

IN MEMORIAM

Lois R. Stranahan

Feb. 1, 1919 - May 17, 2017

Lois Redding Stranahan, a tireless fighter for trade unionism and economic justice, died May 17 at the age of 97.

Lois was well known in the local labor movement, together with her husband Jesse Stranahan. For many decades she was a presence at picket lines and union meetings, gathering signatures on ballot measures, and promoting the union gospel of solidarity.

She was born Lois Redding on Dec. 1, 1919, in Mena, Arkansas, and grew up there as one of six children in a farm household. She met Jesse Kneeland Stranahan while the two were attending a summer labor school at Commonwealth College in Mena. At the time, Jesse was a reporter for a CIO newspaper. They married on Sept. 13, 1940 in Pocatello, Idaho — en route from Arkansas to Portland, his home town. In Portland, he worked the docks as a member of International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 40. She worked as a waitress and helped organize for Waitresses Local 305.

When the United States entered World War Two, Jess ini-



tially stood as a conscientious objector, but later served the U.S. Army on an ambulance crew in Europe. Lois, meanwhile, went to work in a Swan Island shipyard building Liberty Ships as a welder and member of Steamfitters Local 235.

After the war, Jess went back to working on the Portland docks, and became a prominent local union officer. Lois went to work as a telephone operator, where she was one of the founding members of Communications Workers of America Local 7901, taking part in a 1948 strike against the Bell phone system.

She eventually left to become a full time wife and mother. In the 1960s, she joined the ILWU's Ladies Auxiliary, and served as a photographer for *The Dispatcher*, the international union's newspaper. She also became a committed volunteer on the grape boycott campaign led by Cesar Chavez of the United Farm Workers, and stayed with that cause for decades.

Lois was a dedicated volunteer signature gatherer for ballot measures she believed in, going back as far as the 1940s, and in the late 1980s, she became active in campaigns to defend the

right to gather signatures. On Oct. 11, 1989, she was gathering signatures outside a Fred Meyer shopping center at Southeast 82nd and Foster in Portland, and refused an order by a security officer to leave. Lois told the officer she had a constitutional right to be there, and showed a newspaper article about a recent court case backing that up. A court had ruled that even though a shopping center was private property, it couldn't ban petitioners, because their public spaces were the modern-day equivalent of the town square. But Fred Meyer had her arrested anyway, and as she was entering the police car, she injured her back. Stranahan sued Fred Meyer for false arrest. A jury awarded \$125,000 in compensatory damages, plus \$2 million in punitive damages. The trial judge reduced the total award to \$500,000, but the Oregon Court of Appeals reinstated the jury amount. By the time *Stranahan v. Fred Meyer* went before the Oregon Supreme Court in 1995, the damages were \$3.8 million with interest. Stranahan had many plans to use the money to fund causes she believed in. But the Oregon Supreme Court decided against her, ruling that the store had the right to exclude pe-

tioners from its property.

Undeterred, she continued her activism. On Dec. 1, 1999 — her 80th birthday — she and 350 other union activists boarded a chartered train to Seattle to take part in the largest labor demonstration in decades — a protest at the World Trade Organization summit.

In the late 2000s, her health worsened, but her spirit remained: Friends say that in the hospital, Lois would grill the nurses about their union membership, and she once was said to have gotten rid of a doctor who was insufficiently pro-union. Health difficulties prompted a move to New Jersey, where her daughter Judith Karen Stranahan — a union railroad conductor — could look after her. She spent the last decade of her life there, and died peacefully at her daughter's home in Edison, New Jersey.

She was preceded in death by her siblings and her husband Jesse, who died in 1998. She's survived by her daughter, and numerous nieces, nephews, and extended family. She'll be buried at Willamette National Cemetery, 1180 Mt. Scott Blvd, Portland, next to her late husband Jess. A graveside service was held May 25.

...Class Cluelessness

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the divide? My goal is less to spark empathy on the part of the cultural elite than to send a message that people who have jobs like plumbers, electricians, radiology technicians, these people don't deserve empathy — they deserve respect. The work they do is important. The life you live would be impossible without it. It's as important as the professional job. They deserve respect, and they're not getting it. You have Hillary Clinton calling these people deplorables — racist, sexist, and homophobic. And Barack Obama in 2012 saying they are bitter people, clinging to guns and religion. Those are very condescending comments, very unselfconsciously delivered.

One "clueless" question you get into in the book is "Why don't laid off Rust Belt factory workers just get retrained as computer engineers?" It's a typical example of class clue-

lessness. The cultural elites are busy announcing that because of globalization and automation, we're going to have a knowledge economy. Well, excuse me: Who is going to maintain your bridges, who's going to give you electric power, who is going to give you your mammogram? That is patently false. That is such a clueless thing to say. People hold blue-collar jobs because they think those jobs are important and they don't want to be pencil pushers. And my response is: These jobs *are* important. Going to college is a very different proposition if you're from a blue-collar family than it is for people from a professional family. First of all, it's three times as hard to get in, says one study. And even if you do get in, it's a far more risky economic proposition because you may feel so culturally ill-at-ease, and you may be so poorly prepared academically that you're much more likely to drop out, in which case you're going

to be paying huge college debt on a high school graduate salary. Which means, according to one study, many people end up paying like a third of their income, without the college degree. And thirdly, the kinds of colleges that people from professional families go to are often quite different from the kinds of colleges that blue collar kids go to, and are much less likely to lead to high paying jobs. The divergence between incomes of high and low paying college graduates has very sharply increased in recent decades. So many people graduate from college and end up earning not a lot more than non-college graduates.

Do you think Americans are class conscious? No. Everybody knows that classes exist, but there's a serious social taboo towards acknowledging they exist. Trump is so unbelievably good at channeling the resentments against the cultural elite, because he has been condescended to his whole life. He made his name as a boy from Queens having people from Manhattan look down their nose

at his garish Atlantic City retreats that were clearly not in "quiet good taste." So people often say: "How can a rich boy who started out with \$14 million from his dad connect with the white working-class?" The way he connects with them is that he feels equally condescended to, and has for his entire life.

There's an argument you hear a lot that working people who vote Republican are dupes because they're voting against their own economic interest. What do you make of that? I think that's another example of condescension — that these poor ignorant peasants have been duped by the business elite. I don't think they are duped by the business elite. I think that these voters feel like neither Democrats nor Republicans have offered them anything substantial when it comes to providing the kinds of solid stable middle-class jobs that their fathers and grandfathers had. Trump offered them jobs. The only party that's been offering these blue-collar families jobs is the Republican party. They've

been saying, "through supply side economics we're going to unleash the economy and give you jobs." I think that has been shown to be inaccurate, but at least they're talking about jobs. If people's chief concern is that they feel the American dream is slipping from their hands, Democrats have only themselves to blame if these people don't vote for them, because they're not talking about that. I think before Trump, these working class people felt that neither Democrats nor Republicans cared a whit what happened to them economically. At least the Republicans were showing them some respect for their much more traditional values than are common among the cultural elite, so they voted Republican. I don't think it was stupidity. It was very understandable, given the way they were being treated by both parties.

ONLINE EXTRA

This interview has been edited for space. See the full interview online at <http://nwlaborpress.org/2017/05/white-working-class/>