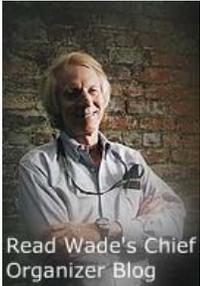


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BOOKS FROM SOCIAL POLICY

## How to be an Internal Organizer: Fred Hirsch and Plumbers Union Local 393

Written by MIKE MILLER



### Preface

I've known Fred Hirsch since the early 1960s. He and his wife Ginny were the spark plugs for the Santa Clara Friends of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee); I was SNCC's Bay Area "field secretary." We worked closely on a variety of SNCC events; Fred went to Mississippi to lend his hand on some Movement projects there. Fred and his wife Ginny dove into farm labor support work as well, and were part of the Cesar Chavez-led union in its early development.

Throughout these activities, Fred was a working plumber in what initially was a conservative Plumber & Pipefitters Local 393, San Jose, CA. While Fred's work with SNCC and the farm workers union itself deserves telling, the story here is a different one. In my mind, Fred epitomizes what "internal organizing" is all about. As a young radical, he became a skilled plumber and did his politics both in the community where he settled down to raise a family, and within the union that represented him and his fellow workers.

### Introduction

Fred's now a retiree; he was eighty in November, 2013. In 1953, married and looking for a job, he became a plumber. His plumbing-contractor uncle asked a Bronx local union official about getting Fred in; the response was, "Just so long as he ain't no nigger." Through his cousin, he soon found work in a different local. When he took his journeyman test, he was told by a union official, "If you pass the test, kid, we want you out of here."

After a brief stint in Los Angeles where his politics made it difficult for him to get work, he and his wife Ginny moved to San Jose where he joined Local 393. The Los Angeles Business Manager warned the San Jose local, "Fred is a Communist." That was in 1959/1960, and it was still the tail end of the McCarthy era.

A Local 393 Business Rep and executive board members came to see Fred at a job site. As he tells it, "They asked the boss if they could talk with me for a few minutes. They repeated what they'd heard from Los Angeles, and said they wanted to know the facts. They said they were going to put me on the agenda of the next membership meeting and

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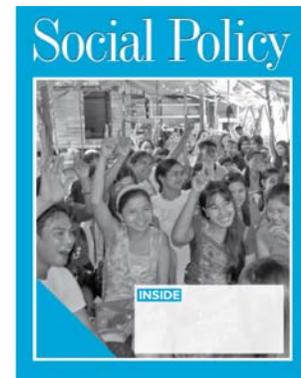
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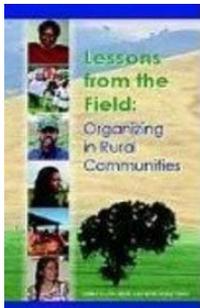
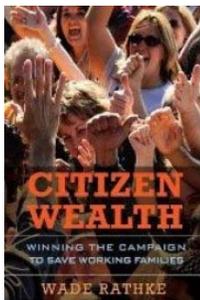
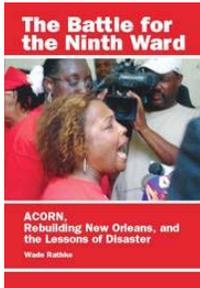
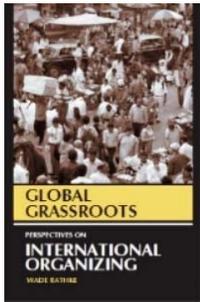
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have me explain myself. I told them this accusation is because I'm an active anti-racist, and politically active. 'If I say, "I'm a Communist," I won't be able to work. If I say, "I'm not a Communist," you'll say I'm a liar. There's no way I can answer this question except to say that we have to work for racial equality, and work to have our unions—this union—function in the political world for working people, and that we have to work for peace in the world. If that makes me a Communist, so be it.' And that was the end of it. The Local's President defended me as the union's COPE (Committee on Political Education) representative. After a decade, the rumor went away."

