

*The following text is a response by four individuals whose testimonies were used in an article published in the Spring/Summer 2013 issue of Left History. Our decision to include this response in this issue was motivated by a number of factors. In addition to providing a first-hand account of the history and politics of the International Socialists, we feel that this response makes a valuable contribution to debates concerning the benefits and potential risks of oral history. Most importantly among these are the issues of ownership of testimonies and relationships of power between interviewers and interviewees, both of which are questions that must be navigated by historians who make use of oral history. The arguments raised by Candace Cohn, Deborah Roberts, Bill Roberts, and Joel Geier, we feel, provide us with valuable insight into this debate. We also feel that allowing the individuals and communities whose stories and lives we make the centre of our research to respond to our work is an important part of constructing and maintaining relationships with these individuals and communities in which we conduct our work.*

*While it is important to maintain and protect the academic freedom of our authors, in instances where disagreement occurs, we also feel that we, as scholars and editors of Left History, owe it to provide those whose lives we examine with an equal platform to respond. Therefore, the response is published below in the hopes of contributing to a free and open debate. We hope that our readers will find the same value in its contribution as we have.*

*Left History Editors*

## Response to Martin Smith's "Talkin' about a Working-Class Revolution: Not the IS, Not in Our Name

*Candace Cohn, Deborah Roberts, Bill Roberts, and Joel Geier*

The rank-and-file trade union work of the International Socialists (IS) of the 1970s has been recognized by many on the Left as an important contribution to left labor work in the United States. One therefore approaches a history of it, and particularly an oral history based upon the first-hand experience and testimony of those directly involved, with high expectations.

*Left History*, a Canadian academic journal, has (Spring/Summer 2013) published "Talkin' 'bout a Workin'-Class Revolution: The Gendered 'Turn' to Party Building, the Personal, and Perspectives Gained from Within," by Martin Smith, of the University of Illinois.<sup>1</sup> Smith's article purports to be an "oral history" (75) based on interviews given to Smith in 2006 by seven former IS members, including some who played leading roles in the organization's labor work of the 1970s. Smith offers, he says, a "gender analysis" that goes "beyond the IS's unique theoretical innovations or its organizational history" and "uncovers even more deeply buried histories of radicalism in the Seventies, and the unique experiences of the IS women who took industrial jobs, in particular" (76). Martin Smith's piece in *Left History* might be worth his readers' time but for a number of serious weaknesses.

The data on which Smith relies consist of oral history interviews he conducted seven years ago with seven former members of the IS. Smith's ostensible purpose at the time included his professed desire to preserve the important lessons and history of the IS's industrial work, complete a class assignment, and study the "fascinating" IS political work. He claimed at the time that this work showed "the opposite" of gender stereotypes prevalent in his circles and academia, namely that, according to Smith, women (particularly white women) could not lead or unite with men (particularly Black men) and vice-versa. At least six of the seven interviewees (we have been unable to reach the seventh) were given no notice, at any time, that any of the material would be published, and they neither gave, nor would have given, their permission to publish their oral histories, which under the standards of oral history are their property, not that of the interviewer.<sup>2</sup> Four (Deborah Roberts, Bill Roberts, Joel Geier, and Candace Cohn) were trying to help a close personal friend and comrade. Two others (Wendy Thompson, Sarah Shaffer) were referred by two of the first four, relying on trust. The seventh interviewee, Bruce Levine, is a former academic advisor of the interviewer. Smith verifies in "Talkin'" that he "identified openly" as a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) at the time of the inter-

views. “My relationships,” he writes, “to the majority of the participants grew out of these political affiliations and were built on personal ties of mentoring and comradely solidarity” (94, n.4). Six of the seven of those interviewed strongly repudiate Martin Smith’s misrepresentation of their narratives.

Smith’s understanding of the International Socialists contains numerous factual and historical errors. To supply a few examples: Smith writes on page 77 that in 1975, IS membership; including its youth group, the Red Tide, included “a handful” of “newly-recruited black workers.” In fact, the Red Tide was at least two-thirds Black; together, the Black membership of the Red Tide and IS was about 20 percent. On page 78, Martin Smith tells us that the IS women who went into industry “were also some of the first female organizers to likewise carry revolutionary politics along with them—a feat that was nearly impossible among previous generations of radicals.” Genora Johnson, Anne Draper, Alice Peurala, Jessie Glaberman, Edie Fox, and other radical socialist-feminists in heavy industry from previous generations would disagree. On page 92, Martin Smith tells us that following her work in the mill, Candace Cohn became head of the national IS steel fraction. In fact, Cohn went on to become steel correspondent for *Labor Notes* (Cohn was never head of the IS steel fraction.). There are at least twenty other, similar *errata* in Smith’s piece. In addition, there are misleading descriptions, for example, Smith’s characterization of the IS as “a now-defunct 1970s radical group” (1). Actually, the IS chose to merge and regroup as (the continuing) Solidarity. The IS also initiated *Labor Notes*, and played a central role in initiating TDU (Teamsters for a Democratic Union), both of which are far from “defunct” today. In addition, a split-off section of the IS, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which maintains the same basic worldview, is generally accepted as the largest American far left group today.

What is the expectant reader of “Talkin’ ’bout a Working-Class Revolution” to make of Martin Smith’s blackout of virtually all of the narrators’ actual rank-and-file work? In fairness, the author gives this nod to IS work in industry: “In addition to local initiatives, members helped found national union reform networks and participated in national union reform caucuses, notably the United Action Caucus of the American Federation of Teachers and the United National Caucus within the United Auto Workers (UAW)” (78). Teamsters (one of whom Smith interviewed) will be interested to learn that the Teamsters for a Decent Contract (TDC), Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and UPSurge are not considered sufficiently “notable” to merit inclusion even in this brief mention. Steelworkers (two of whom Smith interviewed, and at least one of whom spoke at length about the Sadlowski campaign), will likewise notice the omission of the Sadlowski Steelworkers Fight Back campaign of 1976-7—the largest and most important national opposition movement in the history of the United Steel Workers.<sup>3</sup>

In his “uncovering” of the “even more deeply buried histories of radicalism in the Seventies, and the unique experiences of the IS women who took industrial jobs” (76), Martin Smith has deleted virtually all of the IS labor politics and concrete rank-and-file labor work so extensively described by the interviewees in their narratives. We therefore begin by presenting some of the historical background to the IS labor work. We then discuss the other weaknesses of Smith’s “Talkin’”: its anti-feminist stereotyping of militant socialist-feminist leaders, its presentation of narrators’ views, experiences, and words as their opposites, and its core nature as polemic.

