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Susan Williams's Comments - Panel 1

Susan Williams

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SUSAN WILLIAMS'S COMMENTS – PANEL I

SUSAN WILLIAMS

“Organizing is about carrying hope about what is possible and sharing that with other people ...”

I'm very happy to be here to recognize Fran Ansley's amazing contributions through so many years. This work was a long time ago now, but it was so important. I want to share some thoughts about popular education and organizing, the importance of hope, the importance of stories and the importance of getting the Southern United States to be visible.

I came to the Highlander Center¹ to work in 1989 and shortly after became part of the effort to build the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network or TIRN. Highlander Center is a 90-year-old social justice institution, started in 1932 in the depths of the Depression in Grundy County, Tennessee in the Cumberland Mountains. Highlander's mission is to bring together communities fighting for justice to share their stories, strategies, and songs, to create change in their communities and to build connections and relationships to fuel larger movements. This process is a powerful example of popular education, that everyone is a teacher, and everyone is a learner and that together we can do amazing things. Highlander is known for the early work on labor organizing and support of Civil Rights anti-racism work in the South and Appalachia. Highlander continues today to gather freedom fighters to create positive, liberating social change.

I first came to a Highlander workshop in 1979 as an untrained community organizer with Save Our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM) in East Tennessee (now called Statewide Organizing for Community Empowerment). I met all these amazing people whose communities were raising their voices and fighting for better conditions around issues that were very hard and very risky. At Highlander workshops, participants would all participate, going around the circle for everyone to contribute. This was a huge lesson for me in the importance of creating spaces where all can talk, and how that facilitated space allows people to share stories and strategies about what people do to create change. And this process fuels hope and ideas that people take home. I have seen repeatedly how popular education provides a space to build connections made across race, language, geography, age, and other barriers to coming together in the South.

1. To learn more about Highlander and its mission, visit www.highlandercenter.org.

I came to work at Highlander Center in 1989 and my job was to help provide a space to build sustainable economies, where people would not have to choose between a decent job and a clean environment. My ten years with SOCM taught me that we needed to deal with the economy, because in the Appalachians, in Tennessee, almost everything was a bad idea to create jobs. There were efforts to build toxic waste dumps, nuclear waste storage facilities, strip mining for coal. There was a plan for a National Guard training center that would have displaced hundreds of families, taken huge amounts of federal dollars to build and that was not needed. There was a proposal for a synthetic fuels facility that would have doubled coal production in Tennessee and would have required huge amounts of federal dollars for untried technology. SOCM worked with local communities to take on all these issues and many more.

So, I came to Highlander anxious to learn more about how we could tackle the economy. And John Gaventa, an amazing educator at Highlander, suggested I help organize this conference for the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network. TIRN was created to tackle the loss of industrial jobs across Tennessee. This was happening across the Southern United States. Companies had come to the South for lower wages and to escape unions decades earlier. In the 1980's they were moving to other countries where they could pay even lower wages and avoid environmental requirements, like the maquiladora zone in Mexico, which was just across the border from the United States. The maquiladora zone was set up specifically for factories that made products that were to be sold or assembled into products to be sold in the United States.

This work connected me with my own family's history. I grew up in Oak Ridge Tennessee, but my mother is from Pittsburgh, and I have this very distinct memory of going to Pittsburgh after the steel mills closed. Her family lived right above the steel mills in Munhall and my grandfather worked his whole life for U.S. Steel. I remember my cousins having little hope about their futures because they were graduating during the time that this economy, based on steel, was just sinking. My father's family is from Piedmont. North Carolina, and I remember seeing all these factories close in the middle of these mill towns. Towns languished when the economic driver that was in the middle of town vanished. And so, these long-term workforces, with all their relationships and steady incomes are left with fewer options for decent jobs. I do not want to romanticize these jobs and certainly some were better than others, but they were steady economic options that also were then an important part of people's community.

So, in 1989, we had the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Conference, which was incredible. What I remember are the stories and resources that people shared and the energy and spirit that built so that at the

end a group of union staff, workers, community groups and religious staff came together and agreed to continue to build this work. Members of the Federation on Industrial Retention and Renewal came and shared their work in the rust belt cities of the Northeast and Midwest.

