

Labor of Love

Nearing 98, Harry Kelber is still pushing the labor movement to do better and fulfill its potential. BY CARL GINSBURG

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FROM HIS PERCH HIGH UP on Brooklyn Height's north bank, Harry Kelber can see across New York Harbor at all of Wall Street, its skyscrapers stacked in jagged outline. "They are dominating our country. The government is subservient to Wall Street," said Kelber, never one to pull punches. "We need a settlement to make up for what was taken. They are getting away with murder."

On June 20, Harry Kelber turns 98. With remarkable clarity, focus, and recall, this venerable labor activist and educator, writer, father and grandfather, has the poise—and hearing!—of a man several decades younger. He is articulate and passionate, indefatigable and prolific—still turning out three columns a week for distribution on the Internet, various newsletters, and his extensive network of labor contacts.

"Our unions should be particularly concerned about the 5.3 million people who have not had a paycheck for 27 weeks or more," he wrote recently. This day, he added, "Union leaders need to win victories—small and large. But you can't call curtailment of anti-union legislation a victory!"

Kelber has seen much in his long life, which makes this conclusion all the more startling: "Billion-dollar CEOs and millions without healthcare living on poverty wages, and a corrupt political system. I have never seen it quite as bad as today."

He was asked, what is the secret of a mind so engaged at 97? "I do not get easily discouraged," he offered with a smile. "And I don't go to bed until I'm tired." Which is very late—well past midnight. Next to him sits a pile of publications, works of Upton Sinclair and Jack London, and a rifled *New York Times* from that day. "The Times has a peculiar way on labor," Kelber noted. "Good on events

but short on criticism. Reporters soft pedal, afraid to lose their access to labor leadership."

Kelber was raised in Brooklyn, one of four siblings and the first born in the United States. His father, Zalman, emigrated from Russia in 1911, leaving behind a wife, Ita, and daughter. It took two years of working and saving to bring them over. His father, whose English was never more than rudimentary, was a founder of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

He attended public schools, graduating from Thomas Jefferson High School, and to this day touts it—"top-notch public schools," he says. Just three months into his freshman year at Cornell University, Zalman Kelber died and Kelber's mother summoned him home, for good. He would need to help support the family. It was 1933 and a Depression was raging.

Weinstein Food Store, a big store along the lines of today's supermarket, hired him. He worked 78-hour weeks, for two years. It was at Weinstein that he learned first hand of the pernicious practice of "speed up." Weinstein would add up sales at the end of each day. "The person with the lowest sales could get fired, unless total sales were up," Kelber recounted. "We were shivering." Labor was in his blood; now it was in his muscle. Today, he notes that both he and National Nurses United Executive Director RoseAnn DeMoro, who once worked and unionized supermarket checkers, "come out of grocery stores."

Over his long career, Kelber has been and continues to be one of the most outspoken constructive critics of the labor movement, of unions, and of labor leaders at the helm of organizations such as the AFL-CIO. In an even and articulate manner, Kelber saves his considerable ire for



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list: a financial transaction tax (“To be pursued vigorously ... puts labor on the offensive”); pressuring Obama (“Too many concessions to Wall Street, why no minimum wage increase?”); universal Medicare (“the most important, concrete issue”); exposing Wall Street (“They will do anything ... money counts, it’s impersonal, conformity rules”); and, finally, building labor (“Organize, organize, organize.”).

Unprompted, Kelber said, “The nurses of NNU are the best organizers in labor today. They are the exception.” But most of labor does not get it done, not in the eyes of Harry Kelber.

At 25, he was editor of two weekly labor papers that reported the historic CIO organizing campaigns. As a union printer, he was involved in a strike against New York City’s newspapers that endured for 114 days. For five years he was education and cultural director of the Electrical Workers Union, Local 3. In 1995, at the age of 81 and as a member of the Communications Workers of America, he became the first and only independent candidate to run for AFL-CIO vice president, forcing an election. Decades of service to the labor movement, including years of educational

organized labor. “We take a certain joy in exposing hypocrisy,” he said. “But then nothing happens.”

In his view, the labor movement is its own worst enemy by failing to strive for goals and take risks. “The movement must be on the offensive, find ways to attack the enemy,” said Kelber. On his

service to the New York AFL-CIO, make him a senior statesman of the rank and file.

The labor movement today, said Kelber, is “stilted and sluggish, self-centered and refuses to take action. Labor cannot deal with its own problems.”

What’s to be done, then? “Labor should be involved in all issues that affect working people. What kind of life do we expect for our children, according to labor?” he asked. Draw the line, he said, on “concessionary bargaining,” form a “united way against concessions.” And what about a third political party? At this time, he explained, “we must fight for third party issues.” He takes a rare pause. “We need a government that serves working people.”

That is, go on the offensive. “Adopt non-violent actions of the 1960s and boycott companies,” he inveighed. “There is no room for corruption. We should defend the working class, take up legislation of importance to working people, and express our opinions. The inequality today is deplorable.” Raise wages, support retirement that works, bring forward educational improvements that are tangible. These are on Harry Kelber’s short list.

“We are in a crisis,” said Kelber. “If you don’t know that you don’t know any answers—to unemployment, to how to raise revenue.”

This kind and considerate, thoughtful and gracious man of 97, sat back in his big chair. He had spoken for hours. But he had one final thing to warn against. “There is a great deal of cowardice.” ❧

Carl Ginsburg is a longtime progressive TV producer and an NNU communications specialist.