

Tom Kahn and the Fight for Democracy: A Political Portrait and Personal Recollection

By Rachelle Horowitz

Introduction

This is the story of Tom Kahn, a man who devoted his life to the struggle for freedom and the extension of democracy. He was active in and wrote about the major American movements for justice in the last half of the twentieth century.

In a sense, it is also my story. I met Kahn when we both were students at Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn. I participated with him in the social democratic and civil rights movements. He joined the labor movement before I did and worked in the area of foreign policy. I concentrated on domestic policy, working as the political action director of the American Federation of Teachers. We had become close friends while attending Brooklyn College and remained close until he died.

Unless otherwise cited, this paper is based on my conversations and experiences with Kahn. It is not written from a detached point of view, but I hope it is a fair portrait of what he did, how he did it, and what he achieved.

Kahn's activism started in 1956, when he was a volunteer worker supporting the Montgomery bus protest and it ended with his death in 1992, when he was the International Affairs Director of the AFL-CIO. His life was short. He died at the age of 53 from complications of the HIV virus. He has not been written about much since then, and he has not been given sufficient credit for what he did. There are many reasons for this. Above all, he was primarily a staffer functioning behind the scenes, ghost-writing speeches, developing strategies, organizing events, and supporting the elected leadership.¹ This paper looks at his earliest days in the democratic socialist movement in New York, where his principles were honed and where he published his first writings. It examines his participation in the non-violent civil rights movement. It shows how his ideas crystallized during the major political debates of the late 1960's and 1970's -- the growth of the New Left, the reform of the Democratic Party, and the war in Vietnam. And it concludes with the capstone of his life, his time at the AFL-CIO and the triumph of Solidarity in Poland.

Tom Kahn made a major contribution to the growth of democracy by writing and educating, by creating and strengthening organizational structures, and by inspiring young people to continue in the struggle. And he made conscious and well-considered decisions to work on behalf of movements for social change -- the socialist movement, the civil rights movement, and the labor movement. It was in the labor movement that he ultimately saw the greatest potential for the growth of democracy.

Throughout Kahn's life, he maintained a consistent and clear belief in democracy and freedom of association, which he defined in many articles and speeches as "the right of ordinary people to create their own institutions independent of the government, institutions which can shelter them from the power of the state, the power of the employer, or the power of other organized social forces." He began

his adult political life at 17, stuffing envelopes and attending meetings in a loft on 14th Street in Manhattan.² It was a long journey from Labor Action Hall, the headquarters of the Independent Socialist League, to 815 16th Street in Washington, the headquarters of the AFL-CIO.

Kahn was first and foremost a writer. Eric Chenoweth, who worked for him at the AFL-CIO, collected his articles, printed speeches, audiotapes, and videotapes after he died.³ These writings, along with a series of interviews,⁴ a lifetime of reading radical, civil rights and labor material, and our joint political activity, are the sources for this paper.

Kahn wrote in his own name and he ghost-wrote speeches and articles for civil rights, labor leaders, and politicians—Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, Walter Reuther, Hubert Humphrey, and Henry Jackson. He brought more than nice words to these speeches, often adding historical analysis and eloquence. He analyzed current events, wrote polemics against the Old Right and New Left, and edited agitational pamphlets. He called the shots as he saw them. He was never afraid to take on what seemed like the latest panacea or slogan designed to cure the world's ills, whether it was "preferential treatment" or "participatory democracy."

Over the years, Kahn's scope of interest was wide and his forums were diverse. His analysis of the civil rights movement helped propel it from demanding equal access to demanding economic equality, and from direct action to political action. His first major work, *Unfinished Revolution*, was written in 1960 in response to the sit-in movement.⁵ As Stokeley Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) would note, it was read and studied by the young student activists.⁶ Kahn continued writing about every aspect of the civil rights movement until 1983. In 1966, he started writing about the New Left and its conflicts with the labor movement. He deplored what he considered the New Left's anti-labor elitism. He wrote and spoke for the social democratic movement -- for the Young People's Socialist League and for Norman Thomas' Socialist Party, which eventually became Social Democrats USA. He edited the AFL-CIO's *Free Trade Union News* and collaborated with Lane Kirkland on many of the latter's speeches and reports.⁷

His writing, however, was never divorced from political activism or organizational concerns. He did not write critiques for their own sake, either in his own name or for others. Everything he wrote -- and everything he believed in and fought for -- was meant to push the struggle for democracy forward.

Early Years – Becoming a Radical – First Principles

Tom Kahn was born September 15, 1938. All he ever knew about his biological parents was that his mother was probably French Canadian and that he was left at the New York Foundling Hospital.

From there, he was adopted by Adele and David Kahn. David Kahn was born in Kingston, Jamaica, the son of a German immigrant street peddler. His mother had also been born in Kingston and, according to family myth, came from a fairly well-off Spanish Jewish family. David's older brother brought him to New York when he was sixteen. Adele was born in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, one of six children. Her father drove a hearse. She finished the sixth or eighth grade and went to work in various factories.

She was 17 and David 20 when they met. David was already working at the Brooklyn Union Gas Company and impressed Adele's family by moving her from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn to Maspeth, Long Island. David later converted to Catholicism, and further impressed the family by supporting many of them during the Depression. Two years after adopting Tom, they adopted a little girl, Rosemary.

Tom Kahn always remembered the house as shrouded in secrecy and unhappiness. His father was a workaholic and his mother an hysteric. The Kahns had decided not to tell the two children that they were adopted. But there were hints from family members, including Adele. Once when Tom was about four or five and misbehaved, she took him by the hand, led him down the street and told him she was taking him back to where she got him. Tom found the evidence, the adoption papers, in a drawer when he was in junior high school. The Kahns finally admitted to Tom and Rosemary that they were adopted a few years later when both were in high school.

David Kahn was also secretive about his politics and his work for the trade union movement. He was a union delegate for Transport Workers Local 101 of the Brooklyn Union Gas Company. Rosemary⁸ remembers him telling her years later that he and John Lopez, then President of Local 101, were members of the Communist Party and that they “shaped the local by recruiting others, salting the meeting hall with their recruits who voiced issues for them in what looked like a serendipitous fashion; mailing ballots from all over Brooklyn and just generally subverting the democratic process.” David Kahn became Vice-President of the local and then President when Lopez left.

Rosemary doesn't remember any “political nurturing in the house Talk about the union came only as complaints about trivia.... There was no knowledge of Dad's membership in the CP.” She remembers her father conducting the job as president much as he had as union delegate, only the number of calls increased. Their mother was President for a time of the Women's Auxiliary of Local 101, a job she didn't relish according to Rosemary, who believes there was always a “subtext of anxiety there.”

Kahn was a sickly, intellectual boy. The only sport he excelled at was stickball, a form of baseball played in the street. Mostly, his mother screamed at him and his father ignored him. His major attachment to the family was to the little sister who idolized him. He rebelled against his parents, their religion, even their participation in the trade union movement. He developed a hatred of secretiveness, of keeping one's ideas quiet, of muting criticisms, that was to stay with him the rest of his life. He believed that people had to face and own up to reality.

By the time he got to high school, he was a bohemian, intellectual ascetic. He considered himself a civil libertarian and radical. He ran for president of the Student Organization of Erasmus Hall High School in 1955 on a platform calling for the destruction of the student assembly, because it had no power. It was the truth and he wanted to expose it. He lost the election.⁹

It was at Brooklyn College that he began to deal with the contradictions of his young life and to act out his rebellion from the life of his parents. He had homosexual fantasies and relationships with women. He was attracted to the bohemian life of Greenwich Village at a time when the Beat Generation was just emerging. He was busy reading Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*. And, perhaps in rebellion against his home life, he was majoring in Latin, Greek, and classical literature.

In 1956, the country was still reeling from McCarthyism even after McCarthy's own downfall, free speech was in danger, blacks were discriminated against, and the Cold War raged. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate for President, had been defeated a second time. Like most of the rest of the country, Brooklyn College was politically dead. The president of the college, Harry D. Gideonse, an esteemed liberal and officer of Freedom House, had been brought to campus to clean out the Communists. He had succeeded too well. The faculty had essentially been purged of all independents, the student newspaper was a house organ, and the most popular group on campus was the ROTC.

But there were some stirrings in the country and the rest of the world. The Montgomery bus protest continued through the 1956-57 school year. There were political uprisings in Hungary and Poland.

Brooklyn College was having its own small cultural revolution. Paul Feldman¹⁰ was on campus then and he reminisced about those days for a later generation of young socialists:

*At Brooklyn College I was a leader of the Cultural Revolution at that college and a devotee of Ernest Hemingway and books about the Spanish Civil War and black motorcycle jackets. I was therefore naturally attracted to a little band of school politicians who also wore black jackets. They had certain bohemian tendencies and were very strong about intellectual pursuits and were more serious about ideas than I was. That was interesting for me.....This little band was led by a boy named Tom.*¹¹

Kahn had joined Students for Democratic Action, the small, campus-based youth group of Americans for Democratic Action. SDA was a national organization and he attended city-wide and regional meetings as well. It was at those meetings that he met members of the Young Socialist League, the youth arm of the Independent Socialist League, a third camp, democratic socialist organization whose headquarters were in a big loft on 14th Street not far from Union Square in Manhattan. After walking up a rickety flight of steps, visitors were greeted by a large banner proclaiming, "Neither Washington nor Moscow."

The ISL was led by Max Shachtman, who had been expelled from the American Communist Party with the other followers of Leon Trotsky in 1928 by Jay Lovestone, who was then its executive secretary. Later, Shachtman broke with Trotsky to form a new socialist organization.

Many years afterwards, Albert Glotzer, a follower of Shachtman, described the rift. Trotsky and Shachtman had disagreed about the nature of the Russian state. They agreed that Stalin had betrayed the Russian Revolution, but Trotsky believed that the absence of capitalism and the collectivization of the Soviet Union made it a "degenerated workers state," and, therefore, worthy of support.¹²

Kahn, in his eulogy for Shachtman, described the first time he heard him speak:

It was shortly after the Hungarian uprising when, at the invitation of some friends, I found myself in a dingy and smoky room packed with several hundred people. They fell quiet as the speaker was introduced and moved to the podium -- a bald, clean-shaven man who I remember thinking at the time looked like Nikita Khrushchev....

Max had an incredible voice. It was capable of a kind of music -- Beethoven. It would sneak up on you in soft whispers, gently threading your uncollected thoughts together, and then burst forth, with powerful resonance, filling up the room and tingling your spine.

I still remember the portrait of horror Max painted that night -- of rolling Russian tanks, of defenseless Hungarian workers and students fighting back with stones, of a heroic people's crushed hopes, and of our democratic socialist links to those hopes. Freedom, democracy were not abstractions; they were real and could therefore be destroyed. Communist totalitarianism was not merely a political force, an ideological aberration that could be smashed in debate. It was a monstrous physical force. Democracy was not merely the icing on the socialist cake. It was the cake -- or there was no socialism worth fighting for. And if socialism was worth fighting for here, it was worth fighting for everywhere: socialism was nothing if it was not profoundly internationalist.

*I do not remember whether that was the night I signed up. But it was the night I became convinced.*¹³

Michael Harrington, who would later write *The Other America* and awaken the country to the problems of poverty, was head of the ISL's youth affiliate, the Young Socialist League. He could sit down at a typewriter (remember those?) and in minutes, dash off an article on almost any topic. His Jesuit training

helped make him a great debater and speaker. He had read every novel by Balzac and Proust in the original French, and read the German Marxists in German. He edited the *Young Socialist Challenge*.

