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Interview with Studs Terkel

Abstract

Studs Terkel, now well into his eighties, has broadcast The Studs Terkel Show, a daily one hour radio talk show in Chicago, for more than 40 years, and produced 10 classic books of oral history, including *Race*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. David Ransom spoke to him.

INTERVIEW WITH STUDS TERKEL

(from *New Internationalist* no. 281, July, 1996)

THE ANCIENT MARINER

Studs Terkel, now well into his eighties, has broadcast The Studs Terkel Show, a daily one hour radio talk show in Chicago, for more than 40 years, and produced 10 classic books of oral history, including Race, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. David Ransom spoke to him.

DR: I suppose people around the world still look to America as a kind of model; we have this idea of a go-getting, 'open' sort of a place with no class system, where anyone can make it if they just try hard enough.

ST: The United States was never a classless society, you know. It was a myth to begin with. For example we never use the word 'working class'. Here's a case in point: a young girl whose father is a garbage collector, a sanitation man. I say to her: 'your father is doing very important work'. He's stopping plagues taking place, stopping diseases, terribly important work. Martin Luther King died for the garbage men of Memphis, you know.¹ You are a working class family.' She says to me: 'I beg your pardon! We're middle class.'

DR: Why are Americans so anxious to think they're all 'middle class'?

ST: I guess we're told that. At the end of World War Two the veterans that came back got a GI Bill of Rights. It gave them the right to buy a home or go to school, and for the first time millions went to college. But something new happened. The suburbs came into being, suburbs of GIs. They were given money to start homes. Before the War – and certainly before the Great Depression – the suburbs were where the rich people lived.

Illawarra Unity

Then along came a new kind of suburb, a blue collar suburb. Now there are as many blue collar suburbs in America as there are middle class ones. So the young GI of working class family starts thinking he's middle class. He's told that. And he buys things. He owns a home of his own, and people think as he does. And he's away from *them* – the blacks of course...The young, the new crop of Americans, have no sense of the past. They've been deprived of it, and many are anti-union.

DR: How did that come about?

ST: Well, because of the elimination of history. So now the young pick up a newspaper, and there is no labor section. There's a business section, a sports section, an entertainment section – no-one thinks about labor, except when a picket takes a swing at a scab, when it's a news item. And so how would they know? They've been deprived of labour history. They don't know how the eight – hour day came into being.

I tell this tale of a young, up-scale couple waiting for a bus in Chicago, at the same place I do. We're there every day, and I can't get into conversation with them.

One day I say: 'Labor Day is coming up!' I knew that was the right thing to get them. They just turned away from me.

And I say: 'On Labor Day we March down the main streets of Chicago with banners flying, singing songs...'

And they say: 'We *loathe* the unions!'

Well, that was all I needed. I've become the Ancient Mariner now, you know, with a 'glittering eye', and I've got them pinned against the mail box, they can't get away.

And I ask him: 'How many hours a day do you work?'

He says: 'Eight.' He's caught unaware.

And I say: "How come you don't work eighteen hours a day?"

And he's looking for escape and thinking this guy's nuts or something, and the girl is trembling, you know.

And I say: 'You know why you work eight hours instead of eighteen hours a day, as your great-grandparents did? Because some guys got hanged for you!' And I tell them about the Uprising, something that happened in 1886.²

And the bus is coming and I am giving him this lecture. Finally he hops on the bus and gets away with this girl, and I never see them again. And to this day I think, in the

mornings they look down at the bus stop from that very posh high-rise building, and he says to her: 'Is that old *nut* still down there?'

Well, it's a comic tale but it's basically true. How would this couple know about the eight-hour day? No-one's told them about it. There's no labor history they were ever taught. So they wouldn't know. All they do is read the business section of *The Wall Street Journal*, and they've become part of it.

Notes

- 1 Martin Luther King had gone to lead to Memphis to lead a garbage-collectors' strike when he was assassinated in April 1968.
- 2 On 1st May 1886 there were strikes across the US for an eight-hour working day. On 5 May an 'anarchist' bomb killed seven people in Chicago. The perpetrator was never found, but seven men were arrested and sentenced to death for 'incitement': one committed suicide, four were executed and the other two had their sentences commuted. These events were formative in marking 1st May as Labor Day around the world.