



Gene Bruskin Papers

1963-2018

6 boxes, posters (8 linear feet)

Call no.: MS1020

Collection overview

Gene Bruskin arrived at Princeton in 1964 as a basketball player and left as a political radical. After taking part in the Second Venceremos Brigade, Bruskin got involved in antiracist and labor organizing in Boston. As president of the United Steelworkers of America local during the busing crisis of the 1970s, he helped win overwhelming support among the city's bus drivers to have the union represent them, leading successful campaigns for better wages and working conditions. In the years since, he has held numerous high-profile positions nationally and internationally, including as labor director for Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, Secretary Treasurer for the Food and Allied Service Trades Department of the AFL-CIO, and co-convenor of U.S. Labor Against the War, an organization promoting peace and the demilitarization of U.S. foreign policy. Bruskin was a major figure in the largest private union election in the history of the United Food and Commercial Workers when he led the successful campaign to unionize 5,000 workers at Smithfield Foods in North Carolina. Since retiring in 2012, he has continued to consult with unions. In addition he has returned to some of his earlier undertakings in producing cultural works as a poet, songwriter, and playwright, centered on social justice and working class themes.

Documenting nearly fifty years of activism, Gene Bruskin's papers are an exceptional resource for the labor movement in the 1970s through early 2000s, and particularly its radical end. Although Bruskin's early years are relatively sparsely represented, there is a significant run of *Brother*, the first anti-sexist, "male liberation" journal that he helped found while in Oakland, and the collection includes important material from his work in Boston with the Hyde Park Defense Committee, the Red Basement Singers, and especially with the School Bus Drivers and their tumultuous three-week strike in 1980. The collection also contains a rich assortment of material on labor left and antiwar organizing in the 1990s and 2000s, the Justice at Smithfield campaign, and Bruskin's work on behalf of single payer insurance, for International Solidarity, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees.

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Background

Autobiography, by Gene Bruskin

I was born into a Jewish working class family in South Philadelphia in 1946. My father had just come back from

several years in the infantry in Europe during WWII. He had been active as a high school Communist Party cell leader in the 1930s in Philadelphia but grew disillusioned with the Party. He became a TV repairman in the late 1940s when televisions were novelties and remained one until he died at the early age of 61 in 1977. I have an older and a younger sister. My mom raised the children and made the home work.



Gene Bruskin

My mother's family had emigrated from Rumania to Philadelphia by way of Montreal around 1925. My father's parents fled a pogrom in Vitebsk, in the Jewish Pale of settlement near Minsk, Byelorussia, around 1906, and somehow reached Philadelphia. Story has it that my great grandparents -- hat makers for the Cossacks -- were thrown down a well by the Cossacks in a pogrom. My grandparents opened up a small store, Bruskin's Hardware, on the corner of Fifth and Porter Streets in South Philadelphia, which is still operated by my cousin Irv, who lives above the store where our parents and grandparents once lived. My mother's family ran a small upholstery store in Philadelphia until the Second World War. Growing up, my family lived a few blocks away from the hardware store in South Philadelphia on a street that was Jewish on one half and Catholic on the other. We all got along . My family was loving, but in its own way fairly dysfunctional; my mother suffered from serious mental illness at a time when there were few good treatment options.

In 1954, hoping for better schools, we moved to Upper Darby, a white almost entirely Christian suburb, where we stayed until I graduated high school. While I got good grades, my obsession was basketball. In my junior year, our team lost in final rounds for the state championship, and with good fortune I received scholarship offers to a number of colleges, ending up at Princeton in 1964, which was at its height as a national basketball power led by Bill Bradley.

By my junior year of college, I stopped playing basketball due largely to injuries, and became engulfed in the cultural and radical political and antiwar movements sweeping college campuses. Upon graduation I was able to get a teaching job at a South Bronx elementary school which, ironically, gave me a draft deferment, presumably under the logic that it was riskier to teach there than to go to war. I was married to Meredith Means and we moved to Washington Heights in Manhattan.

After College

My first day teaching in September 1968 was the opening day of the citywide strike by the teachers union (AFT/UFT) against the community forces exercising local control, led by community leaders in Ocean Hill Brownsville, Brooklyn. This was the first of three strikes, and I wholeheartedly supported the first two. By the third and longest strike, I became convinced that the largely Jewish teachers union was working against the interests of the mostly Black and Latino communities. I became part of a small effort by a group of experienced

teachers to bring the community across the picket lines and open the school. For several weeks, I taught under these conditions. Ironically crossing a picket line was part of my first union experience. The conflict seriously injured the historic Jewish-Black coalition that for decades had played an important role in New York City and that represented the Jewish tradition with which I most closely identified.

