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CHARLES DENBY, WORKER-EDITOR



Charles Denby, 1907-1983

*See "Black Causes in the Unions," Appendix to *American Civilizer* on Trial.

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The 75 years of Charles Denby's life are so full of class struggles, Black revolts, freedom movements that they illuminate not only the present but cast a light even on the future. At the same time, because his autobiography — *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* — reaches back into the far past when, as a child during World War I, he asked questions of his grandmother as she told tales of her slavery days, readers suddenly feel they are witness there to the birth of a revolutionary.

I first met Denby in 1948 when he had already become a leader of wildcats, a "politico," but the talk I heard him give of tenant farming in the South and factory work in the North was far from being a "political speech." Listening to him, you felt you were witnessing an individual's life that was somehow universal, and that touched you personally. You feel that when you hear him tell of his first strike:

I remember the first strike I ever led. It was over the discrimination against Black women workers in our shop. It was during World War II when I was at Briggs and I was so new in the shop I didn't even know what a strike was. I was working in the dope room where you put glue on the airplane wing. The fumes and odor were so bad we had no appetite left by lunchtime . . . The women had been talking about their husbands who were in the service in Germany — and here they couldn't even get a job in the sewing room next door. That was for white women only. These things just burned us up . . . On the day that we walked out, they locked the gates on us. By that time other workers inside the factory were out with us . . . It wasn't until the company sent for me as the "strike leader" that I had realized what we had actually done.

Recently — not for any reasons of nostalgia but because we were discussing the question of robotics and what forms of organization were needed to fight the labor bureaucracy that has been helping management wring concessions from the workers — Denby began talking about what had happened when Automation was first introduced. He was talking about the Miners' General Strike of 1949-50 when the continuous miner had first been introduced into the mines.

It was when the government threw the Taft-Hartley law at the miners and John L. Lewis

ordered the miners back to work that the miners refused, organized their own rank-and-file Relief Committees, and appealed to other workers throughout the country for help. Denby recalled the miners who had come up from West Virginia to his local:

I remember that the bureaucrats were not too hot about the idea. They didn't dare come right out and oppose it, but you could tell they weren't enthusiastic, like the rank-and-file were. But our enthusiasm was so strong that by the time the meeting ended the bureaucrats had to triple the amount they had intended to give. After that, the miners knew they had to talk directly to the rank-and-file. At Local 600 the workers not only gave several thousand dollars outright, but pledged \$500 a week for as long as the strike lasted, and sent a whole caravan — five truckloads — of food and clothing. The strike didn't last too long after that show of solidarity.

Denby's point was not that workers today must "copy" what the labor militants did then, but that it is the informal rank-and-file committees that show how "workers talk and think about everything while on the job — things about everyday life but also about world affairs." News & Letters, he said, "must continue to elicit from the workers thinking their own thoughts. Actions are sure to follow."

A TURNING POINT IN DENBY'S LIFE

The year after the historic miners' strike, Denby began dictating the story of his life. It became a turning point in his life because in telling his life story he gained confidence that he could express himself in a way that carried meaning for other workers as well. Part I of his autobiography was published in 1952. I moved to Detroit in 1953 and it was then I first broached the question of having a worker as editor of a new type of paper we were planning. Instead of forever bestowing that prerogative on an intellectual who would speak "for" the workers, Denby was at first non-committal. At the same time he knew I had been working on a book on Marxism and the new stage of capitalism I called state-capitalism, and began asking me how trade union questions were handled in Russia before it became state-capitalism and was still a workers' state. When I told him about the famous trade union debate of 1920-21, I asked him whether he thought it would be of interest to American workers.

A few months later, both questions I had posed to Denby reappeared in a most unusual way. It was March 5, 1953 when Stalin died. Denby called me the minute he got out of the shop. He said he imagined I was writing some political analysis of what that meant and he wanted me to know what the workers in his shop were talking about all that day: "Every worker was saying, 'I have just the man to fill Stalin's shoes — my foreman.'"

It impressed me so much that I said not only that I would write the political analysis of the death of that totalitarian, but that the workers' remarks would become the jumping off point for my article on the trade unions. I asked whether he could distribute those articles in his shop and record the workers' comments. He agreed enthusiastically.

