"Award for Lifetime Contribution to Social Justice for Working People"
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Fred Hirsch
<fredhirsch@cruzio.com>  

Thank you for this award and for the opportunity to be here among people who dedicate energy, study, and action to the working class.

These are my old stomping grounds. My first union meeting was in Plumbers’ Local 457 in Mineola. My first apprentice job was for Arrow Plumbing in Great Neck. Both places are less than an hour away. That was over 61 years ago. I’ve come geographic full circle.

This award embarrasses me. Many others are much more deserving of it - folks right here in this room. The best I can guess is that the award is for getting into the working class struggle as a young man, making some difference, and sticking with it for over three generations - doing what Mississippi Freedom Movement hero, Fanny Lou Hamer, described as “keepin’ on, keepin’ on.”

I take this award as recognition for doing my bit in the work of untold thousands of activists who consciously drive the organizations of our working class to fight for, not just better wages, benefits and working conditions, but toward a future of social and economic justice, with peace in the world, class wide and international solidarity and equality, with the human dignity we all deserve.

I’ll take this award home to my brothers and sisters in Local 393. They have had to put up with me at work on the job for decades and in more than 600 union meetings, chairing the Local Union Executive Board, reporting on conventions and doing my best to lure them to work side by side in the political action that can make change. I am closer
to them than to any other group in the world. It has been a fifty-four year long romance with many ups and downs and I love them dearly – some more than others.

Most of you understand that labor-political activists have principles; they don’t seek awards. The rewards are in touching the lives of the millions of rank-and-file working women and men like ourselves who have in their hands and in their heads the collective power to change the world. They are the men and women who do the work and care for our families. They – we all- need to make the world a better and safer place. We’ve all met thousands of us, on the job, at lunch and coffee breaks, on marches, and in our neighborhoods. We meet us at demonstrations, phoning in phone banks and knocking on the doors, precinct by precinct. We sometimes meet on scaffolds, on roofs, in ditches, during concrete pours and on the shop and factory floors. We clerk behind counters, drive trucks and taxi cabs. We mine in the mines, teach in the schools and work in the labs that make pharmaceuticals. We mow the lawns, make the hotel and hospital beds, scrub public floors, shovel the dirt, shoulder the hods, connect all the pipes and pull all the wires that turn on the lights.

They call some of us professionals; that cuts us off from the rest. They divide us by nation, by station, gender, religion and race while they pile in the profits at an ever-quickening pace. We do the work in airplanes, mills, ships, offices, farms, factories and we work on the trains. We work with our hands and we work with our brains. We work hard for our families. We play by the rules, but it’s time long past due for us to be making those rules.
We can be one in that number passing out leaflets or getting folks to sign, in meetings, meetings, meetings, and walking the picket line. I’ve been one in that number marching for workers rights through tear gas in the streets of Bogota. I’ve wept as one in that number side by side with Salvadoran families grieving at their community’s massacre site. I’ve thrilled to be truly one in a million among Cubans hailing victory over capitalism in Havana’s Revolution Square. I’ve felt a tingling rush in my soul as one in that number, in a massive Mexico City May Day march with my own upraised left fist one in the number of tens of thousands thrust upward and bold.

Yes, “one in that number”! When that’s all we can be, then that’s what we have to try to be. Our power is in our numbers – our power to produce – our power to fuel the economy – our power to lock it down – we have the power to not produce! We have the power to say no to white racism, to say no to wars and to demand an end to the militarization of foreign policy. When each of us is one in that number we can win our wants and needs because we are the working class and we can take hold and we can lead.

But to get it right we have to really organize. We have to do the drudgework, one on one, on the job, at the door, and on the telephone. We have to go to all the meetings with a purpose and make each meeting count. We need to use the voice of our unions to articulate, not just our members’, but our people’s needs. Our one single voice is hardly heard, but when it's backed by the voices, strength and the will of our brothers and sisters, our sounds have no bounds. We have to build coalitions and make them strong, build a movement that puts millions in the streets. And when millions of class-conscious workers march, they can’t be wrong.
Here's some of my history. I was a neighborhood kid who got to sit on a porch with William Z. Foster when he was resting from a coronary crisis. He told me stories that you can read in his book “Pages from a Worker’s Life.” Foster led the drive to organize the Packinghouse Workers and then the Steel Workers. When I met him he headed up the Communist Party in the late forties. He taught me, “the organized working class can do anything.”

In our community, we hosted one of the greatest men of the twentieth century, Paul Robeson. Sitting at his feet and breaking bread with him I sensed, felt and learned his fierce passion against the tyranny of white racism and U.S. imperialism. The image of his words is a clenched fist in my mind’s eye: “Never give up.” In 1949 he did a concert defying and confronting fascist mobs in Peekskill, New York (88 miles from here). I was privileged to be one in that number of 1500 who stood between the racist riot mob and Robeson’s audience. His simple words to me, “Never give up!” reverberated louder in my mind than the amplified songs of the concert.

My seventh grade teacher, Jerry Helmuth, taught about the American revolution with a class project dramatizing the life of Thomas Paine. We performed it for the entire school. I played Paine. His words lodged in the folds of my brain. Today, in a relentless recession, with Corporate America assaulting unions, with the military industrial complex entrenched in Washington, with over 700 U.S. military bases arming the global reach of empire, and with nuclear powers drawing swords over Ukraine, Tom Paine’s words are as meaningful, perhaps more so, as they were at Valley Forge in 1776. I quote: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country. But he who stands it now
deserves the love and thanks of men and women. Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered!”

In more modern times, too, 53 years ago we heard President Dwight Eisenhower words warning: “We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence...by the military-industrial complex... the disastrous rise of misplaced power…”

Today, once again, in these times that try the souls of the working class we have to find and take effective action. WE HAVE TO USE THE MEGAPHONE OF OUR UNIONS AND THUNDER OUR VOICES TO SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER, TO SPEAK TRUTH TO THE COMPLEX OF MILITARY, INDUSTRIAL, AND CORPORATE POWER AND ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE!

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Your comments and criticism are welcome. <fredhirsch@cruzio.com>