Teaching in the South Bronx was a radicalizing experience for me. For the first time I witnessed the impact of deep institutionalized poverty on poor Black and brown children. After eighteen months, with the encouragement of my good friend Jeff Perry, I left, feeling that the systemic discrimination was so deep that I, as a young untrained teacher, could not help the kids in that context and in fact was becoming part of the oppressive system. In one instance, for example, I took an exasperated, and regrettable, swat at one of my favorite fourth graders who would not stop disrupting, only to find out from another student that his father had killed his mother that morning, and that they sent him to school, not knowing what else to do with him. I had to get out.

Again with Perry's encouragement, my wife, Meredith, and I took part in the second Venceremos Brigade to Cuba in February 1970, along with 800 other mostly young Americans. We were breaking the U.S. blockade of Cuba and spent six weeks cutting sugar cane (incredibly difficult) and two weeks crisscrossing the country. We met Fidel Castro and cut cane with revolutionary delegations from all over the world: the Tupamaros from Uruguay, the Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola, the National Liberation Front from South Vietnam and others. It was a profound lesson on international solidarity and a transformative experience for me.

Following the Brigade in June 1970 we moved to Springfield, Mass., with a group of Brigadistas and joined with local activists to attempt to create a community-based radical movement. We reached out to local working class youth, created a women's center that helped women get what were then illegal abortions, supported the Black Panther Party, marched against the war, provided draft counselling for local youth and started a food coop. The group dispersed a year later in internal confusion over the dramatically emerging women's and gay liberation movements.

Boston

After a year in Oakland, California, my wife and I moved to Boston in 1972 where I lived for eighteen years. We ended our marriage there, but remain friends. During those years I held a series of part-time jobs, including as a day care worker at a year round after school center for poor white kids north of Boston. There we organized a union (short-lived) and I met Evie Frankl, who eventually became my wife and life partner.

I remained politically active. Around 1973, I helped found the Red Basement Singers, a song group that performed at left/progressive events, on picket lines, at rallies and even on the Boston T. We sang a range of pro-union, antiwar, labor, and international songs. This was the first initiative for me in countering the lack of a political culture for many U.S. left and progressive movements, particularly in the labor movement, with the civil rights and the women's movements being notable exceptions.

In 1975, my friend David Wood and I wrote and produced a musical, *The Stolen Bicycle Blues*. Both David and I grew up in families that loved musicals, but we had no real musical or theatrical experience. We gathered the friends and the talent to create the show and performed at community events and at youth centers. The play was eventually turned into a radio show with the help of host Danny Schechter, and it aired on WBAI and other radio stations. The play was based on a true story of a bike being stolen from a friend in downtown Boston and the chase and capture of a young white working class kid from Southie that followed. The theme of the play was about theft and class in the United States.

During this period a federal judge ordered the desegregation of Boston's highly segregated school system, a ruling that came after decades of attempts by the African American community to get the School Committee to develop an effective desegregation plan. This set off a fierce and violent reaction from the white communities where African American children were being bused to, while many white students were bused to African American neighborhoods. These developments profoundly shaped my experience during the 70s.

One result was that African American families who dared to move out of their confined geographies and into mostly white neighborhoods often faced intense violence. I became active in creating a group called the Hyde Park Defense Committee. This group kept a 24 hour a day vigil for a year at the home of Susan Page and her family in the Hyde Park neighborhood, to prevent harassment by the white neighborhood youth and their parents. Eventually those in the neighborhood who most violently objected moved and Susan and her family stayed.

In 1977, after spending a summer interning with the legendary San Francisco Mime Troupe, David Wood and I wrote a play called *It's Not the Bus* which was based on a story of a black family facing violence when they moved into a white neighborhood. We created an integrated collective to workshop and develop the play. Unfortunately, the play had a very short run, in part because of the difficulty of Black and white folks working together in the midst of so much tension around racism in Boston, and in part due to other tensions within the collective.

