizing the need to engage in a struggle against the capitalist values of selfishness, me-first-ism and consumerism, had replaced my youthful romantic views of solidarity and workers united to fight the system. Yet, most workers and union activists refused to see how damaged and individualistic we had all become - because we had internalized the values of capitalism. For example, an entire shift at my plant was laid off; yet we were still working ten hours a day. When I organized a rally against the overtime, fewer than five people joined me. As I watched so many Detroiters lose their jobs and crack and violence take over the lives of so many young people, I also witnessed the silence of unions and of my fellow workers.

It had become clear to me that workers were not “the” social force to be mobilized to create a new way of life. At the same time, there were still growing numbers of individuals in the plant who, like me, were hungry for purpose, meaning and dignity in our family lives, as parents and as spouses. We were bound together by a hunger for self-respect, for the respect of our children and our spouses, and by a hunger for meaning.

Yet most radicals continue to think as I did when I first entered the plant as a young radical. They continue to romanticize the unions of the 1930s. They still talk about 19th and early 20th century ideas of “worker’s power” and still dream of re-energizing the union movement of the 1930s. They still have the illusion that, through militant struggles and solidarity, the middle class benefits of the “American Century” can be maintained. But as Americans experience the devastation created by deindustrialization and globalization, the outsourcing of jobs, and the planetary environmental crisis, we have the opportunity and are challenged to struggle for a new vision based upon defining the good life in terms of quality of life and useful Work rather than in terms of a higher standard of living.

For those of us seeking to understand this new way of thinking about the good life, I recommend reading this little book. Re-reading and discussing it with others has helped me understand the U.S. welfare-warfare state and the bankruptcy of social democracy and radical concepts of socialism.

In 1986, after 15 years in the plant, I began to make plans to leave. (That never happened). Because I wanted to remember my years in the paint and trim shops of the Ford Michigan Truck plant and also because I wanted to thank my co-workers for all they had taught me, I co-edited the book *End of the Line: Autoworkers and the American Dream*. I dedicated the book to a dear friend who committed suicide in the plant. He hung himself because of personal issues and the pressures of work.

By the 1980s the American Dream had already turned into a nightmare in Detroit. Our experience then is now the national reality. Today headlines across the country scream of the laid-off worker who killed fourteen people in Binghamton, N.Y. and the unemployed worker who committed suicide after killing his family in California.

What we need to recognize is that there will be no recovery. There will be no return to the economic dreams and higher standard of living of the past. Wall Street is bankrupt and so is Industrial America. Neither national health care, nor massive education funding, nor reform can bring back the old American dream. No concepts or packages of economic redistribution can resolve the economic, political and spiritual crisis facing our nation.

In 2009, local and national marches and demonstrations are being organized based upon slogans like "The unions built the middle class," "Bring back the American Dream," "Buy American," "If you buy it here, build it here," and "We have a right to the American Dream and to fight for the Middle Class life style."

The American economic dream is dead; the middle class economic security which existed because of the U.S. Empire is over. From 1945 to the end of the 20th century we traded our souls and our dignity for the Almighty Dollar. We defined ourselves as consumers.

As I look back over my experiences in the plant, I will always remember the faces and the conversations of people who said clearly that life was more (or should be more) than our jobs, our things. It was about family, community, our children, our relationships. The children of millions of workers campaigned for Obama because they hungered for change. As so many of my fellow workers said in 1988, and James Boggs understood in 1963, "We had reached the end of the line."

A search for new meanings of quality and security is now going on. The challenge is to dream an American Dream that our children can build on. For us, and them, to have hope in the future, we need more than "quality education" and material security. To remake the American Dream we need to build upon life-affirming principles of community and the public good.

In trying to create a new society we can draw upon the legacy of the dreamers and builders of the past. Just as the descendants of slaves and sharecroppers and of immigrants, coal miners and farmers wrested dignity out of the assembly line, so today, as Berlin Scott said in *End of the Line*, "The solutions will have to come from ordinary people getting together. We have to work it out among ourselves and stop pretending we're so ignorant."

In 1963 James Boggs asked the question: What does it mean to be socially responsible? Today, we are on the edge of a cliff. The view of what's behind and what's ahead is

vivid. Community or chaos. Middle class economic dreams are over. Achieving security and quality of life based upon our relationships and our commitment to creating community is our mission.

This is an opportunity for activists, radicals and revolutionists to face the challenge of this historic moment. We should no longer be fighting for full employment. We should be imagining and creating new forms of Work that provide for our Needs rather than our Wants and reaffirm our connection with the Earth. A job ain't the answer. We need Work that creates community and dignity. And we need an economy that no longer separates the two.

The next American Revolution will involve a two-sided transformation of both ourselves and our institutions. In the spirit of that revolution I offer some questions and visions. I hope that these questions will encourage conversations about the principles we need to guide us in creating a new American dream. And I hope these visions of a future economy will inspire even more visioning and eventually the realization of an economy that provides sufficient goods and services to satisfy the basic needs of our communities, which are not only material. Meanwhile, these questions can help us get at the essence of everything written by James Boggs, which is all about the question, "What does it mean to be human?"

QUESTIONS

How does an economy based upon social values differ from one based upon exchange values?

How do we create a different relationship between local, regional, national and global economics?

How can we live simply so others can simply live?

What will it mean for human beings to define ourselves as citizens rather than as only producers or consumers?

What is the difference between a higher standard of living and a new quality of life?

How will schools educate young people to become members of their communities rather than educate them to become successful and leave their communities?

What is the difference between an economy based upon local sustainability and one based upon “Buy American?”

