"An inspiring guide for carrying the crucial struggle forward." —**NOAM CHOMSKY**

FIGHTING TIMES

Organizing on the Front Lines of the Class War

JON MELROD

"An eloquent voice from the frontlines of the hard, bitter, exhilarating struggles for freedom and justice that have made the world a better place, and an inspiring guide for carrying the crucial struggle forward."
—Noam Chomsky

"In *Fighting Times,* Jon Melrod shares his personal experiences in historical context about his human rights battles against social injustices. Jon was an early supporter of the Black Panther Party and the struggle for black liberation. As you will read, he became a target of the FBI after landing on the Bureau's radar when he called the Chicago office to coordinate sales of *The Black Panther* community newspaper in Madison, WI. A must-read for all freedom-loving peoples."
—Emory Douglas, social justice artist and minister of culture for the Black Panther Party, 1967–1981

"Jon Melrod's *Fighting Times* blends the riveting personal history of a dedicated class war veteran with important lessons in building multiracial, multigender, working-class solidarity on the shop floor, in the streets, and especially when confronting the boss. As a lifelong activist and unapologetic revolutionary, Melrod's efforts to democratize the UAW during the 1970s and '80s foreshadowed today's battles for union democracy, and his story offers a handy blueprint for the next generation of fired-up workers, labor organizers, and hell-raisers."
—Kim Kelly, labor journalist and author of *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor*

"Melrod's *Fighting Times* isn't a memoir that talks about halcyon days when revolution was in the air; it's a fighting manual for people today who want to change society. The revolutionary doesn't just think the masses into action, but acts alongside them, lifting their fellow worker up and leading by example. If you're a young worker or student who wants to get things moving, *Fighting Times* shows you what it means to do just that."
—Brace Belden, cohost of the *True Anon* podcast, volunteer with YPG Kurdish Militia in Syria, ILWU Local 6 organizing committee at Anchor Brewing, San Francisco

"To organize communities and workers, you have to listen to them. Jon Melrod's many stories show he did just that—and had a blast, too, as they turned their creativity and solidarity against the boss. Yes, there's a lot to be learned from Melrod's tales, but they're also a joy to read."
—Ken Paff, cofounder of Teamsters for a Democratic Union

"Brother Melrod's book *Fighting Times* provides firsthand insight into the valiant struggles waged in the early to mid-1980s in the contentious struggle between rank-and-file auto workers and the four US auto manufacturers. Concession fever, pushed by both the auto companies and their partners in the UAW International union, swept the industry and threatened to decimate decades of hard-fought gains won by the rank and file since breaking down the nonunion shops in the 1930s. For any young activist just entering the labor movement, *Fighting Times* offers inspiration, guidance, and insight on how to motivate the rank and file to identify its own interests and stand up to corporate attacks and, in some cases, union sellouts who do the bidding of the owning class. The book is a must-read for all aspiring labor activists."
—Peter Kelly, former president, UAW Local 160 GM Tech Center, UAW National Bargaining Committee 1985

"Long before Kenosha, WI, became a flashpoint in Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, this blue-collar city was the scene of intense shop-floor campaigns against racism and for militant unionism in the auto industry. Jon Melrod's account of his workplace organizing and reform caucus building in the 1970s and '80s is full of useful lessons for younger radicals trying to revive organized labor today. *Fighting Times* illustrates the importance of resisting contract concessions, defending free speech on the shop floor, and democratizing the United Auto Workers, a key rank-and-file struggle to this very day."
—Steve Early, labor journalist, former international representative at Communications Workers of America, author of *Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of an American City*

"Jon Melrod's *Fighting Times* tells the story of a '60s-era student radical who was one of thousands of young revolutionaries who left the campus and headed for mills, mines, factories, and battered neighborhoods. It was a learn-as-you go migration that was as challenging and exciting as it was chaotic and dangerous. Much ink has been devoted to Weatherman's stuttering attempts to attack the system. What's missing from those accounts is the organizing these onetime SDS activists did in the coal miners' right-to-strike movement, the postal workers' wildcat strikes, and—in Melrod's case—Kenosha's American Motors factory. American youth everywhere were inspired by the freedom fighters of the Black Panthers, Vietnamese NLF, and the Chinese Revolution. It was an exciting time, and Jon Melrod's extraordinary book puts you there."
—Tommy Amano-Tompkins, English professor at LA Harbor College and onetime arts editor at the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*

"*Fighting Times* is an excellent example of a militant rank-and-file caucus taking up the battle for women's equality. The Fighting Times caucus at the American Motors auto plant in Kenosha, WI, took up the battle against discrimination of women on the shop floor, within the union, and in the broader community. When Jon was elected chief steward his election slate consisted of newly energized women activists. Under his leadership, half the steward body were women. I recommend any young person looking to become active in the union movement read this book, which is vital for building today's movement in support of women's fight for equality and the fight for social justice."
—Laura Drake, senior organizer at Chicago AFSCME Council 31

"Jon Melrod, now in his seventies, has been an activist all his life, starting in second grade. His book, *Fighting Times,* is a remarkable document that shows us how one dedicated person became a leader who helped build a movement that improved the lives of industrial workers. *Fighting Times* is a blueprint for anyone who seeks to bring justice to the workplace."
—Stephan Shames, photographer

"For too long the dominant narrative of Sixties radicalism has been one of unrealistic idealism giving way to desperation, capitulation, or despair. Missing are stories of those who became radicalized in that time and went 'to the working class' as a means to effect fundamental change. Now Jon Melrod brings us one of those stories, one that is both unique—his having been a catalyzing force in key struggles—and far more representative than what we have been led to believe. His is an essential story of someone who emerged from the Sixties maelstrom intent on taking things in further liberatory directions."