## The Early Days

Fred: "When I came here in 1959, the local was not exceptional. Members would come to the meetings after a few drinks at the local bar, and maybe more. There was an in-crowd; they were all Anglos. The local was about seventy-five percent white, twenty-five percent Chicano/Latino, and maybe one or two black members. We were members of the Building Trades Council and the Central Labor Council. Race was a big issue. The UA had a reputation of being all white. And there was truth in it; many members came into the union through their fathers. The whiteness was a generational thing; there was natural white privilege that got people into the union. There was a black guy who was a contractor. He wanted to do union work, but the union didn't want to sign up his shop and organize his employees because that would open the door to black members. When the issue was spotlighted in the African-American community the Local finally opened its doors. The company signed with the local, and the employees became union members, including the boss' son, who became a plumbing inspector. He knew the work, and came to be respected for that. He became an outstanding person in the trade and in the professional association, which is a joint labor-management body. In addition to work-related issues, I brought up peace and race issues. That set me apart. I was viewed as a maverick."

## Know the Work

I wanted to know what kind of plumber Fred was, and whether that was important to others in the Local. Former Business Representative (business agent) Paul Oller didn't have any doubts. Before coming to San Jose, he'd been a business agent in the Bakersfield, CA local where he moved union representation from zero to seventeen percent of residential plumbing work. (In most places in the country, it is large construction jobs where you find union plumbers, not in residential work.) In Chicago, where he'd been before that, plumbing work didn't get done if it wasn't union. "Mayor Daley made sure of that," he said.

Paul: "When I got here, I heard about Fred. So I asked what kind of plumber Fred was. Everybody I spoke with said, 'Fred carries his weight as a plumber,' or 'Fred takes care of business'."

Bill Guthrie, now forty and a graduate of UC Santa Cruz's sociology department who first became a steamfitter then got elected as a Business Rep: "What I always heard about Fred is, 'he's a good mechanic'—that's the phrase that tells you someone knows the work.

"That's important. If a person can't hold his own in the trade, people don't listen to him. If you don't have the ability to carry out the job, you don't last very long in a conversation. It contributes to your believability because people know you're a real plumber. There are people who bring up issues to protect themselves in the work even though they can't do the job."

Fred: "I'm a good plumber. I raised a lot of issues on the job—both to defend workers and to insure that the work was being done properly. I have a strong, hands-on, relationship to the industry and the work. I know the nuts and bolts of the work."

## Be Vigilant on the Job

Fred: "I was viewed as a maverick because I functioned as a steward on the job even though we didn't have many stewards. It was easy to let the boss do what the boss wanted to do. I didn't go along with that. If something came up that violated the contract, I would address it. One of the things that make us different is that this local is both a reflection of all the prejudices of the country, but we are also people who think of ourselves as part of the working class."

Paul: "Fred was always a torchbearer for people who might otherwise get screwed by the boss."

## Be Persistent About the Important Things

Bill: "Fred is tenacious. He doesn't get burned out. He speaks with intelligence and persistence, and he ties it back to who we are. At the same time, he dresses conservatively. He frames things in a way that ties who we are as working people to

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whatever cause he happens to be supporting."

Fred spent about fifty years in Local 393. As the years went by, he "earned the right to meddle." He became a respected member of the local. He was elected at various times, including multiple terms, as vice-president, labor council and building trades council delegate, state and international convention delegate and to other posts.

Local 100 ULU

## Learn The Rules

Fred: "Knowing the process, knowing the union constitution, these are essential. I know the mechanics of how the union works. And I knew the contract very well. If I didn't know these things, I wouldn't have been successful."

