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‘No Condensing Savors’ A Personal Tribute to Noel Ignatiev

Gary Fields

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Hard Crackers founding editor, Noel Ignatiev died a year ago today. In his memory, we are running in full this tribute written by a longtime comrade and friend of his. We also plan to publish a printed issue of *Hard Crackers* to memorialize Noel’s life and thought in the coming months. –The editors

It was March of 1979 on the midnight shift at Danly Machine Corporation, a large machine tool builder on Chicago’s Southwest side, when I first encountered a worker roughly fifteen years my senior whose name was Noel. At 11:45 that night, just before shift change, the second shift foreman brought me to the 60-inch Blanchard Grinder where I was now going to work midnights after four months in the weld shop. Noel was at a drill press next to the Blanchard.

The foreman explained to us that we would be the only two workers in the department on the midnight shift and therefore we would be without a foreman but a building supervisor would come through periodically to check on us or to solve any problems that might arise.

I began work at this immense industrial facility, organized by the United Steelworkers of America, much like a number of other radical 20-somethings of that time. I was a member of a left group with crude pretensions of leading the working class on its historical mission. Many of these groups, mine included, were sending cadres into basic industry on the assumption that after just a short time on the job, we would emerge as bona fide working class leaders. After ending a 5-year period in the Communist Party, I became a fervent believer in this approach to political activism. My new group was pursuing this “turn to industry” with a zeal unmatched by rival left organizations and that impressed me. Although at the time I was a history student in Montreal with plans for graduate study, I dropped those plans and returned to my hometown of Chicago, still an industrial powerhouse in the late 1970s, to seek a job in one of the steel mills there. My new comrades helped me in my job search and as luck would have it, I found work at Danly with the help of a fabricated job application listing small machine shops on my work history that had recently gone bankrupt.

Danly Machine

Despite my enthusiasm for the job at Danly, the weld shop where I started was the site of some of the toughest work in the plant, cutting up heaps of scrap, and grinding “slag” from the edges of finished die sets. I worked swing shift – 4 p.m. until midnight—and in this part of the plant, the fumes and noise were intense. Except for me, the entire work gang in the weld shop was nonwhite. The foreman whose name was Bill had instructed a 45-year old African-American named Clem to work with me my first day on the job, and the two of them approached me together. Clem looked me over with a fascinated curiosity and with the foreman right there, hollered, “What the *FUCK* are *YOU* doin’ here?” I uttered some inaudible and probably idiotic response when Clem interrupted me: “Just get one of those fuckin’ torches and start cuttin’ that scrap,” he ordered me, “cause there’ll be plenty more to cut.” I fetched one of the gas torches from near the foreman’s office and readied to begin cutting up the mountain of metal in front of us, but Clem walked away, probably with some indignation if not disgust. It took some time before he accepted me on his gang, but I could imagine that he must have thought of me in this part of the plant as some kind of white freak — or worse, a company spy.

Despite being organized by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), Danly was replete with the kind of racism that segregated Clem and workers of color into areas of the plant such as the weld shop. After only a few weeks of coughing up black soot after every shift in the weld shop, I realized how certain jobs, and specific areas of the plant were relegated to Blacks and Hispanics. I became fascinated almost immediately in walking through various departments and sections of the plant, how the racial and ethnic demographics changed with different kinds of jobs. The areas of huge gear-cutting machines, for example, were populated with white workers; my area in the weld, except for me, was home to people of color.

At the same time, there was also racism from some of the white workers, many from nearby Cicero, who ironically were among some of the most active members of the union local. Because of this racist environment, I was able to exploit my own skin color to bid out of the weld shop after only four months. This is how I landed the job on the midnight shift with the Blanchard Grinder.

“This is a gravy job,” I was told by an older white worker who ran the machine on day shift and trained me. “You’ll make bonus.” The only difficulty, he cautioned me one day, was if you had to grind pieces that had to be hoisted into the machine not with the crane magnet but with “plate hooks.” We did it one time and, indeed, it was daunting. I hoped that I would not see this kind of job too often.

