

# **Caroline Lund: Reflections of a trade union militant and socialist in the United States (in 1992-2006)**

Monday 1 September 2014, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2014).

August 25, 2014 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Caroline Lund was for many years a leader of the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and for some years of the Fourth International. She and I resigned from the SWP in 1988.

In 1992 she got a job at an automobile factory in Fremont, California, called New United Motors, Inc. (NUMMI). She became an activist in the plant and the United Auto Workers locally and nationally. In 1998, she began to publish a plant newsletter, *The Barking Dog*.

The newsletter came out about once a month until she became too sick to publish it in early 2006 (she died later that year). In 2000, she was elected to the local's executive committee. *The Barking Dog* was one of other UAW plant newsletters put out nationally, including Live Bait and Ammo published by Greg Shotwell in Michigan. Greg's collected newsletters were published in a book, *Autoworkers Under the Gun*. It was Greg who first raised with me the idea of publishing a book of Caroline's newsletters, and the book — titled *The Barking Dog: a plant newsletter published by a militant autoworker, 1997-2006* — is the result.

Caroline was a union militant and socialist in the plants, taking on both management's treatment of workers, as well as the union leadership when it failed to defend the workers. Her newsletter was also open to workers in the plant who had something to say. This collection is relevant today for labour activists and socialists for how Caroline intervened in a situation when the going is tough for workers.

I wrote the introduction to the collection, which *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* has published below, providing the background and context.

One part covers the SWP's "turn" to industry in 1978, and the subsequent degeneration of this policy. This part is useful not only because Caroline came out of the SWP and was part of the "turn," but also because in her work at NUMMI (and before) she charted a path in the most part diametrically opposed to what became the SWP's wrong policies. Another important part is a description of Caroline's overall work at NUMMI that provides a context for *The Barking Dog*.

An appendix consists of an interview done with Caroline by Sheila Cohen in 2000. Sheila was a British trade union activist and socialist, who is still an educator and writer in that country, who spent some time in the United States.

It costs US\$19.95, including postage.

If you are interested in buying a copy, you can order it by writing to:

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**Barry Sheppard**

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## Introduction

This booklet contains all but one issue of a newsletter, *The Barking Dog*, put out by Caroline Lund at the auto factory, New United Motors Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI), where she worked since 1992. NUMMI was located in Fremont, California. The first issue was published In August 1997 and the last in April 2006. A final special issue was published by me and distributed to NUMMI workers after Caroline's death.

The actual issues of the newsletter are reproduced here, not only the text. NUMMI was shut down in 2010.

Caroline was my companion since 1966, until her death in October 2006 from ALS, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, after the great baseball player who also died of it.

She was also my comrade in the Socialist Workers Party until we both left the SWP in 1988. I write much about her activities in the SWP and in other industries before she was at NUMMI in my two-volume political memoir, *The Party*. The first volume, *The Sixties*, covers the SWP's exemplary role in the turbulent years 1960-1973. The second volume, *Interregnum, Decline and Collapse*, covers the SWP in the years 1973-1988, and includes the degeneration of the SWP into the sectarian cult it remains to this day.

In the 1970s, the SWP continued to be active in the mass movements, including in the unions. In 1978, the party enthusiastically adopted a "turn to industry." The idea was to get the majority of our members into industrial unions. Coming out of "The Sixties," a majority of our new members came from the student movement of the time. As they graduated in the 1970s, they tended to get white-collar jobs as teachers, government social service workers, health care workers, and so forth, and we had built up what we called "fractions," organized groups of members in those unions.

One result of the radicalization of young people and African Americans in "The Sixties" was that anti-communist red-baiting was greatly weakened in the working class and society as a whole. It became easier for socialists to operate in industry. Some socialist groups, such as the International Socialists, made their own turn to get members in industry in the early 1970s. Our turn to industry came a little later.

Some of our campus recruits had gone into industrial jobs earlier, and we had recruited young workers in industry. But we were disproportionately white collar. The turn was designed to correct that imbalance, while also putting us into the most important section of the working class.

In 1978, the projection was to maintain our white-collar fractions, although reduced in size. We would also maintain a strong base on campuses through our associated youth group, the Young

Socialist Alliance (YSA). We selected six industrial unions to target: steel, coal mining, automobile, rail, machinists and garment. We already had fractions of comrades for some time in rail and steel. Our Steelworkers fraction had grown through our participation in an important movement within the union, called Steelworkers Fightback, which rose to prominence in the mid-1970s and challenged the union bureaucracy's policies of giving concessions to the steel companies at the expense of the workers.

