

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0592
Barbara Zelter
March 31, 2006**

**Field Notes – 2
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FIELD NOTES: BARBARA ZELTER

Interviewee: Barbara Zelter

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge, Heirs Project director

Interview Date: March 31, 2006

Project: Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists

Location: Raleigh, NC

THE HEIRS PROJECT

“Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South. This is a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition.

THE INTERVIEWEE

Barbara Zelter has lived in North Carolina since 1971 and has been involved in organizing in the areas of economic justice and peacemaking through a number of groups, including NC Equity, NC Fair Share, the Common Sense Foundation, Democracy North Carolina, NC Waste Awareness and Reduction Network, New Beginners Community Help Mission, and for the past 10 years with the NC Council of Churches. She is an active partner in the Southern Faith, Labor, and Community Alliance. Barbara and two partners founded a statewide nonprofit called JUBILEE, operating from 1997-2002, linking churches with families affected by welfare reform and fostering the family voice in welfare policymaking. She has written several study guides and curricula on faith and justice.

She has co-led a long-term, experimental inter-racial, interdenominational group of four churches in rural Orange County, NC, in a program called Living the Word. With others she coordinates Triangle-area Sabbath Economics gatherings that tie into Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries of activist theologian Ched Myers.

Honors include: Health of the Public Award, UNC (1994); Mitch Snyder award for antipoverty action (Boston, 2001), NC Justice Center's Defenders of Justice award for JUBILEE (2002), the NC Peacemakers award from NC Peace Action (2006), and the Distinguished Service award from the NC Council of Churches (2007). Zelter is currently taking a year away from organizing for discernment of the next stage of calling.

THE INTERVIEWER

Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW:

The interviews in the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition project are organized around several themes:

- Lessons learned through their experiences about effective social justice activism, movement building strategies, and approaches to community organizing.
- The ways class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity affect the narrators as social justice activists.
- Questions related to the significance of activism in the South and specifically in North Carolina.
- Exploration of what nurtures and sustains the narrators as activists as well as what challenges and discourages them.
- Questions about the evolution of the narrators' socio-economic, political, and philosophical perspectives.

Generally, the interview questions flow chronologically beginning with questions about the narrators' parents and family of origin and ending with descriptions of their plans for the future.

Interview topics included: the importance of organizing in the South and North Carolina in particular; the Smithfield campaign as an example of the South getting more attention recently; the process of being interviewed for the Heirs Project.

TRANSCRIPT—BARBARA ZELTER

Interviewee: Barbara Zelter

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: March 31, 2006

Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Length: 1 cassette; approximately 15 minutes

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BB: Today is Friday, March thirty-first, 2006.

BZ: Already.

BB: Already. Doing a follow-up interview with Barbara Zelter at your cozy home again. This is for the Heirs to a Fighting Tradition oral histories of the North Carolina social justice activists project. Bridgette Burge, interviewer, and Barbara Zelter, oral author.

(laughter) So just a few follow-up questions. The first one is do you think it's important to stay and organize in the South and in North Carolina particularly?

BZ: I've become convinced by my own observations and hearing other good analysts that say the South is the key to the country. Look who's heading up our national so-called leadership. It's people from the South or the "Southern Strategy," neo-con strategy. To undo that mismanagement, foul kind of leadership, I think the solutions will come from the South as well, because this is where the worst of everything in many ways occurs in terms of labor and environment maybe, a lot of things. So yes, I affirm the importance of organizing in the South. It's interesting to see slowly some national realization around that, one example being the Smithfield campaign, where the United Food and Commercial Workers nationally have,

after six or seven years of that effort, finally decided to really allocate some big money, some organizing power, to building a Smithfield worker union and community long-term effort to turn around that hog plant situation.

BB: Will you say a little bit more about the situation?