—Aaron J. Leonard, author of *Heavy Radicals* and *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*

Fighting Times

Organizing on the Front Lines of the Class War

Jon Melrod

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Fighting Times: Organizing on the Front Lines of the Class War
Jon Melrod

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Due to space constraints, sections of the original manuscript had to be cut but have been posted to my website, www.jonathanmelrod.com, along with primary source material supporting the book, including portions of my FBI dossier.

Fighting Times is dedicated to my sons Eli and Noah, whose questions about my life, during the period I battled pancreatic cancer, inspired me to write this book. It is my deepest hope that they will continue to find their own ways to better society as they proceed along their lives' paths.

WARNING: Language in this book is racist

Fighting Times focuses extensively on the topic of racism and confronting real-world bigots and white supremacists. Readers will find certain language to be ugly, demeaning, and utterly abhorrent.

I thought long and hard about whether to include racial epithets. Racism, I believe, must be exposed in all its ugliness and aggressively opposed. Rather than sanitize the language, I chose to quote individuals in the context of their most distasteful and hateful utterances, which at the time, and today, make me cringe in disgust and despair.

I first experienced racism in its most despicable form as a ten-year-old growing up in apartheid-like Washington, DC. The amusement park my buddies and I visited—Glen Echo—in nearby Maryland was forced to desegregate by courageous and persistent young Black students, who faced not only arrest for trespassing but harassment from counterprotesters from the American Nazi Party.

I remember later in my childhood seeing a Black chain gang working under the blazing summer sun on a Virginia road under the glare of white guards with shotguns cradled in their arms. That indelible scene of American racism in action turned me into an antiracist at a young age.

I joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1965 after three young civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi by the Ku Klux Klan. Around the same time, I joined my first picket line in front of the South African embassy in DC to protest apartheid. From then until now, fighting white supremacy has been at the heart of my political organizing.

As one cannot live life in America without observing and experiencing racism, I decided not to disinfect the language of the book, as I want readers to see the world as I did in my many years of organizing. I hope you will understand.

Contents

Acknowledgments

Hundreds of people have directly and indirectly influenced my life and thinking over the past seventy-two years. If one is an observer of the human condition, there are no limits to what can be learned from others and their experiences. They are our guideposts for understanding our mandate for change and how to go about it.

Sadly, quite a few partners in crime and close political comrades have already departed, many from the protracted ravages of the Vietnam War and others from the effects of spending one's life working in dangerous, often toxic factories.

I owe special thanks to those who have provided invaluable assistance in the lengthy process of writing, editing, researching, and designing this book and my website. Much credit is due to my wife, Maria Isabel Melrod, who has been my rock over the past eight years, nursing me through numerous health crises and always being there for me in good or bad times. I also owe my brother Joey Melrod much thanks for being available for me through thick and thin.

Much credit is due to Tod Ohnstad and John Drew for putting up with me over the years at American Motors and without whom there would be little to write about. Also, I owe a shout-out to now-deceased Rudy Kuzel and Robert Fletcher, my Local 72 mentors, friends, and veteran union militants from whom I learned so much.

There are many more to whom thanks are due, including Martha Gruelle, Casey Goodwin, Noah Melrod, Ethan Young, Mara Yokohama, John Kaye, Mat Callahan, Tommy Tompkins, Max Elbaum, and Darryl Vance, my invaluable graphic/web designer. I sincerely apologize to those I've left out.

Finally, I pay tribute and offer encouragement to newly minted activists who are ready to devote themselves to the struggle for a just and humane world. All power to the people!

Introduction

I wasn't looking forward to the call, but it felt inevitable. Just the day before, I'd undergone an emergency scan to ascertain the cause of the incessant, nagging pain in my abdomen. Most days, I reported to work at Rock River Music in San Francisco but found myself resting my head on my desk for hours, overcome by debilitating pain and nausea.

Though I knew the phone would ring, the piercing sound triggered a visceral reaction.

"Hello, Jonathan. Dr. Abel here."

"Good morning, Dr. Abel. I guess you have news."

"I do, Jonathan, but it's not what we hoped. The scans indicate a tumor on the tail of your pancreas. It appears malignant. We need to immediately get you into surgery. This is quite serious, but we'll do our best."

"Do our best." That didn't seem very reassuring.

A quick Google search left me gobsmacked. Odds of surviving pancreatic cancer ranked among the lowest of any cancer, particularly for the aggressive variety that afflicted me. Only about 2,750 pancreatic cancer patients out of 35,000 survive five years. There were *no statistics* available for how many survived beyond those five years to lead a cancer-free life.

Why me? Why was a nice Jewish boy, raised in all-white, middle-class Northwest Washington, DC, a terminal cancer statistic at fifty-four? I needed to understand genetic factors and behaviors I had engaged in that might explain my 2000 intestinal surgery and now my diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer.

