USA: The Highlander Idea

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For decades, the Highlander School has nurtured some of the most important radical movements by pushing a simple idea: ordinary people can act as agents of change. It's an idea that's threatening to the Right — and it should be.

In 1932, coal miners in Wilder, Tennessee went on strike. Wilder was a company town, and the company — Fentress Coal and Coke — retaliated with force, locking out the workers and shutting off their electricity during a freezing winter. The Red Cross arrived to alleviate the crisis, but only gave provisions to strike-breakers, leaving strikers and their families to starve.

About a hundred miles away, in Grundy County, Tennessee, the Highlander Folk School had recently opened with the aim of building a radical labor movement in the South. Its staff and students traveled north to see what was happening and how they could support the strikers. They organized a food and clothing drive and transported provisions to Wilder from other parts of the state. On his first visit to Wilder, Myles Horton, co-founder of Highlander, was arrested and charged by a National Guard officer for "coming here, getting information and going back and teaching it."

Going into the field, getting information, and going back and teaching it does not sound like a chargeable offense. But this approach to education and movement-building, which has animated Highlander's programs for the past eighty-seven years, has consistently provoked attacks on the school and its staff.

Shortly after Horton's arrest, Highlander experienced the first of many attempted bombings. And just two weeks ago, the main office building at the organization's headquarters in New Market burned to the ground. Staff found a white power symbol, also used by the Christchurch shooter, spray-painted on the parking lot of the burnt building. While the investigation into the fire's cause is ongoing, we should be alert to the possibility that Highlander is once again under attack — and with it, the transformative movements that Highlander makes possible.

Labor Years

"Highlander is an idea," Myles Horton said in 1961 after the state of Tennessee seized the school's original home and locked its doors. "You can't padlock an idea."

The Highlander idea was that movements for democracy succeed when they turn their participants into leaders — transforming ordinary people, often disciplined into passivity by their workplaces and political systems, into agents of change. Highlander would recruit students that showed organizing potential and teach them methods that they could replicate in their communities. Horton called this approach "yeasty education."

Yeasty education worked when it was attached to a growing movement. By way of explanation, Horton used a metaphor that he'd picked up while riding the rails in the South: if you try to jump on without matching the train's speed, it will throw your body under. Instead, you have to put your hand on the ladder, run until you reach its pace, and then spring up. Similarly, Highlander tried to

anticipate the next issue around which a democratizing social movement might emerge and coordinate its programs with the people most likely tolead it.

In a speech to Citizenship School teachers in 1961, Horton explained:

> I want the struggle for social and economic justice to get big and become so dynamic that the atmosphere in which you're working is so charged that sparks are darting around very fast, and they explode and create other sparks, and it's almost perpetual motion. Learning jumps from person to person with no visible explanation of how it happened

Attacks on Highlander have always been most intense when the school has been in sync with growing movements.

In the 1930s, Highlander staff identified industrial unions as the most plausible site for movements for economic and political democracy. Accordingly, Highlander supported and accompanied the Southern labor movement with extension and residential workshops for rank-and-file organizers.

These workshops were unconventional — students would participate in activities designed to give them the feeling of freedom. One program was developed by Zilphia Horton, Myles Horton's wife, who put together a dramatics program based on her study of workers' theater at the New Theatre School in New York. Students improvised, wrote, and performed plays based on scenarios familiar to them, from confronting scabs on the picket line to explaining the purpose of dues to skeptical union members and dealing with manipulative bosses. By recreating their worlds on stage, workers gained a sense of themselves as protagonists of social change.

In addition to drama, students took courses on economics, public speaking, history, and current events. They workshopped the problems they faced in their unions, sharing ideas and learning to recognize their own expertise. Cooperative living arrangements at Highlander gave students an experience of self-governance.

By the end of the 1930s, Highlander staff estimated that they had served about two thousand people in twenty-one CIO, AFL, and independent unions. Six alumni had been elected presidents of their union locals, twenty-two had become full-time union organizers, and many more had assisted in or directed local union membership drives and strikes.

During this period, the school's opponents launched a string of attacks attempted to discredit Highlander and shut it down. In the fall of 1939, a series of articles in the *Tennessean* characterized Highlander as "a center, if not the center, for the spreading of Communist doctrine in 13 Southeastern states." Harassment and bomb threats followed.

After serving as the official school for Southern CIO organizers from 1944 to 1950, Highlander broke with the CIO, in part over whether to exclude Communists from its workshops. The CIO favored the proscription, bowing to mounting anticommunist sentiment, while Highlander deplored it as an assault on free speech. Horton had also come to view the CIO as excessively bureaucratic and detached from workers. It had failed, in his mind, to push beyond unionism into a revolutionary movement for economic and political democracy. It was time to move on.

From CIO to Civil Rights

In searching for their next program, the staff again looked for the issues around which a radical

democratic movement might emerge. In the early 1950s, that looked to be civil rights. Highlander had supported antiracist policies for years, rejecting anti-black unions and hosting integrated workshops since 1944. In anticipation of the *Brown v. Board of Education*decision, Highlander staff began organizing workshops on school integration in 1953.

