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Let's Get Moving! Organizing for the '90's

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Abstract

[Excerpt] If there were one book I'd recommend to individuals who are excited by this issue of LRR, it would be Myles Horton's autobiography, *The Long Haul*. Horton founded the Highlander Folk School in Appalachia in 1932 to provide education for people in his region committed to democratic social change. He is probably best known for his work in the civil rights movement, but actually his work began in the early days of the CIO.

Keywords

THE Long Hall, Myles Horton, Highlander Folks School, Appalachia, CIO, AFL-CIO

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THE LONG HAUL: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Myles Horton (with Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl),
228 pp, Anchor Books, 1990.

If there were one book I'd recommend to individuals who are excited by this issue of *LRR*, it would be Myles Horton's autobiography, *The Long Haul*. Horton founded the Highlander Folk School in Appalachia in 1932 to provide education for people in his region committed to democratic social change. He is probably best known for his work in the civil rights movement, but actually his work began in the early days of the CIO.

Guided by the view that Highlander should try to anticipate a social movement and educate people for the fight to come, Horton laid the groundwork for industrial union organizing in the South in 1935. Unemployed workers, mineworkers, textile, furniture, and upholstery workers who studied at Highlander were ready when the CIO came calling in the South. By 1937, Highlander was the official training school for CIO organizers and staff in the South, and worked with the CIO through the 1940s.

The Long Haul, however, is not a history of Highlander's activities. Instead, it is a rich and provocative memoir of a lifetime devoted to teaching people to organize for social change. Horton's philosophy on bottom-up organizing, linking education to action, is similar to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Their liberatory models of education stress people's own experiences as the learning source rather than reliance on an omniscient source (be that teachers, management, or bureaucrats). Horton writes: "You don't just tell people something; you find a way to use situations to educate them so that they can learn to figure things out themselves."

Union people who are committed to building the labor movement through strong internal organizing and movement-oriented strategies of organizing new members will be inspired by this book. The organizing model of unionism reflects a dynamic integration of Horton's educating-for-empowerment philosophy with the realities of union organizing. Freire, in fact, is currently an education director of Brazil's worker's party. In the U.S. there is an emerging community of labor organizers and educators who are seriously undertaking this model in their work.

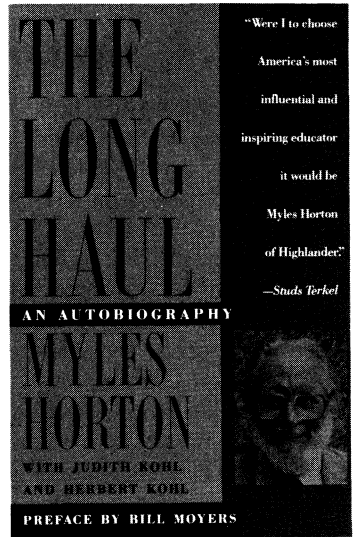
There are also similarities between the type of people who attend Highlander and those who take on leadership roles in their unions as stewards or volunteer member organizers. Horton describes them as community/union members who are sought out

by their neighbors or co-workers for advice and participation. They keep up peoples' spirits during organizing, are willing to take risks, and are dedicated to bringing along others. "Multiplying leadership" is Horton's term for developing leadership at the grass roots.

Horton also provides a historical perspective for today's organizers. Informed by nearly 60 years in the struggle for social change, he sees that social movements are similar to "valleys and peaks." The valleys are organizational periods where goals are short-term and limited. The peaks are when people are mobilized, directed, taking action, and taking risks—in other words, the social movement. Horton describes it:

"It is only in a movement that an idea is often made simple enough and direct enough that it can spread rapidly. Then your leadership multiplies very rapidly, because there's something explosive going on. People see that other people not so different from themselves do things that they thought could never be done. They're emboldened and challenged by that to step into the water, and once they get in the water, it's as if they've never not been there."

While we read about the history of U.S. labor or analyses on economic trends or how we got here, or even stories of the most innovative and challenging strategies being used by unions, we also need to hear the voices of past organizers. And Myles Horton's voice is one of the richest around. "There's much to learn from how things get started," Myles Horton writes. "You can't cut off the top of a tree and stick it in the ground somewhere and make it grow—you have to know about the roots." *The Long Haul* offers some roots to today's organizers and reminds us: organizing isn't easy, but it is the only way.



—Lisa Oppenheim