At twenty-one, after high school and college years consumed as a radical activist in support of student rights and the civil rights movement, in opposition to the criminal Vietnam War and in support of the struggle for Black liberation and women's liberation, I had chosen to continue organizing by working in a factory.

Along with thousands of other student revolutionaries, I believed that our generation could organize workers and poor people to fight for an end to exploitation, racial oppression, and sexual discrimination, and to bring to birth a new world in which hunger, poverty, inequality, and environmental destruction were forever banished.

Little did I realize that the choice I made then—to take factory jobs to organize workers in those plants and help them get the justice they deserved—might end up killing me decades later.

In the spring of 1972, just months out of college, I took my first job as an hourly wage slave at a small plastic injection-mold factory in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I soon found myself at the bottom of a large concrete vat, rushing frantically to clean the toxic residue of trichloroethylene (a cancer-causing chemical) used to degrease the oil on metal paint trays. When I asked for protective gear like a respirator, the straw boss let me know that respirators were for girls and sissies. "Juan—are you a sissy?" he asked.

In May I landed a job at the large United Auto Workers–organized American Motors Corporation (AMC) plant in Milwaukee. Within months, I led young workers to fight forced overtime and a speedup of the auto assembly line. The FBI, hot on the trail of student radicals taking factory jobs, met with AMC management to orchestrate my discharge.

Unemployed and likely blacklisted, I took a job at the lowest rung of the industrial hierarchy, a nonunion shop populated entirely by workers of color, except for me: Phister and Vogel tannery, where thousands of stinking, maggot-infested cowhides were turned into luxury leather. At P&V I experienced exposure in my groin area to the acidic industrial-grade solvents used to waterproof leather, which made me wonder if I would ever have kids.

Later I worked at Crucible Steel, manufacturer of Mack Truck axles. Nightly I choked on welding smoke, while tiny particles of silica dust swirled around me. When red-hot molten steel was poured from the overhead ladle into a sand mold in the shape of an axle, a byproduct was crystalline silica dust, the cause of silicosis. The FBI tracked me to Crucible, and again I was discharged.

Then Pressed Steel Tank in West Allis, just outside Milwaukee, hired me as a general laborer in 1975. At PST, I wore asbestos mitts to offload red-hot, high-pressure tanks as they exited roaring blast furnaces, spewing hot air that singed eyebrows. All around me floated feather-like particles of asbestos that had burned off my mitts.

On another job at PST, I climbed into a four-foot-high pit under a "blaster" to shovel metal pellets—tens of thousands of metal pellets. After I emerged from the pit, I coughed and sneezed black, crystalline soot, protected only by a rag tied around my mouth and nose. Again, no company-issued respirator.

While I was working in industry, I didn't focus on toxic exposure but instead on building solidarity and militant resistance among coworkers to capitalist exploitation. Before I left PST, the Unity caucus, a group of young rank-and-file militants I had pulled together in our Steelworkers local, led a bitter eight-week strike. We flattened the tires of trucks crossing our picket line to transport strikebreaker-made tanks. When GMAC (GM's financial arm) used the court system to repossess a striker's car, we barged en masse into a staid GMAC office, causing a disruption until the executive manager returned the striker's keys and apologized.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), after an appeal by American Motors to the Seventh Circuit Appellate Court, ordered the nation's number-four automaker to reinstate me after 1,008 days, with restored seniority and back pay. I reassembled our rank-and-file caucus, Fight Back, in time to organize resistance to the takeaway of hundreds of jobs. Pinkertons, perched on rooftops, filmed us picketing the AMC employment office, resulting in two-week disciplinary suspensions for four of us.

The NLRB administrative law judge ordered American Motors to remove the suspensions, which was my second of seven NLRB wins in forcing American Motors to reverse decisions punishing me for my organizing efforts. When I transferred with 350 other Milwaukee workers to AMC Kenosha, I joined with other activists to help organize the Fighting Times caucus in United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 72.

Over the next nine years, our caucus grew into a militant, class-conscious organization of shop-floor activists, and we led relentless day-to-day resistance on the assembly lines and joined broader political struggles.

As a consequence of the caucus publishing the highly popular, bold, and irreverent *Fighting Times* newsletter, supervisors at the behest of (and funded by) the company sued three of us for defamation (John Drew, Tod Ohnstad, and me), alleging damages over $4 million. The NLRB intervened after the civil trial, finding AMC in violation of our protected rights and ordering the company to pay over $300,000 in legal fees and lost wages.

Despite incessant red-baiting and periodic physical attacks, I steadily moved up in UAW leadership. I held the positions of line steward,

department chair, education committee member, chief steward, and international union delegate, and eventually I was elected to a top position on the executive board, which also was the bargaining committee.

While I was chief steward of the trim department, my desk sat within breathing distance of an open barrel of trichloroethylene used to wipe grease off car bodies. Despite the skull and crossbones warning on the barrel, bare-handed repair workers dipped rags into the barrel, slopping toxic chemicals over themselves, the floor around us, and onto car bodies. It required a battle of the first order to force the company to move the barrel and eventually substitute a less virulent, noncarcinogenic chemical.

