

Review of *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*, Stephen L. Fisher, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). Published in *The Workbook*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter 1993), pp. 180-182. Copyright 1993.

At a time when the Right is finding a foothold in rural communities throughout the West, activists would do well to review recent organizing efforts in central Appalachia, where Protestant fundamentalism is widespread and patriotism legendary -- yet where both faith and flag have been appropriated by progressive working people's movements (vividly illustrated by the cover photograph of flag-waving coal miners occupying Pittston's Moss Preparation Plant during a strike). Although much is singular about the history and culture of social movements in the central Appalachian coalfields, the experience there contains lessons for organizers in rural and resource-extraction regions throughout the U.S., especially in the Southwest, Pacific Northwest, and Northern Rockies.

There's no better place to start than *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, a collection of 15 studies of organizing efforts during the 1970s and 80s, framed by introductory and concluding essays by political scientist and activist Stephen Fisher of Emory & Henry College, published in Temple University Press's valuable series on community organizing. Contributors include both academics and activists, many of whom have worked together for years in various movements as well as meeting in an annual Appalachian Studies Conference (analyzed in an essay by scholars Alan Banks, Dwight Billings, and Karen Tice). The writers relate not only victories, but frankly confront organizational mistakes and weaknesses, and give several examples of groups formulating new and successful strategies. The essays reflect a collective effort to rethink the strategies and tactics of grassroots organizing in light of experience since 1960, evaluating theories and perspectives of class, race, gender, region, and "the new populism."

As Appalachia was "rediscovered" by the national media and the federal government in the 1960s, activists attempted to turn the national attention and War on Poverty programs into a regional social movement for social justice. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had imparted a militant (if often undemocratic) historical legacy of struggle, and coalfield communities were among the first to respond. Major victories most often came in the form of single-issue reforms and legislation associated with the coal industry: the Black Lung Association won recognition of coal miner's

pneumoconiosis as a compensable disease, the rank-and-file Miners for Democracy reformed the UMWA, disasters and strikes forced passage of the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act in 1969, and a long campaign passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act in 1977.

Several essays in *Fighting Back* assess organizing related to coal issues. Bennett Judkins traces the battles of the Black Lung Association (BLA), which inspired cotton mill workers to form the Carolina Brown Lung Association, and asbestos workers to found the White Lung Association -- the core of a new occupational health movement. Richard Couto recounts the lessons learned in the UMWA strikes against A.T. Massey Coal in 1984-85 and Pittston Coal in 1989-90, and discusses strikes as "free spaces" (Sara Evans and Harry Boyte's term) in which miners realize their power and democratic potential. Jim Sessions (director of the Commission on Religion in Appalachia) and Fran Ansley write a deeply moving account of the union and community take-over of Pittston's Moss Preparation Plant in the mountains of southwestern Virginia in 1989 -- consciously modeled on the nonviolent direct action of the civil rights movement and the occupation of the Fisher Body Plant in Flint, Michigan by auto workers in 1937. During the Carter administration, women used the sympathetic climate to push for non-traditional jobs. Chris Weiss describes three women's advocacy organizations formed during this window of political opportunity: the Coal Employment Project, the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition (highway construction jobs) and Women and Employment (building trades in West Virginia).

After the Reagan administration took office in 1981, federal agencies were no longer potential allies of the grassroots, and community organizations were forced to turn to the state level to resolve problems from surface mining regulation to funding for human services. Except for West Virginia, the Appalachian regions are the "backyards" of their states; organizations in the mountains of Kentucky Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina would have to build statewide structures or develop alliances with groups in other parts of their states. Organizer Joe Szakos describes how the single-issue Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition, based in the eastern coalfields, became the statewide, multi-issue Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC), and won a state constitutional amendment campaign in 1988, culminating twenty-five years of work against the notorious "broad form deed." Activist Bill Allen relates a parallel development in Save Our Cumberland Mountains, SOCM (pronounced "sock'em"), in eastern Tennessee. Started

as a local single-issue organization to ban strip-mining, SOCM survived a leadership crisis and debate about internal democracy to develop a representative chapter structure for several counties in the eastern part of the state.

