by Leo Casey

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New York City's Greenwich Village Society for Historical Preservation (GVSHP) has published an appeal to grant protected landmark status to the "12-story Beaux Arts style office building" at 70 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. The building was built in 1912 for George Arthur Plimpton, a publisher of education textbooks, a collector of rare books, a philanthropist and a peace activist. For many years, the GVSHP tells us, the building was a "haven for radicals and liberals." I immediately recognized the address as that of the offices of the New York City Teachers Union (TU) for two decades. There is an intriguing story behind that address and the Teachers Union, and it provides a revealing window into the political history of early teacher unionism.

In the same year as 70 Fifth Avenue was built, Henry Linville and a small number of New York City teacher comrades launched a publication, *The American Teacher*, to report on the economic and professional status of the educator workforce and the politics of American public education. Linville was a biology teacher of some note with a Ph.D. from Harvard; one can still find copies of influential science textbooks he authored. He was a democratic socialist and pacifist who had a particularly close relationship with Norman Thomas, the longtime leader of the Socialist Party. The two worked together in an unsuccessful effort to oppose American involvement in World War I.

In the early twentieth century, there was a great deal of trans-Atlantic cross-fertilization between British and American leftists, with London and New York as the two intellectual centers in this exchange of ideas. From the Women's Trade Union League and the settlement house movement to Fabian Society proposals for reform and the idea of labor party, from anti-imperialist support of Irish and Indian independence to militant suffragist tactics and campaigns for birth control, sex education and the decriminalization of gay sex, New Yorkers often drew inspiration from their British counterparts. *The American Teacher* followed the development of the National Union of Teachers in the United Kingdom, and New York teachers on the left increasingly looked to it as a model of what could be done in the United States.

By 1913, a group of 20 socialist New York City teachers, who had coalesced around the *American Teacher,* issued a call for a mass meeting to discuss the formation of a labor union for teachers. In addition to Linville, this group included Caroline Pratt, who would become a noted progressive educator in NYC and establish the City and Country School, and Henrietta Rodman, a feminist and socialist who was engaged in major battles with the New York City Board of Education over the right of women teachers to marry and have children. John Dewey, America's foremost educator and philosopher, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a leading feminist and socialist author of this era, had also written for *American Teacher*, and they both spoke at that 1913 mass meeting which brought out 700 teachers. The Teachers Union (originally named the Teachers League) was born out of this meeting and Linville was installed as its president, a position he held until the union split in 1935.

In 1916, three years after it was founded, the TU came together with seven other local teacher unions to form the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). John Dewey was given the AFT's first membership card; for the rest of his life he remained a committed teacher unionist, active in the TU, the Teachers Guild and the AFT.

The young AFT was a small organization that was strapped for resources, so it adopted the *American Teacher* as its national publication. At the same time as the AFT was founded in 1916, the offices of the TU and the *American Teacher* were moved to 70 Fifth Avenue. (The GVHSP appeal states that AFT had its offices at this address, but it is mistaking the offices of the TU and *American Teacher* for the offices of the AFT, which were then in Chicago.)

During the AFT's early years, there were frequent political tug-of-wars between the national headquarters in Chicago and the New York City TU, the union's largest local. The AFT's national president, Chicago high school teacher Charles Stillman, adhered closely to Samuel Gompers' vision of "pure and simple" unionism that avoided questions of economic and social justice. The democratic socialist Linville was not only the president of the TU, but also the editor of the *American* Teacher, and the progressive politics of the TU often found its way into its pages, leaving Stillman none too pleased. After years of wrangling, he was eventually successful in moving the AFT's official publication to the national office

in Chicago. Linville was elected president of the AFT for one term in the 1920s, but he did not win re-election.

By the early 1930s, the TU was embroiled in paralyzing factional battles, largely due to a caucus established and run by the Communist Party (CP), although another caucus organized by dissident Communists, followers of Jay Lovestone, played a contributing role. During this time, the CP was going through a particularly negative phase known as "Third Period Stalinism" in which it attacked other organizations on the left, sometimes employing violence. These assaults were justified by the absurdly sectarian claim that socialists and other non-Communist leftists were "social fascists." Moreover, battles between the CP and dissident Communists were often played out in unions, including the TU and the New York City needle trade locals. Unable to control the factionalism and believing that continuous disruptions made it impossible for the union to act on behalf of its members, Linville and other "Old Guard" socialists, including John Dewey, left the TU and formed a new union, the Teachers Guild, which refused to admit Communists as members. Shortly after this split, the TU relocated from 70 Fifth Avenue, eventually moving to a nearby townhouse. The Guild rented offices on 23rd Street. Plimpton died in 1936, and the building's tenants gradually lost their movement character.