★

In 2004, Dr. Abel mentioned to me that Ashkenazi Jews experienced a statistical propensity to suffer from intestinal and pancreatic cancer. I arranged for a state-of-the-art genetic test at UCSF medical center to determine if my cancer had been the product of an Ashkenazi genetic abnormality. The answer came back negative. As the clinician interpreting the test results explained, "There is no evidence of genetic-based causation for your cancer. Based on your employment history, the most likely explanation is that the disease resulted from prolonged exposure to industrial toxins."

In July that year my thoughts had turned to my two sons, Eli and Noah, ten and seven, when I received the prognosis that I needed to put my affairs in order and had only six months to a year to live.

Somehow, some way, I promised myself, I would beat the odds. I had two young boys, and I wouldn't leave them without a father.

Later, as my sons were growing up, they asked about my life before them. As they grew older, their questions turned increasingly to my political activism. I shared many stories you will soon read. "Dad," they asked, "why did you pull a shotgun on the FBI when they wanted to talk with you?"

In college, were you really a bodyguard for a Black Panther?
Why did you go to work in a factory after graduating from college?
Why did you go to an Indian reservation when you could have been killed by police?
Did you get cancer from working in factories? What kind of factories did you work in? Was it dangerous?
What is a union like? Did you really get sued for $4 million?

So many important questions to answer, including the ultimate: would I do it all over again knowing I would contract cancer from toxic factory chemicals?

The first thing to say is that hardly anyone else working in those factories had the choices I did. Most didn't have the option of safe and healthy careers, and, if they did, it would have been at far too low a wage to support themselves, much less a family.

Whether or not I would do it again, there were strong reasons for my choices. I am convinced of the need for revolutionary societal change, and that certainly won't happen on its own, particularly the long-term goal of a socialist society.

I've seen again and again what disempowered people—students, community members, women, people of color, and workers—can do when they join forces. That is awe-inspiring, whether in day-to-day struggles on the shop floor or political campaigns like confronting the KKK or fighting with the Menominee Warrior Society to break a police blockade of their armed siege to win a medical clinic for their deprived reservation, as I did in 1975.

And I must be honest: we had a blast—a total blast. There is little that rivals the spiritual high of joining with coworkers to take on a pompous, autocratic boss who needs a slapdown, or walking off the assembly line to launch a wildcat strike.

Two people who were an essential part of organizing at AMC deserve special mention: John Drew and Tod Ohnstad. They were my compatriots, fellow activists, and codefendants in the Fighting Times defamation trial. My stories mostly center around what happened in my own department, in Building 40, and John and Tod worked elsewhere in the plant. But keep in mind as you read about Fighting Times that I was one of a trio.

Not knowing if there would ever be enough time to answer my sons' queries, I started writing a memoir some fifteen years ago. The chapters that follow, I hope, will answer many questions, point today's new generation of organizers in the right direction, and maybe inspire a few young people to join the struggle.

CHAPTER 1

Apartheid in My Backyard

My world as a young child in the mid-1950s was an all-white, largely Jewish enclave in a largely Black city: Chesapeake Street in Northwest Washington, DC, adjacent to Rock Creek Park. I walked about a mile through all-white neighborhoods to an all-white public elementary school; rode bikes with other white kids who lived on my cul-de-sac; played basketball at the Jewish community center; and enjoyed shoestring fries, ketchup, and cherry cokes at a drug store counter staffed by young white waitresses.

Outside the Northwest quadrant, however, the city transformed into a bustling Black metropolis. In the 1950s, DC remained as racially segregated as any Southern city.

My naive, mostly color-blind view of the world was transformed one summer day when a roadside scene, just beyond the borders of DC, imparted an indelible imprint on my young mind. My father had taken the family for a weekend drive on back-country roads in nearby Virginia. I peered out the window and noticed a line of Black men chained together. As we neared them, clad in white-and-black striped uniforms, I noticed that each wore heavy metal shackles around his ankle and waist, causing the line to shuffle awkwardly, the men tethered by twos.

Perched atop imposing horses, as the chain gang labored with pickaxes and shovels, slouched large, potbellied, uniformed white men cradling scary-looking rifles. I felt sad for the unhappy-looking men chained together. Puzzled, I wondered why they were all Black.

For perhaps the first time, I experienced a disquieting inkling of the racial divide in which I lived. That vivid childhood memory has long remained with me, particularly the black and white stripes and the imposing white men on horseback with rifles.

My parents grew up in Newark, New Jersey. In search of opportunity, my father, Leonard, left Jersey with five dollars in his pocket and moved

to Washington, DC, in the late 1940s. He pulled himself up by his bootstraps from selling shoes to become a self-educated attorney. Having no money for tuition, he sat on the floor in a hallway listening to evening law school classes through a transom. Weekends he spent in the library reading volumes on court decisions.

After passing the DC bar, no law school degree required, he hung out his shingle. My mother soon joined him from Newark. I arrived in 1950, and our family moved from a small apartment to Northwest DC about six years later.

In the torrid heat of the DC summer, we often escaped to Glen Echo Amusement Park in Montgomery County, Maryland. As I frolicked with friends, it never occurred to me that the ornate merry-go-round with its gaudily painted wooden horses, towering Ferris wheel, white wooden roller coaster, and expansive swimming pool were the exclusive province of white kids.