Maxine Waller, from Ivanhoe, Virginia, came and talked about a factory closing in Ivanhoe, and the devastation to her, their family, and the community. She was so eloquent describing the personal and community impacts a plant closing causes. She was a part of a group, the Ivanhoe Civic League, that had organized to find strategies to build Ivanhoe after this loss.

Shirley Reinhardt came and told us what was happening in Morristown, Tennessee. Morristown was running smack-dab into the growth of the contingent workforce – or a better term is the precarious workforce – which none of us even knew what that was. But General Electric had laid off workers from the warehouse because they were organizing. They moved these jobs to a subcontractor company just down the road in Knox County. They got a grant from the government project, called JTPA or the Job Training Partnership Act, to train and hire workers for less money at a subcontracting industry and call them temporary. The ex-GE workers bravely organized as Citizens Against Temporary Services (CATS) and marched through the streets of the town, bought ads about their plight, and went to the legislature. Their position was that this was wrong: to call people temporary, and have them be permanent, and pay them less and give them less benefits for the same jobs. It's just wrong. And they went to Nashville, got the Tennessee Legislature to set up a study committee and worked with SOCM and other unions and groups to try to pass legislation, to say if you were temporary, you still had to pay people the same. At the legislature, temporary companies from across the country showed up, because it was the first time there was a legislative assault on what was going to become the new normal for many jobs. Now in Knoxville, there's adjunct professors at UT organizing for better wages and stability. Custodians in the Knox County school system need to get paid more so that people will take the jobs, but the proposed solution is to hire a temporary service to fill out the custodian work. And we now know that these types of insecure jobs are scattered all throughout the workforce. And this was another way for corporations to increase their profits.

After the conference, TIRN started working on contingent work, and on plant closings, using the information and ideas we gained from the Federation of Industrial Retention and Renewal members and building our own strategies. We increased our knowledge and skills around what could be done about plant closings, both before factories closed and afterwards, we had a Displaced Workers Think Tank, we

created rapid response teams, we wrote a manual all together that shared what we had learned called Taking Charge: A Hands-On Guide to Dealing with Plant Closings. And in 1991, we took a group of factory workers who were connected to companies that had plants in the *maquiladoras* and we toured factories and communities, seeing the results of corporations taking advantage of Mexican workers to increase profits.² We met women factory workers who were organizing under very oppressive conditions. And we learned about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that was being negotiated in secret. We returned from this trip determined to fight NAFTA, and to share the example of the maquilas as an example of the logic of free trade – that capital can move anywhere to increase profits, but that people cannot. The critical process of spending time in committee and with the board, hearing people’s experiences and ideas, gathering information to help inform our committees and planning actions happened over and over again so that we could organize and support workers across Tennessee who were facing the impacts of this structural shift of jobs. This is the critical process of popular education and organizing.

And we did not understand at first that we were fighting massive structural economic changes; we were fighting neoliberalism. We just thought we needed to do something for people and for decent jobs and we gathered and learned and strategized and acted with unions, workers, community organizations and others. We had a lot of help from law professors, unions, documentarians, brave economists, members from other groups across the country and we did whatever we could think of to organize around the need for good jobs that can support families and communities. Because we had been to Mexico and had met people from Canada who were also fighting NAFTA, we worked hard to develop a more international and less xenophobic analysis, to challenge the Right’s version of the economy that blamed workers and not the corporations. We showed and distributed this film widely, to help explain what NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement was about. We didn’t stop NAFTA, but the effort was incredibly important because it made the issue of free trade agreements visible and built groups to continue to monitor and fight.

2. Anne Lewis, *From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras: A TIRN Educational Video*, TIRN, <https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/20361/>. Anne Lewis also produced a wonderful film chronicling the process and effects of globalization across East Tennessee in the 1990s and 2000s. Anne Lewis, *Morristown: In the Air and Sun*, APPALSHOP (2007), <https://appalshop.org/shop/morristown-in-the-air-and-sun>.