The two decades during which the TU had its offices at 70 Fifth Avenue – from 1916, the eve of American entry into World War I, to 1935, when the United States was beginning its long climb out of the Great Depression – are an interesting period in the political life of New York City unions and radical organizations. The building was not simply "a haven for radicals and liberals." It was also the center of a network of organizations that were closely interconnected with each other. Not only did the TU share a building with these groups, it shared a common cause. For insight into this early period of New York City teacher unionism, we need to examine this radical ecosystem in which it lived and understand how teacher union activists were intimately involved in that larger political world. That ecosystem becomes clear when one considers the connections between the TU and other organizations in its building.

The iconic picture of the NAACP banner "A man was lynched yesterday" came from the time its offices were at 70 Fifth Avenue. The NAACP had been founded in 1909 by radicals and socialists, a mixture of African-American leaders and activists

such as W. E. B. DuBois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett and white socialists such William English Walling and Mary White Ovington. John Dewey had been one of the founding sponsors of the NAACP, and TU activist Leonora O'Reilly (better known among students of labor and women's history for her leadership roles in the famous women's shirtwaist strike of 1909, the Women's Trade Union League and the Wage Earner's Suffrage League) was a leader in the New York City chapter. The TU distinguished itself by its support for the civil rights of African-Americans, including inside a union movement that was often either indifferent or hostile to them.

The League for Industrial Democracy (LID), another tenant of 70 Fifth Avenue, had its origins in the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, which was founded in 1905 by author Upton Sinclair, lawyer Clarence Darrow and author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among others. In 1921, it was relaunched as the LID, and began to function as an educational arm of the broad Socialist Party milieu. John Dewey served as a LID officer for many years, and a number of New York City teacher unionists were prominent in its work – among them were Abe Lefkowitz (legislative representative and the second-in-command in the TU), Layle Lane (the leading African-American teacher unionist of her era, Lane organized the AFT's civil rights work for many years and was a close friend and ally of A. Philip Randolph), Jesse Wallace Hughan (a teacher unionist who helped found and lead the War Resisters League) and Fanny Simon (an expert on Latin American unionism). Leading intellectuals active in the TU, such as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and educator George Counts, also did work for the ILD.

From its beginnings, the TU was in the forefront of the fight for women's rights; it provided key organizational support to Henrietta Rodman's battles on behalf of women teachers who wanted to marry and have children, and it considered women's suffrage to be such a fundamental principle that it wrote support for it into its constitution. When World War I began, progressives in the suffrage movement – women such as Jane Addams, a supporter of the Chicago teacher unions – organized the Women's Peace Party (WPP), and its New York City chapter was housed at 70 Fifth Avenue. TU feminist leaders, such as Henrietta Rodman and Leonora O'Reilly, were engaged in its work; Jesse Wallace Hughan served on its executive committee. The WPP would quickly become the American branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which survives to this day.

The animating force behind the New York City branch of the WPP was Crystal Eastman, the sister of The Masses editor Max Eastman, and an extraordinary organizer for a number of different movements. A lawyer, Eastman pioneered workmen's compensation with a New York state law and fought hard for health and safety laws after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911. In 1915, Eastman, Jane Addams and others founded the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), an organization of both men and women, which together with the Women's Peace Party ran a campaign against compulsory military training in the physical education classes of public schools. Educators such as Henrietta Rodman were also involved in this work.

The entry of the United States into WWI let loose a wave of domestic repression against anti-war activists. The Espionage and Sedition Acts were passed, allowing for the prosecution and imprisonment of opponents to the war. In the most famous case of this repression, the perennial Socialist Party candidate for president, Eugene Debs, was tried and convicted of sedition for delivering an anti-war speech and was imprisoned in a federal penitentiary. At the initiative of Crystal Eastman, Norman Thomas and Roger Baldwin, the AUAM formed the National Civil Liberties Bureau (NCLB) to defend those who were imprisoned for anti-war activism, especially conscientious objectors who often faced very harsh prison conditions. The TU would experience a small piece of this war-time repression, as a number of its leading members were either fired or given punitive transfers to schools far from their homes in retaliation for their anti-war positions, their socialism and their pacifism.

