

Sojourner Truth Organization

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The Sojourner Truth Organization (STO) was a small revolutionary group that emphasized participation in mass struggles, opposed Stalinism as both politic and method, and contributed greatly to the development of the theory of white skin privilege, which it identified as the central impediment to the development of successful movements for social change within the United States. The organization was founded in late 1969 and existed until the mid-1980s, paralleling the historical trajectory of many larger and better-known radical groups that developed in the aftermath of the new left. STO's unique contributions to revolutionary theory and strategy separate it from other outfits of the era.

The movements of the 1960s, especially in the student arena and the black freedom struggle, faced hard times as the decade ended. The collapse of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the violent state response to groups like the Black Panthers forced many radicals to rethink their understandings of revolution. In Chicago, a small coterie, veterans of SDS, the Panthers, the women's movement, labor struggles, and old left parties, founded the Sojourner Truth Communist Organization (the word "Communist" was abandoned early on), and began intervening in popular struggles in both community and workplace contexts.

Two theoretical innovations marked STO's contribution to the revolutionary left. First, the group rearticulated the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as an analysis of "dual consciousness," arguing that the working class displayed both a broad acceptance of the status quo and an embryonic awareness of its own revolutionary potential as a class. An early pamphlet produced by STO (1976) suggested that "what is in the worker's head is a source of power – insofar as it reflects the worldview of the working class – and a source of weakness – insofar as it reflects the worldview of the capitalist class." Revolutionaries were to help expand the level of proletarian consciousness through participation in mass struggle, while challenging the acquiescence to bourgeois consciousness. STO believed that this process required the creation of a revolutionary party but rejected what it called the "Stalin model" of party-building in favor of an eclectic mix of organizational ideas drawn from Lenin and the Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James.

The second quintessential aspect of STO's revolutionary theory was its analysis of white skin privilege as a bulwark of white supremacy. A founding member of the group, Noel Ignatin (now Ignatiev), helped pioneer the concept by reframing ideas initially advanced by the black Marxist W. E. B. Du Bois. According to the theory, people identified as "white" benefit from material and psychological advantages that people of color are denied. STO (1972) argued that white workers must "actively and militantly reject their partial, selfish and counterfeit interests as part of a group which is favored in relation to blacks, on behalf of their total, broad and true interests as part of a class which is coming alive." As a largely white group, the

organization's role was to spur the white working class in this direction and to support organizing efforts emerging from black, Puerto Rican, and other non-white communities.

Heavily influenced by the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers, STO's early emphasis was on organizing at the point of production, especially in large factories in the steel, auto, and manufacturing sectors. In contrast to many groups of the period also engaged in workplace organizing, STO rejected mainstream labor unions as a venue for struggle, calling instead for "independent mass workers' organizations." The group's members participated in the creation of many such organizations, in both unionized and non-union factories, always agitating for demands that challenged what STO described as the "bourgeois legality compromise." This compromise doomed traditional unions, which necessarily negotiated workable relationships between workers and management. STO's activities within several dozen factories in and around Chicago resulted in hundreds of job actions during the early 1970s, ranging from short-term work stoppages to longer wildcat strikes and sabotage at the worksite.

As the 1960s receded into the past and the independent labor upsurge of the early 1970s waned, conflicts within STO over ideology and strategy led to splits that nearly destroyed the group. The rebuilding process preserved the core ideological commitments of the organization, but two strategic shifts manifested. First, the group extended its reach geographically, becoming a regional organization and eventually growing to include members in a dozen states. Second, STO began to emphasize the importance of national liberation struggles. Solidarity with, most prominently, the Puerto Rican independence movement and the Iranian student movement in the US became a central component of the group's practical work.

In the early 1980s STO altered its strategy again, distancing itself from the Stalinism of many national liberation movements it had previously supported and focusing on the so-called new social movements – the anti-nuclear movement, anti-fascist organizing, youth/student efforts, and reproductive rights struggles, among others. Within this context, the group consistently encouraged what it called "mass illegality" as a strategic orientation. For example, the group led an attempt to blockade the military

base at Rock Island, Illinois, in 1985 to protest US intervention in Central America. However, disillusionment caused by the Reagan revolution and a new series of splits over strategic direction undermined STO's organizational viability. By the late 1980s the group was defunct.

The Sojourner Truth Organization was never very large, but its legacy has been both outsized and underappreciated. Little scholarly attention has been paid to the group's history, with only brief mentions in Buhle, Elbaum, and Glaberman, although a website is dedicated to archiving the group's prodigious written output. STO's theoretical influence is felt in the widespread acceptance within the US left of "privilege"-based narratives of oppression, and its strategic legacy can be seen in the anti-fascist work of groups like Anti-Racist Action (ARA) over the past two decades.

SEE ALSO: Anti-Racist Action (ARA); Black Panthers; Du Bois, W. E. B. (1868–1963); Gramsci, Antonio (1891–1937); James, C. L. R. (1901–1989); League of Revolutionary Black Workers; Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich (1870–1924); Leninist Philosophy; Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

References and Suggested Readings

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