### 1. IS Trade Unionism

Smith dismisses IS trade union work as a “failed strategy” (80). All varieties of 1970s militant trade unionism “failed,” as the neo-liberal restructuring of capitalism devastated working-class organization, demolished the revolutionary Left, and introduced decades of economic, social and political reaction. No small, radical group could have affected the historic victory of neo-liberalism over the working class. We made our share of errors and mistakes, and like all previous generations of radicals, ultimately failed to end capitalism. But what is equally, if not more, important is what we got right.

IS trade union policy was the application of its political program to the 1960s-70s working-class revolt. The foundation of all IS politics is the central tenet of revolutionary Marxism, that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself. We extended this basic principle with the IS’s major theoretical contribution, the concept of “socialism from below.” The IS rejected both social-democratic reform from above and Stalinist state nationalization as socialism. We argued that socialism’s meaning is workers’ democracy, the working class raised to ruling class—workers’ control of production, the economy, and the state, through organs of direct democracy.

The IS upheld the Leninist concept that for the working class to emancipate itself it had to create a revolutionary party to provide leadership in the fight for socialism, to raise the fighting capacity, class consciousness, and unity of the entire working class to the point that it could contend for revolutionary hegemony. The road to a revolutionary party in the U.S., with its small socialist and large labor movements, went through a rank-and-file movement in the trade unions. *Workers’ Power*, the name of the IS newspaper, summed up our political tenets.

The IS was defined by the programmatic slogan from which it drew its name: Neither Washington nor Moscow, but for the Third Camp of International Socialism, opposed to the two imperialist camps of the Cold War.

The IS was an enthusiastic champion of Black, women’s, and gay liberation from the start. Revolutionary socialists, we maintained, had to view the world through the eyes of the oppressed, and to fight against all oppression in

society, the workplace, the unions, and within the socialist movement. We supported the self-activity and self-organization of the oppressed, including Black, women's, and gay caucuses within trade unions and socialist groups, the IS included. The IS rejected as spurious any call for unity based on subordinating the fight against oppression to conservative ideas of workers, or to the constraints of the trade union bureaucracy, liberalism, the Democratic Party, American imperialism, or the prevailing ideologies of the rulers of Moscow, Peking or Havana; we never apologized for, or ignored, the racism, sexism, and homophobia rampant in the capitalist world as well as in the so-called "really existing socialist countries." The liberation movements of that period knew our views: no one in those times, save some strange sectarians, would have agreed with Martin Smith and denigrated our organization's, or leading members,' commitment to women's liberation.

Our plan to fight for these goals was through a rank-and-file movement within the trade unions. That movement, as one of our slogans summed it up, should "return the union to the shop floor," to create strong shop-floor organization to fight on working conditions, the embryo of any workers' control, as explained in our classic 1965 pamphlet, *A New Era of Labor Revolt*, written by Stan Weir. (Much of our trade union theory and record is contained in our many labor publications, which have stood the test of historical accuracy and relevance: *The American Working Class in Transition*, by Kim Moody; *Women Workers: The Forgotten Third of the Working Class*, by Ilene Winkler; *Class Struggle Unionism; A World to Win; Auto Revolt; Toward the Working Class*, by Kim Moody, Fred Eppsteiner, and Mike Flug; *Why the Working Class?* by Hal Draper; *Productivity: The Employers' Attack and How to Fight It*, by Lori Larkin; *Conspiracy in the Trucking Industry; Struggle in the Coal Fields*, by Kim Moody; *Taking Care of Business—The Struggle for Workers' Power*; [USW] *Contract '77—From Bargainers to Beggars; The Steel Industry and the United Steelworkers of America—The Crisis Within*, by Ken Morgan; *Don't Buy "Buy American,"* by Kim Moody; *Toward Teacher Power*, by Steve Zeluck, etc.)

The IS view challenged traditional models of union reform caucuses focused on union elections and leadership positions. Our view of rank-and-file groups linked shop floor struggle and strong shop floor organization with the fight to restore the unions to democratic workers' control. We presented our aims in harmony with the outlook of militants, through the transitional bridge of class-struggle unionism, that is to say, confrontation, as opposed to the prevailing business unionist ideology of cooperation and class collaboration between union officials and employers.

These were not positions that we developed through the radicalization of the student movement of the 1960s. They were the trade union lessons passed onto us by our revolutionary predecessors, the 1920s Communist Party Trade Union Educational League, the 1930s Trotskyists and Musteites in

Minneapolis and Toledo, and the organization from whose demise we emerged, the Workers Party-Independent Socialist League (of Max Shachtman, C.L.R. James, Hal Draper, Raya Dunayevskaya, Irving Howe, Anne Draper, James T. Farrell, B.J. Widick, Julius Jacobson, Marty Glaberman, Deborah Meier, Michael Harrington, and many others), which had organized rank-and-file caucuses against the no-strike pledge during WWII. A number of our older, well known trade unionists (Stan Weir, Anne Draper, Steve Zeluck, *et. al.*) were active participants in these events in the 30s and 40s, and educated us in these principles.