VISIONS

Food Security, Food production and Local markets:

Rather than shipping food thousands of miles across our country and across continents and oceans, we could increase local and regional food production. All across the country and in most urban centers, especially in places like Detroit, people are establishing community-based gardens, urban farms and greenhouses that produce for community-owned and worker-owned grocery stores and co-ops that stock their shelves with locally grown food -- so that our children eat healthy food, connect with the Earth, and engage in nurturing and caring activities that create self-respect and respect for Nature.

People are developing local fish farms, raising fish for sale to restaurants as well as for sale in local grocery or fish stores. Cities are changing ordinances so that chickens can be raised in backyards, and so that we are not dependent upon mass-produced, chemically-induced poultry that is flash frozen and shipped from warehouse to warehouse.

Every elementary, middle and high school can grow and produce its own food, for use in its own cafeterias.

Every office building, workplace and housing area can have its own greenhouses and canning co-ops.

Thousands upon thousands of work opportunities could be created by commitment to local food production and distribution, which also ensures greater food security.

We can design and produce clothing and shoes locally, rather than buying goods produced by child labor in distant sweatshops.

Cities, Suburbs: Where will we live?

In upstate New York’s older cities, in Iowa’s small towns, in de-populated textile towns in the northeast or south, and abandoned lumber and farming communities in the west and midwest, we now have the opportunity to re-imagine our cities and towns.

Leaving behind the strip malls, we can create communities with accessible housing, stores, libraries, internet cafes, parks and community centers that allow all citizens to live full lives. Folks with disabilities would be part of the community. Older folks would no longer be isolated in senior citizen homes, depriving communities not only of their wisdom but of the intergenerational relationships which have enabled human beings to survive and evolve over the millennia. Schools will be both institutions of learning and centers for community building. As we say in Detroit, the time has come to put the neighbor back in the 'hood. Every school will be a peace zone because of the public presence of the community, not because of the police, in the halls or on the street.

New forms of transportation:

The mantra of the 21st century could be green jobs and green transportation. Some of General Motors' closed factories could begin building green buses and light rail for regions across our country.

Auto plants could become dis-assembly plants where vehicles are dis-assembled and parts are reused and recycled instead of discarded.

We could end the wasteful production of military equipment and armaments and begin producing vehicles for new forms of mass transit for regional economic needs.

Instead of using airplanes to travel less than 500 miles, we could create the infrastructure for rail and buses. Sometimes it may be as fast and sometimes it may take a little longer. Maybe it is time to slow down.

Recycling:

We could gather every abandoned tire and create small factories where these tires are turned into floor mats and foundations for parks.

We could train an army of young people to properly insulate our homes in the north and use waste and compost to create heat where possible.

We could replace the society where every house on every block has a washer/dryer, lawnmower, and lawn edger with community sharing of these appliances, thus reducing our waste of resources of energy and increasing our cooperation and sense of community.

Health Care and Community Clinics:

We could educate and train one million community nurses to provide preventive health care and education in local community health clinics. Elders can share their knowledge of traditional remedies, while urban gardeners supply medicinal herbs grown on what were once trash-covered, vermin-attracting and, hence, health-threatening vacant lots.

Youth, Arts, Media:

Thousands upon thousands of young people can be painting murals, creating music, and writing poetry. Every school and community center would house media labs so children can meet each other from across the globe, sharing each other's words, music and visions. Young people would mentor younger people as technology advances. Opportunities would exist for youth interested in creating local music labels, entertainment venues. There would be studios and social gathering places for a new generation of artists defining citizenship in their own genre.

Work, not Jobs:

Instead of leaving it up to corporations to define the economy, unions and union members would assume the responsibility for deciding and creating what they view as Work in the community; creating a new concept of solidarity that is committed to the producing, buying, selling and consuming of goods in a locally sustainable world.

Thus, Work would be not just Jobs, or hours spent for a paycheck, but the socially necessary Work of repairing our cities, our houses, conserving or regaining our health, creating new forms of transportation, initiating new concepts of local healthy agriculture and food distribution, and new relationships between school and the community, with an increased emphasis on art and culture.

Education as Community:

Redefining education from top down factory-model schools of the 19th and 20th centuries has been a personal journey for me. I now travel to Chicago for the annual Disability Pride Parade and work for a new paradigm in education based upon inclusion and citizenship. My son, Micah, has a cognitive impairment or intellectual disability (formerly called 'mental retardation'). Forty years ago he would not have been accepted in public schools. But through my wife Janice's creativity and tenacious

commitment to our family and education and Micah's journey, we are re-imagining and redefining the purpose of education. What does it mean to be a student, to get a "good education"? Micah speaks around the country about how inclusion has benefited, not only him, but other students. My daughter, Emma, is gay and working on issues related to immigration and education. The movements of the 21st century have allowed both of my children to struggle to strive to reach their potential as human beings. A poster in our house reads: A Community that excludes even one of its members is no community at all!

James Boggs, in 1963, captured the contradictions that can no longer be ignored. Whether you work in industry, health care, education, services, entertainment, technology, whether you live in our cities, our suburbs, small towns or on the prairies of our country, you and I have the opportunity to create a 21st century movement that, basing itself upon the principles of local sustainable economies and participatory democracy, creates local and global citizens.

Jimmy, of course, put it best: "The coming struggle," he said, "is a political struggle to take political power out of the hands of the few and put it into the hands of the many. But in order to get this power into the hands of the many, it will be necessary for the many not only to fight the powerful few but to fight and clash among themselves as well."

The urgency of now and the patience of the long haul is our rhythm.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

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