

Remembering Vincent Raymond Dunne

by David Thorstad

[Comments to forum on 80th anniversary of the 1934 Minneapolis strikes, Minneapolis Public Library, July 17, 2014]

I'll mention a few of my experiences with Ray that shed light on him as a revolutionary and as a human being.

I feel privileged to have been able to spend as much time with Ray as I did during the late 1960s when I was branch organizer of the Twin Cities SWP. Ray would come into the headquarters almost every day. He would observe what was going on and offer insights if he thought it appropriate. He was never obtrusive; after all, a branch organizer is supposed to take initiative and learn through experience. Ray had a long and colorful past as a radical, and not only during the strikes that made Minneapolis a union town. He told me he had ridden the rails across the country as an IWWer. But he never dwelt on his past exploits, rarely reminisced about them, and always had his eye on the present and the future, helping to train a new generation in the struggle to overthrow capitalism.

About the 1934 strikes he did say, though, that at one point Governor Olson came to strike headquarters and pleaded: "What am I to do?" Ray said the workers had to be restrained from taking him by both arms and smashing him into a pillar.

Occasionally, Ray would ask me to go to Haskell's liquor store nearby and get him a bottle of his favorite bourbon, Four Roses. Haskell's would never accept payment. Ray had a standing offer of a free bottle in gratitude for his role in the 1934 strikes. This attitude was fairly widespread, even more than three decades after the events. Even a poet friend in college, Maggie Smith, who worked as a secretary in Frontier Hall where I worked the switchboard in the early sixties, expressed admiration for his role in the strikes.

When the branch decided to hold a banquet for Ray's 80th birthday, I was responsible for overseeing things. I found a calligrapher on, I think, Marquette Avenue to engrave a plaque in Ray's honor. When the calligrapher saw who the plaque was for, he refused to accept any payment.

Ray showed up early the day of the banquet. I knew he wanted to make sure there were no loose ends. "Have you checked to see that all the lightbulbs are working?" he asked. You can imagine my relief at being able to say that I had in fact checked them all! No detail, however minute, escaped his scrutiny.

I often headed down to Ray's basement apartment on Lake Street just to visit and hang out. One time, I brought my friend Diana Johnstone and her daughter Elizabeth to meet Ray. We took him out to eat. As he was getting out of the car, Elizabeth accidentally shut the door on his hand, which had to have hurt. He did cry out briefly, but downplayed it so as not to hurt the young girl's feelings.

The SWP once helped organize an antiwar street rally at the corner of 7th and Hennepin during Minneapolis's annual Aquatennial parade, where Hubert Humphrey was the guest of honor. Various people made speeches standing on a stepladder displaying an American flag. That was so as not to violate a city ordinance requiring such rallies to display a flag of a certain size—I believe the specified size was a 3 X 5 foot flag on a 9 foot pole. In my talk, I said LBJ's "war on poverty" amounted to sending young men to die in Vietnam. Diana, in her first public speech as an antiwar activist, was arrested and pulled down from the ladder, but, with the help of SWP comrades, who created a ruckus by banging on a newspaper box and yelling "Let her go!," she was hustled to safety in the party headquarters across the street. During the rally, the FBI had planted a woman to heckle the speakers. Later, Ray told me how an IWWer he knew had dealt with heckling. He said the man would stop his speech and ask the crowd: "Do you want to hear a sonnnng? I'm going to give you a sonnnng." It went as follows:

I don't know,

It may be so,

But it sounds awfully queer.

Go peddle your wares someplace else

'Cuz your bullshit don't go here.

The crowd was won over and the heckler silenced. I don't know if that approach would work nowadays, but it was reassuring to learn that heckling was nothing new to agitators.

Another time—I think it was during the 1968 presidential race after Robert Kennedy was assassinated—Senator George McGovern had just come out calling for immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Putting down the *New Yorker* article he was reading, Ray pronounced it a very significant development. Not only did it show a split in the ruling elite, but immediate withdrawal was also the SWP's position in the antiwar movement. Some pacifists, and the Communist Party, were calling for negotiations, but our position was that negotiations implied that the U.S.

invasion had been justified, that the U.S. had a right to be there. We argued that the only thing to be negotiated was how fast the troops could be pulled out.

One of my most cherished experiences with Ray is not just a memory, but something that remains a tangible presence in my daily life. On October 16, 1968, during one of my visits, I mentioned that the day before had been my twenty-seventh birthday. Immediately, Ray said he wanted to give me a gift and produced an unsigned cartoon that his son, Ray Jr., had given him. His son had been a cartoonist with the Minneapolis paper and at a cartoonist convention in St. Cloud where they showed each other their unpublished work, another cartoonist had given him the cartoon. Unpublished cartoons are unsigned, Ray explained. The cartoon was particularly meaningful to a Minnesotan and to a Viking descendant, since some people believe that the Vikings made it all the way to Alexandria and left behind a runestone (visible in that city, which grandiosely, and misleadingly, bills itself “the birthplace of America”). It shows two American astronauts on the moon, with a tiny earth in the distant sky. In the background is a Viking ship. One astronaut is saying, “Sonofabitch.” Nine months after Ray gave me this cartoon—which hangs on my wall—the U.S. landed a man on the moon. Probably a young person today might not get the joke.

Best of all, though, Ray inscribed the cartoon with the following note: “To David Thorstad, one of my great friends—and more than that, he’s a wonderful companion.” Signed “V. R. Dunne, Mpls. Oct. 16th, ’68.”

One more experience seems more striking in hindsight than it did at the time.

As a student at the University of Minnesota in the early sixties, I got involved with the Student Peace Union. Two factions vied for influence in the group: a Communist Party one and a Trotskyist one. The pacifist social democrats of SANE (Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy) probably were a third one. My friend Bob Binkley (who I believe is now dead) had recently joined the Young Socialist Alliance and he was a thorn in the side of the CPers in the SPU. I was a neophyte in leftist politics and knew little about the fine points of left-wing politics. Bob explained that you could tell a CPer because he wore a suit and tie. I was not a suit-and-tie guy, but I wasn’t yet a Trotskyist either.

Bob was not only brash and articulate. He was also a talented musician. He played saxophone in Woody Herman’s band. And he had his own combo, which played gigs at frat houses and other venues around the university. I played piano in his group. Bob was openly gay and didn’t care what other people might think about it. I admired that, but never discussed with him my own same-sex experiences. His gaydar probably picked up on it, but he never let on. Bob also hustled on Washington Avenue,

and said he had once had one of my French professors as a client. I myself didn't come out until 1970, after Stonewall, and knew nothing firsthand about the gay subculture beyond the stories Bob told me. Bob's involvement in that subculture grew chaotic enough that later on his activism in the YSA became erratic and problematic.

What does this have to do with Ray Dunne? After I became branch organizer, Ray volunteered to me that Bob's difficulties in his personal life (which Ray didn't specify but clearly were related to Bob's gay lifestyle) were causing problems with his activism. Ray said he had proposed to the SWP national office that Bob be transferred to New York to write for the party's paper, *The Militant*, if he wished to escape the chaos of his hustler life. Bob chose not to, but what struck me then—and even more so a few years later when the party's antigay policy came to a head—was the lack of judgmentalism in Ray's effort to find a solution, and the extent to which he would go to try to retain a talented comrade. I regret not pursuing the issue of homosexuality and his attitude toward it, especially in view of subsequent developments in the 1970s when the antigay prejudice of leading comrades who were former labor figures prevailed and led to my quitting the party.

For me, some of my fondest memories from my involvement in the movement come from the brief friendship with Ray Dunne.