These politics allowed us to be relatively more successful in trade union work than were some other left groups, who often veered between dual unionism, popular front “center-left” alliances with union bureaucrats, or front groups masquerading as rank-and-file groups. We never confused or counterposed socialist political organization to rank-and-file groups, both of which have different roles to play. We organized wherever possible in collaboration with the existing militants to build broad formations that included people of diverse political views united for militant, class-struggle unionism. Our members were open socialists, because we believed in the necessity of total honesty with the workers with whom we collaborated, never hiding our politics, our aims and goals, or our perspectives on the rank-and-file movement.

Our view was that the strength of the movement depended on its ability to engage as many workers as possible in activity and struggle, to draw upon their talents, insights, intelligence, experience, and creativity—confident that struggle and joint activity would raise class consciousness and deepen the organizational capacity of the rank-and-file movement, as well as convince some workers of the validity of our socialist politics. One of our strengths in rank and file work was in initiating dozens of shop bulletins and rank-and-file newspapers, drawing in other workers to write, produce, and distribute them. They were the source of news on the company, industry, union, shop floor struggle, racism and sexism, politics, and the organizational center for an alternative leadership.

In alliance with other working-class leaders and cadres—Art Fox, Edie Fox, Pete Kelly, and Jordan Sims in the UAW; Vince Meredith (UPS), Pete Camaratta, and Lester Williams in the IBT; Ed Mann, John Barbero, and Ken Doran in the USW, Anna Palmer in the APWU—the IS helped initiate and lead approximately 35-40 local rank-and-file caucuses, and a few national ones. In the United National Caucus in the UAW, the IS played the key role in uniting the white skilled-trade opposition with Black assembly-line workers on a militant anti-racist platform. The IS was central to Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and UPSurge in the IBT, United Action in the CWA, and the rank-and-file caucus of the same name in the AFT (as well as supporting broader formations, such as Fight Back in the USW).

Another aspect of our rank-and-file strategy was to spread the news and information of trade union struggle and strategy to the broad labor left

through the publication of *Labor Notes*, which the IS initiated, and which to this day remains an influential labor newsletter.

It is beyond the scope of this reply to provide a history of the concrete IS rank-and-file work throughout these industries. Since, however, Smith ignores virtually all of this work described in both his researched citations and interviews, we supply one example here: the UPSurge campaign. In 1975, a handful of IS members working at UPS helped organize Teamsters for A Decent Contract, the precursor of TDU. The fantastic reception of co-workers led them to publish a newspaper called *UPSurge* in September 1975. The phenomenal growth of the paper brought the ISers into contact with networks of UPS militants coming out of previous strikes, particularly at the best-organized hub in Louisville, Kentucky, led by Vince Meredith. The resulting alliance with the existing layer of working-class fighters then led to the formation of the rank-and-file organization, UPSurge. Its first national meeting in Indianapolis, in January 31, 1976 drew 650 UPSers to determine demands and strategy for a contract campaign (the first demand in its program was for the same pay and benefits for part-timers as for full-timers.) A national coordinating committee of nine was elected, three of whom were IS teamsters, all women. Thousands then took part in the local founding meetings of UPSurge—a response not seen since McCarthyism—including 100 in Cincinnati, 100 in St. Louis, 175 in Kansas City, 225 in Minneapolis, 450 in Detroit, and 250 in Chicago. Those setting up local committees were young, multiracial men and women, who typically had no prior trade union experience. To prepare for industrial action and a possible strike, they mobilized the ranks around a fighting program that carried union meetings, and had the officials on the run. The IBT was forced to call a strike—only to settle for the Master Freight Agreement settlement, which the union could have gotten without a strike. The UPSurge national committee issued a call to continue the strike, as a wildcat (officially-unsanctioned) strike, until other gains were won. Workers stayed out in at least eight cities. Within a day, the company got an injunction and threatened to fire any striking workers; the union bureaucracy pledged they would not defend fired strikers; and the police were brought in to break the wildcat. Up against the company, union, government, courts, and police, the wildcat collapsed after a day. UPSurge called it off, as inexperienced workers, fearful of losing their jobs, were no match for the combined forces they were up against. One can draw the conclusion that these events were a stirring experience of working-class struggle, indicative of the potential of the rank and file in the 1970s, if it had been allowed the time to mature and if there had not been such a sweeping victory of neo-liberalism. Or, following Martin Smith, one can dismiss these events as the “failed strategy” of some “outside” women revolutionaries, mainly concerned with gendered personal experiences. If so, the narrative of the rank-and-file revolt of the 1970s will continue to be lost to history.

In all of its rank-and-file work in various unions, the distinctive programmatic ideas the IS raised are recognizable in the platforms of many of the groups it initiated or collaborated in building: innocent until proven guilty (in the grievance procedure), a steward for every foreman (to rebuild shop floor organization), open the skilled trades to Blacks and women, affirmative action and super seniority for previously-discriminated-against groups, maternity and paternity leave, immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, no union funds for Israel bonds, as well as traditional militant demands such as 30 for 40 (cutting the existing work week without cutting pay), no forced overtime, right to strike over local grievances, an independent labor party, *etc.* Many of these demands did not originate with us, but in the mid-'70s we were arguably their most prominent proponents within the labor movement.

There is nothing about IS politics that is “outside” the working class, as Martin Smith maintains, unless one agrees that capitalist ideology is normal for workers, and socialist politics are foreign to workers and are “importations from outside.” That view, still popular in redbaiting circles, was developed under McCarthyism, when American capitalism succeeded in separating socialism and the working class. The effort of the IS and other industrial radicals was to restore that broken link between socialism and the working class. All of our trade unionism was carried out with the knowledge that socialism is nothing but the conscious expression of the unconscious striving of the working class for its liberation.

## 2. Women’s Liberation and Anti-Feminist Stereotypes in “Talkin”

Throughout, Smith presents IS women as primarily concerned with “personal” motivations, influences, concerns, and satisfactions in their work—as opposed to political and theoretical ones—while the IS men, we are told, are the opposite, political and theoretical thinkers who are emotionally empty vessels. Ignoring for the moment its reactionary sexism, Smith’s great “insight”—that men are dispassionate and theoretical, while women are emotional and nurturing—is both sophomoric and false.