For Black kids, Glen Echo's pool and rides were a mirage. They glimpsed the park through a chain-link fence, but the pool's cool waters were off limits. Glen Echo in the 1950s enforced a whites-only admission policy. Black kids, banned from the park, might open a fire hydrant to cool off when temperatures topped one hundred degrees.

Summer 1960, students from Howard University organized a picket line and demanded Glen Echo be integrated. On a steamy summer day, Black students made it into the park and refused to disembark from the carousel. A security guard approached Laurence Henry, a divinity student from Howard, and challenged, "What race do you belong to?"

Henry responded, "I belong to the human race, sir." He was promptly arrested.

Riots ensued as white bigots furiously tried to hold back the tide of history. For days, we heard scary rumors of whites attacking Blacks at the park. From my eleven-year-old perspective, I couldn't understand the fuss. Why couldn't Black kids enjoy the rides and pool with us? They were, after all, members of the human race, as Laurence Henry had eloquently pointed out. Even as a kid, I was aware that some of those who had attacked picketing students at Glen Echo Park were members of George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party.

By summer's end, the conflict dissipated. The next season Glen Echo opened on a nonsegregated basis, but I never returned.

Racial tension over the integration of Glen Echo was merely an opening salvo of a contentious battle in Washington. Black residents of the capital

and its environs were emboldened by a newfound awakening, while many whites resisted encroachments on their protected sanctuaries—an incursion on their racial pride and privileged white supremacy.

In 1962 opposing racial camps faced off at the "City Title" high school football championship, played each Thanksgiving between the DC public school champions and the Catholic school champs. Considering the racial makeup of the public schools versus the Catholic schools, the matchup was incendiary—gasoline awaiting a spark.

Excitement welled up in me when my father announced he and I, father and twelve-year-old son, would be going to DC Stadium to join the crowd of fifty thousand fans watching St. John's College High School play Eastern High School.

In the fourth quarter, the ferocious athletic battle turned nasty after a tussle between two players, and the Black player was removed on a stretcher. Tension in the stands was already high, as cheers were replaced with racial epithets. My father grabbed my arm and rushed us out of the stadium before the final whistle blew and verbal aggression exploded into raging violence.

Numbers of injuries reported ranged from forty to five hundred. One thing for certain, the racial divide, inflamed by the game, engulfed the city, and the title games were canceled forever.

My parents were not particularly political. They were upwardly mobile, middle-class Jews who religiously voted for the Democratic Party. Early 1960s Democrats were good liberals, as were my parents: fair, honest people. I grew up with a deep-seated sense of justice.

It came as a shock when my mother suggested I apply to Putney School on Elm Lea Farm in Vermont for ninth grade. No one I knew attended boarding school; the very concept seemed foreign. To my surprise, I was admitted.

My parents and I flew to the tiny airport in Keene, New Hampshire, rented a car, and traveled an hour to the town of Putney—population under one thousand—and then continued up the mountain until we spotted the Elm Lea Farm sign.

I hoped my parents would realize they'd made a mistake and return me home. As we moved my few belongings into the Noyes boys' dorm, the highly intellectual conversations I overheard sounded foreign. I'd arrived in an alternate universe.

I inquired about weekend activities. "On Friday night we all gather to sing madrigals," a student volunteered with a smile. What, I wondered, were madrigals? And would I be required to sing them? Sure enough, after

Friday dinner the entire student body moved en masse to the nearby Main Building.

For the next two hours, two hundred students sat packed together, shoulder to shoulder, sweaty thigh to sweaty thigh, on backless wooden benches, in an airless hall, singing Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven. The conductor, Norwood Hinkle, who I learned was an esteemed classical music teacher, worked himself into a frenzy, waving his wooden batons. I squirmed on the uncomfortably hard bench.

As my student life weaved through transformative political, cultural, and social events, I remained sealed-lip silent at Friday Sing. It wasn't my thing. One Friday I sat, head bent, shoulders hunched, engrossed in a book by Aldous Huxley. Startled, I heard a furious clanging of the wooden batons on the metal lectern. The hall fell deathly quiet. I continued reading.

"Mr. Melrod!" Hinkle bellowed, clearly exasperated. "Do you have something better to do than join us?"

I responded with a nonchalant yes. I was barely sixteen but felt certain this man, despite his reputation, had no right to force me to sing. Hinkle's voice ratcheted up a few octaves, "And what could that be? Do tell what has your rapt attention."

"An excellent book by Aldous Huxley." In defiance, I lowered my gaze and resumed reading.

Completely flummoxed, Hinkle yelled, "Mr. Melrod! Put down that trash immediately and join us."

Slowly raising my head to meet his incensed gaze, "I don't think so, Norwood. (At Putney we addressed teachers by their first name.) I'm thoroughly enjoying my book."

Utterly beside himself, he sputtered, spewing spittle on the first row of students: "Leave the hall immediately. Wait for me in the Social Room."

Immensely pleased with myself by the unexpected outcome of being released from mandatory Friday Sing, I squeezed through the rows of students.

I plopped comfortably into an overstuffed chair in the Social Room and was soon engrossed in my reading. I hadn't noticed the singing had ceased when the door flew open. As if possessed, diminutive Norwood barged in, barely able to control his anger.

"Mr. Melrod, since I've been here at Putney, students have sung madrigals every Friday night. I will not tolerate your flouting of our traditions. I expect you will rejoin us and surely participate."

