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Thomas Barton Papers

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In the early 1960s, Tom Barton (b. 1935) emerged as a leader in the Left-wing of the Young People's Socialist League, the national youth affiliate of the Socialist Party. Deeply committed to the civil rights and antiwar struggles and to revolutionary organizing, Barton operated in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York and was a delegate and National Secretary at the 1964 convention in which tensions within YPSL led to its dissolution.

A small, but rich collection, the Barton Papers provide a glimpse into the career of a long-time Socialist and activist. From Barton's entry into the Young People's Socialist League in the late 1950s through his work with the Wildcat group in the early 1970s, the collection contains outstanding content on the civil rights and antiwar movements and the strategies for radical organizing. The collection is particularly rich on two periods of Barton's career -- his time in the YPSL and Student Peace Union (1960-1964) and in the Wildcat group (1968-1971) -- and particularly for the events surrounding the dissolution of YPSL in 1964, following a heated debate over whether to support Lyndon Johnson for president. The collection includes correspondence with other young radicals such as Martin Oppenheimer, Lyndon Henry, Juan Mclver, and Joe Weiner.

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Background on Thomas Barton

A native of Indiana, Tom Barton (b. 1935) joined the Socialist Party (technically, the Socialist Party-Social Democratic Federation) in the late 1950s and its youth cadre, the Young People's Socialist League, one of the new generation of activists who reenergized the fractious Party and helped propel it into the struggle for civil rights and the peace movement. A third generation union activist, Barton's grandfather was a member of the International Workers of the World, an uncle helped form a UAW local in Wisconsin.

Affiliated with Student Peace Union, Barton traveled to Philadelphia in 1960 to help organize the peace movement in that city. His efforts soon bore fruit. Working with fellow Socialists Martin Oppenheimer (a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania) and Leo Kormis (a lab technician at Penn), he was influential in galvanizing local students to action, although their more orthodox Marxist perspectives sometimes sat uneasily with the New Left sensibilities of the Students for a Democratic Society and other groups. On the national stage, YPSL enjoyed considerable success in organizing the march for a nuclear test ban in Washington, D.C., in 1962, and they are credited with being the first left-oriented group to oppose U.S. military intervention in Vietnam.



YPSL logo

With the Chicago Branch of YPSL in 1963, Barton gained increasing prominence. As an editor of *Young Socialist Review* and through his involvement in national committees, he was selected as a delegate to represent the Branch at the national YPSL Convention in 1964. The membership during that summer was badly divided in the stance the organization should take with respect to the upcoming presidential election, and particularly whether to support the candidacy of Lyndon Johnson. While Shachtman and Michael Harrington argued that the Socialist Party should realign to work with the Democratic Party and push them to the left, Barton became one of the leaders in the Left-wing faction of YPSL (along with Bob Brown, Marge Green, Walt Lively, Joe Weiner, and David Komatsu) opposing the realignment and favoring building a mass labor party. At the Convention, where he was listed as National Secretary, Barton was at the center of dispute between the Realignment, Left-wing, Third camp, Spartacists, and other camps. The events came to a head after a resolution was passed to suspend Socialist Party discipline over YPSL until the Party prevented its leaders from supporting Johnson and the Realignment (Right-wing) faction walked out. Although the Left-wing never formally split from the Party, the Party responded by suspending YPSL. The Left-wing itself split into factions and YPSL itself dissolved. Although reconstituted two years later, it did not regain the vibrancy it enjoyed during the early 1960s.

During the latter half of the 1960s, Barton continued in the revolutionary vein and as an active participant in the antiwar movement. At one time East Coast distributor of the antiwar *Vietnam GI* -- assisting in sending issues to Vietnam -- he was part of

the Wildcat group that supported revolutionary organizing of the working class. Described by Barton's friend and fellow Wildcat Juan Mclver as surviving "in a no-man's land between leftism and communism," the Wildcat was rooted in Chicago, Baltimore, and New York, and published *Wildcat* (later renamed *The Spark*), *Wildcat Report* (for New York), and *Worker and Soldier*. In Detroit, they built on widespread alienation among Black auto workers, attempting to coordinate with radical organizations such as the Dodge Revolutionary Workers Movement, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and Detroit Revolutionary Organizing Committee. One worker at Chrysler's Eldon Ave. gear and axle plant regarded the Wildcat people as "Old Left" and "so secretive they had crossed over into paranoia." (<http://libcom.org/library/black-cats-white-cats-wildcats-martin-glaberman>).