At the end of the war, the NCLB would become the American Civil Liberties Union, with Roger Baldwin at its helm. (Baldwin was also the head of the philanthropic American Fund for Public Service, better known as the Garland Fund, which had its offices at 70 Fifth Avenue. For the eighteen years it was in existence, the fund financially supported a wide variety of progressive causes.) With the eruption of the Russian Revolution at the end of the first world war, anti-war repression in the United States took an increasingly anti-radical direction, and blossomed into the first "Red Scare," directed against the full spectrum of the left. The young ACLU was involved in the defense of radicals and liberals who were imprisoned and deported during this period.

One of the ACLU's first campaigns was against the work of the Lusk Committee, established by the New York State legislature in 1921 to investigate organizations and individuals suspected of "sedition." (In 1920, the Republican-controlled Assembly had expelled five of its duly elected members from New York City on the sole grounds that they were members of the Socialist Party.) The Lusk Committee targeted the Socialist Party's Rand School, where a number of socialist TU members – Linville, Dewey and Rodman, among others – taught classes or gave lectures. The committee also issued subpoenas for TU members working in the New York City public schools to testify in investigations of "their loyalty." This "loyalty oath" campaign came to a screeching halt, however, when a fearless Henrietta Rodman announced that she would defy the committee and refuse to appear, and the committee backed down. (None of the men under investigation came close to Rodman's stand.) In 1923, the Lusk laws were repealed, and the committee's work ended.

The ACLU and the TU worked very closely in opposing the Lusk Committee, and on questions of academic freedom. Linville served on the national board of the ACLU for many years, and he took the lead in its academic freedom work, as well as in the academic freedom work of the AFT. During the 1920s, leaders of the TU continued to face discrimination for the union activism and political views, with the ACLU playing a significant role in its defense. Abe Lefkowitz and Ruth Gillette Hardy, a TU leader who was a noted progressive educator and Socialist, were passed over for promotion to principalships despite being at the top of the city's list for appointments, having achieved the highest scores on the qualifying exams. (Until the collective bargaining era, principals and assistant principals were often members of teacher unions.) In response to a wave of public criticism, the Board of Education resorted to character assassination – describing Lefkowitz as belligerent and Hardy as hysterical. The Board was eventually forced to surrender, however, and appoint the two as principals. When TU member Jesse Wallace Hughan was given a low score on her exam for the principal's exam on the purported grounds that she misunderstood John Dewey's educational philosophy, Dewey wrote a remarkable letter in her defense, suggesting that she understood his educational theories better than the examiner did.

One well-known case illustrates the close working relationships between the ACLU, Linville, the TU and the AFT on issues of academic freedom. When Tennessee passed a law in 1925 forbidding the teaching of evolution in its public

schools, Linville recruited a young biology teacher in Tennessee, John Scopes, for a legal challenge to the law. But the AFT lacked the resources to take on the case: during the 1920s, a nadir for the American labor movement, its membership had shrunk to quite low levels. So Linville turned to the ACLU, who convinced the legendary Clarence Darrow to defend Scopes. In a high profile confrontation, described by the legions of national press which covered it as the "Scopes Monkey trial," Darrow faced off against the renowned populist William Jennings Bryan, who defended the biblical account of the origins of humanity. To this day, the story of that trial is a regular subject of high school classes in American history, biology and, through the play *Inherit the Wind*, English language arts.

Tragically, many of the women who had central roles in this story – Rodman, O'Reilly and Eastman – had their lives cut short, in their prime. The loss of Rodman and O'Reilly, two accomplished organizers and established leaders, was a serious blow for the young TU, as both women died at the very point that they had begun taking on important roles within the union. What little that has been written on the TU in these early years focuses mainly on Linville and Lefkowitz. Both men held elected officer positions in the union and were active for many decades, playing major roles in the battles over Communism in the TU and AFT. As well, the accounts of the early years of the union have a narrow institutional lens, ignoring the larger political eco-system in which the TU functioned.

But the story of 70 Fifth Avenue provides a window into the world from which the New York City Teachers Union emerged and in which it took shape. The extensive connections between the TU and the network of progressive organizations that were also tenants in this building points to a union that was intimately connected to and deeply involved in the civil rights, feminist, peace and civil liberties struggles of its era.