## Relationships Are Important

Fred: "We had a Business Rep by the name of Hardigan. He was a business unionism guy. We had arguments. But we learned how to get along together because his son got in trouble with the FBI. I was also in trouble with the FBI. That gave us a common experience. I let him know that I supported him. I just learned how to get along with different people who became leaders in the union. The Business Rep who made life easier for me was Ray Borgett, a man who had genuine feelings for people. He wasn't a particularly political guy, but he was friendly with me. Another Rep, Lloyd Williams, told me that he came to regret that our local hadn't stood up during the civil rights movement. He came to see that he was wrong then, and that the local was wrong then. He became a

very progressive representative of the union when he was its Business Manager. Another Business Manager by the name of Bob Duffy and I were always against each other in the union meetings; that was a turn-off for a lot of members. Then one of the local's leaders died, and we both showed up at the memorial service; we learned we both felt the same about the man who'd died. That created a different bond between us. We shook hands and had a warm embrace at the memorial service. We both stood on the common ground of the union; we came to understand each other and treat each other with great respect."

Bill: "Fred has a good sense of humor, even though he's serious and passionate about what he's doing. He can joke with people; he can be a person in addition to being a tenacious social activist. I'm an example. I'm a forty-year old person talking with a guy who's eighty. Fred is my friend. He's a salt of the earth kind of guy. He gets along with people, except for those who are right-wing, militantly racist. I came into the local with a radical background. I looked up to Fred as a mentor in the union. I saw him as the social conscience of the union. He brings up things that I think are going to be a big fight. But when he brings them up, it becomes a dialogue and an education."

Paul: "Fred was one of the first guys to welcome me as an outsider coming into this union."

## The Local Produces for Its Members

Paul: "393 was ahead of the rest of the locals. They were one of the first to come up with a 401(k) plan above the normal pension plan. That gave working people more opportunity to put money aside for a pension. Another example is the health and welfare plan. Most of ours were PPOs; we didn't have any HMOs. Here they had Kaiser. Through this, we got Kaiser to move to Bakersfield, and we got an HMO with them. We meet regularly with the contractors to work out issues before they become fighting matters; that came from 393. We might be on the other side of the fence, but we're partners in what we do as well. We're the ones who make them a profit. If the contractor doesn't make a profit, we don't have a job. When I was a supervisor, workers knew I wasn't going to violate contractual requirements for pay, benefits, working conditions. For getting the decent pay and benefits that we get, we are obliged to do a decent day's work."

Fred: "It was a big deal for us to get into Kaiser. In the early '60s we were still stuck in the PPO approach. We reduced our work week from forty to thirty-six hours; we got every other Friday as a non-work day. Half the weeks of the year, we had a three-day week-end.

Our 'jointness' (cooperation with management) is done in such a way that is not antagonistic to the interests of the workers. One of the things that characterizes the whole UA is that every member comes through an apprenticeship; the foremen and supervisors were members who showed their value to an employer and thus got hired to be a boss. These are men respected by the plumbers; they have to know the work to supervise people doing the work."



## Challenging 'Self-Interest' Narrowly Defined

"Our local passed a resolution against Keystone pipeline. We took that to the state pipe trades council; it went down in flames there. That's as far as we could go with it. Keystone might get us a couple of thousand jobs. Fracking hasn't come up yet; the question for us is jobs. A primary objective of business unionism from the get-go is jobs, wages, and conditions. Those are still the most important considerations when you think about Keystone or fracking or other things that might be destructive of the whole of society. We get our hands dirty in that kind of thinking. But this local took a stand against Keystone, even with the jobs."

## A Progressive Voice In Politics

"In 1974, when I was a labor council delegate, we looked at the CIA's role in Chile. That was raised through the labor council; our local supported the report that I wrote that was very critical of the AFL-CIO's role. The report showed that AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development) cooperated with undoing the Allende government in Chile that was elected by the people. I wrote the report for the committee. We talked about that in the local. It was tough to get through, but we supported that report.

Paul: "Fred went to Colombia, and was afraid of what might happen all the time he was down there. He brought someone from Colombia to talk with us. We heard how you might get killed if you're active in a union. That touched the members here. Fred not only explains why he's asking us to support a resolution, he also educates us about what is going on there and how our action might be a help to people elsewhere. His resolutions make sense." (The local paid to send Fred to Colombia on a solidarity mission with workers and their unions there, and invited Colombian trade unionists to the U.S.)

