

Working class loses a leader: George Edwards, activist every day

October 2012

The working class and people lost a great leader, activist, and fighter for justice and equality this past week when 94 year-old George Edwards died. While his accomplishments were many and will have positive influence on our lives for generations, what those who knew George will remember most was his all abiding humanity. While a lifelong champion of worker's rights, civil rights, and peace, George was as at home with a beer watching the game, gardening, hiking, camping, or visiting friends as he was at a meeting of his beloved steelworker unionists.

Born in 1918 in South Dakota, his family moved to Tennessee and homesteaded land in what is now the Great Smoky National Park. His father worked in the Indian Service until becoming frustrated with mistreatment of native peoples.

George obtained a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee, then received his graduate degree from Oberlin Seminary, studying to enter the ministry. After completing his studies, George went to work as a machinist at the huge U. S. Steel Works in nearby Lorain, Ohio, making less than \$1 an hour. His goal was to set up a "labor church."

However, he quickly joined the Steelworker's Organizing Committee, which was campaigning to organize that mill, and joined the Communist Party USA, along with many of the other organizers. He was active as a member/leader for the rest of his life.

Denise Winebrenner-Edwards, George's wife of 31 years, said, "He was absolutely convinced that the only way working people could achieve justice was for the people, not the wealthy, to control our economy. He saw that inherent in capitalism was inequality and injustice and that the system needed to be changed fundamentally to meet the people's needs."

After winning unionization in 1942, George founded the local union newspaper, the Lorain Labor Leader, founded a veteran's committee, and was part of the local's Political Action Committee. He was elected the local's vice president.

When America entered World War II, George immediately joined up, fighting to defeat the fascist menace in Europe.

After victory, he came back, but to a much different political climate. McCarthyism was rearing its ugly head. Still, George was elected to the 1948 United Steelworkers of America (USWA) convention, where he raised the first resolution calling for an African American vice president of the union. Although this wasn't won at that convention, George was a leading part of the movement that achieved that goal at the USWA convention nearly 40 years later.

For George, the 1950s were difficult times. Hounded by the FBI, spied on, and ostracized at the union he helped found, his name was even chiseled off of the founders' plaque at the union hall. He suffered isolation and tough times, even going through a divorce.

However, George used this time to become a photographer, setting up a studio in Lorain, became involved in hiking, camping, and became a serious artist, painting and producing metal sculptures. His metal chess sets are highly valued and are on display as gifts in presidential offices in Vietnam and other nations.

Even in these hard times, George still found ways to fight for justice. Seeing Puerto Rican workers brought in to work at the mill housed in railroad cars on company property, without running water, heat or sanitary facilities, he invited leaders of the Puerto Rican independence movement to Lorain to help the workers understand what rights they had and to push for decent housing. When African American steelworkers were unable to buy homes in still-segregated areas, George purchased homes which he resold to those workers. As the civil rights and peace movements developed, George jumped on board.

In the '70's, George really began to put his stamp on policy changes that would shift political ground for all of us. Seeing a lack of democracy, a slackening of the fight against the big corporations, in the USWA, George formed the National Steelworkers Rank & File Committee. It pushed for democracy, membership involvement and solidarity. He literally ran the budding rank and file movement from an old mimeograph machine in his front room, almost permanently having blue-stained fingers. Local committees were formed in Steelworker locals across the nation, mainly made up of younger workers.

The Lorain committee did not come about because George made great speeches, but grew out of what will forever be known as the "Pink Hard Hat" incident. By now, George was a machinist instructor, teaching young apprentices the trade. But the shop foreman was making life hell for the young workers, harassing them in numerous ways, including forcing them to shave beards and cut their hair short (a big deal for those guys in those days). George painted his hard hat pink, stating that it looked like "the boss's bald head."

He was suspended for his protest, but the union, especially the young workers, rallied to his side and he won his grievance and back pay.

This was during a time that the mainstream media all trumpeted the "generation gap," the idea that only young folks were progressive and that if you were older, you couldn't possibly relate to young people. Throughout his life, and especially during this period, George showed this concept up for the lie it was. He was beloved by the younger workers and he fought for them, as well as all workers.

An important principle of the rank and file movement that George often spoke of during this period was: "We have no enemies that are workers. We are fighting for all workers. We need a rank and file movement always, to involve regular workers in the union. It needs to support union leaders when they're right and push them when they aren't!"

The rank and file movement that George began expanded and won many gains during this period. The right of workers to ratify their own contracts was won, as well as the election of an African American USW vice president. The movement fought against an experimental negotiating agreement that would have ended the union's ability to strike. The well-known Consent Decree, which ended practices of keeping minority workers in the worst, most dangerous and low paid jobs, opened up all jobs to bidding and brought women and minorities into the trades, was a major victory of the movement. All these had George Edwards' fingerprints on them.

The Steelworkers union began to shift, becoming the progressive union it is today, mobilizing its members, building coalitions, standing up for solidarity with other workers and unions across the globe.

After retiring, George married Denise Winebrenner and moved to Pittsburgh. Winebrenner, a USW activist in her own right, was elected to the Wilksburg City Council.

Hardly ready to relax and enjoy "golden years," George spoke of these as "the best years of my life." He was a founding member of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR) and was a member of SOAR's ruling executive board. With his wife Denise, they formed a local coalition, Wilksburg for Change, which stopped privatization of the local elementary school and pushed for better services and more access for the community to local government.

George was especially proud of the fact that he was "the first one arrested" for sitting in, blocking trucks carrying copies of the Pittsburgh Press, when workers there were on strike. The strike was successful, especially due to the massive solidarity movement.

Even into his 90s George Edwards was active, mobilizing steel retirees to rallies for health care and retiree security. When Occupy Pittsburgh held demonstrations and news conferences this past year, George was out front, attending and bringing friends.

Finally, in his late years, George got something he'd never asked for: credit for his work! He used to say, "It's amazing what you can get accomplished if you don't care who gets credit!"

Certainly, at least for the rest of us, it was wonderful to see some credit finally go his way.

At the 70th anniversary of the United Steelworkers union in Cleveland last year, George Edwards was honored with a long, very loud, standing ovation. He was recognized for his work and as the only one present who was at the founding USW convention as well as the present one.

George had just returned from a USW Civil Rights Conference in Cincinnati when he fell into a coma. At that conference, USW President Leo Gerard had honored George, saying, "He was an activist every single day of his life." The comments were occasion for another long, standing ovation, which brought tears to many eyes, including George's.

George died peacefully. He didn't live that way!

He is survived by his wife Denise, a son, daughter, and three sisters.