In January 1977, both Evie and I took jobs as Boston school bus drivers, jobs created due to the desegregation bussing, in a move that was to change my life. My motivation in choosing the job was that the hours included long morning breaks while the kids were in school, during which I thought I could do writing and other theater work. That September, however, the two privately contracted busing companies cut the drivers' pay by 88 cents per hour, down to \$5.89 an hour, without benefits or guaranteed hours. I became intimately involved in an organizing drive for the 200 plus drivers, and in December, we held the first of a series of strikes to bring the union in and get a contract. I was one of the two people arrested for striking against an injunction. We won the election and I became president of one of the two locals formed with the United Steelworkers of America. During my ten years there, we built a powerful multi-racial union that included strong women's leadership, including gay women. We won a number of strikes, many people went to jail, and the local became a model for militant, democratic, community-oriented trade unions in the city. The strong ties between Black and white workers we built in the midst of the stark divisions within the city created a model for me that inspired my

union work for the next forty years. By 2018 the more than 600 Boston school bus drivers, mostly Haitian, made well over \$25 an hour with benefits.

In Boston during the 1970s there was great ferment among many on the left who had emerged from the civil rights, antiwar, and women's movements. Many leftists went to work in the industrial and medical workplaces in the city and either organized unions or became active in reforming them. In many cases, they took over union locals, activating what had been a cautious and conservative labor movement in the area. There were intense debates and study circles among leftists attempting to build Marxist Leninist organizations that had a broad revolutionary vision, linked to the revolutionary upsurge that was happening around the world, particularly in third world countries. Eventually most of these groups folded as people matured and cultivated deeper roots in the working class, even while maintaining a strong anti-capitalist perspective.

I became active in City Life/Vita Urbana, a socialist-oriented organization based in Jamaica Plain that focused on housing, and I helped create a workplace committee among City Life labor activists who produced a city wide paper for unions called *The Labor Page*. City Life still exists and is more vibrant and relevant than ever in Boston.

In the late seventies, at the urging of my partner Evie Frankl, I became involved in Re-evaluation Counseling, also known as Co-Counseling. The organization was founded on peer-based methods of mutual support to help people deal with the many emotional effects that come from various forms of hurts and oppressions we all experience (as a child, woman, African American, etc.) in Capitalist society. Co-counseling has been a tremendous aid for me throughout my life in dealing with the many discouragements and difficult moments that come with organizing and life in general, including understanding those of people I am working with or trying to organize.

With an increasingly activated labor movement in the 1980s, we developed a multi union labor community organization called the Massachusetts Labor Support Project (MLSP). The MLSP created militant picket lines for strikes and organizing efforts, held cultural events and hosted visits from international trade unionists. In many ways, this was the precursor for the national organization Jobs With Justice that developed later in the decade.

In 1986 I left the bus driver's union, partly because of back trouble aggravated by the driving and because both Evie and I were ready for a change after ten years as bus drivers. In 1987, I was hired by the small Laundry and Dry Cleaners International Union (AFL-CIO) Local 66 as their only organizer in the Massachusetts region. I organized a small chemical company in Chelsea as well as the biggest industrial laundry in Boston, Hospital Laundries, which was owned by a consortium of Harvard hospitals. The diverse immigrant and Black workforce there made the organizing a major challenge and learning experience for me.

My experience in the Boston left labor movement was tied to solidarity with international labor movements including visits to the Philippines and Mexico, and solidarity in the anti-apartheid movement and the

Salvadoran, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Nicaraguan struggles. International solidarity work, with a labor focus, continued to be integrated with my work, including visits to the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel, and building US labor opposition to the Gulf war among DC based local unions, DC Labor for Peace.

Washington DC and the National Stage

Evie and I moved to Washington, D.C., in 1990 along with my friend Bill Fletcher and his wife Candace, to work for a newly elected African American leadership in the National Postal Mailhandlers Union, a division of the Laborers International Union of America (LIUNA). During this one-year stint, I served as the National Field Director for their postal contract campaign and Bill was assistant to the President. This was my first experience with a national union and the culture of international labor unions based in Washington. Evie and I decided to stay in DC. Both my sisters and their families lived in the area and my mother was in a nursing home nearby in Baltimore. Evie became a teacher in the D.C. public schools. I was hired as a community outreach coordinator for an eighteen-month stint with the D.C.-based initiative of the national Justice for Janitors Campaign, SEIU Local 500. At this point Justice for Janitors was developing as a militant organizing model for labor to fight back against the anti-union restructuring of many formerly unionized industries.

