Tim Costello: Worker-Intellectual

(Born: June 13, 1945, Died: December 4, 2009)

An appreciation by Jeremy Brecher

It's not every day that anyone connected with the American labor movement, let alone someone who has never held a high leadership position, is even mentioned in the *New York Times*. But the day after Christmas, 2009, the *Times* gave a full length feature obituary to Tim Costello, who it described as "a truck driver who became a labor advocate and theorist, the co-author of four books and the founder of an organization that fought globalization." It added:

> Mr. Costello was hailed by many academics and labor advocates as a bona fide worker-intellectual. A genial, mustached native of Boston, he drove fuel-delivery trucks, worked as a lobsterman, founded a group that battled against the fast-growing use of temporary workers and developed close links with labor advocates in China, Italy and Mexico.

[For the rest of the *Times* article, memories and reflections about Tim from people all around the world, and listings and samples of Tim's writing, see http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_ labor_strategies/in-memory-of-gls-founder-tim-costello/]

I first met Tim Costello in New York around 1969. A small group of us were holding meetings to start the magazine *Root & Branch*. Most of us had been influenced in one way or another by Paul Mattick, a German-born machinist and writer who for many decades had been the leading voice of Council Communism in the US. Tim used to show up occasionally at the meetings and kind of hover around the fringes of the group.

Tim seemed like something of a mystery. We knew that he was a truck driver, that he drove a fuel oil truck, and that he worked an incredible number of hours, often twelve to fourteen a day six or seven days a week. Usually he was pretty quiet, but occasionally he would regale us with stories about the drivers' class struggle on the job. He told us how they would steal time, often hours each day. This required cooperation among drivers to establish their own work rates for the various jobs. Tim stole his share: He set up an office in the back of his truck and spent several hours of each working day reading and writing.

You can get a sense of Tim's approach in those days from an article he wrote for *Root and Branch* under the name "Mac Brockway" called "Keep on Truckin'." It provided a detailed account of informal resistance on the job at a fuel oil company. It described a threatened work stoppage that forced the rehiring of two fired militants (one of them, one might guess, the article's author). His approach had a big influence on me; I was working on a book called *Strike!* about mass strikes in the United States, and from Tim I got a sense of informal worker self-organization on the job that I presented as the force underlying great upheavals.

At that time there was almost an apartheid wall between America's radical students and the American working class; Tim seemed to be something that we just didn't know: a real-life, in-the-flesh, worker-intellectual.

Tim had participated in, but also maintained an ironic detachment from, the radical student movements of the late 1960s. In the last couple of years before the demise of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), working class opinion turned against the Vietnam war, and kids at working class high schools and colleges began forming SDS chapters, often with little or no contact with the divided and tottering national organization. Tim connected with them and somehow ended up at the last SDS convention in Chicago in 1969.

As the group that would later became Weatherman prepared to march out of the convention, Bernadine Dohrn called together their faction in one part of the hall. As Tim told the story, she announced, "Everyone should assemble here who supports the black liberation struggle, the Black Panther Party, the right of national liberation, the North Vietnamese, and the Vietcong." At that point Tim and his friends began shouting, "Enver Hoxha! You forgot Enver Hoxha!" (Hoxha was the Communist leader of Albania, who had managed to quarrel first with the Yugoslavs, then with the Soviets, and finally with the Chinese, and who claimed to lead the only true Communist state). Bernadine obligingly added, "and Enver Hoxha!" to her litany. I think Tim was flabbergasted anew every time he told the story.

Tim and I both landed in Boston at the same time, crashing in the living room of Paul Mattick, Jr., son and chief interpreter of Paul Mattick. We both needed a place to live. We decided to look together and ended up renting a railroad apartment in Summerville. He told me later that Somerville then was regarded as a very bad place by respectable working class Bostonians, a place where you might end up with a corpse on your door in the morning. (It had recently had some politico-gangland slayings.) His aunt had told him, "Tim, you don't have to live in Somerville, I'll give you some money."

Tim went to work delivering oil for Metropolitan Petroleum and continued to hover around the edges of *Root & Branch*. I remember Paul Mattick asking, "Does he read?" and Paul Jr. recalling to his father that when they had all been discussing the longevity of dogs, Tim had pointed out that the dogs in the *Odyssey* had lived for 24 years – so at least he had read the *Odyssey*.

I gradually learned more about Tim's background. His family came from Ireland and Scotland via the Canadian Maritimes and was about as mainstream Boston working class as you could find. His father had been a railroad worker and head of his local union for 30 years. As a child, Tim had laboriously typed the local's correspondence on his father's manual typewriter. When his father was laid off and went to work as a construction laborer, Tim had worked beside him "playing the banjo." (He had to explain to me that this meant digging with a shovel.) Tim says that his father "preached unionism," but that he always saw "the union" less as an institution than as an activity that you engaged in.