There had also been an important development in the United Mine Workers in the 1970s, the emergence of a rank-and-file movement, Miners for Democracy, which succeeded in overthrowing an entrenched, corrupt and concessions-minded bureaucracy. This resulted in an empowered membership able to wage strong battles against the mine owners. In 1978 the UMW led a powerful strike, which then President Carter tried to smash by invoking the Taft-Hartley law, and ordered the miners to go back to work or face drastic legal consequences. The union members and leaders stood firm, rejecting the order, and although they were now technically criminals, went on to win.

These two upsurges in the Steel and Mineworkers unions were the backdrop to our turn to industry. They came on top of other industrial struggles in the 1970s. On this basis, we had come to the conclusion that we were entering a new period of rising industrial struggles, which would be characterized by a political radicalization of the working class as a whole, both industrial and service workers.

In the early 1970s, there had been a turn in capitalist-class policies, under increasing international capitalist competition, to begin an offensive against the wages, living conditions and rights of all workers. This was announced by President Nixon in 1971, decreeing a freeze on wages and prices. Wages were frozen, but prices weren't. This capitalist offensive developed over time. It was intensified during and after the 1974-75 world recession. Steelworkers Fightback and Miners for Democracy were examples of worker resistance to this offensive. We thought that the resistance to the capitalist offensive would intensify.

Our turn to industry was projected to be three-pronged. First we would learn to become integrated into the workforce in our plants, getting to know our fellow workers, their lives, their views and so forth. The second was to become activists in our unions, participating in the daily struggles on the shop floor as well as becoming known as people with ideas to move the union forward. The third prong was that we would be known as socialists with broader ideas about the world. It would take time to do all these things in a given workplace.

When the turn was projected in 1978, it was proposed that the union fractions of the SWP would become semi-autonomous. That is, while still under the political policies decided by the party, they would have significant leeway to decide what they would do in the plants and unions. As they became rooted, the fractions would elect their own leaderships, from the local up to the national level. They would become a parallel structure to the political structures of the party, and through the dynamics of their internal life, become a new source of leadership cadre for the party as a whole. All of these proposals were gutted, beginning in 1980.

Contrary to our expectations, it turned out that the Steelworkers Fightback and the new militancy in the UMW capped by the great strike of 1978 were not harbingers of more to come, but the end of a previous period. The working class did not politically radicalize, and in fact moved in the opposite direction. The election of Reagan to the White House in 1980 saw a large section of working class voters go over to him, largely on appeals to racism. These became known as "Reagan Democrats."

The capitalist offensive against the working class and its unions charged on, but did not result in a working class fightback, but a retreat. When Reagan moved to break the air controllers union in

1981, the rest of the labor movement failed to come to their defense. This included the other airline workers, especially the machinists who keep the planes running. The machinists could have shut down the airlines, drawing the flight attendants and the pilots into the struggle. That would have defeated Reagan. This ignoble retreat by the union bureaucracy ushered in a long period of concessions to the companies at the workers expense, and a shrinkage of the unions and their power that has continued to this day.

The SWP leadership, however, refused to recognize that our projections had been 180 degrees wrong. For years it kept repeating the mantra that the workers were just about to become politically radicalized – it was “just around the corner.” Every partial union struggle was similarly held to be a resurgence of the industrial unions.

The leadership made a distorted response to the reality it refused to recognize. Beginning in 1980, there was a conscious decision to pull back from participating in union politics. This soon became a prohibition of our union members from joining or supporting any union caucuses of any type, including rank and file caucuses seeking a way out of the dead end of the union leadership’s policies. We were prohibited from running in union elections for any post, including shop steward. It was forbidden for our members to publish any newsletters or help out on union newspapers. The SWP press, with a few exceptions, ceased criticizing the sell-out policies of the bureaucracy. Increasingly, the only union activity that was permitted was to support strikes when they occurred.

This was a sharp reversal of the SWP’s union orientation since its founding right up to when we supported Miners for Democracy and Steelworkers Fightback. Actually, it goes back further to the early Communist Party, and before that to the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World. What the new policy boiled down to was abstentionism regarding union politics, an objective move to the right.