Since Smith’s “history” both contradicts and ignores the extensive historical record and role of the IS on the Left in terms of its politics, work, and theory in aggressive support of women’s and gay liberation, we first give some of that background here, before examining Smith’s claims.

The IS was one of the few organizations on the U.S. Left to respond to the rise of the women’s liberation and gay liberation movements with enthusiasm—in stark contrast to most of the New Left, which approached both with hostility.

From the beginning, the IS was unique in its commitment to fighting for women’s and gay liberation. The overwhelming majority of New Left organizations were indifferent to women’s liberation. Most socialist organizations

refused to acknowledge that gays even faced discrimination under capitalism, some holding that homosexuality was an illness or perversion. As veteran New Left activist Max Elbaum recalled of Maoism, “With a few exceptions, Maoist groups had an unfriendly attitude toward the rapidly growing women’s liberation movement (dismissing it as petty bourgeois) and were intensely hostile to homosexuality and the emerging lesbian/gay rights movement.”<sup>4</sup> Until November 1970, the SWP (Socialist Workers Party [US]) barred from membership and expelled gay members.<sup>5</sup> These groups were imitating Castro, who put gays into concentration camps. The IS, by contrast, fought publicly, militantly, and consistently for gay and lesbian rights, and for socialist-feminism.

Given Smith’s emphasis on gender, his research would have benefited by documenting the IS’s embrace of the women’s and gay liberation movements since the organization’s founding in 1969. Indeed, if Smith had done an adequate job of researching the IS’s history, he would have shown that both male and female members of the organization shared a deep *political* commitment to winning both women’s and gay liberation. Instead, Smith erroneously concludes that men were motivated by *political* events, while women found motivation from *personal* relationships—echoing the same reactionary gender stereotypes that the women’s liberation movement sought to overcome. Smith’s conclusion does an enormous disservice to the many women leaders active in the IS during this period, including those he interviewed.

The necessary documentation to demonstrate the IS’s commitment to women’s and gay liberation would have been easy to compile by a mere survey of the organization’s newspaper (the IS newspaper, *International Socialist*, was issued monthly until mid-1970, when it was renamed *Workers’ Power*, thereafter published first bi-weekly, and later, weekly.) Indeed, every issue of the newspaper during the early years of the women’s liberation movement contained at least one and usually several lengthy articles written by and about women. These articles were not about women’s feelings or personal relationships but rather sophisticated political analyses of the pressing issues of the times. Among the many valuable articles explicitly focused on women that appeared in the newspaper, the following provide examples of a clear theoretical orientation for the organization around the goals of women’s liberation:

- “The Hidden Proletariat” (*IS*, October 1969; soon thereafter published as an IS Pamphlet, *Women Workers: The Forgotten Third of the Working Class*, by Ilene Winkler).<sup>6</sup> This article, taking up three full pages in a twenty-page newspaper, provided a detailed picture of women in the labor force, combined with the discrimination faced by all women of that era. Like all socialist-feminists historically, Winkler focused on the importance of building a working-class women’s movement. However, far from limiting the goals of socialist women to organizing in the

workplace, Winkler concludes, “In general, probably the most important elements in the development of a working class women’s movement will be a cross-class movement for women’s liberation and the growth of militancy among the working class as a whole.”

- “The Pill and Women’s Liberation” (*IS*, March 1970), by Erica Dunn.<sup>7</sup> This article analyzes the profit motive of drug companies in marketing the pill despite the clear health hazards it posed to the women who used this as a method of birth control. Dunn calls for 1) 24-hour/day childcare facilities; 2) equal pay for equal work; and 3) free and legal abortion on demand.
- “International Women’s Day: Commemorating a History of Struggle” (*IS*, March 1970), by Stephanie Batey and Cynthia Novak.<sup>8</sup> This article provided a radical history of the women’s movement, including its origins in the abolition movement.
- “Marx and Engels on Women’s Liberation” (*IS*, April 1970), by Hal Draper.<sup>9</sup> This article, taking up five full pages in a 24-page newspaper, was an excerpt from a chapter in Draper’s then-forthcoming *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*. The introduction to the article argued, “It should go without saying that acquaintance with Marx and Engels’ views is useful only in order to tackle the added knowledge and problems of our own day.”
- “Maoism and Women,” by Laurie Landy.<sup>10</sup> This lengthy article analyzes the lack of liberation for women in Mao’s China, at a time when much of the New Left held up China as a model for all human liberation, including that of women.
- “Protective Legislation and the ERA,” by Marilyn Danton.<sup>11</sup> Danton lays out the need for an equal rights amendment for women while underscoring the concrete problems inherent in the ERA legislation then under consideration by the U.S. Senate, which would have likely eradicated all protective legislation then in place that limited hours of work and imposed safety regulations for male and female workers. As Danton argues, “Let it not be thought for a minute that we are opposed to equal rights. We are for an equal rights amendment which achieves equal protection for men and women workers, as well as equal rights for women... [T]he passage of an equal rights amendment which did not form the basis for the destruction of protective legislation would be a step forward for the movement. Support for the existing one must be seen, however, as at least implicitly anti-working class.”
- “Women and the Democratic Party,” by Ilene Winkler.<sup>12</sup> This article, based on a speech by Winkler to the march for women’s equality on August 26, 1971), was an explicit response to the push underway

among mainstream feminists to focus on electing more women to public office. Winkler argued presciently, “They might let us have a few more women Senators, but that won’t get us free childcare. That won’t get us equal work for women and jobs for everyone. That won’t get us free abortions, or end the harassment of lesbians.”