As fate would have it, the job awaiting me on my first night on midnight shift when I met Noel consisted of picture-frame-shaped metal pieces that had to be lifted with plate hooks. For three hours, I tried – unsuccessfully – to get the first piece onto the grinding table in the machine. Noel stopped by at 3:00 a.m. and told me that it was time for lunch and so we went together to the cafeteria.

On the way back from lunch, I admitted to Noel that I was unable to get the first piece rigged with the plate hooks and asked if he could help me. He looked at the job with a kind of sardonic smile but he told me to move the piece with the magnet, get one plate hook underneath one side, and then repeat to get the other side rigged with the second plate hook. It worked! Later, Noel would admit to me that he knew instantly when we met at the beginning of the shift that I was one of those “college types” and that he had enjoyed a good chuckle when I couldn’t get the plate hooks underneath the piece to grind it.

That night I managed to grind only one side of the single piece I had rigged. The job was timed by Danly at two pieces, both sides, for the 8-hour shift. Noel came by at 7:30, told me it was time to clean up and asked me how things had gone. I told him that I had not even completed the second side of the first piece for the whole shift. “You don’t worry about that,” he told me. The horn for shift change sounded and we punched out. “I’ll see you again tonight,” Noel said as we walked out of the plant gate in the bright morning sun.

Life on Midnights

The nights on midnights began to pass and Noel and I became friendly. We would start work when the horn sounded at 12:00 sharp but when the second shift foreman would leave, usually by 12:30 and there was no longer a foreman in the department, we would stop work and talk for an hour or so, sometimes more. Noel told me that he had worked for years at the largest mill in the area, U.S. Steel Gary Works, and had just come to Danly after a couple years at International Harvester. I could see that he knew his work. Noel had a quick wit and an infectious laugh, but he also surprised me with some striking observations about working life and conditions in the plant.

I told my party comrades about Noel and my situation at work without a foreman and they instructed me to bring Noel into the fold of revolutionary socialist politics. “Introduce him to the newspaper,” they advised me; “this will give him a taste of socialism.” I was never comfortable with this aggressively open practice of hawking the Party newspaper and “talking socialism” with co-workers and decided to approach the task with Noel by engaging him, at least initially, with a seemingly more innocuous topic — films.

One night, I ambled over to Noel’s drill press and started a bit of banter about the recent film *The Deer Hunter*. So began a nightly habit between us of discussing movies and a range of other topics about work and culture. I decided to try a slightly different approach one night when I brought in a book given to me by one of my comrades, Linda L., titled *Out of this Furnace*, a story about immigrant labor in the late 19th century in the nation’s steel mills. When I showed the book to Noel, he nodded and said that he had read it, but he insisted that it romanticized white Eastern European immigrant laborers.

“If you really want to understand the system of labor in America,” Noel insisted, “the book to read is W.E.B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction in America*. Despite my familiarity with radicalism and working class history, I barely knew the book and had certainly not read it. Moreover, I was embarrassingly ignorant about DuBois. This exchange really knocked me off balance, but by now I had a pretty good idea that Noel was no ordinary worker at Danly.

We began a new ritual of going to breakfast after our shift ended, mostly at Mexican places on 18th Street. A couple of times, we went to Noel’s place in Logan Square where he introduced me to *scrapple*. I had never heard the word “scrapple” and was thinking that it would be something unspeakable and might even contain Spam. Thankfully, Noel’s version of the dish included eggs, sausage, peppers and potatoes and I would watch as he scarfed down twice as much as I could eat – and he seemed quite pleased that he could eat far more than I could.