The industrial fractions had little to do or discuss. In reality, the SWP leadership moved to stifle the fractions. One aspect of this was to ask members to frequently move. This was justified under the strange assertion that our members shouldn’t become rooted in a workplace, and that the party’s continuity in a plant was carried out by the continued existence of the fraction. The individual members of the fraction were held to be interchangeable. Obviously, this led to a weakening of the first prong of our orientation, having our members become part of the plant workforce, getting to know the views of our fellow workers on politics generally and union politics in particular, and cut across getting to know who were our friends, who were our opponents and who were in the middle. All of this takes time, and was undermined by too-frequent transfers from one city or industry to another.

There was only one prong left: being socialists on the job. This degenerated into sterile propagandism, which was called “talking socialism.” And to carry out this task, one member was as good as another. This one-sided approach also cut into the effectiveness of our socialist ideas, as our members seemed to be disconnected to the life of the plant and union. We began to be looked at like Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Another wrongheaded response to the changing reality was to dissolve our teachers and other service workers fractions, which isolated the SWP from many struggles in these unions. In addition the Young Socialist Alliance was dissolved, torpedoing our campus work.

It is beyond the scope of this Introduction to explain how this all came about. I would refer interested readers to the second volume of my political memoir.

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When Caroline and I returned from a political assignment in Europe early 1980, she enthusiastically joined the turn and became an autoworker at a General Motors plant in Tarrytown, New York. In part because we were asked to take on political assignments in various cities, but also because of the policy of too-frequent transfers, Caroline worked in many different industries. Like many other members in the unions, she simply ignored the more bizarre aspects of the new orientation. She always got on well with fellow workers, which was reflected in her recruiting two workers to the SWP in increasingly difficult times.

In one small factory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which employed some deaf workers, she began to learn sign language. In a steel mill, where we both worked, she was the first woman "crane repairman," and encountered hostility at first because of her gender. But she soon won over her crew, and then the whole department. When we left that job because we moved to California, one of the workers who was initially most hostile went out of his way to wish her well, and a group from the repair department helped us load the moving van.

Caroline felt at home among workers, and she enjoyed the political work in industry even when the work itself was repetitive and boring.

In 1992, she got the job at NUMMI. Unencumbered by the increasingly wrong-headed SWP policies, she was able to fully come into her own.

One feature of the workforce at NUMMI was that white males were in the minority. There were large numbers of African Americans, Latinos and Filipinos, as well as women.

During her time in the plant, she worked in two areas, the door line and then in the plastics department. She formed friendships with coworkers in both. She soon became known as a union militant, and attended and spoke up at Local meetings. The United Auto Workers (UAW) still had many democratic traditions, one of which was the right of rank and file members to observe meetings of the Local Executive Committee, which she took advantage of. She discussed the meetings of the Local and the Executive Committee with her coworkers, as well as broader political issues in the International union, the country and the world, becoming known as a socialist.

For the first years she was active in the union, the Administration Caucus held the majority of officers and the Executive Committee of Local 2244 of the UAW. The Administration Caucus was part of the national machine of the same name that was the organ of the UAW bureaucracy in Detroit. There was an opposition grouping called the People's Caucus at NUMMI, which attempted to counter the pro-company bias of the Administration Caucus, and promote union democracy against its heavy-handed methods. For a time, Caroline joined the People's Caucus. She also became active in a national grouping in the UAW, New Directions. New Directions fought against the policy of giving concessions to the auto companies championed by the national UAW leadership since 1979. New Directions later went under, but Caroline joined subsequent national class struggle groupings in the UAW, the most recent being Soldiers of Solidarity.

When Caroline was hired, there were a few SWP members in the plant. These were barred by the SWP from participating in any caucus or intervening in internal union affairs. In the mid 1990s, the SWP pulled its members from the plant, as part of the elimination of its entire auto fraction. Eventually the SWP shut down its rail and oil fractions, too.