Because of FBI harassment and McCarthyism, some people adopted pen names when writing for the paper. Kahn sometimes used the name Tom Marcel. But Harrington wrote so much, so often, and with such expertise that he often used pen names to make it appear that the paper had more writers. In his biography of Harrington, Maurice Isserman reports, "The front page of the January 30, 1956, issue of *Challenge*, for example, was devoted to reports on international student protests. The story on India carried the byline of Michael Harrington; the story on Spain was written by one Edward Hill; and the story on Argentina was written by one Eli Fishman."¹⁴ All were favorite Harrington *noms de plume*.

Kahn was awed by Michael Harrington's facility with the spoken and written word. Harrington in turn was the first real intellectual to take Kahn seriously. But it was Shachtman who would be the lifelong influence on him. Kahn was struck that Shachtman's rejection of Stalinism and the Soviet system did not lead to a rejection of socialism. Indeed, Shachtman viewed the Communist regime and its supporters around the world as enemies of socialism. He saw the Soviet Union as a country in which the party apparatus ruled, forming a new class which had total control. He called the system "bureaucratic collectivist." This was a society in which the means of production were in fact nationalized and owned by the state and the state was controlled by a totalitarian apparatus – the Communist Party.

This was not an arcane academic point. It lay at the heart of Shachtman's opposition to the Soviet system. It was in arguing about this theory with Trotsky and his followers, and with the Stalinists, that Shachtman came to understand the importance of democracy to socialism.

He publicly examined and changed his mind about a lot of issues, but he never gave up a radical analysis of what was needed in the United States. In the 1950's, for example, he abandoned his earlier support of the Leninist notion of a one-party state because it led to the totalitarian degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Similarly, the Workers Party, the forerunner of the ISL, had opposed the Marshall Plan for European Recovery. Shachtman came to believe that was a mistake.¹⁵

In 1958, soon after Kahn first heard him speak, Shachtman led the ISL and its youth group back into Norman Thomas' Socialist Party. He believed that party was rooted in American radicalism and thus it was where American socialists should be, not in a loft recalling the glory days of early European Bolshevism and the betrayal of the Russian Revolution.

Listening to Shachtman speak soon after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Kahn was convinced by his argument that capitalist society could be transformed to a more just system, and that there could be no just system -- no socialism -- without democracy. Shachtman believed the working class was central to that struggle.

The youthful radical absorbed the principles that would guide his whole life. And his idea of the labor movement was transformed from the demanding, clandestine organization his father had been part of to Shachtman's idea of it. This is how Kahn described what Shachtman taught him about labor:

But on one matter of socialist theory he was adamant: socialism had no meaning and no possibility of realization except as it based itself on the struggles and aspirations of the organized working class. That means the labor movement. Not the labor movement as radicals fantasized it, or thought it should be – but the labor movement as it was, in actuality. Not this or that "progressive" union – but the labor movement as a whole. The great failure of the socialist movement he said again and again could be traced to its estrangement from the mainstream of the labor movement. But unlike the chic radicals of today, he did not attribute that alienation to the progressive arteriosclerosis of labor but to the sectarianism of American socialism.

For Max, loyal socialist participation in the labor movement did not mean or require the surrender of distinctly socialist ideas. But it did mean the surrender of old radical myths – e.g., that the labor leadership¹⁶ was unrepresentative and to the right of the rank and file; that since the militant Thirties, it was all down hill for labor, conservatized by affluence and power; that anti-communism was a manifestation of reactionary Catholic attitudes, etc, etc.¹⁷

So the lessons that would last a lifetime -- the absolute necessity of democracy and the importance of the working class in that struggle -- were absorbed by the still teenaged Kahn.

The Civil Rights Movement and Bayard Rustin

It was while Kahn was at Brooklyn College as a full-time student, working part-time as an usher at Broadway's Alvin Theater and trying to attend as many YSL and ISL meetings as possible, that Michael Harrington dispatched the two of us to a temporary office that Bayard Rustin, the civil rights and pacifist activist, had set up to raise money and to increase support in the north for the Montgomery Bus Protest.

Kahn and I met Rustin together. It was a life-changing experience for both of us. Rustin was charismatic, brilliant, charming, and handsome. Kahn described him as an anti-depressant. I felt as if I had just met the personification of history in the making.

Rustin was working at every level of the civil rights movement. Under his direction, we corrected misprinted flyers and stuffed them into thousands of envelopes. Rustin sat with us and helped. He was constantly interrupted by calls from Montgomery, Alabama, and from the young Martin Luther King, Jr. He would give us mini-tutorials on Gandhi, and when the work got dull, he would sing spirituals and freedom songs. If this country was to be improved, if change were to be made, this was the place to be.

Rustin would become a major influence on Kahn, and would teach him about organization, theory, and practice. After Rustin's death, Kahn wrote:

When I met him for the first time he was a few years younger than I am now,¹⁸ and I was barely on the edge of manhood. He drew me into a vortex of his endless campaigns and projects.... He introduced me to Bach and Brahms, and to the importance of maintaining a balance in life between the pursuit of our individual pleasures and engagements in, and responsibility for, the social condition. He believed that no class, caste or genre of people were exempt from this obligation.¹⁹

The time of demonstrations had begun. Rustin persuaded the newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference to organize a Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington in 1956 and Kahn helped fill buses for it at Brooklyn College. In 1956 and 1957, Rustin organized two Youth Marches for Integrated Schools and Kahn worked full time on those. Classes and the classics at Brooklyn College faded.

Rustin briefly left the United States in 1959 to lead a pacifist protest against French atom bomb testing in the Sahara Desert. At the same time, Martin Luther King, Jr., wanted him to move south to work for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Working with Michael Harrington and the Young Socialists, Rustin had also come up with a plan for marches at the 1960 Democratic and Republican Conventions. In 1959, neither party nor any prospective candidates for president had taken a stand for integration. (The one candidate, Hubert Humphrey, who was clear on this issue had dropped out of the race before the convention.), The marches would urge support in both party platforms for the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision outlawing segregation in the schools.

Rustin had to decide which project he should work on. And he was wrestling with a dilemma that he

had to face since his arrest on a morals charge in the early 1950's: how prominent a role should he play? Would his enemies make so much trouble that his presence would do more harm to the movement than good? Was helping build the SCLC and advising King in the South more important than the conventions project? In a letter to Rustin, the young Kahn weighed in on all these questions:

It's also true that people will make trouble for you from now until you until you've got both big feet in the grave. Hasn't a vicious cycle been created whereby you have calculatingly avoided real public prominence in order not to expose yourself and others to attack, with the result that you remain the vulnerable assistant? Invulnerability comes with total anonymity. That you cannot have. Are you therefore less vulnerable as a leader or as a second-stringer?... Taking as the starting point the historical-political necessity for the thrust of the movement to come from the South, ...and keeping in mind the strong possibility (probability) that King may languish in the South without you, at what point does it become feasible for you to assume leadership in this vital area? When if not now, when the call for you is unanimous, when King's feelings...are unequivocal? ²⁰

But Kahn also believed the conventions project was essential and Rustin's participation in it had to be worked out. At the end of the letter, he joked:

Meantime, just keep repeating the formula: 1960 Project – increased tension within the Democratic Party – split in the Democratic Party – Formation of Labor Party – Labor Party under influence of mass socialist left-democratic foreign policy – end of nuclear testing in Sahara and everywhere else.

In his biography of Bayard Rustin, John D'Emilio points out, “Though Kahn was a quarter-century younger than Bayard, he was intellectually precocious, well read, a good writer and already as a teenager thoroughly engrossed by progressive politics and social movements.” And while his principles were unchanged throughout the years, his belief that the Democratic Party should split and become a labor party would change drastically.

Unfinished Revolution: A writer is born

Kahn had started writing *Unfinished Revolution*, a pamphlet about the civil rights movement, while Rustin was in Africa. He was pretty busy at the time, working for the American Committee on Africa, actively supporting the New York Drug and Hospital Workers Union, Local 1199's 1959 hospital strike, and helping in the preparations for the marches on the political conventions. The start of the sit-in movement in February, 1960, gave the pamphlet new urgency. Kahn drew heavily on Rustin's experiences in the civil rights movement, A.J. Muste's thinking on non-violence, Michael Harrington's socialist perspective, and George Rawick's historical analysis -- but *Unfinished Revolution* was pure Kahn.

There were lots of articles written about the burgeoning civil rights movement and the labor movement in the 1960's. Many of them urged the civil rights movement to cool down, to give the South a chance to absorb change. Other articles criticized the labor movement for not doing enough to integrate or to support the freedom struggle.

But among all of the writings in the 1960's that were deeply rooted in the southern non-violent movement, *Unfinished Revolution* was possibly the only one that urged the movement to join with the labor movement to transform the Democratic Party, and indeed all of America:

If the momentous events of the spring of 1960 are viewed simply on the surface, the broad movement for civil rights will have lost enormously. The Southern Negro students were engaged in a profound social act.... Their action had tremendous implications for every institution in American society – above all for a political party system that has managed to blur over the issue of civil rights for

decades.²²

It is a sign of the times that the use of the word “Negro” was perfectly acceptable and it is another sign of the times that Kahn felt it necessary to include an appendix that outlined the history of Jim Crow. Of course, he also provided a Marxist analysis of the relationship of the North and the South:

*The cheap labor market – the South's main attraction for Northern capital – depended in large measure upon segregation and discrimination, as it does to this day. The Negro without a vote and without a union card has little to say about his wages and is up against a take it or leave it proposition. In addition, the presence of a politically disenfranchised and economically uprooted Negro population represented a threat to the poor whites because if the latter sought to improve their economic status, their bosses could always threaten to turn them out and give the job to Negroes who, in desperation, would work for less.*²³

Kahn called for an alliance of the forces of A. Philip Randolph, the head of the predominantly black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and AFL-CIO Vice-President, and of Martin Luther King, Jr., to create a liberal labor party “committed to the fight of the Negro for equality, of the workingman for improved living conditions, of the farmer for the fair share of his produce.”²⁴ This pamphlet was to have a strong influence on civil rights activists ranging from Rev. James Lawson, the non-violent leader of the Nashville movement who wrote a foreword for it, to John Lewis, the hero of the non-violent movement -- and even to Stokeley Carmichael who, as mentioned earlier, reminisced about its influence in his autobiography.

Howard University

Kahn had not given up on getting a college degree. He had traveled to Los Angeles in 1958 to live with his parents and attend UCLA. Socialist meetings and the East Coast pulled him back. He also attended Columbia University for a while, but got bogged down organizing a campus Young Peoples Socialist League.

By 1961, he knew what he wanted to learn and where he wanted to be – the predominantly black Howard University. He wanted to understand everything about the black experience in America. The faculty was a Who's Who of black writers and thinkers. The great African-American sociologist and author E. Franklin Frazier and the magnificent poet Sterling Brown were just two of the faculty members at Howard.

A recent graduate of the Bronx High School of Science, Stokeley Carmichael, was Kahn's classmate, along with Eddie C. Brown, who had just been expelled for sitting in at his school, Louisiana State University. Kahn absorbed the lessons taught by the faculty and he joined the Non-Violent Action Committee, a branch of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Carmichael later wrote, “Tom Kahn [was] one of our most experienced activists and a shrewd strategist.”²⁵ The Howard students were arrested in Baltimore for sitting in at a segregated restaurant. In addition, Kahn sat in at Attorney General Robert Kennedy's office to protest criminal charges against students in Baton Rouge.