In June 1992 I was hired by Reverend Jesse Jackson to assist in mobilizing African American and labor voters for the national and state elections that year. I remained as Jackson's labor deputy after the elections until 1994, charged with building labor support for the National Rainbow Coalition, at that point based in Washington, DC. Working closely with Reverend Jackson and the Rainbow was an eye-opening and challenging role and gave me an opportunity to develop a national network of progressive trade unionist connections. I left the Rainbow after adopting Nadja (Anastasia) from a Russian orphanage in January 1994: truly a transformational moment for me and Evie, and one of the great continuing joys of my life.

After leaving the Rainbow I was hired by the Food and Allied Service Trades (FAST), a trades department of the AFL-CIO. I worked for Jeff Fiedler at FAST, a major influence on my development as an organizer and campaigner. FAST and Jeff were a significant influence on the development of Comprehensive/Strategic Campaigns in which unions began using many points of leverage against major corporations in contracts and organizing fights starting in the 1980s, to combat the aggressive anti-unionism that was flourishing. My initial campaign was a coordinated effort between SEIU and UFCW to organize the massive national nursing home chain, Beverly Enterprises. I subsequently became the Secretary Treasurer of FAST and organized hotel workers in Hilton Head, S.C., nurses for the AFT in various locations, laundry workers, and more. Eventually FAST, then Research Associates of America, lent me to the UFCW in 2006 to run the Justice@Smithfield campaign. During the early years of the 21st century I participated in a number of gatherings of left trade unionists from across the country to consider strategies to move the labor movement to the left.

While at FAST, Bob Muehlenkamp and I initiated the founding of U.S. Labor Against the War (USLAW) to oppose the anticipated invasion of Iraq. The USLAW coalition was formed in a Chicago Teamster union hall in January 2003. It became a bottom-up national organization that created an unprecedented movement of unions against a major military invasion by our country, and it eventually persuaded the AFL-CIO to pass a resolution

drafted by USLAW. USLAW developed close ties of solidarity with Iraqi unions and continues to this day, having just returned (May 2018) from sending a delegation of U.S. trade unionists to South Korea.

In January 2006 I began working with the UFCW around the massive slaughterhouse owned by Smithfield Foods in Tar Heel, N.C., which had been an organizing target since it was opened in 1991. The three years I worked on that campaign, resulting in a successful December 2008 election for 5000 workers, were in many ways a high point of my work in the labor movement. FAST and Jeff Fiedler played a major role in that struggle, at that point the biggest labor election victory in the 21st Century.

Following the Smithfield Campaign, I was by hired the American Federation of Teachers to create and direct a new Strategic Campaigns Department. The new department, which including some FAST researchers I brought with me, was charged with analyzing and developing strategies to combat the massive influx of private money and ideology into public education, particularly with Charter schools and vouchers. It included organizing the non-union charter industry and working with AFT Healthcare struggles, work that I continue to do to this day as a consultant. I retired from AFT in September 2012 at the age of 66.

Retirement

Since retirement (I called it Redeployment) I have continued as a consultant with the AFT on an extensive organizing effort focusing on the Los Angeles charter school market. Also, starting in 2013, Peter Olney and I were hired by the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way (BMWE/IBT) as consultants to create a national member-to-member internal organizing and communications network. Work on this network continues, although Peter and I play more of a supportive role, and represents an extensive transformation of member involvement within the BMWE and an integral part of their national railroad contract fight in 2017-2018.

When I retired, I returned to my interest in musical theater and spent several years writing the book and the music for and producing *Pray for the Dead, a Musical Tale of Morgues, Moguls and Mutiny*, a musical play directed at non-theater going working class and labor audiences. I received extensive help from Tom Smerling and Glenn Pearson with the music and Mike Thornton as the director. The play was produced for unions and community settings as a professionally done reading/musical in the summer of 2016 and was distributed nationally in a radio show format in 2016/2017. I am currently (2018) working on a musical/historical play that takes place in 1869 during the post-civil war period of Reconstruction where America almost did the right thing in terms of racial justice.

Through it all I have been a happy and very lucky father to Nadja and husband to Evie, relationships that grounded me and nourished me and made it possible for me to do all the work I have done in the rest of the world.