Having these cross-border connections with Mexico and Canada was important because it helped us think about what is not just our story but what is everybody's story? At Highlander, this was a part of a long-term effort to demystify the economy. And there were groups around the country doing a lot of popular economic education. Working together, we developed a publication called "Unpacking Globalization" with groups around the country with workshops that demystified globalization and built alliances.

We went to Washington, D.C. to lobby, to push our representatives to oppose NAFTA. Shirley Reinhardt and I went to see Representative Jim Cooper not long after we came back from Mexico. – We wanted to go to the Tennessee delegation in Congress to tell them about what we saw in Mexico and why NAFTA was such a bad idea. We were showing Rep. Cooper pictures and telling him about our trip thinking he will be influenced by this information. And he was just looking at us, wondering where we came from. And I realized that we had no place there, because he was not used to regular people from Tennessee coming to talk about fair trade, because it wasn't even a public dialogue then. That was an important lesson to me, about going to the places you are not supposed to be, where the power is, and no matter how they look at you, to just keep talking.

There were unions and organizations working on NAFTA across the country and they continued to fight subsequent efforts to create other free trade global agreements and structures. In 1999, there were massive protests at the World Trade Organization new negotiation round in Seattle that were a result of all the on-the-ground organizing that had been happening around the world.

And we began to see the need to work on immigrant rights that continues today. It was the workers in Morristown that alerted us to this beginning growth of an immigrant workforce that was being pressed out of Mexico because of the peso devaluation and NAFTA's passage in 1994. TIRN members from Morristown said: there's all these people playing soccer in parks, from Mexico. There were other signs. You could go to the grocery store up there, and there's a whole new section of Mexican food that was from Mexico – it wasn't El Paso brand. There were small *tiendas* and restaurants with signs in Spanish. So, at Highlander we started having gatherings of new immigrants working to create organizations, and these were held in Spanish. We also began holding workshops to connect new immigrants to groups already here and we began holding workshops in English and Spanish. We shared ideas of the situation that was informed by both a long history of the South and the histories and situations of immigrants who had been forced to come to the U.S. to survive. We were working to see how we connect these issues and interrupt the dominant narrative that blamed Mexicans for taking

jobs away from U.S. citizens, particularly African Americans. The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Network formed alongside groups working with immigrant across the South and is still going strong.

We made a mistake not connecting immigration issues with these global economic issues. We discussed this after NAFTA's passage, at an "After NAFTA" conference. The DC people were so sort of centered on this kind of campaign mentality that they didn't get the sort of movement building crossbridge building, equity issues that were underlying all this that is what we really needed to address. And I remember thinking they're trying to do a campaign. We're trying to build a movement, and we missed an important chance to help explain both the economy and immigration in terms of the larger context of neoliberalism and corporate globalization. So that we could help interrupt so many xenophobic ways that immigrants have and are being attacked while they are also providing essential labor. That this is a story of wealthy people making more money on the backs of everyone. And that's so simple. We were encouraged to think we couldn't understand that it was too complicated. But the lessons about that, we really could understand and even more, we can do something about this together.

I'm also incredibly proud of what we did because who would have thought people from the South would just pop up from here and challenge contingent work and fair trade?

Organizing is about carrying hope about what is possible and sharing that with other people. I have been so fortunate to see people do amazing things and then, when I came to Highlander, I began to look at archival material – for example from the 1950's – of black people organizing in Mississippi and began to be educated about what that work really took. That is why at Highlander we are working hard to share these stories, both historically and now. Sharing ideas about what we can do is our job. It is hard to figure out what to do. But that's still our job, and I'm not sure what we should do either. But I know that there's also people doing amazing things all around this country all the time, every day.

So, across this country and world, there are groups organized everywhere. There are people working on solidarity economy, organizing unions, fighting state-sanctioned violence, working to address reproductive rights in this terrible time, and people working on climate justice. There are people all over this country that are coming together. We need to share more stories about these efforts and to support groups with our energy, time, money, and conversations. I am excited to hear from the other panelists today about their current efforts.

So, we will now hear from Luvernel Clark, one of the leaders in TIRN who went on this first trip to Mexico and who taught me so much.