In 1962, Kahn was invited to speak at the first north-south student conference devoted to race and politics. It was sponsored jointly by the newly formed Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and SNCC, and held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Kahn told the truth as he saw it. The NAACP and the established civil rights leadership had not participated in the mass civil rights action and had steered clear of the Freedom Rides. He argued against the “sterility” of advocating the use of legal action or legislation without including mass action:

On the strategic level, the Freedom Rides have provided the most clear cut demonstration of the sterility of legalism that our generation has witnessed. By legalism, I mean the view that social revolutions can be carried out in courtrooms. Working through the courts is, of course, a proper and necessary part of the struggle against injustice. The gains we win must be recorded and precedents must be set.... Thus, the 1946 decision²⁶ afforded a legal and a moral basis for the Freedom Rides. It is also true that the 1954 school desegregation decision helped create an atmosphere and a certain confidence conducive to Freedom Riding. But it cannot be said that the 1946 decision actually integrated the bus terminals any more than the 1954 decision is really integrating the schools. Or any more than it can be said that it was the courts and not the Montgomery Bus Protest that integrated the busses [sic]. That's a little like saying it was the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves without mentioning Abolitionist agitation and the exigencies of the Civil War.²⁷

Having established his ideological bona fides, he went on to discuss the Freedom Rides:

But back to the Freedom Rides themselves. I think we have to recognize that they were a fluke – a bomb whose fuse we never lit. When it exploded, the noise was louder than anyone had expected. We owe their impact not to their intrinsic importance so much as to the irrationality of the segregationist officials. Had they not been so insane as to permit and encourage mob violence and bus burning, it is likely that the Freedom Rides would have been just another direct action project.²⁸ This question of strategy was to bedevil the civil rights movement for years. That is, did the success of any project depend on the overreaction of the enemy rather than the correctness of the strategy itself? Kahn raised the question precisely so that strategies would be developed that in and of themselves could bring about victories. First and foremost, he saw the need for students to join in coalition with other progressive forces in this country. At the top of his list was the labor movement.

Some southern students might not have thought of it as an obvious coalition partner. The labor movement they had seen in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi was weak and not integrated. But interestingly enough, many of the northern students present were from Detroit. Some were the children of UAW leaders and trade unionists. For many of them, a progressive coalition including students and labor made sense.²⁹ Kahn made a left-wing argument for an alliance with labor:

The American labor movement compared with its counterparts elsewhere in the world is conservative. Not only has it dragged its feet inexcusably so far as the Negro is concerned, but its white membership is declining as a result of its overall policies. I think we have to look shrewdly to the labor movement as an ally, not because we like George Meany – I don't³⁰ -- or because we like white Southern workers, but because I know of no other major American institution of which it can be said with certitude that if it does not move radically on civil rights it will unquestionably be destroyed in our lifetime. In personal relations we may chose our friends according to what they say or think about us. But in politics we must chose our friends according to whether they cannot get along without us, despite themselves.³¹

This was not an argument the AFL-CIO would like, but one Kahn knew the activists would possibly buy.

He managed to be a serious student at Howard at the same time that he organized a small band of young men and women into a chapter of the Young People's Socialist League. It was the only predominantly black local in the organization, which by then had grown to about 800 people nationally.

The YPSL was having its own internal fight, however. The organization was torn between those who stood by the old slogans and called for “independent political action,” i.e., for a labor party, and those

who saw some hope in the Democratic Party and called for “political realignment,” a slogan which reflected the realities of the civil rights movement and the labor movement. The adult leader of the realignment wing was Michael Harrington. In its youth section, Kahn was the most influential. He wrote about how he felt in a letter to me in 1962:

*I think socialists have to recognize that these movements [civil rights, peace and trade union] are, by and large, inside the Democratic Party. Hence I think that socialists must pay special attention to the conflicts that exist within that party owing to the presence of the progressive mass movements (who show little disposition to form an independent political party.)...Although a Democratic Party free of the Dixiecrats would not be a socialist party, it would...provide a vehicle through which civil rights, peace and labor movement could achieve a more nearly unified political purpose and in which socialists, as socialists, could function as a left wing.*³² The 24-year-old Kahn was now more grounded in the real world and he was searching for a way to turn his vision of America into reality. He could not ignore the fact that all over the South, black men and women were risking their lives to vote for Democratic Party candidates, and that their much needed allies in the labor movement showed no inclination to abandon the party of Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Humphrey.

1963: The March on Washington

Kahn came back to New York City during summer vacations and student breaks from Howard, and he stayed with Rustin. They spent much of their time together analyzing the movement and thinking about where it should be headed.

Rustin believed that the civil rights movement had to begin to look to Washington for solutions. All of the major fights were then taking place at the local level. There were bus boycotts in many southern cities; sit-ins were taking place in the North as well as the South. Victories came only one at a time as local merchants gave in to demonstrators, or in long-delayed court decisions. Black people could not vote and replace local officials who discriminated. It was clear that federal legislation barring segregation and guaranteeing the right to vote was needed.

Rustin believed the civil rights movement should make another shift as well. The civil rights agenda had to include “a broad and fundamental program of economic justice.” In both of these areas, Rustin was in perfect sync with his mentor, A. Philip Randolph. Together, in the words of historian David Garrow, they wanted to “transform the civil rights agenda into a broad and fundamental program of economic justice.”³³

In January, 1963, Rustin called Kahn and Norman Hill, a young black socialist who was then working for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), to his apartment to discuss an idea he had for a two-day protest in Washington. He proposed they draw up an initial memo for Randolph to win his support for the project. All three men contributed ideas, but the writing of the memo fell to Kahn.

That memorandum³⁴ called for a two-day action program which was to the left of the final plans for the March on Washington. The first day would be a “mass descent on Congress...to flood all Congressmen with a staggered series of labor, church, and civil rights delegations from their own states so that they would be unable to conduct business.” On the second day, there would be a mass protest rally to put forward an “Emancipation Program to the Nation.”

The preamble of the memo argued that action was necessary primarily because of the economic disparity between blacks and whites:

Today the ratio of unemployment among Negroes and whites remains two-to-one. The condition of Negro labor is inseparable from that of white labor....So far the federal government has produced no

serious answer to the problems of rising unemployment....Thousands of workers have been displaced by automation....25% of the long term unemployed are Negroes. . . A disproportionate number of 8,000 school dropouts a year are Negroes.... Integration in the field of education, housing, transportation and public accommodations will be of limited extent and duration as long as fundamental economic inequality along racial lines persists . . . Clearly, there is no need for Negroes to demand jobs that do not exist. . . Nor do Negroes seek to displace white workers as both are being displaced by machines... For the dynamic that has motivated Negroes to withstand with courage and dignity the intimidation and violence they have endured in their own struggle against racism in all its forms may now be the catalyst which mobilized all workers behind demands for a broad and fundamental program for social justice.

A. Philip Randolph embraced the idea of the “Emancipation March,” while Rustin tried to gather the support of other civil rights organizations.

The spring of 1963 brought more protests and mass demonstrations. The nation was horrified by the assassination of Medgar Evers in Mississippi and the fire-hosing of children in Birmingham, Alabama. President John F. Kennedy was forced to introduce civil rights legislation. Randolph continued to push for the March.

On July 2 , 1963, Rustin presented a revised memo drafted by Kahn to the “Big Six” leaders of black organizations: James Farmer of CORE, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, chairman of SNCC, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and Whitney Young of the Urban League. The focus of the March was now broadened to include an end to discrimination. It would be the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (MOW).³⁵ The rhetoric of the earlier memo was replaced by a platform for action:

- To arouse the conscience of America to the economic plight of the Negro 100 years after emancipation
- To call on the administration and Congress for a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act.
- To call on the administration and Congress... to set up a national minimum wage of not less than \$1.50 per hour
- To demand an effective and meaningful civil rights bill
- To protest any filibuster and demand majority rule in the United States Senate.³⁶

The memo that contained this platform went on to detail the structure, leadership, and finances of the March on Washington. It would be a one-day march and rally, a far cry from the original two-day demonstration for economic justice, but Kahn was content knowing that the mood of the country had changed since the original plans had been drawn up. There were now several civil rights bills before Congress, one of them proposed by the Administration. The modified plan for the March was the only one that could get the support of the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and attract the largest possible number of supporters.

Randolph was named Director of the March, Rustin his deputy, and Kahn became Rustin's chief assistant.³⁷ Kahn functioned as chief of staff and drafted virtually every statement issued by the MOW. He did first drafts of the demands, edited most statements, and wrote the operating manuals. He ghost-wrote Randolph's Lincoln Memorial speech.

Dr. King's “I Have a Dream” speech is the one most remembered from that day. But John Lewis' speech was the most controversial. And some of that was Kahn's fault.

Lewis brought a draft of his speech to New York several days before the March and showed it to

Rustin, Kahn, and other staff members. Kahn could not resist a little editing and added the line, “We will march through the south as General Sherman did, pursuing our own non-violent scorched earth policy.”³⁸ Lewis was one of the most saintly, non-violent people in the civil rights movement but he liked that line. On the other hand, Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle of Washington, who was scheduled to deliver the invocation at the March, objected to that and some other sections of the speech and threatened to withdraw from giving the opening prayer. After a series of meetings and discussions, Lewis edited and removed the most controversial parts of his remarks, including the reference to General Sherman.

The March gave Rustin a new prominence and taught Kahn something about the world of Washington politics. The AFL-CIO was correctly criticized for not endorsing the March, but the support of national unions was absolutely essential to its success. Busloads of trade unionists attended and thousands of dollars were contributed by union members. In the end, it was the AFL-CIO that won the inclusion of equal employment opportunity in the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Rustin believed the March was only the first step in building a national coalition that would fight for and win justice – economic and legal -- for black people and all Americans. And while Rustin spoke and acted broadly to create such a coalition, Kahn functioned as his chief writer.

The first place to begin to build was the AFL-CIO. There were two problems, however. The Federation had not endorsed the March, and the relationship between George Meany and A. Philip Randolph, while friendly on a personal level, was publicly quite stormy.³⁹

Randolph was scheduled to speak at the October, 1963, AFL-CIO convention. And Rustin, Randolph, and Kahn worked on that speech together. The speech was written by Kahn and illustrated how Kahn worked as a ghost-writer.⁴⁰ He absorbed Randolph’s earlier speeches and knew his ideas. He was very comfortable with Randolph’s militancy, strong trade unionism, and social democratic leanings. Randolph’s speech began, “I do not propose to rehash altercations that are better left to labor’s past than projected into labor’s future. I intend instead to analyze the plight in which the Negro finds himself in 1963, and to make concrete proposals for action by the labor movement.” Jervis Anderson, Randolph’s biographer, said, “No speech had better summed up his moral conception of the labor movement and its role in the social life of the country. Even George Meany conceded it was a moving speech.”⁴¹

The second phase of coalition-building would be convincing the protest movement to move into politics. Rustin began making speeches about that idea after the March on Washington. He was saddened when the civil rights movement was torn apart at the 1964 Democratic convention over a dispute about whether to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democrats.⁴² So, when he was approached by Norman Podhoretz to write an article for *Commentary* magazine, he enthusiastically agreed. It was generally understood that Rustin’s ideas about the movement would be written by Kahn.⁴³

The resulting article, "From Protest to Politics," would become a seminal piece for the civil rights movement. Daniel Levine, the author of *Bayard Rustin And The Civil Rights Movement*, acknowledges Kahn’s work on the document and says, “The article is complex, emphasizing the interrelationship of economic, racial, regional, historical, political and class issues. The elimination of racial barriers he argued... was likely to continue, [but] was not enough. The article was reprinted and was distributed throughout the civil rights and labor movement and in Lyndon Johnson’s White House. It would be given to newly enfranchised blacks in South Africa, to Lech Walesa, and to activists in Northern Ireland.