- “Abortion and Women’s Liberation” (*Workers’ Power*, November 26–December 9, 1971), by Louise Mitchell, which argues that the goal of free abortion, abandoned by the mainstream feminist movement, is central for working class women, Black women, and other women of color.<sup>13</sup>

The IS’s early commitment to gay liberation was also evident in the newspaper. As James Coleman, an IS member who was a regular writer for *Workers’ Power* and a gay liberation activist, argued in the newspaper’s February 21–March 11, 1971 edition, “In a little more than a year, Gay Liberation has changed both the radical movement and the gay community. Gay people, who had been secret in radical organizations as everywhere else, are now forcing these organizations to reconsider their prejudices against homosexuality... Whether Gay Liberation can go beyond these beginnings, to start building a movement of real social power, depends on whether it can find a clear political direction and a way to move beyond its present middle-class base.”<sup>14</sup> With the benefit of hindsight more than forty years later, it is clear that Gay Liberation, since transformed into an LGBTQ movement, has indeed implanted roots in the working class. Same-sex marriage—with its clear financial benefits to LGBTQ people who had been denied the legal rights of heterosexual couples—has now reached a degree of momentum that makes its ultimate victory almost inevitable. The IS championed these rights when most of the Left regarded the gay movement with hostility.

The position of the IS was that there could be no true socialism without women’s and gay liberation, and there could be no true women’s or gay liberation without revolutionary socialism. The consistent, strong coverage by *Workers’ Power* of women’s and gay liberation issues continued throughout the 1970s—as did the IS work and leadership in these movements, and in particular, in the working-class women’s liberation movement, as an organization deeply committed to socialist-feminism.

Smith fails to present this historical record, despite the fact that 1) Smith presents what he describes as a “gender analysis”; 2) Smith claims to have written an oral labor history of IS women in industry; 3) the IS industrial work generally was frequently led by militant, political women (for one example, the leader of national UPSurge was a woman ISer), and Smith interviewed four of these women; 4) the IS industrial work frequently could not be separated from an aggressive fight for working-class women’s liberation; 5) members of the organization’s national leadership, including two of its national secretaries, the editor of

its national newspaper (*Workers' Power*), and a number of its branch organizers, were key, powerful, women; and 6) IS men, three of whom Smith interviewed, were generally, publicly known to be strong, revolutionary socialist-feminists.

Despite interview narratives and the historical record of IS politics and work on women's liberation, Martin Smith's "gendered" "oral history" attempts to undermine the political and intellectual competence of IS women who actually became leaders in industry, and upon their very ability to provide political leadership. Martin Smith would have us believe that the militant, political women he interviewed (and by extension, all women) are predominantly "personal," relationship-oriented creatures—not intellectual, political or theoretical thinkers—while men are their polar opposites.

"Friendships," states Smith in what seems to be his thesis, "and bonds of solidarity were more important than party doctrine and theoretical abstractions for why some [*i.e.*, women, unlike men] had made the gendered turn to Seventies revolutionary practice" (76). "While the men... emphasized 'the political' and revolutionary theory, the women turned to 'the personal'..." (76). "[P]ersonal relationships sustained the [women's] activism..." (76). "Their decisions to become revolutionaries were connected to feelings they associated with those they held dear, rather than theory, electrifying speeches, or the party line..." (p. 85). "The women I interviewed had turned to radicalism for reasons beyond the narrowly political [meaning, the 'personal']" (84). "But it was clear from their interviews that their [IS women's] greater triumph [greater than success in changing male co-workers' minds about sexism] and the real lesson learned was the importance of friendships, community, and solidarity in their relationships with other women on the job, a solidarity that went beyond simply militant unionism and revolutionary theory" (88-89).

Smith goes on to argue that these same personal concerns continued to outweigh and obscure political ones for the IS women in their trade union work.<sup>15</sup> Although Martin Smith claims that his "gender analysis" is something new that he is just "uncovering" (76), his stereotyping is an obstacle that political women have had to contend with throughout history. Even the most brilliant woman theoretician in the history of the socialist movement, Rosa Luxemburg, had to contend with ignorant, "theoretical" men who dismissed her as "emotional" and "personal." She nonetheless habitually ignored and disdained their petty insults, displaying her theoretical, intellectual, and political superiority by the continuing incisiveness of her theoretical contributions—despite the denial of the reality of her leadership by the Martin Smiths of her day.

Since we know that even Luxemburg had personal trauma in her life, a historian might have used that information to paint her political activity as nothing more than the personal expression of her emotional difficulties. This is the path that Martin Smith followed, when able to collect personal data on his female interviewees. Smith never informed Cohn of his plan to publish her identity in

an academic journal in connection with (half-true, half-false) traumatic events from her formative history. Until his publication of them, these events had remained, over many decades, deeply and deliberately private. His publication of them without notice to Cohn, before or afterward, violates professional ethics in oral history and in journalism. His forced “outing” of this highly sensitive material—a crucial part of which he gets disgracefully, inexcusably wrong—constitutes a repetition of deep, personal violation.

One portion of Smith’s information is accurate: Cohn’s sister was brutalized and killed, and Cohn experienced strong emotions in response. Her emotions, however, rather than *generating* her feminist views and activities, as Smith implies, *reinforced* her *already established*, militant socialist-feminist politics. Smith transforms Cohn’s experience of ultimate misogyny into a demeaning view of women’s capacities: socialist women (and by extension, all women) as primarily emotional and personal, rather than political and intellectual, beings. In our view, the interviewer’s unilateral publication of Cohn’s private, misogynist trauma, and the anti-feminist analysis Smith uses these to support, is nothing short of another unconscionable violation, both of her sister and of Cohn.

### 3. “Talkin” and the Challenges of Oral History: Fidelity to Interview Narratives

Smith posits women as fundamentally weaker (if not void) theoretical and intellectual beings. He goes further, and—posing in the guise of an “interviewer” conducting an “oral history”—presents the *women narrators as themselves voicing* Smith’s demeaning views about them(selves). Not only does Martin Smith denigrate the important work and leadership of highly committed, highly serious, highly political women—he has the women publicly trashing their own work. “It was not their work ... that made their contributions significant, but their ability to highlight the personal ...” (86). We are told that these are the reflections not of Smith, but of the women themselves, “sharing their own... gendered (*sic*) analyses of what had given their lives meaning... highlight[ing] what had given significance to *them* and what *they* valued. . .” (*italics in original*, 93).

