

A Tribute to Bill Watkins

William "Bill" Watkins (19 October, 1946 – 5 August, 2014)

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"When a friend departs/what remains is an empty space/that can't be filled/by the arrival of another friend." — Alberto Cortez, "Cuando un amigo se va", Equipaje. Ed. Pomaire, 1977, pg. 124

Son of a protestant pastor, Watkins graduated from Los Angeles high school, city college and California State-Los Angeles (Political Science: 1970), receiving a Master's (Education: 1979) and Doctorate degree (Public Policy Analysis/Education: 1986) from University of Illinois-Chicago to which he returned (after a 1986-1995 posting, at the University of Utah). While teaching in the Curriculum and Instruction section of the College of Education for twenty years, and becoming full professor (2003), Watkins wrote *Race and education*, (2001), *The white architects of Black education* (2001), *Black protest, thought and education* (2005), and *The assault on public education: Confronting the politics of corporate school reform* (2011) as well as articles in the *Harvard Educational Review* and *Western Journal of Black Studies*.

As a Cal-State Los Angeles student in the 1960s, Watkins was among the radical group of Black students, influenced by Nelson Peery, organizing the Communist League [CL] in Watts during 1968, publishing *The People's Tribune*, emphasizing both the centrality of class racialization and the application of Marxist social theory to the concrete conditions of North America (1). With a group of ex-SDS militants in California, segments of both a Detroit League of Revolutionary Black Workers [LRBW] 1971 split (2) and another from Motor City Labor League, as well as "La Colectiva del Pueblo" of Mexican radicals in California who also joined the CL, the latter became the Communist Labor Party [CLP] in 1974. This new multi-racial organization emphasized the relation between class, colonialism and imperialism in a liberation strategy for all workers.

In 1974 Watkins was East Coast coordinator of the CLP meeting regularly with cultural nationalists like Amiri Baraka (from the Congress of African Peoples, CAP) who were trying to understand racialized exploitation, as well as the limitations of electoral politics and black politicians answering to small merchants and production/service managers. Two years later, in 1976 the CAP became the Revolutionary Communist League.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Communist Labor Party [CLP] continued to emphasize education and comprehensive explanations of the world situation, which included the permanent replacement of manual workers by robotics and information technologies. As of 1993 the CLP became the League for a New America [LRNA] with main offices in Chicago, proposing alternatives to permanent unemployment

and impoverishment, while continuing to struggle against exploitation and authoritarian exclusion of the majority from all decision making.

In 1995 Watkins returned to University of Illinois- Chicago distinguishing himself as an internationalist scholar-activist [in *Sociology of Education*, *Politics of the Curriculum (in Africa)*, *Contributions of Black Americans to Curriculum Thought*, *Epistemology*, and *Foundations of Social Studies Education*], and as a public intellectual who participated in a) commemorations of workers' triumphs in Asia, Africa and Latin America, b) support for the Caucus of Rank & File Educators [CORE] leading the Chicago school teachers union [CTU] since 2010, c) the *People's Tribune* network, d) union local 6456 of the AAUP/AFT/AFL-CIO at University of Illinois-Chicago, and e) the campaign to replace the current mayor of Chicago's 1%. In the neo-liberal era of public higher education as for profit knowledge factories, debt peonage of students, militarized research calendar/curriculum, exploitation of disposable athletes, administrative bloat and the recurring attack on academic freedom, it is important to remember those, like Watkins, who nurture(d) spaces not controlled by the State or financial capital (3). It is in those spaces where students, faculty and staff not only teach each other democratic decision making supported by evidence produced with those to whom public intellectuals are accountable, but also organize direct actions that verify abstract conclusions and rehearse the creation of alternatives premised on solidarity.

Death only scares those intellectuals anxious about their immortality and terrified about the ultra-terrestrial nothingness that their logic presents (4). People who show up to struggle once are good, people who show up for a semester are better, but the ones who are necessary are those who show up all the time. Bill was one of those who was necessary because he showed up every day. He died all of a sudden like soldiers in battle, against those who betray working people. While we follow his example – making the road less travelled, teaching others to follow the star we have chosen – our friend will continue to live, because like Antonio Maceo in Cuba or Elma Francois In Trinidad, Watkins is one of those dead who never dies as long as there are those among us who know who we are, what side of the fence we are on, and exemplify what we can be.

End Notes

1) Kelley, R. (2002). *Freedom dreams. The Black radical imagination* (pp. 103-104). Boston: Beacon Press

2) Georgakas, D. & Surkin, M. (1999). *Detroit I do mind dying: A study in urban revolution* (p. 164). Boston: South End Press. 1st edition 1975, 3rd Edition 2012

3) Wolf, S. (2014, Spring). *Why the faculty fell?* *International Socialist Review*, Issue 92, pp. 142-145; Newfield, C. (2008). *Unmaking the public university*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P.; Bailey, M. & Freedman, D. (Eds.). (2011). *The assault on universities. A manifesto for resistance*. London: Pluto Press; Schrecker, E. W. (1986). *No ivory tower. McCarthyism & the universities*. NY" Oxford U.P.;

Tuchman, G. (2009). Wannabe U. Inside the corporate university. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

4) Unamuno, M. de (1980). El caballero de la triste figura. Madrid: Espasa Calpe. 1st Edition 1951.