Years later, Arch Puddington, the author and biographer of Lane Kirkland, reflected on Kahn's writing. "As the writer for the Randolph Institute, I spent much time poring over the articles that Tom had ghosted for Bayard. I thought then that from a polemical and stylistic perspective, Tom was the best around. There was leanness and toughness about his articles that many of us admired and a few, myself among them, occasionally tried to emulate without great success."⁴⁴

The League for Industrial Democracy

Kahn had to earn a living. His talent as a writer and the glow that resulted from his work on the March on Washington opened up many opportunities. But his ideology and his politics led him to the League for Industrial Democracy, where he served as Executive Director until 1972. Founded in 1905 by Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Clarence Darrow, the League had evolved from the Intercollegiate Socialist Society whose focus was on educating college students about socialism and the muckraking tradition of its founders into a broad-based educational organization. John Dewey, the noted educator, served as president for many years. Norman Thomas, by then considered the conscience of American socialism, sat on its board as did trade unionists and intellectuals from around the country.

By 1964, the LID was a shell of its old self. Like many social democratic organizations, it had lost support and members to the New Deal. McCarthyism had dealt it further blows. The recent fight with its youth group, Students for a Democratic Society, had finally been settled with a friendly divorce. But the activism of the 1960's seemed to provide new hope for the organization. Kahn would become the operating officer and Michael Harrington the public face of the LID. Harrington believed, "The sixties... were going to be a time of renewed reform, the first such period since the New Deal. In that perspective, the LID was supposed to become a center for discussion and debate where trade unionists, blacks and intellectuals could meet and analyze events and programs."⁴⁵

Kahn and Harrington broadened the LID's reach by adding the editors of the radical magazine *Dissent* to its Board of Directors, forging a working relationship with the editors of *Partisan Review*, and adding academics like S.M. Miller of NYU and Herbert Gans of Columbia to the Board. Bayard Rustin and Norman Hill, now on the staff of National CORE, also joined. Finally, Kahn and Harrington began working with Walter Reuther of the UAW and Jack Conway of the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department. But they were determined not to make the mistake of earlier radicals who looked only toward the UAW, the Steelworkers, and other CIO unions for support, so they included Lane Kirkland, the AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer, and Charles Zimmerman of the ILGWU on the Board. In New York City, the LID worked closely with Al Shanker, the President of the United Federation of Teachers, and Vic Gotbaum, the executive director of District Council 37 of AFSCME along with Ed Gray of the UAW.

So the stage was set for the LID to be the bridge among the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and liberal intellectuals – a place where new programs could be developed and problems worked out.

In early 1964, the League published Kahn's pamphlet, *The Economics of Equality*, which described the post-March on Washington frustration in the black community -- "more actual segregation in schools and housing today than in 1954." The pamphlet noted the southern white counter-revolution, and went on to observe, " but its most disturbing manifestations are here in the North."⁴⁶

Kahn then reflected on the stakes if the movement failed:

A heavy burden weighs upon the Negro and his white allies. Far more is at stake than the right to eat a hamburger – far more even than racial equality itself. What is at stake is the very structure of and substance of the new society we are all about to enter. Will it be humane and democratic? Will it meet

people's needs? Will it finally liberate us from psychological prisons, animal toil and material deprivation?

*This pamphlet means to suggest that at this juncture in American history the answer to these questions rests largely – and perhaps unfairly -- with the civil rights revolution and the response of the white majority to it.*⁴⁷

The pamphlet was devoted mainly to a discussion of economic trends in the United States -- growing unemployment in the black community, the growth of the public sector, the disparity of income between blacks and whites, the problems posed by panaceas such as preferential treatment -- and it concluded that the solution to these problems was political. It pointed out that:

*a numerical minority, Negroes, by themselves, lack the political power to achieve the economic reforms required by the civil rights revolution. These can only be won by an alliance of progressive forces – of which the labor movement is the largest organized component.*⁴⁸

Kahn was still dwelling on the economic problems in the black community, but he now had a deeper understanding of how an alliance should be built. By 1964, the labor movement had taken on a special role in his thinking and writing:

*Even when its program is inadequate – and many criticisms can be leveled at the AFL-CIO – it is the single most powerful bulwark against conservative and reactionary interests. It is no accident that virtually no dictatorial or totalitarian regime has won power without first destroying or repressing the free labor movement. There are doubtless as many individual Americans dedicated to democracy outside of the labor movement as within it. Many belong to liberal organizations that provide important sources of leadership. But they cannot provide the social ballast represented by institutions with socio-economic roots.*⁴⁹

The pamphlet ended with a call for political realignment and a call to action:

We have not yet demonstrated loudly enough, frequently enough and in enough places that political power lies on the side of democratic social change. We have not yet built a political movement....

Meanwhile, we remain in the streets.⁵⁰ *The Economics of Equality* was the precursor to the more agitational *Freedom Budget for All Americans*, published by Rustin's A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1966. Conceived and drafted mostly by Leon Keyserling, who had been chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors under Harry S. Truman, the Freedom Budget was a comprehensive plan for full employment through social investment. In the words of David Garrow, it was “a program for improving the lives of America's poor and dramatically increasing their incomes that made President Johnson's uplifting 'War on Poverty' look miserly.”⁵¹

The LID published an edition of the *Freedom Budget* and became its prime sponsor in the liberal community. The Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO published and distributed a labor edition.

The Freedom Budget met resistance from unexpected quarters. The war in Vietnam was escalating. Harrington and Kahn had hoped that hawks and doves could unite on domestic programs. But the doves in the peace movement and the hawks in the Johnson Administration did not see it that way. The administration did not have to do much to kill the *Freedom Budget*; the left opposition did it for them. The conservatives argued that you couldn't have “guns and butter,” and many doves said the call for butter had to wait until the guns had stopped. Then, they said, there would be a “peace dividend.”

Kahn had served on the advisory committee that helped formulate the budget. He had helped recruit intellectuals and economists to support it. Moreover, he deeply believed in its program. Years later, he reflected on those times and on the impact of the fights within the liberal-labor coalition: "That would not be history's last nasty joke on us. Under the impact of Vietnam, the liberal coalition fell apart, Hubert Humphrey lost the Presidency, and the nation endured Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford."⁵²

In the five years between 1963 and 1968, the mood in the country would completely change. After the March on Washington, it had seemed to Kahn that a mass movement for progressive social change might actually develop in the United States. The left was no longer dominated and discredited by the Communist Party, which had lost many of its members and its following when Soviet tanks ran down Hungarian and freedom fighters. An alliance between the civil rights movement and the trade union movement was beginning. All over the country, trade unionists and black civil rights activists marched on state capitals demanding higher minimum wages and an end to all forms of segregation.

John D'Emilio described what happened next. "1968 was the most turbulent year of all. It brought battlefield reversals and rising casualties in Vietnam; the crumbling of a presidency; assassination of charismatic figures; urban uprisings and a national capital in flames; rebellions on scores of campuses and pitched battles between police and citizens outside a national political convention. There had not been a time in living memory when the country was so bitterly fractured."⁵³

Pen in hand, Kahn wrote articles, made speeches, and within the LID fought what he considered to be the forces of reaction on both sides: liberals who backed off from the fight for economic equality, and New Leftists who abandoned non-violence and traditional allies. He wrote extensively on the growth of the Black Power movement, radical politics, and the problems of the Democratic Party, and he dealt with the problem of the League's former student organization, SDS, now spinning off as a semi-terrorist organization. His articles appeared in the Socialist Party's *New America*, and in the left intellectual magazines *Dissent* and *Partisan Review*.

Unsurprisingly, it was in the pages of *Commentary* that he wrote his longest broadside against the new radicals, "The Problem of the New Left," in 1966. First, he attacked the New Leftists' opinion of the labor movement:

Whatever their differences, every group, without exception, which has called itself Left or radical has believed that the organized working class, the labor movement, has a unique historical role to play in the creation of the new society.... The single new ideological feature of the "New Left" – all that seems really new to me -- is the rejection, implicit or explicit, of this fundamental assumption.... The reasoning behind this rejection... [is] that the organized working class has achieved its goals and has consequently become part of the power structure....

But it is important to remember that the indifference or hostility to labor grew out of a conservative period when middle-class prosperity was reshaping the university.... Thus, while much student criticism of labor comes from the Left, it also contains strands of middle class prejudice – a lack of appreciation for, or identification with the historic and continuing role of labor in the day to day lives of literally millions of working people.⁵⁴

He then turned to SDS and the *Port Huron Statement*, objecting to its anti-anti- Communism:

Activists of the New Left most frequently describe themselves as a-Communists, or as anti-anti-Communists. Their writing speaks indiscriminately of "the ideology of anti-Communism," as if the anti-Communism of socialists, trade unionists, liberals, McCarthyites, Birchers and Klansmen were cut from the same cloth. What actually operates here is a kind of reverse McCarthyism which refuses

*to differentiate between civil libertarian and rightist opposition to Communism.*⁵⁵

He also refused to be cowed by the attractive sound of "participatory democracy," the slogan most often used by SDS to rally students and fend off divisiveness in its own ranks. Years after the *Commentary* article, he wrote, "Decision by consensus, borrowed from the Quakers, helps to prevent the expert abuse of parliamentary procedure, but it also discourages the crystallization of opposing viewpoints, seeking the gentle obliteration of differences."⁵⁶ Kahn knew from experience that participatory democracy worked to the benefit of those people who were most tightly organized and could stay latest at any meeting. It also created the pretense that there were no leaders when in fact there were. Moreover, he did not see participatory democracy as a viable or more democratic alternative to representative democracy, as many in SDS did.

The 1968 elections turned out to be a defining moment for everyone left of center. Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate for President, was supported by the labor movement, most civil rights organizations, and most liberals. Richard Nixon, of course, had the support of the Republican Party. But Humphrey faced two major problems: first, the attraction of blue-collar labor to the presidential candidacy of George Wallace, the racist governor of Alabama; second, the political apathy of peaceniks who thought he had been too much of a toady to Lyndon Johnson and who ultimately stayed home.

It was not an election that could be merely watched from behind the desk of a tax-exempt organization. So, when Kahn was asked by Walter Reuther, President of the United Automobile Workers, to come to Detroit to work during the election period, he readily agreed. Reuther was an unofficial advisor to Humphrey and knew that the best way to influence a candidate was to give him or her words that could be tested in front of an audience. The job was not easy. The writer had to understand the labor movement and the politics of the campaign. Walter Reuther believed Kahn was up to that task.

Kahn wrote speeches and memos for Reuther to give to Humphrey. He also helped write some UAW Humphrey literature and participated in very important discussions within the union about how to mobilize its own members.⁵⁷

Humphrey began the campaign with a terrible disadvantage. The Democratic convention which nominated him was a disaster, with student riots taking place outside. The Chicago police had reacted brutally to the somewhat provocative demonstrators. Mayor Richard Daley was one of Humphrey's top supporters and if he did not order the police action, he totally supported it.