Smith presents the words of his interviewees as their polar opposites. He is not “uncovering” hidden, “deeply buried” meanings: *he is making it up* (76), a type of misrepresentation that historians should strive to avoid. To give a few examples: Deborah Roberts, according to Smith, joined the IS not because of her theoretical convictions about the Russian revolution, following an intense political debate, but because she liked the person with whom she discussed the question into the wee hours of the morning (75). Martin Smith has discounted and turned on its head the very evidence he himself has presented, putting forward the opposite conclusion as fact.

The reader, unfortunately, cannot fairly comprehend “Debra’s” reasons for joining the IS on any basis, because (as in the case with other interviewees)

her narrative about her activities, politics, and influences—involving many movements, political and world events, including a strong political and theoretical relationship with the IS prior to joining—is deleted from her narrative and experience by the interviewer.

In similar fashion, Martin Smith maintains that Cohn was only secondarily or incidentally influenced by the political movements of the 1960s, and became a revolutionary socialist primarily to achieve her own individual, personal liberation. But Cohn's passionate, extensive narrative about her deep immersion in the political and social movements of the '60s had in fact repeatedly emphasized their primacy in influencing her political development. For one example among many: "[T]he Civil Rights Movement and the courage of Blacks... in the South... [e]veryday people who weren't famous, their courage and their heroism was *number one* what modeled it for us and what taught us what it was about." (*italics added*, interview transcript, 5). Instead, according to Smith, Cohn was "shaped" by "the politics of the personal." In fact, Cohn had described repudiating these personal, anti-male, class-contentless politics from the time she first encountered them in the consciousness raising groups of the Ann Arbor women's movement.

Nor was Cohn influenced and radicalized, Smith tells us, by theoretical ideas (76, 84, 85). To make this assertion, he must ignore and contradict Cohn's own narrative: "I read Marx and Engels in one of my first classes my freshmen year and... became convinced that class distinctions and the ownership of the means of production were the critical core problems in this society." (Interview transcript (1).

Martin Smith paints militant, fighting women and men as gender stereotypes. The very stereotypes that these socialist-feminists participated in and 'built the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s and continue fighting to this day to end. In presenting his views as belonging to, and voiced by, his socialist-feminist interviewees about themselves, Smith's "gender analysis" provides a classic example of what patriarchy has always done to women. Deaf to their voices, and unable to conceive of intellectually competent, serious political female leaders and thinkers, Martin Smith dismisses, silences, and voids the women's descriptions of their own experience and then substitutes his content for theirs.

Due to the limits of his gender analysis, Smith is no more capable of hearing men's voices than he is women's. The interviewer concludes that one narrator, Bill Roberts, "stressed 'theory'" as his reason for joining a revolutionary organization in 1970 (75). What the supposedly then-theoretical Roberts has just been quoted as saying, is "We probably would have... joined PL [Progressive Labor Party]... or the RU [Revolutionary Union]... or any other group... pursuing us at that time... I don't know why we would have been immune to that?" (75). And to show that, like men in general, the theoretical Roberts is also emotionally

shallow, the interviewer criticizes him for his “dispassion,” which, Smith explains, is evidenced by Roberts’ “notable understatement” in describing the protests outside the 1968 Democratic Party Convention as “kind of exciting,” and a Marquette Park civil rights march led by Martin Luther King, Jr. as “an eye-opener” (79).

Not only Roberts, but none of the men, maintains Smith, “mentioned friendships, emotional attachments, personal feelings, or—surprisingly—the memory of any women directly when they described what *most* influenced their politicization and decisions to join the IS” (*italics in original*, 78).

But in a 2008 biography of Joel Geier, Martin Smith discussed Geier’s early years, including his close relationship with his socialist grandfather, the murder of much of his extended family by the Nazis, and personal and physical anti-Semitic attacks upon him—experiences that profoundly affected his political development. Smith also discussed the influence on Geier’s political development of his teachers Deborah Meier and Phyllis Jacobson. (*Vive Le Revolution*, 2-4, 7). Furthermore, Bill Roberts’ narrative noted that it was Deborah Roberts who had introduced him to the politics and core ideas of the IS.

#### 4. Martin Smith’s “Talkin’” is a Polemic

Like presumptions of gender inequality, examples of bias in Martin Smith’s linguistic choices abound. The interviewer describes one interviewee as having “*bragged*” [not “reported” or “explained”] that she had “continued to pass out radical literature at the [auto] plant gates at least once a month for more than 30 years” (*italics added*, 92). Another is said to have “*claimed*” (not “said” or “stated”) that she had taken on *every* instance of racism and sexism she encountered on the shop floor...” (*italics in Smith*, 88). Another narrator’s voice is prefaced with the phrase, “Trying to put a positive spin on [the subject]...” (90). Gestures common to Jewish, working-class culture are described by the interviewer as “studied mannerisms...” (80). In reporting the “irony” the interviewer “could not help but note” in one interviewee’s expression of ongoing political commitment, Smith describes her home in “a prosperous Chicago exurb” (84). The “prosperous exurb” of Marengo, Illinois is in fact a rural farming community of average median household income. And Martin Smith has this to say about Bill Roberts, a political activist whom Smith had *requested* to *interview* about his *political work*: “However for Bill, the personal was tangential to a revolutionary organization anchored in theory and practice. If he had been *sentimental* (*sic*) during the interview, it would have changed the *relationship established between the two of us*, with him in the role of *revolutionary pedagogue*” (*italics added*, 79).