In contract negotiations in 1994, NUMMI management tried to cut health care benefits. Although the Administration Caucus held the majority of positions, Richard Aguilar, who was from the People's Caucus, had been elected Chairman of the Local's bargaining committee. He was also the only other member of New Directions in the plant. Caroline worked closely with Aguilar, and although she was a "mere" rank and filer, became his right hand, drafting his leaflets and providing advice. Against the wishes of the Administration Caucus, Aguilar led a strike when the contract

expired at midnight. The night shift, which normally worked until 1 a.m. or longer, streamed out of the plant to the union headquarters across the street. Within two hours management capitulated. This was the only strike in NUMMI's history.

Caroline began to see that the People's Caucus had many features of the "outs" versus the "ins" dynamic in the union movement; that is, its leaders were interested in union posts to get ahead personally. She decided then to become an independent in the plant. She still supported the People's Caucus in opposition to the Administration Caucus because of its more militant stance toward the company.

The official newspaper of Local 2244 kept the workers in the dark concerning the Local's functioning and its relations with the company, concentrating on "fluff" issues. In 1998, Caroline decided to step into this vacuum by publishing her own plant newsletter. She called it *The Barking Dog*, naming it after a plant newsletter published by a Black militant worker in the 1970s and early 1980s, when the factory was a GM plant. (GM shut the plant down, and then it reopened as a joint venture with Toyota in 1984.) Caroline had discussed with old timers the union's relations with GM, before the era of concessions, and that is how she came across the original Barking Dog and obtained a set of its issues.

After a time, Caroline decided to also put the Spanish and Tagalog (a major language in the Philippines) translations of "The Barking Dog" on the masthead, reflecting the composition of the plant.

Besides reporting on decisions of the Local, *The Barking Dog* reported on struggles in the plant and in the UAW nationally. She also wrote opinion pieces, and opened its pages to any workers who had something to say. Her newsletter quickly became popular in the plant, except among the Administration Caucus leaders. *The Barking Dog* exposed management abuses, but also criticized the Local and International union leadership when they failed to defend the workers.

One fight Caroline took on was that of women workers who had been punished for taking days off to attend to family medical emergencies. This company policy was in violation of the law, specifically the Family Medical Leave Act. Caroline helped explain the issue to the workers throughout the plant, and helped these women workers to bring their case before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB ruled in favor of the workers and forced NUMMI management to change its policy, something they didn't like and blamed Caroline for.

Top management in NUMMI, who mainly came from Toyota and were used to labor laws in Japan, first tried to ban *The Barking Dog*. They were taken aback when the Local leadership, including the Administration Caucus, informed them they could not ban such material. The whole leadership saw that allowing management to ban *The Barking Dog* would cripple the union's ability generally to produce newsletters, leaflets, and other materials.

Caroline was not only a critic, but also a politician. She won both caucuses' support for a major labor battle of the mid-1990s. Three unions in Decatur, Illinois, waged a long struggle that captured the imagination of labor militants across the country, a story told by Steve Ashby and C. J. Hawking in their book, *Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement*. Caroline also helped build a Bay Area support committee for the Decatur strikes. Two strikers on separate occasions, part of teams sent out nationally, stayed at our house when they came through the Bay Area, and they spoke at a number of union meetings in the Bay Area. His wife accompanied one of these road warriors, and Caroline and I took them on an excursion to see the redwoods at Muir Woods National Park. Caroline also got the Local to support Toyota workers in the South who were attempting to win union recognition. There were other national battles Caroline helped get the Local to support.

At one point the Local leadership tried to suppress *The Barking Dog* when Caroline criticized them. A lawyer paid by the Administration Caucus sent Caroline a blistering letter threatening her with a libel suit. Anonymous threatening letters were sent to our home, one enclosing a photograph of our house. She and I found a capable young pro-labor lawyer, who drew up a reply that proved labor law and the First Amendment were on Caroline's side. Caroline printed both letters in *The Barking Dog*, and flooded the plant with them. Many workers were furious that their "leaders" would threaten a rank-and-file worker for criticizing them. Our lawyer also pointed out that those who filed frivolous lawsuits were liable for all legal costs in California, and the threatened libel suit was hastily withdrawn.

*The Barking Dog* was also distributed nationally through the nation-wide militant caucuses Caroline was a member of. It also caught the attention of fighters abroad. One group of German autoworkers invited her to attend and speak at a conference they organized in Germany, and to tour auto plants in the country.