The leadership of the UAW, along with the leadership of many other unions, was surprised to find that a good many of its members were supporting Wallace. Not sure about how to handle him, the leadership debated whether to take Wallace on frontally or just be positive for Humphrey. In the end, the UAW joined the AFL-CIO and various international unions in distributing hundreds of thousands of leaflets contrasting both men's records and making a frontal assault on Wallace's policies as Governor of Alabama -- low wages, bad working conditions, inferior schools and housing. Kahn was particularly proud of the work he did on some of those flyers.

Kahn returned to LID saddened by Humphrey's loss and more convinced than ever that it was the labor movement that was the most consistent and reliable force for social change in this country.

In spring, 1969, the League presented Hubert Humphrey with its annual award. The event turned out to be a replay of the 1968 elections. Michael Harrington and *Dissent* editor Irving Howe protested the award because Humphrey supported the war in Vietnam. Demonstrators and hecklers crashed the ballroom where the luncheon was taking place and tried to silence Humphrey. This time -- unlike during the campaign when many Humphrey rallies were broken up -- the hecklers were silenced. Kahn had left

nothing to chance. As the former Vice-President got up to speak, protesters tried to shout him down. This time, members of the Seafarers International Union non-violently escorted them from the room and Humphrey's speech was delivered without interruption.

In 1971, Kahn tried working in the Democratic Party again. He joined the Jackson for President Committee as a speechwriter. Scoop Jackson was in the Humphrey tradition of the party, a vigorous supporter of New Deal policies, full employment, and government programs, and a hawk on foreign policy. He was a very nice man and a bad campaigner.

The labor movement sat out the primaries quietly backing its old friend Hubert Humphrey, but to no avail. The party's rules for choosing a presidential nominee had changed, and only the forces of George McGovern had mastered them. (It was McGovern himself who had originally chaired the Democrats' commission that overhauled the rules.) Kahn worked with Kirkland at the Democratic convention and helped write a convention speech for I.W. Abel, the president of the Steelworkers union.⁵⁸

When the election was over, Kahn did not return to the LID. Divisions on its board over the war in Vietnam; the UFT strike in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and the takeover of the Democratic Party by the supporters of George McGovern made his initial dream of the LID as a bridge for liberals and labor people unrealistic.⁵⁹

To the AFL-CIO: Assistant to Meany

In 1972, Lane Kirkland made an offer to Kahn. "Come to Washington and work for Meany," he said. Kirkland's offer was impossible for Kahn to refuse: he set no limits on what Kahn could do.

Kirkland and Kahn had come to know each other through the LID and the Randolph Institute. On the surface, they were very different people, but both were serious wordsmiths, intellectually tough, serious radicals with hard-line foreign policy views. Kirkland was more the Southern populist and Kahn the New York Shachtmanite. They were both chain-smokers.

In the years that followed it would be impossible to separate their words in Kirkland's articles and speeches. They would talk about a speech and an approach to a problem, Kahn would write one draft, Kirkland would add new words and ideas, and Kahn would write some more until Kirkland delivered the final text in his own voice.⁶⁰ Kahn would later say that Kirkland was the only person he ever worked for who was a better writer than he was.

Kahn's relationship with Meany was more formal and distant than the one he had with Kirkland. Meany's secretary, Virginia Tehas, acted as an intermediary between them. Kahn was not his only speech writer. But Tom was immediately impressed with Meany's bluntness, his straightforward working-class style, his sense of humor, his incredible memory, and, like Randolph, his steadfast principles. Yes, he had come to like him.⁶¹

The dream of a civil rights-liberal-labor alliance that would transform the Democratic Party had shattered. Some civil rights activists were holding up their end by moving into politics, electing black leaders, and supporting progressive white leaders. But the movement had been changed by the cry for black power and the integrationist dream of the "beloved community" had faded into the background.

Part of the realignment perspective had been realized. The Democratic Party machines in most big cities were destroyed or weakened by insurgent movements. The racist Dixiecrats were leaving the party in droves. Blacks in the South were finally allowed to register and vote, but their numbers were not enough to counterbalance the white defections. Many white radicals and students had abandoned

the party for the peace movement: the fight over the *Freedom Budget* had been the tip of the iceberg. Even old allies like Michael Harrington, who had always argued that the labor movement was central to and the most important part of any progressive coalition, decided that if one had to choose between the liberal-student-peace movement and the labor movement, he would side with the peace movement. Kahn wrote in 1980, "Some have plausibly suggested that the realignment of the Democratic Party actually took place in 1968. No sooner did this occur, however, than the political parties themselves began to disintegrate."⁶²

It seemed to Kahn that the labor movement stood virtually alone. As Eric Chenoweth later put it:

*Tom's association with the trade union movement made perfect sense. For him . . . the AFL-CIO was America's mass social democratic institution. While communists and Third Way socialists had tried unsuccessfully to radicalize the American working class, the AFL-CIO had gone about the business of improving the living and working conditions of American workers – raising them to the highest levels in the world....The AFL-CIO was also the only major American institution to remain unwaveringly anti-communist.*⁶³

When Kahn arrived at the AFL-CIO, the International Affairs Department was headed by Jay Lovestone, who was based in New York, while Irving Brown headed its office in France. According to Arch Puddington, Kirkland believed that Lovestone's opinions were "becoming crankier as he aged, and...secretive methods were out of place in an institution that was in the American mainstream.... To the extent that the labor movement was treated with respect, it was because of Irving Brown."⁶⁴

Kahn formed a natural bond with Brown. Brown had started out as an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. He later organized the non-communist forces in the French unions to defy the communist union effort to block the landing of Marshall Plan goods on the docks of Marseilles. He had worked with the unions in North Africa in their freedom struggle. Tom Donahue described Brown as "the AFL and later AFL-CIO man in Europe from 1946 until the day he died."⁶⁵ He was courageous. And on top of all that, he was a gourmet with whom Kahn could enjoy a great meal.

Meany finally asked Jay Lovestone to leave as International Affairs Director⁶⁶ and appointed Ernest Lee, his son-in-law who had been Lovestone's deputy, as head of the department.

From that time on, there were virtually two International Affairs Departments.⁶⁷ One, which was run by Lee, handled the bureaucracy of the department and escorted official visitors around. Then there was the Paris office, with its annex in Kahn's office in Washington, fomenting revolution in authoritarian countries, nurturing new leaders, and fighting totalitarians aggressively.

When Alexander Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1975, President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger refused to meet with him. Kahn suggested to an enthusiastic George Meany that Solzhenitsyn be invited to the AFL-CIO building.

In the past, Meany would have met with the exiled author and the International Affairs Department would have issued a statement deploring his expulsion from the Soviet Union and the cowardice of the Administration for not meeting him. But now, Kahn suggested an added public event: a large dinner where AFL-CIO vice-presidents; local leaders from Washington, Virginia, and Maryland; and national union presidents and their staff could welcome Solzhenitsyn to the United States. Kahn's idea was that such an event would put added pressure on the Administration, which was advocating détente with the Soviet Union, and would deepen trade unionist understanding of Soviet totalitarianism.

The same thing happened again in 1977. This time, the Democrats were in the White House. But President Carter refused to meet with another Soviet dissident, Vladimir Bukovsky, who had just been released after 15 years in a Soviet prison. This time, Kahn organized a nationwide tour. Bukovsky spoke before trade unionists all around the country. He recalled that time at the memorial service for Kahn. "Tom was my first American friend, a symbol of this country's youthfulness and vigor," he said.⁶⁸

Eric Chenoweth described Kahn's tenure as Meany's assistant:

During this time Tom Kahn helped craft much of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy and domestic strategy for maintaining a credible anti-communist stance....As editor of the Free Trade Union News, Kahn kept readers abreast of the struggle for democracy and free trade unionism in the communist world.

Kahn built political alliances for the AFL-CIO to conduct its foreign policy work. In 1977, with the League for Industrial Democracy, he launched an international campaign to defend the first free trade union in the Soviet Union, SMOT, and its leaders who had been thrown into psychiatric hospitals. In 1979, Kahn helped organize, with Freedom House, the International Sakharov Hearings and the Counter-Helsinki Conference, both of which helped give voice to opposition to the U.S.'s policy of not bringing up human rights issues at follow-up conferences of the Helsinki Final Act. These were just a few of the efforts undertaken to defend human rights activists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

*Most importantly, Tom was a rare ally and friend to the growing number of Soviet, Eastern European, Cuban, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Angolan, Chinese, Ethiopian and other dissidents from communism – people who were arguing desperately against accommodationist policies of détente.*⁶⁹

Lane Kirkland succeeded Meany in 1979. In 1982, Kirkland removed Lee as head of the International Affairs Department and replaced him with Irving Brown. Brown, however, had no intention of leaving Paris. He did not need to. Kahn became his representative at the Washington headquarters.

On August 14, 1980, workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, went on strike against the enterprise's management. The cause of the strike was the Communist regime's announcement of increases in the price of basic goods and the firing of popular workers. But its ultimate target was the system -- the corruption, the favoritism, and the denial of basic worker rights.

Kahn's political life was about to come full circle. His political awakening had taken place during the 1956 uprisings in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Then he had been able only to march and protest. This time, he was in a position to do something more: he could actually aid the revolution. Chenoweth remembered, "Lane Kirkland... proposed to establish an AFL-CIO Polish Workers Aid Fund at the end of August, 1980, even before the formal establishment of Solidarity; he assigned Tom Kahn the task of running it."⁷⁰

Irena Lasota was a young Polish refugee when she met Kahn in the mid-1970's. She had been forced to leave Poland because of her anti-regime activities as a student. She and Kahn worked together during the entire time of the growth of Solidarity. She spoke at his memorial:

Then came August of 1980 – the birth of Solidarity in Poland, the realization of his old dream that the people, especially the working people, will revolt against the communists. Tom was excited; he wanted to know, to do. He was emotional about the movement, about the people who created it. What followed was eighteen months of euphoria, when the AFL-CIO – and for me, it was first of all Tom – did everything possible to help its brothers in Poland.

After December, 1981, after the communists tried to crush Solidarity, the euphoria was gone, but Tom did even more things – he was organizing underground help at different levels, keeping contacts, never losing hope that Solidarity would prevail. All of it he did with passion, with personal involvement. Forceful, discreet, again he was the best friend Solidarity had in Washington.... He fought against the premature lifting of sanctions, against several intrigues which could have weakened Solidarity. He was the master mind and also the eminence gris of support for Solidarnosc.⁷¹

There were three tasks as Kahn saw them: first, winning financial and political support for the Polish workers through demonstrations and activities in the United States; second, purchasing and smuggling in the materials Solidarity needed – printing presses, typewriters, computers; and third, making sure the Administration (first Carter's and then Reagan's) did not undermine the workers by lifting sanctions against Poland. And even though Solidarity was underground for much of this time, he followed Kirkland's dictum that all activity be coordinated with Lech Walesa and his leadership.

Kahn was the staff person on Poland. In the words of Eric Chenoweth⁷²: “He was the technician and the architect, the person who kept Lane focused on Poland when there were competing demands, cultivated new contacts in the Polish and intellectual and political community, developed ideas and strategies and helped formulate policies. He introduced Lane to Poles, kept the perspective alive, and helped formulate the policy. Moreover, when the regular channels to Solidarity were infiltrated by spies for the Polish government or shipments of goods were blocked, it was Kahn who made new contacts and searched out alternative routes.”