A Friendship Develops

Over the next couple of months, Noel fed me a steady diet of new reading material. He introduced me first to C.L.R. James with a book titled *Facing Reality*, a boldly pioneering critique of “official society” aimed not only at conservative officialdom but also at the formulaic and schematic radicalism of innumerable left theorists and parties, including my own group. Next was Antonio Gramsci, although not the Gramsci of the *Prison Notebooks* and “culture,” but instead the Gramsci of the Italian factory councils of 1919 and the searing critic of trade unionism as an inherently conservative institution. Noel argued forcefully in our midnight shift discussions that trade unions were actually part of official society, defenders of the status quo and roadblocks to revolutionary social change. I had never heard anything like this. More poignantly, unions, Noel insisted, were embedded in systemic forms of racism that plagued American society at the core.

In the course of these discussions, Noel gave me something that he himself had written two years earlier — a booklet titled *No Condescending Saviors*. I could see the influence of C.L.R. James in this text, but it also revealed Noel to be a formidable intellect and polemicist, with impressive mastery of the intellectual history of a broad array of socialist theorists, past and present. Workers, he argued, come to understand themselves as a class and a revolutionary force, not because socialists on the job from some imaginary vanguard party preach to them and tell them what to think. They come to such understandings through their own self-organization. These insights became even clearer to me after Noel gave me an extraordinary collection of essays written by him and Don Hamerquist under the title *Workplace Papers*. Over the course of the next two years, I watched Noel put this idea about self-organization into practice with other workers at Danly with a finesse that no individual in my own organization could even touch.

My organization had always emphasized that if we spoke to our co-workers openly about our socialist politics and our unflagging devotion to the union, we would win their respect. It was a naïve conceit. What I observed with Noel when we were in the lunchroom with other workers, or just on the job, was something vastly different. Noel told me that workers respected other workers who knew their job and did their job well. Young kids coming into the plant and then talking socialism right after the end of their probation had little chance of accomplishing much of anything — except making themselves look like fools.

The most impressive attribute I observed about Noel was how he interacted with these workers, especially the Black workers. When he wanted to make a point or convince others of a certain perspective, he did it by asking them a series of questions. He never told them how they should think or act – or how virtuous it was to be a socialist. He would let them come to their own understanding

of a problem or issue so that they could take ownership of their thinking and action. I came to admire the years Noel had been working, and the respect he showed for other workers.

Sojourner Truth

In the course of our evolving friendship on midnights Noel had admitted to me what I long suspected. He was indeed in another left group, but when he told me the name of the group – the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO) — I was surprised. I had never heard of it. I knew about most of the other left groups in Chicago and at Danly, but STO was unknown to me. Noel invited me to one of the group's forums, and what I remember of the fifteen or so individuals I met that night is that they all revealed a similar orientation as Noel on issues of race and trade unionism.

Basically, STO elevated race as the central axis of American political, economic, and cultural life. Noel extended this core idea into the realm of working class politics and used Gramsci's ideas about trade unionism alongside theorists such as Ted Allen and Herbert Hill to frame a new approach to political work in the plants. On a practical level, this approach embraced the remarkable but underappreciated lessons of the "League of Revolutionary Black Workers." It also involved support for radical minority caucuses within the industrial unions that were critical of the white-dominated unionism in most of basic industry. At Danly, there were two such caucuses, one of Chicano and Hispanic workers known as "Latinos Unidos; the other a bigger caucus of Black Workers known as "The Rank and File."

Noel was a critical supporter of these caucuses that operated inside what was otherwise a somewhat progressive union local of the USWA at Danly presided over by Joe Romano, who himself was a supporter of an insurgent leadership among steelworkers in Chicago grouped around Ed Sadlowski and Alice Peurala. Nevertheless, around Romano was a group of less savory union officers. The two caucuses at Danly were often involved in bitter struggles with the local on issues of equity and discrimination in the plant.

My organization was bitterly opposed to caucuses. The leaders of my group argued that such caucuses weakened the workers' movement in general, and unions specifically, and claimed that such organizational formations constituted "dual unionism," a scourge that had to be opposed by unionists and radicals alike. At Danly, I noticed that most of the activist Black workers supported The Rank and File. I was very uncomfortable with my organization's support for the white union leadership in its struggles with the two caucuses and could not rationalize our opposition to the most advanced Black workers in the plant.