Bill: "For example, we recently passed a resolution supporting Iraqi oil workers." (U.S. Labor Against the War urged U.S. unions to support these workers because they were threatened with prison terms for their organizing work.) "Fred got people to see how it's in our interest as union workers to show solidarity with other workers, particularly with union workers. Altruism only moves people so far, and Fred is able to show how our own interests as working class, blue-collar people are tied to the interests of the Iraqi oil workers."

Fred elaborates: "The points I tried to make in the discussion were that the real issue for the Bush war in Iraq was oil, but even Bush talked about fighting Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in the name of democracy. What kind of democracy did 5,000 of our troops and a million Iraqis die for if they can jail oil worker union leaders for organizing strikes? Oil workers are people like us; they get dirty and sweat doing the same kind of pipe work that we do. We're talking about people who work with the same tools we work with – and they're getting screwed over."

It's a stretch to call this an appeal to economic self-interest. So, rather than dismissing them, Hirsch appeals to American democratic values that are shared by his fellow plumbers, and paints a picture of the Iraqi oil workers with which the plumbers can identify—they're like us, and they're getting screwed. And he asked his fellow plumbers if they really wanted their dollars to pay for that, which is self-interest in a different sense.

Fred: "In the labor council today, Local 393 brings an internationalism, a progressivism on local issues, and a strong sense of peace and justice to those meetings. For example in a local city council race between a 'good old boy' and a young Chicano working class

candidate, our local all but convinced the Labor Council to back the underdog young working-class Chicano who knew where he came from. Our local members put their feet in the street and a \$40,000 contribution in the successful campaign to elect Cindy Chavez, the Labor Council Executive Officer, to the County Board of Supervisors. The resolutions we pass move around the labor movement."

## Humility Trumps Arrogance

Paul: "I'm a firm believer that every union local in America needs a Fred Hirsch—someone who'll keep us in touch with the world around us. If we could clone him, we'd be in better shape than we now are."

Bill: "Fred doesn't ask people to do things unless he's going to do them himself. That makes him credible and respected. You don't have to agree with everything Fred says, but nobody can deny that he's a passionate advocate of working people and the union. It comes down to a word I haven't used, and that's 'charisma.' Fred is a charismatic person."

Before our meeting, I told Fred I wanted to interview him and some people from the local who knew his history in it. His memo to one of his fellow workers is indicative of Fred's character: "Our Local has gone through some certain transformations and I'm the oldest, still active member who has had something to do with that. I imagine and hope that the article would be much more about the Local Union than about me."

As we were wrapping up our time together, Fred thanked Bill and Paul for the complimentary things they'd said about him. He wanted to be sure that I knew he didn't expect those things from them. "I'm just astounded by what these guys said today."

### Conclusion

After Paul and Bill left, Fred jokingly said to me, "Well, now I can die." That's Fred.

In January, 2004, Local 393 published a commemorative booklet celebrating its 100th anniversary. In its pages the reader will find this:

#### 1960...Member Exposes Right Wing Organizing

"Local 393 member, Fred Hirsch, exposed right wing organizing in San Jose conducted by Wesley Swift, a Ku Klux Klan organizer, in the guise of Bible study. His work gets the YWCA to ban such meetings in its building and brings increased public attention to the presence of hate groups in the Santa Clara Valley."

P.S. On November 15, 2013, Fred sent this note to friends:

"Yesterday my union, Plumbers and Fitters Local 393, voted to send \$5000 [to the Philippines] through the California Nurses Association NNOC [National Nurses Organizing Committee]."

The local's full name is Plumber, Steamfitters & Refrigeration Fitters Local 393 of the United Association, or "UA Local 393." In 2004, it celebrated its 100th birthday.

Mike Miller directs the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center ([www.organizetrainingcenter.org](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org)), and is co-editor of the forthcoming Vanderbilt University Press book, *People Power: Classics in the Alinsky Tradition*.

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