"Nah, I don't really think that's gonna happen."

With my unequivocal and rude rebuff, Norwood flew into a rage, clenched his fists, and seemed poised to hit me. As the distance between us shrank, I jumped up, grabbed each of his flailing fists, and held him immobilized.

"Norwood, I'm going to say this once and only once. Don't you ever, ever try to hit me."

He shot back, "Melrod, you're banned from Friday-night madrigals. I don't want to see your face again." At that, he turned and stomped out, breathing hard.

How very perfect, I thought, proud that in the school's thirty-two-year history, I had achieved the dubious distinction of being the only student expelled from Friday Sing. For every ensuing Friday evening until I graduated, I lounged in my dorm room reading science fiction.

When Norwood raised his voice to belittle me and his fists to hit me, I intuitively understood for the first time that authority is only as powerful and commanding as one allows, a most valuable lesson that would serve me well.

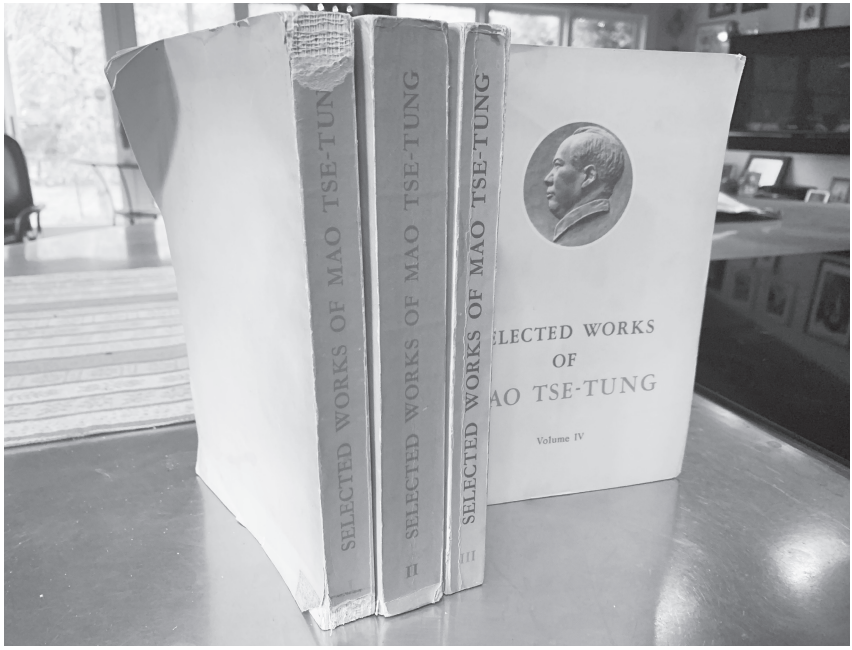
★

I arrived on Putney Mountain a political neophyte, conscious that there were Democrats and Republicans, a president, Congress, and a Supreme Court.

But political turmoil swirled around the country from coast to coast, even on our mountaintop in Vermont. I searched for answers to explain the dramatic events unfolding in the world beyond Elm Lea Farm. I needed to understand why inequality, injustice, and racism seemed so rampant in America.

A fellow student suggested I read *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow. After reading it I composed a handwritten letter on three-hole, loose-leaf notebook paper:

> Dear Mao Tse-Tung, Chairman of the Communist Party of the People's Republic of China:
>
> I am a high school student in the United States. I don't believe that we are living in a fair society. Daily I read about horrible racial inequities and unfair economic disparities. Our country is perpetrating an illegal war of genocide in Vietnam.



A few months after writing to Chairman Mao in Peking, China, to inquire about "socialism," I received this four-volume *Selected Works* in my high school mail cubby.

> I would very much like to find out more about socialism. Could you please send me your writings, as I would like to understand for myself what socialism is all about and how your system works?
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Jonathan D. Melrod
>
> Putney School

Months later, after I'd forgotten the letter, a package arrived. It was surprisingly heavy and postmarked Peking, China. I couldn't contain my curiosity, ripping open the wrapping to discover four volumes of *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*.

Nearing the end of freshman year, I resolved to act on my newfound political ideas. A fire of activism had begun to burn within me. Among civil rights organizations at the time, I felt the most affinity with the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee (SNCC) and its young, militant leadership.

In DC for summer break, I sought out the SNCC headquarters, located across the city, two buses and a long walk away from the familiar confines of the Northwest quadrant.

The woman at the battered reception desk peered at me, puzzled. I timidly asked, "Is there anything you need me to do? I'm here to volunteer."

In the headquarters' windowless basement, I folded, stuffed, and stamped thousands and thousands of letters reciting details of the Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman murders, soliciting support both moral and financial. Their three faces, staring up at me from the thousands of letters I folded, became indelibly imprinted on my memory, as did the ominous words "murdered by the KKK."

Back at Putney, reading Mao's writings, along with revolutionary authors like Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and others, I began to see links between US racism, the Vietnam War, the US capitalist system, and our nation's unrelenting imperialist drive to dominate countries throughout the world.

Bay Area antiwar groups issued a nationwide call for Stop the Draft Week in October 1967. A small group at Putney signed up to block buses at the military induction center in nearby Manchester, New Hampshire. As we arrived in working-class Manchester, I glimpsed a banner reading "BETTER DEAD THAN RED" hanging from an antiquated factory window. Workers hanging out the windows yelled, "Commies, get out of town! We support our boys! You're a bunch of longhaired hippie traitors!"