Martin Smith, like any author, has the right to change his views, analysis, and politics. His changed views, however, cannot be used to change facts and the narratives of his interviewees, or to attack their characters. In his 2008 biography of Geier, Smith described how important it had been to him that Geier

had insisted that Smith and others take a class from Professor Bruce Levine. In 2008, Martin Smith expressed his gratitude and wrote about Geier's non-sectarianism: "Joel never once mentioned to me that Levine... attempted to factionalize and split the IS in the early 1970s... Joel was quite humble to have insisted that all of us—despite his falling out with Levine—study under this magnificent Marxist historian..." (*Vive Le Revolution*, 206-7). However, in 2013, Smith tells us that "Geier's storytelling" with regard to Levine was actually "an attempt to silence minority tendencies or dissenting individuals from the organization's memory" (81). Fortunately, in this instance, Martin Smith provides us with his data for publishing as "history" such a serious charge: Levine's "tone," on remembering that he and Geier had not seen each other in 30 years, "conveyed," "perhaps," "a hint" of "regret," "though [why] was unclear." "Nonetheless," continues Smith, Levine's "tone" "was a telling memory..." which Martin Smith proceeds to supply, since Levine did not, of Geier's authoritarian "attempt to silence minority tendencies or dissenting individuals from the organization's memory" (81). Following are examples of Smith's contradictions:

#### Martin Smith on Geier in 2013

His overweening confidence and studied mannerisms were a style of grandstanding ...  
 ... revealing a sense of self-importance, he boasted ...  
 I surmised from Geier's braggadocios and constant validations of his importance a likely internal conflict...  
 But rather than dismiss Geier as unreliable, such inconsistencies ...  
 ... his unwillingness to take any responsibility for the IS's past failures and to instead boast of his role in formulating the always-correct tactics and party lines ...  
 To have instead reflected on flawed strategy for which he had advocated and recruited several hundreds of followers would have meant admitting to having witnessed ... the dashed dreams of many.(80):

#### Martin Smith on Geier in 2008 (*Vive Le Revolution*):

Joel was quite humble... (206).  
 As I reflect on how much Joel has influenced my political development, I realize how little I have expressed my gratitude to him personally. I hope this... gathering... and that this short essay on his contribution to my life—expresses to Joel the scores of long overdue and much deserved thanks for his dedication to revolutionary politics and cadre building. His influence extends far and wide among

the American Left. And it is a tradition that we are indebted to Joel to keep alive for future generations and for years of revolutionary struggle ahead (208).

I will never forget meeting Joel for the first time... I had never heard such a confident ... speaker ... what he said [about the Holocaust and the nature of capitalism] has always stuck with me (205).

I have another tribute to Joel ... (207).

I read Joel's essay, *Vietnam: The Soldiers' Revolt*. I was completely floored... I was so inspired by the article that I made a commitment... to... write my senior thesis on the topic... (207).

To be honest, I would likely never have graduated from college if I had not found a topic that I could sink my teeth into; and to be frank, Joel's article—along with the stories of a generation of courageous fighters against U.S. Empire—inspired me to finally finish my degree ... (208).

I owe so much to Joel for his patience, dedication, and generosity (208).

As readers, we need guidance. Shall we believe Martin Smith's current view, or the one he held five years closer in time to the interviews? Is Joel Geier a deluded, self-important sectarian, or a model of humility, dedication, and generosity? A political blowhard, or revolutionary beacon? Two entirely different "histories," and two contradictory descriptions of the same historical figure, each based on the same data, each written by the same "oral historian," Martin Smith. Which account are we to believe?

Joel Geier has been a consistent, dedicated militant for over 55 years, in the civil rights, anti-war, student, labor and socialist movements, at times in leading positions. He is known to many thousands of people on the Left. While many strongly disagree with his political views, they respect him as a dedicated fighter, with a reputation for honesty, forthrightness, and integrity. It is therefore shocking to read an "oral history," allegedly based upon Geier's own interview, which depicts him as lacking in basic moral fiber.

Since space prevents us from evaluating the entire depiction of Geier's lack of veracity, we have elected to answer only that charge which might appear to be the most outrageous "boast" described by Smith: "Geier's boasts went as far as to claim he was the originator of the 'Free Huey' [Newton] slogan and helped influence Eldridge Cleaver's decision to join the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, claims contradicted by the historical record" (80). Joel Geier stands behind every word, even if the truth contradicts the historical sources that Smith consults. Members of the ISC (Independent Socialist Club)—the precursor to the IS—not Geier alone, helped influence Eldridge Cleaver's decision to join the Panthers. ISCers' personal and political relationship with Cleaver began as associates at *Ramparts* magazine, and continued in the Community for New Politics, where Cleaver and the ISC shared similar political positions. The ISC argued that

the Panthers, which then had approximately 35 members, had the potential to provide mass organizational leadership coming out of the ghetto uprising (which we supported) through their actions in support of armed self-defense. At the time of the Sacramento March, we issued a leaflet called “In Defense of Self-Defense,” which the Panthers liked so much that they adopted it as their own slogan. ISC members who tried to convince Cleaver to join the BPP may not have been the only, or decisive, influence in that decision, but one purpose of oral history is to draw into historical memory the recollections of people who were present and part of creating the historical record.

In the winter and spring of 1968, when the ISC was closely allied with the Panthers through the California Peace and Freedom Party (PFP), which the ISC initiated and help lead, Cleaver came to Geier’s house for individual one-on-one classes on Marxism by Geier.

After Newton’s shoot-out with the police, Cleaver convinced the Panthers to approach the PFP for an alliance. If the PFP would support a Fair Trial campaign for Huey, proposed the Panthers, the BPP would help the PFP’s registration efforts to get on the ballot. At a meeting at the Berkeley office of the PFP—with dozens of people in attendance from both the PFP and the BPP—Geier and other ISCers challenged the Panthers’ proposal. Geier’s argument was that a Black revolutionary could not get a fair trial in a racist, capitalist court. In addition, if the system could “prove” that Newton had fired the first shot, then he could be “legally” convicted. The ISC did not accept the legal technicality *re*: who fired the first shot. The police were out to destroy and kill the Panthers, and even if Newton had fired first, the ISC considered it an act of self-defense. Therefore, Geier and the ISC proposed that instead of a “Fair Trial,” the slogan be “Free Huey”—a view borrowed from the Communist Party’s handling of the Scottsboro Boys defense in the early 1930s.