Caroline became well known throughout the plant as a result of her activities and newsletter. She earned the admiration of many of her co-workers for fighting and winning against the Administration Caucus' threatened lawsuit. In 2000, she decided to run for Trustee in the Local's elections. She ran as an independent against the candidates of both the Administration and People's caucuses, and won. She supported the People's Caucus candidates for other posts. This election put her on the Executive Committee of the Local, which changed the balance of forces.

Some of the Administration Caucus leaders, mainly those who had some connection to the Local in the old GM days, broke with it and merged with the People's Caucus in a new United Caucus. In elections held in 2003, this new caucus threw out the Administration Caucus. Caroline was re-elected as an independent, and was able to work with the new leadership. In fact, she was asked to become the editor of the Local's newspaper. She decided not to accept this post, but worked on the newspaper's staff with the new editor, a young woman, Leticia Quesada. The newspaper was transformed. There were now regular reports from the new Local leaders, as well as information about management's maneuvers against the workers. The newspaper carried other reports of relevance to NUMMI workers, including about struggles being waged nationally.

Caroline kept up *The Barking Dog*, which supplemented the Local newspaper from the left, and helped keep the leadership honest. Or more honest. Once, she was invited as a member of the Executive Committee to a regional conference of the UAW leadership. She reported in *The Barking Dog* that not much of substance happened, but each night the invitees were treated to lavish meals, with a free bar, bowls of shrimp throughout the room, large roasts on spits carved to order, and so forth. Caroline wrote that she wouldn't ever again attend such a gathering. The new leadership wasn't pleased.

There were three elected Trustees. Caroline in fact ran this committee, which oversaw the Local's finances. She found some irregularities, especially on the part of the Local treasurer, who was a supporter of the Administration Caucus. This treasurer also treated the Local's secretaries in a high-handed and obnoxious manner, and Caroline became their defender. The upshot was that the treasurer was brought up on charges in the Local, and was removed with even the concurrence of the Administration Caucus.

In contract talks in 2005, the company again tried to attack health care and other benefits. Caroline and the other leaders launched a drive to mobilize the membership to fight back. They organized demonstrations in front of the plant with a big banner spread on a bridge crossing a major freeway, covered by TV news. Management's ploy had been to project a "labor friendly" image, and they didn't like this publicity or the fact that the workers were appealing to public opinion.

Both the Local newspaper and *The Barking Dog* talked up in the plant the need to be ready to strike. As the deadline for the contract's expiration approached in July, a couple of thousand workers signed up for picket duty. At midnight when the contract expired, Caroline and I were at the union hall, and there were still hundreds signing up. The contract was extended hour-by-hour as negotiations continued. Then it was announced that the company had capitulated, to cheers in the hall.

Shortly thereafter, in August 2005, Caroline experienced the first symptoms of Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS), which would take her life a little more than a year later.

With the exception of strike support work and her discussing socialist politics with her coworkers, all of the above activities Caroline carried out were strictly forbidden to SWP members in industry. She did this work as an individual in the plant, without the support of a socialist party. She had no newspaper like the SWP's *The Militant* behind her. She did have the support of myself and Malik Miah, who played a leading role in the union at his job as a mechanic at United Airlines. We got together to discuss strategy and tactics at both NUMMI and United. She also had support from her friends in the national fightback groups in the UAW, as well as from Erwin Baur, a retired autoworker in the Bay Area who had once played a central role in the SWP's auto fraction (he left the SWP in 1953).

Whatever the nature of the political period, the class struggle continues, even in periods where the tide is running against the workers. How *The Barking Dog* intervened is useful for today. There were and are other examples of such newsletters, some of which were referred to in the Dog. One of these was Live Bait and Ammo put out by Gregg Shotwell, whom Caroline greatly admired. These are collected in his book, *Autoworkers Under the Gun*. Shotwell was a leader of Soldiers of Solidarity, the national militant caucus Caroline was active in.

It was Shotwell who first raised with me that this book of Caroline's newsletters be published.

The appendix is an interview with Caroline done by Sheila Cohen in 2000. Sheila was a British trade union activist, and continues her work as an educator, researcher and writer. From 1990 to 1995 she edited and distributed the UK rank and file newsletter Trade Union News. Her book *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get It Back*, which looks into the 1968-74 upsurge and its aftermath, was published by Pluto Press, and she is currently working on a history of the main trade union branch at Ford's Dagenham.

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\* <http://links.org.au/node/4019>