Working in the health industry and a shop Steward with Local 768, Health Care Workers, AFSCME District Council 37, New York City, Barton has remained politically active. A member of the International Socialist Organization, he has taken part in anti-globalization protests in 2000 and has been active in opposition to the war and militarism, publishing *GI Special* (later *Military Resistance*) and *Traveling Soldier*. He assisted ex-Iraq GIs in organizing Iraq Veterans Against the War.

Scope of collection

A small, but rich collection, the Barton Papers provide a glimpse into the career of a long-time Socialist and activist. From Barton's entry into the Young People's Socialist League in the latest 1950s through his work with the Wildcat group in the early 1970s, the collection contains outstanding content on the civil rights and antiwar movements and the strategies for radical organizing. The collection is particularly rich on two periods of Barton's career -- his time in the YPSL and Student Peace Union (1960-1964) and in the Wildcat group (1968-1971) -- and particularly for the events surrounding the dissolution of YPSL in 1964, following a heated debate over whether to support Lyndon Johnson for president. The collection includes correspondence with other young radicals such as Martin Oppenheimer, Lyndon Henry, Juan Mclver, and Joe Weiner.

Woven together, the YPSL files -- and particularly those for Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Texas -- give a sense of YPSL's field work and the sometimes radically different approaches taken by the New Left and Old Left, and between the varied factions within each. The correspondence, reports, fliers, and other materials reflect deep seated tensions over ideology and tactics, as well as the assault on the left by the forces of authority, as the grappled with issues ranging from the war in Vietnam to the pervasiveness of racism and sexism, and international politics from Berlin to China and Cuba.

The tumultuous 1964 Convention that resulted in the suspension and dissolution of YPSL is well documented, given Barton's central involvement, and the files for the various branches of the League document the reaction around the country as news of the split spread. The YPSL Texas file with letters from Lyndon Henry and Doug Hainline is noteworthy for the clarity of analysis and candid discussions of YPSL's relations with SDS.

Other materials are bellwethers for the shifts in attitude within the movement and the increasing radicalization of some members. In November 1965, for example, Joe Verret wrote bitterly about pacifists: "Good God -- you know it and so does anyone else with serious intentions of defeating the imperialists -- the change to socialism -- the convulsion of property relations -- will never be accomplished on a world scale if we try tactics such as lying down in front of the tanks of bourgeoisie . . . are we revolutionaries or are we just interested in having a nice sized organization?" (Joe Verret, Nov. 26, 1965)

The most extensive, densest, and perhaps richest correspondence in the collection -- five folders worth -- comes from Juan Mclver, a fellow Wildcat and International Socialist. Sometimes signing himself Frank (and once Igor), Mclver's letters are remarkably intense and detailed discussions of Socialist politics, history, the struggle of the present day, revolutionary organizing, the international scene, his travels in Europe and England, and his evolving views on Socialism and the struggle to create a working class movement. Mclver eventually broke with Leninism-Trotskyism. Some of Barton's letters to Mclver are included.

About one third of the collection consists of a remarkable group of materials relating to the Wildcat, and particularly Wildcat Detroit. Mostly signed pseudonymously, the letters and reports analyze efforts to engage in revolutionary organizing of the working class, primarily in the automotive industry. Among other highlights is an essay (filed under "Wildcat: Trade unions and revolutionary organizing") discussing tactics in navigating racism, suspicion of fellow workers, and the fight against capitalism. In a similar vein, the unidentified author of "Towards a Revolutionary Newspaper" laments the lack of a publication that reflects their point of view and offers thoughts on how better to reach workers:

"Initially we planned, and still plan to use locally produced factory bulletins, distributed free at the plant gates. As the basic tool of our organizing, recruiting, and propoganda work. The format would be the simplest and most economical; and 8 1/2 x 13 sheet mimeoed or printed on two sides; one side being a major political article by members of our organizing group, the other side being written entirely by people...employed at the plant (ourselves and others)..."

The Wildcat files also contain materials relating to Revolutionary Union Movement groups, such as DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) and ELDRUM (Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement), which sought to organize Black workers and which joined forces to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Among the printed materials are several copies of *Wildcat* and its successor *The Spark*, as well as a valuable series of highly ephemeral newsletters from Revolutionary Union Movements.

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Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Acquired from Eugene Povirk, February 2008.

Processing Information

Processed by Dex Haven, October 2010.

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Related Material

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Socialist Party of the United States of America.
Socialists.
Student Peace Union.
Students for a Democratic Society.
Vietnam War, 1961-1975.
Wildcat.
Young People's Socialist League.

Contributors

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Oppenheimer, Martin.
Shatkin, Joan.
Shatkin, Norm.
Verret, Joe.
Weiner, Joe.

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