In a similar vein, Hal Hamilton and Ellen Ryan trace the efforts of the Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky as it grappled with its position in the farm movement of the 1980s. Working in regions largely ignored by such major national community organizing networks as ACORN, Citizen Action, and the Industrial Areas Foundation, groups like KFTC and SOCM had to seek out training from IAF, the Midwest Academy, and the National Training and Information Center to acquire a more disciplined approach to strategic planning, financing, and staff and organizational development. In a critical essay, Don Manning-Miller challenges predominantly white organizations in Appalachia to undertake training, develop leadership, and formulate systematic programs to overcome racism -- essential to constructing statewide multiracial organizations and coalitions.

Myles Horton's Highlander Center has played a key role in the Southern Appalachians since the mid-1960s, bringing together grassroots activists from the region and counterparts from the wider South. Historian John M. Glen explores Highlander's frustrating quest for an issue or approach that would trigger an Appalachian social movement comparable to the labor movement of the 1930s or the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although Highlander helped build a vital network of activists, no overall regional movement emerged, nor did leaders comparable to John L. Lewis or Martin Luther King, Jr. Highlander's long-time cultural workers Guy and Candie Carawan describe how they integrated music, dancing and group singing into community struggles, nurturing a rich tradition of cultural resistance along with regional musicians and song-writers, Appalshop (the energetic and creative film, theater, and recording center), and the Foxfire Project.

In his concluding essay, Fisher assesses the contribution of the "new populist" theorists (and by extension their cousins the "communitarians") to the strategy and tactics of social struggles. Emphasizing that democratic values and leadership skills must be nurtured in local communities, the neo-populists maintain that traditional values and institutions -- family, religion, self-help groups, neighborhood organizations -- can be the basis of a progressive political movement. Fisher agrees the Appalachian experience

confirms much of this outlook, but argues that the neo-populist's "militant localism" often ignores the connections that link grassroots work to national and international politics. He calls for a new critical discourse and practice to connect community struggles to their national and global contexts. Fisher includes an excellent bibliography and directory of organizations for anyone who wants to read more and make contacts.

"There is a tendency to underestimate the importance of cultural work, to feel that music and poetry, dance and humor, will naturally be a part of community life and attempts to challenge oppression or inequality. In our experience, this is not the case. The seeds for cultural expression are there, but cultivating and nurturing these seeds are also necessary. Not only is it important for individuals to seek out and encourage the richness of cultural expression; there have to be organizations and institutions that recognize and support this work."

--Guy and Candie Carawan, "Sowing on the Mountain: Nurturing Cultural Roots and Creativity for Community Change,"
in *Fighting Back in Appalachia*

"Instead of avoiding the issue of racism, organizers and activists must look for every opportunity to raise the issue in ways that help people come to grips with it. This requires a systematic, intentional, ongoing process within each organization. Such a program cannot be deferred until racism emerges as an issue on its own, but must be prospective and build a base of understanding *before* racism becomes a tactical issue in an emotionally charged and polarized situation."

-- Don Manning-Miller, "Racism and Organizing in Appalachia," in
Fighting Back in Appalachia

"The new populists sidestep several key strategic and ideological issues because of their emphasis on gaining local power, developing local institutions, and improving local economies. Localism offers a number of advantages, but few significant problems can be solved today at the local level. . . . Organizers must make clear the connections that exist between local work and national and international politics if local citizens are to understand the importance of national and international forces as determinants of what happens locally and to see themselves as actors at the national level."

-- Stephen L. Fisher, "Conclusion: New Populist Theory and the Study of Dissent in Appalachia," in *Fighting Back in Appalachia*

"As we draw nearer the plant, we get the feeling that we have stumbled into a giant cultural event, something like a cross between a bluegrass festival, a turkey shoot, and an oldtime revival. People are everywhere, standing and talking in quiet groups, strolling side by side down the road, or sitting on tailgates, drinking soft drinks and whittling. . . . The excitement in the air is simply electric.

. . . Suddenly it dawns on us. There are no troopers, no police. The union is in control here. It is as though we have entered another country, another time, another dimension, right here on the ground that was forbidden to the miners by the company and the courts a few short days ago. Now it is UMWA territory.

One of the most extraordinary sensations is looking into other people's eyes, young and old, black and white, men and women. As gazes meet, even between total strangers, there is irrepressible pride and a kind of harnessed elation. I have the impression that all of us are thinking, ' This is one of the most important experiences of my life. I will remember this until I die.'"

--Fran Ansley in "Singing Across Dark Spaces: The Union /Community Takeover of Pittston's Moss 3 Plant," in *Fighting Back in Appalachia*