The Panthers shortly accepted that proposal and reasoning. The Panthers at that time were still a small, Oakland-based organization, and the PFP was important in building broader support for the “Free Huey” campaign. While he was in jail, the PFP ran Newton for Congress, in a campaign modeled on Eugene Deb’s campaign in 1920. This campaign captured international attention: Newton received over 20,000 votes, and it was one of the decisive elements in saving his life.

The interviewer’s dismissal as “boasts” of the testimony presented to him surrounding these events is indicative of Martin Smith’s approach to the oral history of those he was interviewing.

We remind the reader that the interviews were for a friend’s class assignment due seven years ago. No permission, oral or written, to publish—now or at any time—was ever given by at least six of the seven interviewees. Professional guidelines, involving many critical issues of oral history and methodology, emphasize the need to respect privacy, avoid bias, respect interview-

wee rights and ownership, avoid thoughtless stereotypes, employ sensitivity, guard against exploitation in how the interviews might be used, avoid misrepresentations and manipulations of the narrator's words, and obtain written permission. These guidelines throw a deep shadow over Martin Smith's analysis, methodology, and purported oral history.

### Conclusion

Facts are stubborn things. No oral historian should manipulate other people's memories, their views, or their interpretations of their own experience.

The rank-and-file labor upsurge of mid-'60s to mid-'70s was part of the general radicalization that included the social movements—Black, women's, gay, anti-war, Chicano, Native American, anti-imperialist—and of the international working-class upturn of that period. The rank-and-file upsurge of that era has not had the historical attention it deserves. It is one of the great episodes in the history of the American working class.

The role of radicals in those events has been for the most part overlooked or denigrated. The 1970s rank-and-file labor work of the International Socialists bears honest examination as a modest part of the struggle that should not be overlooked. It made mistakes, certainly, but a "failed strategy"—*i.e.*, the victory of neo-liberalism—was not one of them—any more than were sexism, living out sexist stereotypes, or carrying socialist labor politics "from the outside." Although mistakes were inevitably made, what was most important about our work was what we got right. Those aspects deserve honest study.

*Editors' Note: In addition to the response above, we would also like to issue the following corrections to the article discussed above and printed in the previous issue of Left History:*

- Interviewee Deborah is misspelled as "Debra" throughout the article.
- The name Shachtman was spelled incorrectly on pages 76, 77, 95, 96, and in n.12.
- On p. 77, it is stated that IS members referred to jobs in their industrial strategy as "p jobs." None of the interviewees recall ever having heard this term.
- On p. 77 Smith writes that the IS organization "had no prior experience in industrial organizing." In fact, the ISC was actively involved in a number of union campaigns throughout the 1960s and 1970s.
- On p. 78 and 81, it is stated that the IS ceased functioning after 1979. The IS in fact continued until 1986.
- On p. 81, Joel Geier is described as the IS national secretary in 1976. Geier was the organization's national chairman. Glyn Wolf was the national secretary in 1976.
- On p. 83, it was noted that Wendy Thompson was a student at UCLA. Thompson went to the University of Southern California.

- On p. 92, it is stated that Candace Cohn was the head of the IS national steel fraction. She never headed that fraction. She became steel correspondent for *Labor Notes*.
- On p. 94, it is incorrectly stated that the ISO formed in 1976; the correct date of 1977 is found on p. 79

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Smith, "Talkin' 'bout a *Working-Class* Revolution: The Gendered "Turn" to Party Building, the Personal, and Perspectives Gained *from Within*," *Left History* 17.1 (Spring/Summer 2013), 75-99.

<sup>2</sup> *Editor's Note: Although attempts were made to contact Martin Smith regarding this matter, a response was not received by the time of publication. We are therefore not able to confirm or deny these allegations.*

<sup>3</sup> For an alternative view, see Candace Cohn, "Working-Class Women's Liberation and Rank-and-File Rebellion in Steel," *International Socialist Review* 90, accessed December 6, 2013, <http://isreview.org/issue/90/working-class-women-liberation-and-rank-and-file-rebellion-steel>.

<sup>4</sup> Max Elbaum, "Maoism in the United States," in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, eds. Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), accessed December 6, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/ncm-1/maoism-us.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Barry Sheppard, *The Party Volume One: The Sixties, A Political Memoir: The Socialist Workers Party, 1960-1988* (Broadway: Resistance Books, 2005), 320.

<sup>6</sup> Ilene Winkler, "The Hidden Proletariat," *International Socialist* (October, 1969), 12-15, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is13.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Erica Dunn, "The Pill and Women's Liberation," *International Socialist* (March, 1970), 17-19, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is17.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Batey and Cynthia Novak, "International Women's Day: Commemorating a History of Struggle," *International Socialist* (March, 1970), 24, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is17.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Hal Draper, "Marx and Engels on Women's Liberation," *International Socialist* (April, 1970), 17-21, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is18.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Landy, "Maoism and Women," *International Socialist* (June, 1970), 4-6,

accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/is20.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Marilyn Danton, "Protective Legislation and the ERA," *Workers' Power* (October 9-22, 1970), 3-4, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/wp23.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ilene Winkler, "Women & the Democratic Party," *Workers' Power* (September 17-30, 1971), 11, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/n41-sep-17-30-1971-wp.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Louise Mitchell, "Abortion and Women's Liberation," *Workers' Power* (November 26-December 9, 1971), 7-8, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/n46-nov-26-dec-09-1971-wp.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> James Coleman, "Gay Liberation," *Workers' Power* (February 21-March 11, 1971), 10-11, accessed December 19, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/workerspower/wp31.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> For readers interested in learning more, we recommend Cohn's "Working-Class Women's Liberation and Rank-and-File Rebellion in Steel."