Damn, I thought. *I sure wish we had those guys on our side. I don't get it. Their sons are the ones fighting and dying.*

Putney tradition dictated that every Sunday night the student body listened to an outside speaker, someone well known. A scheduled guest in February 1968 was Senator Robert Kennedy. The student body and faculty were abuzz with excitement over the opportunity to hear the prestigious senator in an intimate, informal setting.

Senator Kennedy opened with friendly banter and told the crowd: "Young people have, of course, been playing a greater and greater role in the political efforts and political life in the United States. Goethe once said that the future of nations is determined by the opinions of young people under the age of twenty-five."

He continued by listing the myriad of daunting challenges young people faced in solving the problems of humankind—hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and disease. He spoke about the problems faced by "Negroes" in a racially divided America. He touted the young men and women in the Peace Corps. He finished to thunderous applause. He knew his audience and delivered a message they readily embraced.

Then came time for questions. I stood up. "Senator Kennedy," I said, "you quote Goethe on young people's role in changing society. With all due respect, you've completely circumvented the most important issue facing people under twenty-five—the Vietnam War. How can we sit here listening to you speak eloquently about the role of young people in America while the US government is at this very moment bombing, napalming, and killing the people of Vietnam under the orders of the government you serve in the Senate?"

As I concluded, I looked around the hall for support. A few students clapped half-heartedly, but the room was bathed in deafening silence. I later came under biting criticism from the entire faculty and some of the student body for having embarrassed Senator Kennedy and for not having shown proper deference.

Graduation came and went. I rolled my diploma into a cardboard tube and stored it, a relic of a past that I was prepared to leave behind. Next stop: University of Wisconsin, Madison.

CHAPTER 2

Madison on Fire

In August 1968 I headed to Madison, Wisconsin, for the very first time, the start of a new phase of my life. I arrived on campus primed to join the fight against the US war machine. I was a natural recruit for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS.)

By 1968 national SDS had grown to over one hundred thousand members, with many tens of thousands more identifying with its antiestablishment message. My hopes were high. Madison SDS did not disappoint. Our collective sentiment held that campus ROTC was a direct manifestation of the war and had to go.

First step: disruption of the ROTC orientation classes that were required of every male freshman. I was assigned to a Monday morning session.

After the second lieutenant leading the class had prattled on about the benefits of ROTC, I stood up. All eyes focused on me, wondering who I was and what I planned to do.

I raised my voice, glancing around the room at mostly blank faces: "What we're hearing is a lot of *bullshit*. ROTC is trying to recruit us to be part of their military war machine. I say fuck the Vietnam War and fuck ROTC."

I turned to face the officer, who had been taken by surprise at my outburst. "Let me ask you a question. Why aren't you telling us about how many officers are being fragged, offed by their own soldiers?" I continued. "I'll tell you why. The US is fighting an unjust war of aggression against a people fighting for their liberation. I side with self-determination and liberation and don't plan on sitting here listening to your tired propaganda!"

On cue, thirty of us disrupters, out of a class of around three hundred, walked out chanting antiwar slogans. As I walked out, I couldn't help but smile inwardly. I had come to Madison to fight the war machine and within

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A much longer version of this chapter appears at www.jonathanmelrod.com/madison.—Ed.

week one had already made ROTC orientation class difficult, if not impossible, to conduct.

At a September 18 meeting, about seven hundred SDS activists committed to focus on organizational and educational activity to win over broader numbers of students.

The successful battle to dislodge ROTC was merely an introduction to how I would spend my next three and a half years.

The war was the single issue for many on campus. I aligned with a growing number who saw it in the context of a universal fight against all oppression, foreign and domestic. One fall day, I noticed a poster, adorned with a bold black stylized eagle, stapled to a telephone pole. The poster announced a speech by Jesus Salas, a representative of the Wisconsin farmworkers' union Obreros Unidos. He would lead a discussion on workers' rights and the farmworkers' strike and grape boycott launched a few years before in Delano, California.

I thought I might be interested. Yet I couldn't escape my own prejudice stemming from prior experience with blue-collar workers, like those in New Hampshire who had hurled accusations of "traitor!" when we tried to shut down the military induction center. Regardless, I decided to check out this Jesus Salas.

On the appointed evening, a couple dozen students gathered to hear Jesus, who spoke passionately about the years-old, bitter struggle in the grape fields of California, to form a union to protect the mostly Latino and Filipino workers from inhumane working conditions—like toxic pesticides in the fields, and the absence of toilets or water to drink. The United Farm Workers (UFW) campaign to boycott grapes (pending union recognition) brought the public into the fray and put pressure on the growers to recognize the union.

His words struck a chord—and after the speech I hustled to the front of the hall to volunteer to assist the grape boycott.

Jesus was thrilled to have solicited at least one seemingly enthusiastic volunteer. He introduced me to his older brother Manuel, who ran the day-to-day affairs of Obreros Unidos. I immediately took a liking to the soft-spoken Manuel with his messy mop of black hair and bushy Pancho Villa mustache. Despite our vastly different backgrounds, Manuel and I bonded, so much so that Manuel virtually adopted me.