I felt I was finally beginning to understand Tim when he mentioned that his father had wanted him to become a lawyer. I waited for the conventional next line: "So you won't have to be a working stiff like your old man." Instead it was: "So you can get the

bastards." (Tim's daughter Gilly became a labor lawyer, although, when I told her this story, she swore she knew nothing about it.)

Tim's father had died when Tim was in his early twenties. My mother had died when I was about the same age, and I think it was always an unspoken bond between us, or at least gave us a certain common understanding.

Tim's lifelong commitment was not to any political ideology, but rather an identification with people who have to get up in the morning and go to work just to survive. As it happens, that fitted perfectly with Marx' description of "those who have nothing to sell but their labor power." I think this identification was so unshakable for Tim because it was rooted in loyalty to the working class roots of his family and especially to the memory of his father.

Tim went to Goddard College, where he studied political philosophy and Marx' Capital, among other things. He found it less than satisfying and dropped out. But he always continued to study. He had a strong bent for philosophy. He loved Herbert Marcuse, especially *Reason and Revolution*. Whenever we got down to fundamental questions about why some approach was good or bad, he would quote Aristotle: "The virtue of a thing is its use."

Tim didn't have much use for conventional conceptions of leadership. He believed in the capacity of ordinary people to act on their own behalf. He thought of social change in terms of an on-going effort by working people to understand and affect their world. He saw his own efforts to spread information and understanding as just one more contribution to that process.

Tim's favorite formulation was Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of "the series" and "the group" from the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. He used to say that all he did all day in on the job and in the bars was explain to people about the series and the group.

The series, as Tim explained it, was represented by Sartre's famous account of a line of people waiting for a bus. They all relate to the bus, but they don't relate to each other except through the bus. The series is the normal condition of workers -- they relate to each other only through their relation to the boss.

But when people face a common threat or a common interest, they may form themselves into a group. Sartre's classic example was the action groups that formed in poor Paris neighborhoods at the start of the French Revolution. These initially formed as a response to the threat of military repression, but then decided to go on the offensive and storm the Bastille. Such a transformation from a series to a group lies at the core of what people need to do to achieve their own liberation.

Unfortunately, the group tends to develop leadership and structure that turns its members back into a series. Tim used this analysis to explain how unions that had been created as an expression of groups of workers had become instead bureaucracies that often blocked their members from acting on their own behalf. When that happened, workers had to turn themselves back from a series into a group, even if they had to do so against the opposition of their own recognized leaders.

Meanwhile, we were living in the midst of what we can in retrospect see was the mass strike of the early 1970s, spearheaded by rambunctious young workers. Indeed, the

revolt of young workers – symbolized by a big strike at the new Lordstown, Ohio, General Motors factory – was headline news. Tim and I decided to take a few months, travel around the country interviewing young workers, and write a book about their situation, experiences, and revolt.

When I met Tim he had already begun informally interviewing the people he worked with to find out how they thought about things. We had no training in interviewing or oral history when we went on the road, but Tim's practice stood us in good stead. Those techniques provided the starting point for the discussions we had with more than 100 people around the country about their lives, work, ideas, and observations. The result was *Common Sense for Hard Times*.

Tim and I wrote together for the next forty years. Collaborating with Tim was one of the most fun things I ever did in my life. Most of our work together took the form of talking. We would talk on the phone or, if we could get together, in the flesh – best of all on long walks. (If Tim couldn't go for a walk he would often pace around the room while he thought and talked.)

We used to take turns telling about something we had thought of, read, or observed. Even more often, one of us would pose the other a question – anything from "does a more complex division of labor make it harder for workers to envision workers' control of production?" to "why is public belief in global warming declining and what does it mean?"

Tim would often draw on his observations and informal interviews to address these questions. When we were working on *Common Sense for Hard Times*, we constantly discussed how workers could overcome all the divisions of immediate interest and background. One day Tim called to mind a discussion he had had with a worker who himself asked this question and then said, "The only way I can imagine people ever really getting together would be if everyone had the same beef." Bingo. We called the chapter where we quoted his rap "The Big Beef."

The process was highly dialogic. We – especially Tim – would play Devil's advocate, taking a contrary position to tease out the issues and problems with something that basically we both agreed on. This flexibility was highly supportive of creative thinking and coming up with new approaches. It grew out of Tim's often-noted ability to consider with detachment even something he cared deeply about.

A result was that each of us would often be forced to confront the complexity of an issue and recognize that it had more than one side. Tim and I rarely if ever had a political disagreement that lasted more than a week or two. Often we would return to a previous point of contention only to discover that each of us had reversed our position in the meantime!