Looking back at those days, it is hard to remember that Solidarity once stood virtually alone in the world. Arch Puddington described it in his remembrance:

In carrying out the labor movement's Polish Project, Tom thus found himself at war with the Western elites almost as much as with the Communists. Detente was still a sacred cow to many European trade unionists and social democrats, and it fell to the AFL-CIO to minimize the damage done by the Brandts, Palmes and Kreiskys.⁷³ Even the Reagan Administration harbored a strong impulse to bow to the prevailing wisdom that Solidarity was a spent force and there was no alternative but to accommodate to General Jaruzelski.⁷⁴

Once again, Kahn and the labor movement were waging a lonely fight. In 1981, he debated Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* Magazine and a leader in the neo-conservative movement. The neo-cons, led by Podhoretz and Jeane Kirkpatrick, viewed communism and the Soviet Union as the major problem facing the United States. They took credit for pushing the Reagan Administration away from detente. But like leaders of the earlier Carter Administration, they were afraid of provoking a Soviet invasion in Poland. Podhoretz found Kahn's suggestion that Solidarity could succeed without provoking a Soviet invasion 'incredible.' Kahn's response to Podhoretz points up the difference he and Kirkland had with the neocons: first, a belief in the bottom-up fight for democracy and the importance of working-class action; and second, a refusal to abandon friends or principles because of *realpolitik*.

Excerpts from Kahn's closing remarks in that debate shed light on these differences:

In Poland you have something entirely different...workers who take to the factories, conduct sit-ins, and actually produce a movement, an institution, an organizational force, which has not existed in any of the other countries. . . and which has no precedent in the history of the communist world since 1917 that I know of.... In Poland there is a split now occurring in the communist party, but that split was caused by Solidarity. It was not a case of Solidarity being created by a split in the communist party. This seems to me to offer an entirely new model.

Now, will the Soviets tolerate it? Well, not if they can help it.... But the Soviets do not exercise their options in a vacuum any more than we do. Why do we assume that the Soviet Union has the power, no matter what the possible consequences, to resolve by force or violence overnight, a major contradiction which has arisen in the communist system? Are they ready to assume the Polish debt and the economic problems of Poland? Maybe. If they invade, how do they get the workers to go back to work?... Here you have an organized working-class movement with a membership that's three times that of the Party, and which represents a good chunk of the Party. And it's one thing to invade a country; it's another thing to get people to go to work, unless you want to turn the country into one vast labor camp, which is not as easy as it sounds. Those are two possible deterrents.... The rebellion in Poland is not inchoate. It has a voice, it has a structure, it can define its own interests and its own demands. It has done so. And at least at the AFL-CIO, we are going to accept their definition of their needs, of their limits, and of their demands.⁷⁵

In the end, of course, Solidarity prevailed and the Soviet empire The AFL-CIO had channeled more than \$4 million to it, including computers, printing presses, and supplies. It used its political prestige abroad and whatever influence it had in the Reagan Administration to support the Polish workers. On April 15, 1992, at the memorial service for Tom Kahn, Lane Kirkland said:

Situated on a wall outside the Gdansk Shipyard is a memorial plaque – placed by the AFL-CIO —which honors the long and sometime bloody struggle of Polish workers for freedom, democracy and free trade unionism in their country. Upon it is a line from our anthem, Solidarity Forever, "which reads: "We shall build a new world on the ashes of the old." Tom Kahn never had the chance to see that plaque even though he played such an important role in the struggle that made it possible.... What a shame that is. For someone who spent nearly every day of his life in pursuit of a new world, he, if anyone, deserved to witness that placing of our Ebenezer upon the rock of freedom's triumph.⁷⁶

The AFL-CIO, Kirkland, and Kahn did not ignore the struggle for workers to be free in Central and Latin America, particularly in opposition to the right-wing regimes in Chile, El Salvador, and Guatemala and the left-wing regime in Nicaragua. Their position was not a break with previous AFL-CIO policy. What was different now was the grassroots involvement encouraged by Kahn. The American Institute for Free Labor Development, the AFL-CIO's Latin American arm under the leadership of William Doherty and staffed by David Jessup, organized some 20 trips in which over 200 American trade unionists conducted study missions to El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala.⁷⁷ These were not high-level delegations that made pro forma reports. For the most part they were officers of state federations, central bodies, and local unions. They met with religious leaders, dissident trade unionists, and official trade union leaders. These trade unionists became proponents of AFL-CIO policy, educating their own members and arguing for AFL-CIO policy at conventions and meetings.

Meanwhile, the anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa had grown stronger. In the United States, the AFL-CIO and some of its affiliates had developed relationships with South Africa's black trade union centers.⁷⁸ The AFL-CIO's Civil Rights Department participated in mass protests and arrests at the South African Embassy in Washington. Kirkland and Tom Donahue, the Federation's Secretary-Treasurer, traveled to South Africa. Kahn conducted strategy sessions with Congress of South African Trade Unions' leadership. When 13 black trade unionists were arrested in 1984, the AFL-CIO demanded the Reagan Administration begin a selective boycott of South Africa. Here as in Poland, Kahn's belief that trade unions play a pivotal role in the struggle for freedom was vindicated. And once again, the AFL-CIO's approach was triple-pronged -- public support, rank-and-file participation, and high-level lobbying.

Kahn believed that the United States had a disadvantage when competing on the world stage. The Soviet Union was notorious for sneaking money to its front organizations and so-called revolutionary

governments. The West German government had openly established three foundations, one affiliated with each major political party, and given them grants to spend as they chose to build democracy in foreign countries. In the United States, the CIA had provided funding for similar activities in the past, but that had been outlawed in the mid-1970's. Those operations were suspect, and their very secretiveness made them indefensible. Kahn and Kirkland believed it was wrong to link democracy-building with spying. So when a former congressional aide, George Agree, introduced them to the idea of an American government-funded foundation that would be devoted to democracy-building and would be transparent and free of Washington bureaucracy, they quickly signed on.

Agree gathered Democratic and Republican sponsors, including Congressman Dante Fascell (D-Florida), and sold the idea to Ronald Reagan. In a 1982 speech before the British Parliament, Reagan called for "a global campaign for democracy." He subsequently sent legislation to Congress authorizing the formation of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) with four major grantees: the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, the Chamber of Commerce, and the AFL-CIO. The funds would come from Congress, but the Board of Directors would be independent. Each of these core grantees was mandated to establish an independent arm to accept the funds and conduct its democracy-building programs. Thus, the AFL-CIO created the Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI) to act on its behalf.

Kirkland would serve on the first NED board, but it was Kahn who helped to create and set up the structure of FTUI, hired its staff, saw it through its infancy, and brought the AFL-CIO Legislative Department into the unusual position of lobbying on a foreign policy issue when the NED funding was in danger of being cut off.⁷⁹

International Affairs Director of AFL-CIO

Irving Brown suffered a major stroke and resigned his post in 1986. Soon after, Kahn was named International Affairs director of the AFL-CIO. He had just been diagnosed with the HIV virus. In 1986, this was a death sentence. He had an important decision to make. He could refuse the appointment, take life easy, and spend more time with his new and most beloved partner, Alain Fournier, or accept a job that would most surely work him to death. His doctors had warned him about too much stress.

Kahn didn't see much of a choice. In July, 1985, he gave one of his periodic addresses to the Young Peoples Socialist League. He ended his speech with a critique of an article by Irving Brown's friend, Jean-Francois Revel, in *Commentary* magazine:

Revel closed on a very pessimistic note, saying he had good reason to doubt that democracies would survive to the end of the century. But in the struggle for democracy, optimism and pessimism are irrelevant because we really have no choice. We are going to struggle to protect and perfect and expand democratic institutions, or we are going to let them wither or be crushed by the weight of totalitarianism in the world. *That doesn't strike me as much of a choice.* [emphasis mine]⁸⁰ Just as he had done in his youth, Kahn put his body and mind on the line in the fight to expand democracy, and he saw no better place to do it than in the AFL-CIO at the helm of the International Affairs Department. All of his life, he had believed that the United States needed a mass social democratic movement. He still did. In his youth, he believed that the AFL-CIO would play a central role in building such a movement. By 1968, however, he had modified his view and come to believe that the labor movement was the *dominant* force for progressive social change in the United States. And by the time he went to work for the AFL-CIO, he believed that the labor movement was in fact that mass movement.

Unlike some radicals, he did not see the labor movement as an arena for revolutionary activity, a place to make arguments, recruit some followers, raise consciousness, and move on. He explained his point of

view in a 1987 speech:

[T]he absence of an avowedly mass social democratic movement in the United States of America can be traced to the existence of a real social democratic movement in the United States. It is not called social democratic, it is not a political party and yet it is an inherently social democratic movement. I speak of the American trade union movement, which, the more it has entered into politics, the more it has played the role that political parties play in Europe.... It was the role of the social democratic parties, to which the trade unions were affiliated, to give political voice to the workers.... That is the crucial difference we have with the Europeans. Our social democratic impulse is being expressed through the trade union movement, where theirs is to a large extent being expressed through mass social democratic political parties. And so I argue that we have in fact an actually real social democratic movement in this country. It's simply called the AFL-CIO.⁸¹

Kahn never forgot the lesson Rustin taught him: good theory is necessary, but to make real progress, you need practical ideas, activity, and organization. He never believed that one of these was less important than another. So now the organizational task was to build an International Affairs Department. Historically, the Department's mission was limited to supporting free trade unions around the world and maintaining bilateral relations with other national movements and international federations.⁸² He set out to build an activist department.

His work was cut out for him. The Paris office and the four labor institutes -- the American Institute for Free Labor Development, the African American Labor Institute, the Asian American Labor Institute, and FTUI⁸³ -- now all reported directly to the President of the AFL-CIO and functioned independently of the International Affairs Department.

Kahn intended to change that. First, the Department would provide service to affiliates dealing with foreign companies and, second, would involve the affiliates' leaders in international matters. He envisioned the Department "as the center of a web of policy and program committee and institutes." The web would include the FTUI and the international affairs directors of affiliate unions. For the first time, those directors would have regular meetings with AFL-CIO staff to hash out problems, discuss disagreements, and map out joint strategies.⁸⁴

He began a feverish round of travel to Asia, Africa, eastern Europe, and the Middle East⁸⁵ to meet local trade unionists, find out what Institute staff was doing, and try to evaluate which old-line unions in eastern Europe had in fact become democratic and which had not.

In the United States, he spoke before central bodies, state feds, and international and national union meetings. He always made these essential points:

- 1) We want you to know what we are doing, because we are doing it with your money.
- 2) In this world you can't be an effective trade unionist unless you are an internationalist: American workers know that decisions taken in foreign capitals have a direct effect on their pocket books. And they know that American multinational companies moving capital and production abroad are a threat to their jobs. What they also need to know is that to fight this threat, we need the help of our trade union brothers and sisters in foreign countries.
- 3) We have also learned that building strong unions requires a climate of respect for human rights – freedom of speech and assembly and association, free elections that enable the people to remove government that stands in the way of economic and social justice. In other words, we find that doing trade union work abroad involves us necessarily in the struggle for democracy.

4) And not only in Europe. In South Africa, the emergence of a black trade union movement has been a critical factor in advancing the prospect for a peaceful destruction of apartheid and the construction of a democratic society. In the Philippines, trade unionists, with your help, played a major role in toppling the Marcos government. In Chile, they mobilized masses of voters to get rid of the Pinochet dictatorship. In Central America, they are on the front lines of the fight to establish democracy against the brutality of the far right and the far left.⁸⁶

Kahn had one standard to judge a country: freedom of association. The neo-conservatives in the Reagan Administration had drawn a distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. They argued that authoritarian regimes left space for some institutions to function and therefore should be treated more kindly than totalitarian regimes. This left them room to justify alliances with some dictators against others.

