

Carl Oglesby

# The Working Class Stranger

By Fred Gardner

“Carl Oglesby dies at 76; led Students for a Democratic Society,” was the headline on the obit in the *LA Times*. The description of SDS seems accurate, although nobody ever called it “the SDS”:

“The SDS had been founded in 1960 at the University of Michigan, and its early declaration, the Port Huron Statement, helped embody the idealism of the early ‘60s. The SDS supported civil rights and opposed the nuclear arms race. It was strongly critical of the U.S. government, and called for greater efforts to fight poverty and big business. By the mid-’60s, when Oglesby joined, the U.S. had committed ground troops to Vietnam and the SDS had expanded nationwide, with a more radical purpose.”

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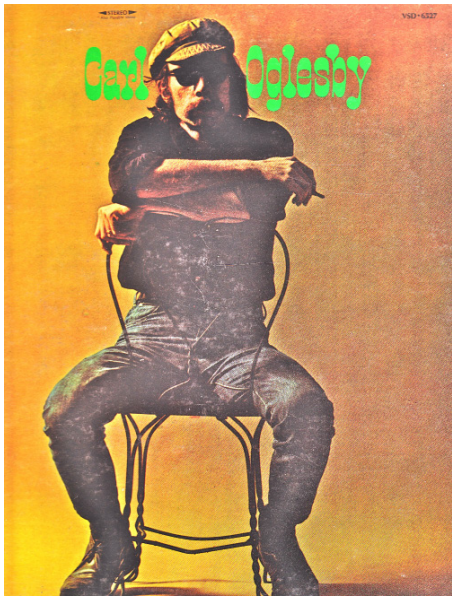
During Carl’s time as president (the 1965-’66 academic year), SDSers helped organize “teach-ins” on U.S. campuses —an innovative tactic that he promoted and participated in to the hilt. A teach-in is basically a set of talks on a political subject, with ample time for questions and discussion.

Carl was extremely eloquent and persuasive. In high school in Ohio he had been a state-champion debater. Todd Gitlin described him accurately to the obituary writers as “the great orator of the white new left.” Both the *LA Times* obit and Margalit Fox’s in the *New York Times* acknowledge the impact of Carl’s speech at an antiwar rally in Washington in the fall of ‘65. Fox wrote, “He condemned the ‘corporate liberalism’ —American economic interests disguised as anti-Communist benevolence— that, he argued, underpinned the Vietnam War.”

Backstage that day Carl had suggested to Judy Collins that she speak and he sing. “She almost went for it,” he said.

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Although our expressions of dissent grew louder and stronger, Lyndon Johnson kept ordering more and more GIs to Vietnam and escalated the bombing. It may be hard for younger generations of Americans to grasp, but those of us who grew up in the aftermath of World War II —when all the other industrial economies were in ruins and our role was supposed to be to be healing the world and rebuilding it along rational, democratic lines— were



ashamed to realize that “we” had taken over where the British and French and Dutch left off as imperial powers. We were humiliated by pictures of huts with thatched roofs on fire and mothers holding burned children in their arms and bombers spraying defoliant on the jungle. “Who made us the cops of the world?” was a question that more and more Americans were asking.

The heavier U.S. military involvement in Vietnam became, the higher the death toll, the more loved ones, friends and acquaintances taken from us, the more our shame turned to outrage. In many cases, the outrage turned to desperation and madness. There was murder in the air, and it wasn’t just blowback from the war. At home non-violent civil rights workers were lynched and killed.

The world knows about the deaths of Martin Luther King (killed as he was planning to lead a “poor people’s campaign”) and Malcolm X (after his outlook became internationalist) and Bobby Kennedy (after he became a peace candidate), but millions of us knew about the deaths of Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, Reverend Reeb, Viola Liuzzo. Those four little girls in Birmingham, who did they ever hurt? The three South Carolina State students shot dead by troopers on the campus in Orangeburg, shot while lying down to show that they posed no threat, with bullet holes in the bottom of their feet... If you were born when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president (1932-1945), and brought up to believe in American righteousness, your disappointment and shame could become all-consuming.

In 1968 a group known as “the Weathermen” took over SDS and expelled Carl and others who dismissed as hallucinatory their efforts to initiate “armed struggle” in

the U.S. We were close friends in this period as the ‘60s came crashing down and our marriages disintegrated and our allies rejected our advice and we tried to find consolation in marijuana and guitars.

Carl, whose dad had worked at an Akron tire plant, described his relationship to the “new left” in a song that began

*They called him the working-class stranger  
And he turned to the people just to have him a little fun  
Saying “What will you do my good buddies  
When the bosses get through telling you that you’ve won?”*

In the winter of 1970-71 Carl summed up the movement’s achievement in four words: “Cultural victory, political defeat.” He was acutely aware that U.S.-led multi-national corporations were investing and building plants in countries where labor was cheaper. That’s what capitalism is all about —the most efficient exploitation of labor. Nowadays the pundits —even the supposed lib-labs— act as if the export of US manufacturing jobs is some recent development. Big Ed Schultz can’t even say the words “working class,” it’s as if a living wage somehow made a steel worker or an assembly-line worker “middle class.”

I moved back to San Francisco in the fall of ‘71 and we drifted apart. We would talk on the phone once in a blue moon, and stayed connected on a level deeper than ideology.

In the years that followed Carl did original research exposing the extent to which Nazis had been recruited as U.S. government operatives after World War Two. He wrote two books challenging the official version of the JFK assassination, and contributed to another by Jim Garrison, the ex-DA of New Orleans. He entertainingly (but incorrectly, I thought) espoused a theory about capital being split between Northeastern (“Yankee”) and Southwestern (“Cowboy”) factions. A play he’d written about the Hatfields and McCoys was produced in Boston and had a short run. It was great, but never made it to Broadway.

Carl cut two records for Vanguard, and I gather they’ve been brought out as one CD, “Sailing to Damascus,” the title of the second record. If you want to hear that clear, intelligent voice, check out

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uehgkyNzX5k>

In 2008 Scribner’s published *Ravens in the Storm*, Carl’s book about himself and SDS. Last time we talked he said he had crossed paths with Weatherman leader Bernardine Dohrn, a key figure in the book. Bernardine had told him, quietly and seriously, the words he’d been longing to hear from her for many years: “I’m sorry.”