I began to argue with the Chicago leadership of my organization on this issue and revealed to them that I had been influenced by my co-worker, Noel. The party leadership knew about Noel and disparaged him dismissively as a believer in the "heretical" notion of "White Skin Privilege." I do not recall hearing Noel use this phrase, but I was angered by their simplistic caricature of what I knew to be a sophisticated analysis of race and working class politics. The leader of our "faction" at Danly, Lee A., took great pains to explain to me why my thinking about unions and union caucuses was so misguided. This exchange with the local Party leadership began a slow but steady decline in my relationship to the organization.

By the end of 1980, I was attending occasional events of STO but something would change my situation on midnights with Noel. A job opened in one of the small parts departments to run a computer controlled (CNC) milling machine on second shift. I saw the posting and told Noel about it. We went together to another building in the plant where the machine was located. "No question — you bid on this job," Noel advised me. "It will give you a whole new set of skills."

I put in the bid and miraculously, nobody else in the plant bid on the job and therefore, owing to the union contract, Danly was obligated to offer me the position, despite the fact that I had absolutely no experience on a milling machine. Two days later, I was training on the 8-turret machine and in what was perhaps an anomaly, the first shift operator was an African-American named Otto F. Although I was excited about the prospect of operating this complex CNC machine on my own, I had some remorse about working on a different shift, far removed from the area of the plant where Noel and I had struck up our friendship.

Second Shift

After the training period, I settled into a new rhythm on the milling machine, not to mention a new sleep pattern as well. I was never mechanically inclined in the way other workers in the department seemed to be and went to work constantly mortified that I would not be able to read a complicated blueprint for a difficult job, or run the machine to make the part according to the print, but after nine months I was running the machine reasonably well. I was not fast and rarely made bonus, but I was careful and made few mistakes. However, something else fortuitous occurred. A lathe opened up in the department on second shift and Noel, who had still been working the same drill press on midnights, bid on and got the job.

It was quite an experience to be working again with Noel, but this time in a department with about 80 workers on each shift. In the department were four foremen and a head foreman by the name of George Fargo. It must be said that Fargo was one of the most feared and hated of all of the foremen in the plant. He resembled a version of Napoleon; short and dictatorial. On occasion he came out of his office onto the shop floor to observe things himself and I saw him often screaming mercilessly at workers, one of whom I had befriended, Rich K. who had many run-ins with Fargo and who later admitted to me that he had nightmares about the little dictator for years running. I was glad to be on second shift because Fargo would stay only for about one hour past shift change, so by 5:00 in the afternoon only the four junior foremen assigned to second shift policed us.

It was an accepted practice that when the horn sounded at 4:00 for shift change those of us on second shift would not start work but would amble down to the coffee machine to quaff a disgusting and otherwise undrinkable substance that somehow passed for coffee. I participated in this ritual at times but I would sip the drink only once so that others would see me, and then I would take it back to my machine where I would dump it later.

One of the four junior foremen on second shift was a contemptuous fellow by the name of Jack Dempsey (yes, "Jack Dempsey"). The mismatch between this individual and his boxing namesake was a running joke among workers. Everyone agreed that this foreman was no Jack Dempsey.

On shift change one afternoon, I went down to the coffee machine with Noel and after we both got our coffee, Noel told me to stay at the coffee machine with him. I had a sinking feeling that this was going to be part of some scheme he had cooked up in which I was about to be an unwitting accomplice. I admit to being scared. We were still at the coffee machine after everybody else had secured their drink and very slowly – because he always walked with such a slow and deliberate gait — Dempsey made his way toward Noel and me. He bought himself a coffee and then turned toward us. "Gentlemen," Dempsey intoned, "we are here *to work*." I started to retreat in the direction of my machine but Noel told me to wait and then he turned to Dempsey and blurted out: "Jack, I think we're here to drink coffee." Noel was just warming up. "I'm drinking coffee," Noel pointed out. "He [pointing toward me] is drinking coffee, and you [pointing at Dempsey] are drinking coffee. Therefore, I think I'm right in saying that we are here to drink coffee."