Scope of collection

Documenting nearly fifty years of activism, Gene Bruskin's papers are an exceptional resource for the labor movement in the 1970s through early 2000s, and particularly its radical end. Although Bruskin's early years

are relatively sparsely represented, there is a significant run of *Brother*, the first anti-sexist, "male liberation" journal that he helped found while in Oakland, and the collection includes important material from his work in Boston with the Hyde Park Defense Committee, the Red Basement Singers, and especially with the School Bus Drivers and their tumultuous three-week strike in 1980. The collection also contains a rich assortment of material on labor left and antiwar organizing in the 1990s and 2000s, the Justice at Smithfield campaign, and Bruskin's work on behalf of single payer insurance, for International Solidarity, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Labor activism

1964-2018

In 1977, Bruskin settled in Boston and was writing and working in radical politics when he took his first job with organized labor. For the next forty years, he held a succession of positions with a number of unions, as organizer, local officer, strategist, and campaigns director, among other things. Series 1 contains records of the full breadth of Bruskin's union activities, including his early days in Boston, labor/left linkages, his work in international solidarity, and work with laundry workers, health care workers, and Justice for Janitors.

Of particular importance in this series are rich materials for four initiatives, the Massachusetts Labor Support Project (MLSP), the Boston School Bus Drivers Union, U.S. Labor Against War (USLAW), and the Justice @ Smithfield campaign. Content for the MLSP and USLAW is relatively limited, but the former is highly innovative effort and militant organizing in Boston in the mid-1980s, while the latter is an important effort by organized labor to oppose war.

The Boston School Bus Drivers (United Steel Workers Local 8751) records cover the years between 1977 and 1986, Bruskin served as a bus driver, organizer, and union official. The materials offer an exhaustive record of union efforts during the tense years of the busing crisis in Boston, ranging from the initial organization and formation of two locals through a series of strikes and contract negotiations, and media coverage.

The Justice @ Smithfield Campaign materials are even more extensive, documenting a highly successful campaign to unionize the Smithfield Foods pork processing operations in North Carolina. The records include notes and communications, legal filings and despositions, media coverage, and some realia.

Series 2. Personal and political

1963-2016

Series 2 contains materials relating to Bruskin's personal life, education, and engagement in social justice and political causes other than the labor movement. Bruskin's radicalization during his college years can be seen in his transformation from a working class student playing basketball at Princeton to his time in the Springfield Collective in the early 1970s that established a People's Coop and printed an underground feminist newspaper. His formal political commitments appear through files accumulated while serving as labor deputy for Jesse Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition in the 1990s, and files from his support of Mel King's candidacy for Mayor of Boston.

Much of Bruskin's own creative output, often with a political focus, appears in the series, including his plays *It's Not the Bus* and *Stolen Bicycle Blues* and materials from the Red Basement Singers, a singing group that performed at left and progressive events. Bruskin was also involved in an important "underground" newspaper *Brother*, which may have been the first "men's liberation" publication.

Finally, the series includes an interesting assortment of Marxist and radical pamphlets collected by Bruskin and dozens of pinback buttons for political and labor causes, ranging from the anti-apartheid struggle and opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America to support for strikes and unions.

Series 3. City Life/Vida Urbana

1979-1991

City Life/ Vida Urbana was a Socialist-oriented organization that Bruskin became involved in during the 1970s and 1980s. Based in Jamaica Plain, City Life focused on issues in housing, and Bruskin was involved with other labor activists in the group in studying workplace issues. The series includes materials stemming from several of City Life's studies, and an extensive run of the newspaper they produced for unions, *The Labor Page*.

Inventory

Series 1. Labor activism

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<i>Provenance:</i> These documents relating to labor in the south were given to Bruskin by his friend James Tramel.		
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Meeting face to face: the Iraq-US Labor Solidarity Tour	2006	DVD	Box 6
Real price of the Iraq occupation, the War on Terror, and Military Spending, 3d ed.	2006	DVD	Box 6
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Baraka, Amiri: Crisis in Boston	ca.1974-1976		Box 1: 2
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 "Property of Local 8744. . . Liz Casey, took many of the photos, some by others."

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Gift of Gene Bruskin, April 2018.

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Search terms

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- Boston (Mass.)--History--20th century
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- Bus drivers--Massachusetts--Boston
- Busing for school integration--Massachusetts--Boston
- Jackson, Jesse, 1941-
- Labor unions--Massachusetts
- National Rainbow Coalition (U.S.)
- North American Free Trade Agreement (1992 December 17)
- Peace movements--Massachusetts
- Segregation--Massachusetts--Boston
- Smithfield Foods, Inc.
- Strikes and lockouts
- United Food and Commercial Workers International Union
- United Steelworkers of America. Local 8751

Contributors

- Bruskin, Gene **[main entry]**

Genres and formats

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