March and April were very busy months for me. By March 19, I had completed the political analysis of Stalin's death. It was inconceivable to me that now that the incubus was lifted from the Russian workers' heads there would not be some form of workers' revolt to follow, and the article enumerated the many unrecorded forms of the Russian workers' hidden revolt at the point of production. By April 16, I had prepared the lengthy article on the trade union debate, called "Then and Now: 1920 and 1953." This was followed by still one more article on April 30 on the ramifications of Stalin's death.* By then, I was not

*See these three articles, dated March 19, April 16 and April 30, in "The Rayn Dunayevskaya Collection" on deposit at Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs (pp. 2180 - 2199). The article "Then and Now" became part of Chapter XII, "What Happens After" in Marxism and Freedom.

fully satisfied with the economic and political analysis, but wanted to work out the philosophic ground. All these happenings couldn't be accidental; nothing that historic can be without reason; I felt I had to get away and took two weeks to work this out.

Whereas I kept more or less to myself the two philosophic letters written in that period — in which I thought I had broken through on Hegel's "Absolute Idea" as something that contained a movement from practice as well as from theory, so that the "absolute" (that is to say, the unity of theory and practice) signified a totally new relationship of practice to theory — I did discuss with Denby the relationship of workers to philosophy.

Several years earlier I had translated Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks on Hegel and I now read certain sections to Denby. He said that Hegel's language meant absolutely nothing to him, but that he certainly understood Lenin: "Couldn't you leave out Hegel and just publish what Lenin said? If intellectuals want to read Hegel can't you just tell them the section that Lenin was talking about? I like, for example, Lenin's sentence that 'the idea of the transformation of the ideal into the real is profound.' I think workers would like to know how to do that."

The following month, on June 17, 1953, the East German workers revolted in East Berlin against raising the work norms in their factories and, as they marched out of the factories, they smashed the statue of Stalin. This was so great a world historic turning point, and the fact that it broke out against speed-up meant so much to Denby, that our discussions on philosophy became discussions about concrete actions of workers.

DENBY BECOMES EDITOR

1954 was a year filled with wildcats as Automation came to Detroit. The East German revolt had stirred everyone with new ideas of spontaneous action, against totalitarianism as well as against conditions of labor. There was also a stirring from below in Africa. At the same time, the rulers became more and more reactionary, as McCarthyism pervaded the land and shackled the workers with the Taft-Hartley law passed during the upsurge of strikes that had followed the ending of World War II.

Denby felt strongly that there was an imperative need for a new kind of workers' paper, and in 1953 accepted editorship of News & Letters. What pleased me especially was that the first issue should appear in honor of the second anniversary of the East German revolt, not only so that none would forget that first revolt from under totalitarianism, but also to show a new phase of international solidarity.

Along with the birth of News & Letters came our very first pamphlet. We published, in mimeographed form, Lenin's Philosophic Notebooks in the form Denby had recommended. It turned out to be our first "best-seller."

1955 was also the year the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. Whereas no others recognized the Black Revolution until the 1960s, we immediately became active participants in that struggle and considered it on as high a level for opening new pages of world freedom as the East European revolts. Alabama was, after all, Denby's home state, and he headed South to meet with both Rosa Parks and Rev. Martin Luther King. Here is how his Christmas, 1956 visit was reported by Denby in News & Letters:

I have recently come back from a trip to Alabama, where I was born and raised. Montgomery is my hometown. From what I've seen and feel, there is a social revolution going on in the South that has it in a turmoil of a kind that hasn't been seen since the days of Reconstruction.

The 1960s, of course, signified a birthtime of history objectively and subjectively, with the Black dimension both in America and in Africa marking the birth of a whole new Third World and a new generation of revolutionaries.

*This pamphlet also had, as appendix, my letters on the Absolute Idea.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF REALITY TO PHILOSOPHY

In becoming both a columnist — his *Worker's Journal* always appeared on page one — and an editor, he no longer limited himself to stories from auto factories, but also gathered stories from the mines, steel mills, and from office workers, too. Here is how he expressed it, in *Workers Battle Automation*:

The intellectual — be he scientist, engineer or writer — may think Automation means the elimination of heavy labor. The production worker sees it as the elimination of the laborer.

And just as he had opened two chapters of his autobiography so that his wife, Christine, could tell her story back in 1952, long before the birth of the Women's Liberation Movement, so now he saw to it that some of the stories of women freedom fighters were reflected in *News & Letters*, as witness the special story on the sit-in movement he obtained from a State Teachers College student from his hometown, Montgomery, Ala., which appeared in the April, 1960 *News & Letters* under the title: "No One Moved."

One of the most important developments of the turbulent 1960s, of course, was the anti-Vietnam War movement whose voices were heard regularly in the paper. In general *News & Letters* not only became the publisher for all freedom fighters speaking for themselves — from the Black and white Freedom Riders, to the youth of the Free Speech Movement, to Women's Liberationists speaking in many voices — but called together conferences of activists in all these movements.