The left also had its favorite dictators such as Fidel Castro in Cuba and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. The left would defend them by arguing that in regimes such as theirs, the economy had been nationalized or the health system was universal or education was now universal or the leader had been a revolutionary.

Kahn set forth a different standard many times to many audiences:

*It is a standard that focuses not on the political character of the regime in power –i.e., whether it is of the left or of the right – but rather on the extent to which there exists in that society the opportunity for people to create, organize and control their own organizations and institutions independent of the State. The more fully that right is recognized, not just in words but in practice, the closer our national relations ought to be with those countries; the more severely those rights are restricted, the more we should distance ourselves from them.*⁸⁷ Lane Kirkland shared Kahn's view that participation in international affairs should be broadened within the Federation. Kirkland established two important study committees: the Perestroika and the Defense Committee.⁸⁸ The first was headed by Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, to examine events in the Soviet Union and to understand glasnost and Gorbachev's role. The Defense Committee, headed by Jack Joyce, President of the Bricklayers Union, was set up to examine all elements of defense strategy and spending. The committees, staffed by Kahn, brought in foreign policy experts like Brent Scowcroft, Condoleezza Rice, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Richard Pipes. No longer were trade unionists going to be dealt out of discussions because they lacked expertise. No longer would support of a strong defense mean the subordination of a union's legitimate demands.

Not only was the federation intervening on the grassroots level; it was engaged in major political and ideological fights. And that meant the federation had to be united. There were differences within the International Affairs Committee of the AFL-CIO. Kirkland had made it clear that he wanted those differences to be reconciled so that AFL-CIO resolutions would reflect policy that all the affiliate unions could support.

A look at how Kahn worked is instructive. On April 13, 1987, he sent an eight-page memo to Jack Joyce describing how he would handle the Defense Committee recommendations. "I am enclosing a written response to the draft Defense Committee report from Owen Beiber, Al Bilik and John Sweeney. Additional comments were phoned in by Ken Blaylock.⁸⁹ Taking all of them into account, I rewrote entirely the recommendations to the Executive Council. I took the liberty of rewriting the recommendations in form that could be easily converted into an Executive Council statement, assuming there is a consensus."⁹⁰

Kirkland also instructed Kahn to meet with Jack Howard, Assistant to the President of AFSCME,⁹¹ to

work out the differences that some unions had with the Federation on Central America, South Africa, and eastern Europe. Despite their own political differences, Kahn and Howard were able to craft united resolutions on Central America and to work together in South Africa. Their disagreements on eastern Europe were more fundamental, however. The AFL-CIO had always opposed contact with the state-run unions of the Soviet bloc, but some unions including AFSCME were urging a change in policy. That never happened, and those disagreements eventually faded with the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe.

Kahn did not see the role of the International Affairs Department as being operationally different from the AFL-CIO. He thought the skills of many of its staff people were needed in his department. For example, he recruited Dick Wilson from the Organizing Department of the AFL-CIO to work with the fledgling free unions in the former Soviet bloc.

Kahn reviewed his tenure at the AFL-CIO shortly before he died in a 1991 speech to the Young People's Socialist League. Ten years earlier, he told the audience, the Carter Administration urged the Federation not to send aid to the Polish workers because "we were meddling in very dangerous waters." And there was no serious discussion among intellectuals and policy makers about how change could come about. "The dominant view in the liberal community and in the conservative community was that the Soviet Union was here to stay," he noted.

Kahn and the AFL-CIO had often been accused of being obsessed with East-West issues. He went on to say:

And worse, we were even accused of being insensitive to the needs of the Third World and the poor. Now what has happened? There is suddenly a new sense in the world that with the end of the Cold War there are possibilities for change in the Third World.... There is hope in Angola, there is hope in South Africa. There is hope in Central America.⁹²

Conclusion

Kahn died in 1992 the way he lived: struggling against injustice. This final time, it was the injustice of a disease that has ravaged whole communities and is now decimating Third World countries. He participated in and wrote about the most complex and difficult struggles of the 20th century: the fight for racial equality in the United States, the effort to build a progressive social movement and to reform the Democratic Party, the fight against Stalinist totalitarianism and right-wing authoritarianism, the crusade of the American trade union movement for freedom of association here and abroad. He made major contributions to the victories and he never shrank away when there were failures.

At the memorial meeting in his honor on April 15, 1992, Cheryl Graeve, who was the executive director of Frontlash,⁹³ spoke about Kahn's influence on young people:

Tom had a special commitment to youth -- to living youthfully, but also to helping young people mature. Because Tom enjoyed the frivolity of youth, he had the patience to accept our youthful righteousness. Instead of dismissing us, he treated us seriously, and always challenged us to go beyond the limits of our prior experience, to think through our ideas and position. Tom always believed it was important to teach and develop younger generations -- as he had been by his mentors, Max Shachtman and Bayard Rustin.

In 1958, Kahn wrote me from Los Angeles. It was a bleak day and he missed being in the East. He quoted from Hamlet:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart

Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

This, then, is his story. Perhaps it is a sketch rather than a portrait. Alas, it has not been possible to fully develop the complexity of each issue with which he was engaged. But, hopefully, it is the start of an appreciation and evaluation of his life.

An Afterthought

I am sure I know what Kahn would be saying and doing if he were alive today. He would have supported the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. He would not have needed to know about weapons of mass destruction or “imminent threats” to do that. And as soon as it was possible, he would have gone himself or sent someone into Iraq to find anti-Baath Party trade unionists to support. And it would not have mattered whether there were two or 2,000 of them.

He would be on the phone with Condi Rice demanding decent labor law in Iraq (and, incidentally, in the United States). And she would be confounded because he would also be the most severe critic of George W. Bush's domestic policy and its go-it-alone international policies. He would be telling me that while it was good the s.o.b. was doubling National Endowment for Democracy funding, Bush did not know anything about democracy-building. Central body presidents all over the country would be grumbling that they had to set up meetings for visiting Iraqi trade unionists. Kahn would revel in the birth on January 29, 2004, of his sister Rosemary's grandson, Thomas Henry Murphy. Oh, how he would have lavished praise and presents on his namesake. “Spread the word,” Rosemary said in an e-mail, “Tom is back.”

Acknowledgments

This paper would not have been possible without three people.

The first is Ruth Ruttenberg, who gave me a choice of kayak or college, and who knew when to encourage me to narrow my intentions and when to force me to deepen my focus.

The second is Eric Chenoweth, the editor of *Uncaptive Minds: A Journal of Information and Opinion on Eastern Europe*, who was on the staff of the International Affairs Department of the AFL-CIO when Tom Kahn died. Chenoweth gathered all of the writings of Tom Kahn he could find, made copies of them, and presented huge packets to his friends. He also put together copies of all the speeches Kahn ghostwrote for Henry Jackson and transcribed the tapes of the Kahn-Podhoretz debate.

The third is my husband Tom Donahue, who I believe knows more about the labor movement than any other living human being, who is the world's greatest and most patient proofreader, and who was willing to let Tom Kahn live with us for these many months.

I also owe huge debts of gratitude to Alain Fournier, Tom Kahn's partner, who let me rummage through Kahn's private papers; Walter Naegle, who opened up Bayard Rustin's private files to me; and Arch Puddington, who let me read and quote from his biography of Lane Kirkland, a work in progress.

Appendix I: Tom Kahn's Life

- 1938 – Thomas John Marcel born and placed for adoption.
- 1940 – Baby placed with Adele and David Kahn, renamed Thomas David Kahn; adoption becomes official in 1941.
- 1955-57 – Attends Brooklyn College.

- 1956 – Joins Students for Democratic Action, youth organization of Americans for Democratic Action, and Young Socialist League, youth group affiliated with Max Shachtman's Independent Socialist League.
- 1957 – Volunteer, Committee to Defend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Prayer Pilgrimage.
- 1958-59 – Assistant Organizer, Youth Marches for Integrated Schools.
- 1959-60 – Staff member, American Committee on Africa.
- 1963 – Receives B.A. from Howard University after briefly attending Columbia University and UCLA.
- 1963 – Assistant to Deputy Director, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
- 1964 – 1972 – Executive Director, League for Industrial Democracy.
- 1965 – Member, National Committee, Social Democrats USA.
- 1968 – Takes special assignment from UAW to write speeches for presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey.
- 1968 – Co-chairman, Ad Hoc Committee to Defend the Right to Teach.
- 1968 – Chairman, Ad Hoc Committee for Justice in the Schools. (This was a citizens committee formed to defend due process for teachers in Ocean Hill Brownsville)
- 1968 – Member, Guiding Committee, National Committee for a Political Settlement in Viet Nam.
- 1969-70 – Member, Urban Affairs Department Faculty, New School for Social Research.
- 1971 -1972 – Chief Speechwriter, Senator Henry M. Jackson.
- 1972-1986 – Assistant to AFL-CIO President George Meany.
- 1974 – Editor, AFL-CIO Free Trade Union News.
- 1979 – Organizes International Sakharov Hearings.
- [1980 – Director, AFL-CIO Polish Workers Fund.
- 1981 – Member, Committee in Support of Solidarity.
- 1983 – Member, Programming Committee, Voice of America.
- 1986 – 1992 – Director, Department of International Affairs, AFL-CIO.
- 1986-1990 – visits Geneva, Paris, Brussels, Kenya, Japan, Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Philippines, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Argentina, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Zaire, El Salvador, Liberia, Granada, Barbados, Hungary, Brazil, Nicaragua, England, Chile, Australia, Poland, and South Africa.
- 1988 – Joins Council on Foreign Relations.
- 1989 – Addresses founding convention of free, democratic unions in Hungary.
- March 27, 1992 – Tom Kahn dies.

Appendix II: Interviews

First I must list the people I should have interviewed but did not, because there comes a point when one has to stop reading and talking and start writing. No future biography of Tom Kahn would be complete without talking to Sandra Feldman, the former President of the AFT. She was with Kahn at the beginning at Brooklyn College and at the end. Another I did not interview but should have is Penn Kemble, also a special friend, who knows more about the Jackson campaign and the neo-cons than this paper could deal with.

Eric Chenoweth, former staff member, International Affairs Department, AFL-CIO, January 27, 2004.
 Thomas R. Donahue, former President and Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO, September 10, 2003, and February 6, 2004.

Douglas Fraser, former President, United Auto Workers Union, January 7, 2004.

Joel Freedman, Assistant to the President, International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craft workers, February 2, 2004.

Jack Howard, Consultant and former Assistant to the President, American Federation of State, County

and Municipal Employees, February 11, 2004.

David Jessup, former staff member, AIFLD, February 4, 2004.

Irena Lasota, editor, *Uncaptive Minds*, January 27, 2004.

Richard Wilson, former staff member, Organizing Department, COPE Department, and International Affairs Department, AFL-CIO, February 4, 2004.

Endnotes

¹Another reason he has not been sufficiently recognized is that as AFL-CIO International Affairs Director, he was neither as flamboyant nor as controversial as some of his predecessors -- Michael Ross, Jay Lovestone, Ernest Lee, and Irving Brown. There are currently biographies and papers being written about Ross and Brown. Lovestone has been the subject of much debate, many articles, and Ted Morgan's biography, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone, Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York, Random House, 1997). Ben Rathbun wrote an anecdotal biography of Irving Brown, *The Point Man – Irving Brown and the Deadly Post-1945 Struggle for Europe and Africa* (London, Minerva Press, 1996).