I might have backed out of my union organizer apprenticeship if I had known it required endless hours of listening to ranchero music, hanging out night after night in bars where no one spoke English (and I spoke no

Spanish), and driving Manuel around unpaved country roads, to meet with migrant workers, in a vehicle that could barely pass DMV inspection, let alone hit 60 mph on a downhill slope.

I continued my organizing with Obreros Unidos—Friday picket lines at Kroger's grocery, printing "BOYCOTT GRAPES" bumper stickers, and leafleting students to spread word of the boycott. More than that, I was becoming a full-timer in something much broader—a revolutionary movement that covered many battlefronts.

When I arrived in Madison, only about four hundred students were Black, out of a student population of around forty thousand. A group of students had formed the Black People's Alliance (BPA).

By the fall 1968, the BPA had repeatedly demanded that the administration address the historical disparity faced by Black students. Frustrated by the lack of response, an angry squadron of Black students roamed classroom buildings exhorting other Black students to join a class boycott, while pulling fire alarms to disrupt business as usual.

Many white students, including in SDS and the Wisconsin Student Association, supported the BPA's thirteen demands. On Monday, February 12, 1969, roving groups of Black and white students interrupted classes, saying, "We're here to let you know that the university is being shut down as of today. Classes will not be allowed to function until the administration grants the Black People's Alliance's thirteen demands."

Picketing began, day by day our picket lines expanded to more campus buildings, and the university ground to a halt.

Momentum extended beyond the ranks of committed activists. Black athletes on Badger sports teams risked their athletic standing and even their enrollment. Six Black athletes boycotted an indoor track meet against Michigan State University.

On February 12, more than two thousand students blocked entrances to major campus buildings with "impenetrable picket lines." We had finally shuttered the entire liberal arts campus.

The governor mobilized the National Guard. Upwards of one thousand troops, in full battle gear, with fixed bayonets, as if dispatched to the jungles of Vietnam, marched onto campus. Military units, combined with the entire Madison police force, forcefully opened safe pathways into classrooms.

The BPA and SDS issued a clarion call for a mass march on the domed state capitol—home to the Wisconsin legislature and the seat of state power. According to news accounts, twelve thousand students—over one-third of

The Black People's Alliance upped the ante by organizing "*impenetrable*" picket lines to physically block classroom building doors during the February 1969 Black student strike. (Author in parka third row from bottom on the right.) The governor activated the National Guard to force open classrooms at bayonet-point, dispersing our picket lines after a two-week strike.

the student body—gathered as the sun set, skies darkened, and cold wind whipped through our ranks. With tectonic force, thousands surged into the streets with homemade placards and banners supporting the Black liberation struggle and the BPA's demands. Never had such a powerful force of humanity gathered under one banner in Madison's history.

Black student leaders held flaming gas-soaked torches aloft, turning the night skies orange. We marched up State Street, a mass of humankind on a singular mission to disavow white supremacy and support the BPA.

From the front of the march, I looked back at the seemingly endless flow. The sheer expanse of humanity was both humbling and inspiring. Never would I have predicted or allowed myself to imagine that twelve thousand would stand solidly with the BPA and Madison's Black students. For that moment, revolution was in the air, and racial justice appeared over the horizon.

Like a tornado that arrived with thunder and fury but dissipated after having spent its massive energy, the gargantuan march marked the pinnacle

of the student strike. The National Guard had placed the campus under a virtual lockdown. Before we could close ranks, unsheathed bayonets and machine gun–equipped jeeps forced us to disperse. The National Guard had regained control of our streets and our campus.

By February 18, student support had dissipated, and the BPA suspended the strike. On February 27, the *Daily Cardinal* said of the Black student strike two weeks earlier: "Students were more in control of the UW-Madison campus than the administration was by Feb. 13, 1969."

The most significant concrete achievement of the strike was the establishment soon afterward of UW's Department of Afro-American Studies, launched in the fall of 1970.

Yet a more profound point is that those many thousands of white students, mostly Wisconsin kids, took an unprecedented stand. They jeopardized their educations to support demands that expressly and solely addressed the historical disparity faced by Blacks at UW Madison—and across the nation. Collectively we proved that despite years of racist division and countless decades of white supremacy, thousands could leave behind the barriers of history and march forward as one.

I had fled the dorms before the end of my first year, moving into a third-floor walk-up apartment in the center of the student ghetto, the 500 block of Mifflin Street. For blocks in all directions, thousands were packed into wood-frame houses needing fresh paint, long neglected by absentee landlords.

I often walked up the block to the Mifflin Street Co-op. I'd pause just inside the front door, helping myself to free peanuts from a wooden barrel, and talk with other students—shelling and tossing—about politics and culture.

That spring of 1969, folks meeting at the co-op decided to organize a block party on the first weekend of May to celebrate our community and the coming of spring.

While the never-ending Vietnam War was on everyone's mind, the block party was to be a celebration, though with a rebellious overtone. The flyer read, "Why don't we do it in the road? Off the PIG! Roll your own reality. Bring share, Food, Fun, Drums, Dogs."

Predictably, Madison police denied permission to hold the party. Of course, denial by the authorities only fueled our determination.

On a sunny afternoon, kids gathered near the intersection of Mifflin and Bassett Streets. Clean-cut students in Greek-lettered tees came from