The following year, Septima Clark, a Charleston school teacher who became Highlander's director of education, recruited Esau Jenkins, a bus driver from Johns Island off the South Carolina coast, to a workshop on the United Nations and world affairs. Jenkins was honest: he wasn't particularly interested in the UN; his community's most pressing problem was adult literacy. Johns Island's black residents were disenfranchised and trapped in poverty by their lack of access to education. Most black adult residents could not read well enough to pass the voter registration test. Jenkins asked if Highlander could help. After the workshop, Jenkins, Clark, and other Highlander staff spent the next few years developing a program to teach adults on the South Carolina Sea Islands how to read.

The first Citizenship School opened in 1956. Bernice Robinson, a beautician from Charleston, led the class. She based the curriculum entirely on what the students told her they wanted to learn — how to write their names, how to write money orders, how to fill out catalog order forms. The Citizenship Schools, like Highlander's other programs, aimed to give students skills but, more importantly, to change their self-understanding.

Highlander supported the Citizenship Schools program with workshops, funding, and teacher trainings from 1956 to 1961, when they turned it over to Dorothy Cotton, the highest-ranking woman in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in order to ensure the program would continue running despite the state's efforts to shut it down. By that time, the program had multiplied across the South. It ultimately registered over fifty thousand black voters.

Highlander's civil rights organizing shifted in a new direction when, on February 1, 1960, four black students sat down at a Woolworth lunch counter reserved for white customers in Greensboro, North Carolina. By the end of the month, over fifty thousand students had engaged in sit-ins across seven states.

In April 1960, Septima Clark organized a workshop to bring the various student groups staging the sit-ins together for the first time. Marion Barry, John Lewis, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette were among those in attendance. Over the course of the weekend, the students deliberated about their philosophy of nonviolence, their relationship to established civil rights groups, and their attitude toward the law. One of their conclusions was that they should form a south-wide umbrella organization. Two weeks later, at a meeting organized by Ella Baker in Raleigh, North Carolina, many of the same students formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Capitalists, white supremacists, and the state of Tennessee were paying attention. From the mid-1950s through the early 1960s, they directed a barrage of defamation and harassment at Highlander. The attacks culminated in a 1959 raid on the school and an investigation by Tennessee state legislators that resulted in the repeal of the school's charter and the confiscation of its home in 1961.

But the Highlander idea endured, and the school immediately moved to Knoxville as the Highlander Research and Education Center. Through the mid-1960s, Highlander continued to support SNCC, running voter registration workshops in Mississippi that eventually included over 1,500 participants. It helped organize the Freedom Summer program, as well as the Southwide Voter Education Internship Project.

A new wave of attacks emerged in response to this work. In 1963, opponents of the Center set

ablaze a Highlander-sponsored integrated North-South work camp and smashed windows at the headquarters in Knoxville. From 1965 to 1968, Highlander was frequently castigated in the Tennessee press. Its physical facilities were vandalized, firebombed, and burglarized.

It relocated once again to New Market in 1972, where it continued to host workshops for social movement organizations.

Highlander Today

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, Highlander's current co-executive director and the first black woman to hold that position, honors the generations of educators and organizers that built Highlander's legacy and weathered earlier storms. She notes, however, that Highlander is not a "living museum." It is actively aiding today's antiracist and anticapitalist movements. Most recently, that has meant supporting organizations like the Movement for Black Lives and the Southern Movement Assembly with resources and capacity, leadership development, fellowships, popular education, and trainings.

But the center's support of contemporary movements goes beyond these programs, stretching to the kind of quiet care work that allows organizers to keep laboring under adverse conditions. After Hurricanes Florence and Michael hit North Carolina and Florida, many former participants in Highlander workshops were forced to evacuate their homes. They contacted Highlander, which housed and fed them and their families free of cost until they could go home. Henderson explains, "That's what accompanying movements looks like sometimes — making sure that they're safe and have rest and opportunities. Now we're literally doing that kind of work for ourselves — our staff, our Board, and our broader Highlander family who are grieving the loss of our office." She adds that the Center has received an outpouring of support in the wake of the fire. "Folks across the country and globe, without our request, have been calling for people to donate resources. We do not take this lightly. Every penny goes toward the continuation of our work."

Debates about strategy in leftist movements often center on an imagined choice between spontaneous mobilization and organizing. This binary is false; successful social movements blend the two. For nearly a century, Highlander has been one of the principal sites of that blending. Its programs have been grounded in finding out what organizers are doing, going out and gathering information, bringing it back to Highlander, and using it to shape workshops for students recruited from the field.

The Highlander idea is threatening to the Right. It should be. They know, like organizers know, that successful movements don't just run on spontaneous bursts of enthusiasm. They require spaces where organizers can regroup, evaluate, plan, and feel free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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