The muscles in Dempsey's face twitched in a kind of contortion. I was mortified by this. I never possessed the kind of "fuck you" demeanor toward foremen that Noel had mastered after decades in factories – and worse, Fargo was still in his office because it was only a few minutes after 4:00. Surprisingly, Dempsey did not raise his voice. He turned to me and said, "You are going back to your machine RIGHT NOW!" He then turned to Noel, and with a satisfied look on his face said, "You, my friend, are coming with me to take a little walk to George's office." Noel nodded rather nonchalantly and I watched the two of them walk the aisle into Fargo's office sanctuary.

Fargo's office was slightly visible from my machine but I could not see what was occurring. After about thirty minutes, Noel emerged from Fargo's office and went back to his lathe. I waited a bit and then walked over to find out what happened.

"It began with some yelling," Noel admitted, "but after things cooled down, I decided to talk to Fargo. I told him that I thought Dempsey was a fool – and he agreed with me. I then decided to ask Fargo for a raise." I stared at Noel in disbelief, and he continued: "He moved me up a step and now I'm getting 35 cents an hour more." This was truly Noel, the most formidable talker and debater I had ever encountered.

Noel told me to wait a week and go to Fargo at shift change to ask for a raise. I actually sucked up my guts and did it — and was surprised by my own courage. I went to Fargo and told him that I thought the company was not valuing me at the level I deserved because I had not fucked up any pieces in a year. I knew that was probably my best card. When Fargo fixed that gaze of his on me after I had made my pitch, I was terrified. "You're right," he said. Okay, you're at \$9.08 an hour. I think you're worth \$9.35 an hour so I'm going to raise you to that level." The money, of course, was inconsequential but I admit that I felt proud of myself. You have to start doing more of this, Noel told me.

The End at Danly

After about one year on the milling machine, a job running a CNC Sheldon lathe opened up in our department on second shift. I was always intimidated by lathes, with the parts spinning at such high speeds, but again, Noel said that it would be a good idea to bid on it. The tolerances on the lathe were much more demanding than the milling machine. Frequently, the jobs required tolerances in "tenths." Unlike the milling machine where parts had to be within a couple thousandths of an inch, on the lathe, the tolerances were often within ten thousandths of an inch. Once again, I was somewhat nervous about the new skills I would have to master, but the job was mine.

This changeover from the milling machine to the lathe in early 1982 came at time of major upheavals in my life. I had just moved to Logan Square from the South Side to be in closer proximity to Noel and another new person I had befriended at Danly, Joey F. An even bigger transformation, however, had occurred in my political life. I had become so estranged from my organization that I was actually pondering the idea of quitting the Party. The Party, however, actually made my decision much easier.

The Party actually put me on trial in January, 1982. The charge was fraternizing with opponents of the Party on the Left, meaning that I had conducted illicit fraternal activity with Noel and STO. I was going to quit at that moment but decided to go through the charade of the trial — and a charade it was. Nevertheless, in the end, the verdict surprised me. I was actually acquitted!

At that point, however, I decided that it would serve me best to be unaffiliated, committed to working for a better society but independent of membership in any group or party. I had been in radical organizations for nine years, and now for the first time in a decade I was on my own. I continued to attend events with STO and at Noel's invitation even wrote a cover article in the STO journal *Urgent Tasks* on the Polish workers' union Solidarity, but I was now working at Danly as an independent activist.