When we were working on a piece of writing, we'd start with what needed to be said. Then we'd try to figure out how to say it in a way that would communicate to the kind of people we were writing for. I remember we were once using the word "milieu" and I asked Tim if it was a meaningful word for our audience; he thought for a moment and then said, "We'll make it a word." For the first few years I did almost all the writing, trying to capture the ideas and language we had worked out in our conversations; but

over time Tim came into his own, writing on his own and doing much more of the writing in our collaboration.

Tim worked off and on as a commercial lobsterman, often with his friend Larry Stepenuck in Rockport, Mass. He had always been a runner (he was a regional cross-country champion in high school) and he loved to run in the woods known as Dogtown that filled the interior of Cape Ann. When a developer came up with a proposal for a major project in Dogtown, claiming it would create jobs, Tim and Larry began organizing fishermen and other workers to oppose the development. They and a number of allies formed the organization Save Open Spaces (SOS). Their big problem was that, although local working people tended to be skeptical about the proposed development, they also tended to be antagonistic toward well-off environmentalists. So Tim and Larry began inventing a new kind of "proletarian environmentalism." They demanded to know not only how many but also what kind of jobs the developments would create, and made an issue of the fact that they would be low-paid, low-skilled, and often short-term. They organized by talking up this issue in the fishermen's bars in the area, then turning out their constituency as needed for public hearings. Their slogan was, "Keep Cape Ann a place where you can be poor with dignity."

Lobstering gave Tim a useful metaphor. He used to say, "If you want to catch a lobster, you have to learn to think like a lobster." His drive to understand how people think, the way they frame questions, and the language they use was one of his strongest characteristics. Whether he was writing, organizing, or fundraising, he was always trying to figure out how to "think like a lobster."

While reading up for *Common Sense for Hard Times*, Tim and I discovered the concept of family and community networks in Michael Young and Peter Willmott's book *Family and Kinship in East London*. We began applying the idea of networks to the structures of working class life, and to present them as an alternative to more hierarchical forms of organization. Many of the labor-community coalitions we wrote about in *Building Bridges* took the form of networks, and in *Globalization from Below* Tim elaborated the idea with elements taken from *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink. The way Tim used the network form for organizations he helped to found like Save Open Spaces, the North American Federation for Fair Employment, and Global Labor Strategies, represents some of his most creative contributions, and opens the way for social action that is highly organized without being hierarchical.

Tim was always fascinated by the realities of work and working life in other countries.

During his brief stint in college he went to Puerto Rico, lived with a rural family, and wrote it up for school. When he married a Danish woman and spent several months with her in Denmark, he willingly took a job on a construction crew with guest workers from Eastern Europe and, as usual, interviewed those he worked with about their job experiences.

During the 1980s, Tim and I began noticing the early effects of what has come to be known as economic globalization. We saw the power of American workers being undermined as corporations increasingly threatened to move their operations abroad. As we tried to figure out how workers could respond, Tim conducted an extensive

research project on labor movement organization and collective bargaining practices in other economically developed countries. He concluded that the systems were so different that international labor cooperation was unlikely to take the form of joint collective bargaining. Then he began studying the attempts to develop international labor standards and solidarity within the EU.

Tim and I eventually collaborated on two books about economic globalization. The first, *Global Village or Global Pillage*, focused on globalization itself. The second, *Globalization from Below*, focused on the emergence of transnational social movements embodying what we called "globalization from below." Much of our strategic perspective grew out of Tim's earlier work on comparative industrial relations.

During a brief stint working for Congressman Bernie Sanders, I had worked closely on globalization issues with a young staffer named Brendan Smith. Brendan began working with Tim and me, co-authoring *Globalization from Below*. He started working with Tim in North American Federation for Fair Employment (NAFFE). He was part of the team from the start of Global Labor Strategies, and travelled with Tim to China, Europe, and Latin America. He developed his own partnership with Tim, as well as functioning as the third of the "Three Musketeers."

Tim knew the importance of job security from the repeated unemployment in his own family. The 1980s saw the start of a change in American working class that shifted the majority of workers from relatively secure job structures and thrust them into a semi-casualized, "contingent," labor market. Tim saw the erosion of "steady work" as a transforming force in working class life. In the early 1990s he began trying to figure out how to make it the focus of an organizing campaign. In 1996 he started the Massachusetts Campaign on Contingent Work which helped give birth to the NAFFE.