BZ: At Smithfield? Well, it's the world's largest hog processing plant in Bladen County, North Carolina. Our state paid money to let them come here and ruin the environment with their thirty-five thousand hogs killed a day. It's industrial meat packing at its worst. The demographics of it have changed in the years that it's been here, from being reflective of the Bladen-Robeson community of African-American, white, and Lumbee population at the plant to now majority Latino, which workers say was an intentional way to keep down wages and resistance, because so many are undocumented, they thought they wouldn't claim their rights. But there was one union UFCW campaign several years ago that failed and it failed because of company intimidation that has been proven. They have been sanctioned by the National Labor Relations Board for a number of unfair practices, including collusion of the Bladen County sheriffs that were their private police force that beat people that were union organizers. Now there's a second organizing wave that is intentionally around building up a slow build of community support and it seems to be much more effective. So they're not jumping in for a union vote as much as they are trying to have all kinds of supermarket actions, getting church resolutions, and using more of a strategy like FLOC used to have its win in the South.

BB: FLOC is—

BZ: Farmer Labor Organizing Committee.

BB: So there's Matt Courtney and Libby Manly are two key organizers I know. Do you know some other people?

BZ: I don't know their names. I work with Libby, but I've met recently the new national guy that is helping to organize it and Libby is incredibly talented. Then they have great folks, a lot of Latino organizers at the Workers Center in Red Springs. So it seems to be a more intelligent or realistic campaign in that nothing happens just through the union alone. You've got to have community and religious group solidarity. But the point being that it took a long time for the national union to recognize that the South is important and at this point, they have and are investing in it. That's a hopeful trend. Another is that the new Religion-Labor-Community Coalition that's coming out of the Beloved Community Center and basically progressive black clergy in North and South Carolina to link together mostly black, but other churches, and labor for a long-term common goal: the kind of unity that was expressed in the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Movement with Dr. King, the church, and black workers.

BB: Around—

BZ: '68, moving on toward his death. So that is a serious effort, the goal of which at this point is to repeal the 95-98 law, general statute, which forbids public workers, government workers, to unionize and collectively bargain in our state. We're one of only two states in the nation that doesn't allow that and as you probably know, this international labor organization came to our state this past fall-winter with judges from Japan and all over the world to have hearings about the condition of our government workers and to say it's a human rights violation. We are in violation of international human rights law not allowing government workers to organize and collectively bargain. So that's another example of

international attention coming to this particular situation in the South of our repressing worker rights and noticing how that's important. I'm seeing certain hopeful trends around that type of thing.

BB: Thanks.

BZ: Maybe that's not what you asked.

BB: No, that is what I asked. It's right on, thank you. So the next question is: is there anything else that we didn't talk about over the few months that you wanted to add or anything more about what we talked about today?

BZ: Nothing comes to my mind at the moment. Thank you for asking. If that occurs, I'll let you know.

BB: I know you've answered this in our small groups and just with me, so thank you for indulging me again as I ask you answer the question for recording: how is the process for you? You're in a bit of a unique situation than some of the others and future heirs being recorded for this, because you're actually on the planning team.

BZ: Yeah.

BB: So it's fine to talk about that too, but if we could start with how is the process of the questions and the interview for you as a tool of recording this and evaluatively.

BZ: Well, to me it's like sitting around in the room with your sister, so that it's utterly comfortable in most ways, except having the light shined on one's life isn't necessarily comfortable unless you like that kind of thing. But despite the awkwardness of that, the process is wonderful because I like you. It might be a whole different experience for somebody else, but it seems that everyone you picked is someone you know. So chances are it will be kind of nice and smooth and friendly for most everybody. But I certainly have kind

of enjoyed it just because it gets me in the room with you. We're both so busy, it's a time to just be together.

BB: Thanks, I'm glad it's been an enjoyable thing.

BZ: I tend to be skeptical of what value it is, but that's your project so you can make that decision.

BB: Anything you would have done differently, questions or tips?

BZ: I can't think of anything. It might be interesting over time if you, for instance, after we have the March or the April eighteenth panel, if it emerges from bringing these presentations public that there are certain areas that people are more curious about than others, certain questions people had about what's important or things they'd want to learn from individuals regarding strategy, it might be interesting to focus interviews on things that people say they're curious about. You know what I mean? Because we've had a broad brush of topics and life patterns, questions, so that's just something that might come up. But I think you did a fine job at it. You took time to get a lot of input from various people on what's the way to go. So I think it is a well-constructed process as far as I can see.

BB: Good, I'm glad it seems like that.

BZ: It's just fun.

BB: Yeah, it's fun for me too. Okay, well that's really it.

BZ: Oh, okay.

BB: Thanks Barbara.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Emily Baran. April 2006.