The biggest change of all occurred on a fateful evening in February, 1982, a couple of hours into a shift. I had a job with parts that I had to rig with the crane in order to position them in the chuck of the lathe. The parts were not big, perhaps about 40-50 pounds, but they had an awkward shape and I used straps with the crane to get them into position. Once the pieces were hoisted, I used my hands to work each piece into the chuck. I had done this job before but as I moved one of the pieces into position with my right hand, I suddenly lost control of the piece and it dropped onto my left index finger, which was resting against a sharp edge of the chuck jaw. In a split second, the impact of the piece on my finger, which was resting against the sharp edge of the chuck jaw, tore through the very top digit of the finger and severed it almost completely from the bottom part. It happened so fast that I don't remember feeling any pain from it. What I do remember, once I had extracted my finger from the chuck jaw, is staring hypnotically in disbelief at the top part of my left index finger now hanging from a thread of skin, blood flowing freely from the wound.

I think it was two minutes or so and I walked calmly over to Noel's machine and raised my finger in his field of view so that he could see what I had done. Noel tried to make light of the moment by telling me not to bleed so much and gave me a cloth to wrap around my finger. He could see that I was in shock so he walked me to the nurse's station and went inside with me. The nurse looked at the injury without emotion and then calmly said: "We'll put some bandages around it and you'll be able to go back to work." Noel then shouted at the nurse that I was not going back to work, and that we needed to see the company doctor, NOW. The nurse obliged and when the doctor arrived, he said I would need surgery right away.

An ambulance took me to a nearby hospital where a surgeon, who performed these kinds of operations for workers at Danly, sewed the hanging top "digit" onto the rest of the finger. That night the surgeon told me that I would be out for 6-8 months with my injury. In fact, I was on workers' compensation for nine months. During those months in 1982, the scourge of deindustrialization caught up to Danly and by the time I was able to go back to work, my entire department – including Noel — had been laid off, and so I was now out of work as well. The night of my injury was the last factory shift I would ever work.

Epilogue: New Pathways

In 1982, with layoffs coursing through the nation's basic industries, there were no industrial jobs to be had in Chicago. At first, Noel and I enjoyed our time off on unemployment, but gradually we had to face the prospect of what to do next. I began to revisit the idea of going to graduate school and somewhat miraculously gained admission to a Masters Program in City Planning at Berkeley. By a stroke of luck, a faculty member there on the admissions committee was doing a study of displaced steelworkers, which probably helped me get in. I moved to the Bay Area in August, 1983 to begin the 2-year program.

Noel and I kept in touch after I decided to write my masters thesis on Danly Machine, where in 1984 the remaining workers waged one of the most militant strikes spreading among industrial workers of that period. Noel was there and told me that Otto F., who had trained me on the milling machine, had been one of the most fervent workers on the picket line in dealing with the “replacement workers” that Danly was trying to hire during the walkout. By the next year, however, Noel had also decided to take a new pathway and applied for a Ph.D. at Harvard, despite the fact that he did not have a college degree.

Harvard admitted Noel based on his impressive writings over the decades, and so he took up studies in the history department. We often joked how both of us managed to get into two of the most elite graduate schools on the two coasts. In 1986, I came out to visit Noel in Cambridge and we had a wonderful time reminiscing about Danly and talking about what was ahead. During the visit, he told me about his plans to do a dissertation on race and the Irish in America. As is well-known, that dissertation became the extraordinarily influential book *How the Irish Became White*.

After the book, Noel and I had less contact as we drifted along separate paths on opposite sides of the country. We came into contact more often after 2006 when I began work on a book about Palestine. In 2014, Noel made plans to go to Palestine but from his emails to me, it seemed that he ended up not making the trip, staying instead in Istanbul.

A day after Noel passed away, I received a handwritten note in the mail that had been posted on November 6, 2019, imploring me to send money to *Hard Crackers*. In that moment, I became pensive and sullen. Very few individuals have steered my life along a completely different path. Noel was one of them. He taught me about race and politics in a way that nobody else had, but more importantly, he taught me to think imaginatively and reject what he called, “schemes.” He was a revolutionary to the core, completely confident in his unorthodox convictions. I admired him and respected his razor sharp intellect and poignant observations about the world. I’ve never met anyone who was able to master the art of searing criticism and hilarious witticisms at the level of Noel. I’m lucky to have been touched by his power and grace.

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