During the eight years that Tim headed NAFFE (1997-2005), it acquired more than 60 member groups, ranging from an AFL-CIO department to local organizations of immigrant day laborers and including members in Mexico and Canada. It had spawned several overlapping networks, including the major organization of academic contingent workers. It had provided information and support for its members and also organized campaigns of its own. It had conducted negotiations with one of the largest global temp staffing agencies. It was recognized by the media as the primary representative of contingent workers. It had helped to reframe the way contingent work is seen locally and nationally.

Meanwhile, Tim watched in frustration as workers around the world were played off against each other in what we called a "race to the bottom." Many in the labor movement became concerned about globalization, but the barriers to real global labor cooperation seemed very difficult to overcome. Tim came up with the idea of creating a bridge-building organization whose specific purpose was to encourage cooperation among unions and their allies across national borders. He asked Brendan Smith and me, along with a Latin America labor and environmental organizer named Claudia Torrelli, to work with him on what we dubbed Global Labor Strategies.

One morning in 2006 I got an email from Tim with a news article from the *South China Morning Post* about a new labor law the Chinese government was proposing. The article began, "Plans for a new law regulating employment contracts have sparked

protests from foreign companies concerned it will put more power into the hands of the government-backed trade union." It went on to say that "foreign companies have already started lobbying" the National People's Congress against the law.

The Chinese labor legislation, let alone the corporate efforts to oppose it, had barely been mentioned in the U.S. press. Tim, Brendan, and I immediately sensed an opportunity to tell a new story about China. We launched into a crash investigation of the proposed law. A friend leaked us a 42-page document submitted to the Chinese government by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai (AmCham) demanding changes in the draft legislation. Based on this and other sources, GLS produced a report titled *Behind the Great Wall of China: U.S. Corporations Opposing New Rights for Chinese Workers. Opposition may harm workers in the US and other countries.*[1]

Tim and Brendan developed a media strategy around the report and managed to interest David Barbosa, the New York Times reporter in Shanghai, resulting in a front page article in the Times based on our report. Meanwhile, Brendan and Tim organized an international campaign against what was increasingly seen as a corporate scandal. International trade union organizations condemned the corporate lobbying. Human rights groups polled global corporations on their actions regarding the law and posted the results on the web. Brendan mobilized the leaders of the Progressive Caucus in Congress to issue a statement and draft legislation criticizing corporate influence. The report was translated into Chinese and Spanish and widely circulated on the web.

This campaign had a significant impact. Nike issued a statement dissociating itself from the AmCham lobbying. Under pressure from the European labor movement, the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China issued a "clarification" giving the legislation a hearty endorsement and claiming – notwithstanding its previous statements -- that it had never opposed the law.

Tim felt that of all the things he had done in his life, this effort to support Chinese workers had perhaps done the most to improve the lives – and increase the power – of ordinary people. Professor Liu Cheng of Shanghai Normal University, who drafted the law, wrote after Tim's death, "I will never forget his contribution to Chinese Labor Contract Law. He is a friend of Chinese working people. The Chinese labor legislation is the turning point from deregulation to reregulation. So Mr. Costello's work is also a worldwide contribution. Working people of the world shall remember him forever."

Friends of Tim who spoke or corresponded with him during his final illness were sometimes surprised when he said or wrote things like, "If you can take it with a Zen attitude it's not so bad, and so far I've been able to do that."

In one of our early conversations, for some reason the subject of Zen Buddhism came up. It turned out that Tim had read quite a bit about it and we found we both had taken a lot from Zen. Tim was in no way into it (or anything else) as a religion, however. In fact, he described to me a group of Zen fisherman he had read about who declined to become monks, or even consider themselves practitioners of Zen, because they believed the most Zen thing would be to just be fishermen and not be Zen at all.

[1] http://laborstrategies.blogs.com/global_labor_strategies/files/behind_the_great_wall_of_china.pdf

Many people have noted how committed Tim was to his political values, and yet also noted his detachment. That was Tim's Zen aspect. Tim and I would often sum something up in an ersatz koan, like, "Take yourself seriously; but don't take yourself seriously."

When we were working on *Building Bridges*, I suggested that we dedicate it to the memory of our respective parents. Tim was extremely unsentimental, and I wasn't sure he would go for the idea. He paused for a moment and then said, "Yes. People's names should be remembered."

There is little danger that anyone who knew him will forget Tim's.

About the author

Jeremy Brecher, writer and historian, was born and lives in the United States. He has been active in peace, labor, environmental, and other social movements for more than half a century. He is the author of more than a dozen books on labor and social movements and has received five regional Emmy Awards for his documentary film work. He is currently writing about labor and the environment, US war crimes in Iraq and beyond, and responses to the global economic crisis. His next book, *Common preservation in an era of mutual destruction,* presents what he has learned over the past half century about how social movements make social change.