Thus, when the highest point in those 1960s came to a climax which, however, was spelled out as aborted revolution both in the U.S. and in France, Denby, far from ringing down the curtain, was instrumental in calling together a Black/Red Conference in Detroit on Jan. 12, 1969. Here is his Welcome:

This is the first time that such a conference of Black youth, Black workers, Black women and Black intellectuals will have a chance to discuss with each other as well as with Marxist-Humanists, who lend the red coloration not only for the sake of color, but for the sake of philosophy, a philosophy of liberation.

"Philosophy of liberation" was not mere rhetoric, much less an empty intellectual task. To Denby, philosophy became a clearing of the head for action. From the minute he became the editor of *News & Letters*, which manifested so unique a combination of worker and intellectual, Denby's interest in philosophy was never separated from action. It was, in fact, at that Black/Red Conference that he chose to single out a quotation directly from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* as his favorite because it applied to the relationship of reality to philosophy: "Enlightenment upsets the household arrangements, which spirit carries out in the house of faith, by bringing in the goods and furnishings belonging to the world of the Here and Now . . ."

Three direct results flowed from both the Black/Red Conference and from the Women's Liberation Conference that followed it: 1) the establishment of a new Black/Red column to be written by John Alan; 2) the creation of a *Woman as Reason* column for the Women's Liberation page; and 3) the involvement of the participants from both Conferences in discussions around my new book-in-progress, *Philosophy and Revolution*. Their contribution can be seen in what became Chapter 9 of that work, "New Passions and New Forces — The Black Dimension, the Anti-Vietnam War Youth, Rank-and-File Labor, Women's Liberation."

THE FINAL DECADE: THE PATH TO THE FUTURE

At the same time, Denby was becoming deeply involved in international relations, especially Africa. Thus, when John Alan and a new, young Black Marxist-Humanist, Lou Turner, wanted to work out the relationship of Frantz

Fanon's new Humanism to American Black thought and our own Marxist-Humanism, they were not only encouraged to develop their ideas in pamphlet form, but Denby and I co-authored an Introduction to that pamphlet, which we published in 1978 under the title: *Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought*.

We felt that Frantz Fanon had, indeed, been the precursor of a whole new generation of revolutionaries so that his *Wretched of the Earth* was not only a Third World Manifesto, but a global declaration for Marx's Humanism. Here is how Denby and I expressed it in our Introduction:

Revolutionary Black thought, whether it comes from Azania, the Caribbean, or the United States, is not end, but prologue to action. We invite all readers to join our authors in working out the imperative task they set for themselves to prepare theoretically for the American revolution-to-be.

1978 was also the year Denby decided to write a Part II to his unique biography, first published in 1952. As he put it in the new Foreword, this was no mere updating: "It isn't only that 25 years separate Part I and Part II. More importantly, the great events of the 1960s that gave birth to a new generation of revolutionaries could but give a new direction to my thoughts and actions as a Black production worker who became the editor of a very new type of newspaper — *News & Letters*."

IN HIS LONG three-year battle with cancer, which ended on Oct. 10, 1983, Denby continued with his *Worker's Journal* column, frequently inviting both our co-editor, Felix Martin, and Lou Turner to write guest columns, the first on labor questions, the second on the Black world. In the last months of his life he was anxious to attend the Aug. 27 March on Washington, but was too sick to do so. He turned his column that month over to Lou Turner to report on it as a participant.

His last letter to me — which he printed in his June 1983 column — spoke of how crucial it is to show the American roots of Marxism, as we had developed it in *American Civilization on Trial*. He had been very impressed, he said, with the new paragraph I had added on Marx and the Black world to my latest work, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*:

Raya, whatever else we decide to write for the 20th anniversary of our pamphlet, I strongly feel that your new paragraph should be the focus. We need to put, right in the beginning, the world context of our struggle and the way our view of it is rooted in Marx. I would like to let all our readers see that paragraph for themselves.

Indeed, that paragraph did become the focus for the new Introduction we wrote for the expanded edition of *American Civilization on Trial* that came off the press just in time to take it with us to the March on Washington.

The inseparability of philosophy and revolution motivated Denby from the moment he became editor in 1955 to the very last days of his life, and he always had some sentence he would single out from various theoretical works that became his favorites. Thus, from *Marxism and Freedom* he was always quoting: "There is nothing in thought — not even in the thought of a genius — that has not previously been in the activity of the common man."

While Denby was too modest a man to think that this had any relationship to him as a person, he had full confidence that that expression did mean masses in motion. Yet the truth is that the genius of Charles Denby lies in the fact that the story of his life — *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* — is the history of workers' struggles for freedom, his and all others the world over.

— Detroit, Michigan, Oct. 24, 1983