² For a chronology of Kahn's life, see Appendix I.

³ They are listed in the Bibliography, and will eventually be part of the collection of the George Meany Archives.

⁴ These are listed in Appendix II.

⁵ Tom Kahn, *Unfinished Revolution* (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1960).

⁶ Stokeley Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokeley Carmichael* (New York: Scribner, 2003), p. 144.

⁷ Thomas R. Donahue, Interview with author, , September 10, 2003.

⁸ Rosemary Colville, E-mail message to author, July 9, 2003.

⁹ I was one of the few people who voted for him.

¹⁰ Feldman would later edit the Socialist Party's newspaper, *New America*, and then work in the public relations department of the United Steelworkers of America.

¹¹ Paul Feldman, *The Making of a Social Democrat* (unpublished manuscript, 1982), p. 3.

¹² Albert Glotzer, "Max Shachtman: A Political Biographical Essay," *New York University Bulletin of the Tamiment Institute/Ben Josephson Library* (No. 50), p. 5.

¹³ Tom Kahn, *Max Shachtman: His Ideas and His Movement* (unpublished manuscript, 1973), pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Untold Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs), p. 128.

¹⁵ Glotzer, *op. cit.*, p.6.

¹⁶ This was 1956 and Shachtman and Kahn were referring to George Meany, who was then President of the AFL-CIO.

¹⁷ Kahn, *Max Shachtman*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ Rustin died in 1987 at the age of 75; Kahn was then 49.

¹⁹ Tom Kahn, *Eulogy of Bayard Rustin* (Unpublished manuscript, 1987).

²⁰ Tom Kahn, *Letter to Bayard Rustin*, November 10, 1959.

²¹ John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 278.

²² Tom Kahn, *Unfinished Revolution*, p. 9.

²³ Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁴ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁵ Carmichael, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

²⁶ In 1946, the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in interstate travel in *Morgan v. Virginia*.

²⁷ Tom Kahn, *Civil Rights: The True Frontier* (New York: Donald Press, 1963), pp. 5-6.

²⁸ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁹ Tom Hayden was at the conference and circulating an early draft of what was to become SDS's manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement*. Hayden's draft called for a student movement opposing in loco parentis, advocating participatory democracy, and rejecting formal alliances with established organizations. pp. 92-125. Ironically, while SNCC later split over the question of black power and the use of violence, the leadership rejected the very personal view of politics presented by the SDS people and proceeded to draw up plans for a massive voter education drive.

³⁰ Kahn obviously changed his mind after that. The following year, while he was at Howard University, he wrote me a letter saying, "I can't quite seem to drive out the negative that characterizes my world view these days. Everything points me more and more into an alliance with George Meany against intellectuals and radical moralists." (December, 1963.) Also, while living in Washington, he became friendly with Don Slaiman and Richard Wilson. Slaiman was then the Deputy Civil Rights Director of the AFL-CIO and Wilson was on the staff of the Industrial Union Department. Both men shared Kahn's belief in the

need for building coalitions. Their real experience in the trade union movement had given them tremendous respect for Meany.

³¹ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³² Rachelle Horowitz, personal papers

³³ David Garrow, "Betraying the March," *The Christian Science Monitor* (August 28, 2003).

³⁴ An original copy is in the Rustin papers.

³⁵ For excellent descriptions of the March see John D'Emilio's *Lost Prophet*, cited above, and Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation* (New York: Ecco, 2003).

³⁶ "Call to the March on Washington," Rustin papers

³⁷ I was appointed Transportation Director.

³⁸ John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harvest Books, 1999), p. 216.

³⁹ Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 304.

⁴⁰ In those days before computers, Kahn wrote out drafts in longhand, and then retyped them himself. He was so late in meeting the deadline Randolph had set for receiving the speech that we both stayed up the entire night working on it -- Kahn drafting and me typing -- so Randolph could read it before it was time to deliver.

⁴¹ Jervis Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁴² For an excellent description of that time and the article, see John D'Emilio, *op. cit.*, pp. 393-416.

⁴³ That understanding was correct. Two years later, Rustin and Kahn would sign a contract with the Macmillan Company to write a book on the problems of the Negro movement. The book was never finished, but the contract reflected the division of labor in their writing partnership: Kahn was to get 2/3 of the advance and 1/3 of the royalties. In other words, Kahn would do the writing and Rustin would do the selling. (Tom Kahn and Bayard Rustin, Letter to Emanuel Geltman, June 15, 1956.)

⁴⁴ Arch Puddington, e-mail message to me, January 12, 2004.

⁴⁵ Michael Harrington, *Fragments of a Century* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1973), p. 198.

⁴⁶ Tom Kahn, *The Economics of Inequality* (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1964), p. 7.

⁴⁷ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴⁹ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 63. This idea divided Kahn from Harrington. Harrington believed that the most important part of the coalition was the liberal-intellectuals and Kahn believed the labor movement, the organized working class, was central to it. This argument continued into the 1968 elections when Harrington sided with those liberals who supported Eugene McCarthy, the peace candidate, and Kahn backed the labor and civil rights forces who stayed with President Lyndon Johnson. The war in Vietnam and the McGovern candidacy in 1972 exacerbated this split.

⁵⁰ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁵¹ David Garrow, *op. cit.*

⁵² Tom Kahn, "Radical in America," *The Social Democrat* (spring, 1980), p. 4.

⁵³ John D'Emilio, *op. cit.*, p. 460.

⁵⁴ Tom Kahn, "The Problem of the New Left," *Commentary* (July, 1966; League for Industrial Democracy reprint), pp. 2-3.

⁵⁵ Tom Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Tom Kahn, "Radical in America," p. 8.

⁵⁷ Douglas Fraser, Interview with author, January 7, 2004.

⁵⁸ In September, 1972, soon after the Democratic convention, George Meany, who was still steaming angry, spoke before the Sixteenth Constitutional Convention of the United Steelworkers of America. He read all sorts of statistics about the unrepresentative character of the 1972 Democratic convention including that there was only one labor speaker, I.W. Abel. And then he said, "We heard from abortionists, and we heard from the people who looked like Jacks, acted like Jills and had the odor of Johns about them." Maurice Isserman (*op. cit.*, p. 298) says Kahn wrote those words. His source for that is John Herling's *Labor Letter* (September 12, 1972). What Herling actually wrote in that letter, however, was very different. All that he reported was that Meany said those words and nobody denies that. It is in fact inconceivable that Kahn would have written them. Indeed, Meany had two other speech writers at the time and Al Barkan's COPE Department often prepared material for him, so there were at least three other possible authors. Isserman, as Arch Puddington put it, "assumes that because Kahn was not publicly gay he had to be a gay basher. He never was." (E-mail to the author, January, 18, 2000)

⁵⁹ Michael Harrington disagreed with Kahn on all of these issues except Ocean Hill- Brownsville. For Harrington's point of view, see his *Fragments of a Century*, cited above.

⁶⁰ Thomas R. Donahue, Interview with author, February 6, 2004.

⁶¹ Kahn wanted his New York friends to appreciate Meany as well, and he started regular mailings of Meany speeches and impromptu press conferences to all of them.

⁶² Tom Kahn, "Radical in America," p. 4.

- ⁶³ Eric Chenoweth, "The Gallant Warrior: In Memoriam, Tom Kahn," *Uncaptive Minds* (Summer, 1992), p. 10.
- ⁶⁴ Arch Puddington, Lane Kirkland biography (unpublished manuscript), p. 4.
- ⁶⁵ Thomas R. Donahue, Interview with author, February 6, 2004.
- ⁶⁶ Ted Morgan, op. cit., p. 351.
- ⁶⁷ Eric Chenoweth, Interview with author, January 27, 2004.
- ⁶⁸ Remarks at Kahn Memorial Service, Washington, D.C., April 15, 1992.
- ⁶⁹ Eric Chenoweth, op. cit., p. 12.
- ⁷⁰ Eric Chenoweth, op. cit., p. 13.
- ⁷¹ Irena Lasota, Remarks at Tom Kahn Memorial Service, April 15, 1992.
- ⁷² Eric Chenoweth, Interview with author, January 27, 2004.
- ⁷³ The Social Democratic Leaders of West Germany, Sweden, and Austria.
- ⁷⁴ Arch Puddington, "A Hero of the Cold War," *The American Spectator* (July, 1992), pp. 42-43
- ⁷⁵ Tom Kahn-Norman Podhoretz Debate, March 31, 1981, New York City? This debate was tape recorded. Both the transcript and audio version are in my files.
- ⁷⁶ Lane Kirkland, Remarks at Tom Kahn Memorial Service, April 15, 1992.
- ⁷⁷ Arch Puddington, op. cit., p. p.14, and David Jessup, Interview with author, February 4, 2004.
- ⁷⁸ There were at least three such centers. There is not space in this paper to go into the details about AFL-CIO policy towards them. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is now the recognized labor center.
- ⁷⁹ Thomas R. Donahue, Interview with author, February 6, 2004.
- ⁸⁰ Reprinted in Tom Kahn, "Beyond the Double Standard," *New America* (July, 1985), unpaginated in reprint.
- ⁸¹ Speech to the 1987 convention of the Young People's Socialist League.
- ⁸² In 1991, Kahn hired Adam Klein & Co. to evaluate the Department and to make recommendations for organizational changes. References to the Department's mission and new programmatic efforts are from Klein's report . The report is in Kahn's personal papers
- ⁸³ These Institutes were founded in 1960, 1964, 1968, and 1983 respectively. Their original mandates were slightly different. AIFLD was established to provide education and training for Latin American trade union leaders. The AALC was to concentrate on vocational training, the establishment of low-cost housing and health cooperatives with unions in Africa. AAFLI's major purpose to help workers and their organizations develop free trade unions in Asia (Philip Taft, *Defending Freedom: American Labor and Foreign Affairs* [Los Angeles, Nash Publications, 1973], pp. 217-240.) The Free Trade Union Institute was formed, as noted above, to receive NED funds and is now called the Solidarity Center. Volumes have been written and AFL-CIO convention debates have centered on the political role and the funding of these institutes.
- ⁸⁴ Joel Freedman, Interview, February 2, 2004.
- ⁸⁵ Kahn's passports show an incredible amount of travel after 1986.
- ⁸⁶ Tom Kahn, Speech to Virginia AFL-CIO (undated).
- ⁸⁷ Tom Kahn, "Beyond the Double Standard."
- ⁸⁸ Thomas R. Donahue, Interview with author, February 6, 2004.
- ⁸⁹ The President of the UAW, a senior AFSCME staff member, and the presidents of SEIU and AFGE.
- ⁹⁰ Memo in Kahn papers
- ⁹¹ Jack Howard, Interview with author, February 11, 2004. Howard represented a group of unions including his own, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACTWU), and the UAW.
- ⁹² Reprinted in Tom Kahn, "A New Era," *The Social Democrat* (March, 1991), unpaginated in reprint.
- ⁹³ Frontlash was a youth group affiliated with the AFL-CIO. It conducted voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives. Its members were young workers and students, and it worked on college campuses.

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The following material was gathered by Eric Chenoweth and is used extensively in this paper. Chenoweth classified it in four categories: Civil Rights; Politics and Labor; Social Democracy and International Affairs; and Labor's Foreign Policy. This division makes sense in terms of tracing Kahn's intellectual development and is reasonable chronologically as well. Some of the documents are undated. Others are copies from publications which are not cited.

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