

An impenetrable force

Reflecting on the Portland police union, past and present, with labor historian Norman Diamond

BY MARTHA GIES
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In the new documentary “Arresting Power,” which premiered at the Northwest Film Center in January, there is a 1981 film clip of Portland police commissioner Charles Jordan in heated dialogue with outraged citizens protesting a blatant act of racial harassment. A group of police officers had left four dead opossums at the door of the Burger Barn, a black-owned business on Northeast Union Avenue (now Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd). In this bit of news footage, the eloquent Jordan — Portland’s first African American to serve on City Council — fends off their demands that Chief Bruce Baker be fired, obviously believing that firing just the officers will fix the problem.

The very next day he and Chief Baker did fire Jim Galloway and Craig Ward, the authors of the prank and two of seven officers who carried it out.

The Portland Police Association (PPA) came back fighting: It organized a rally on behalf of Galloway and Ward, then hired them both on as union employees at the same pay they had on the force.

The real test, Jordan had insisted to the protesters, is: “How do we correct it to make sure it doesn’t happen again?” His optimistic response sounds especially poignant today in a film that reminds us how little has changed in 34 years.

“Arresting Power,” made by local artists Julie Perini, Jodi Darby and Erin Yanke, looks at 50 years of policing in Portland. The work is filled with emotionally wrenching moments, among them the interviews with family members of unarmed black youth who were shot and killed in encounters with the police. On camera, local activists and historians analyze policing in terms of relationships to race and class.

The film offers no solutions. As filmmaker Yanke points out, “That’s because every community is unique, and it’s all about relationship building, conversations and building trust.”

That conversation takes place across a wide spectrum, political as well as geographical.

Portland writer Martha Gies has contributed to Street Roots since the newspaper’s earliest days.

In New York, Police Commissioner William Bratton, talking to Robert Siegel last month on NPR’s “All Things Considered,” acknowledged that African-American men experience harsher treatment than their white counterparts. Bratton went on to point out that it was not a simple matter of reforming the police. “We’re talking about a much more complex, larger national issue,” Bratton insisted. “Don’t go blaming the police. I’m sorry, we’re not going to be the whipping boy, if you will, for this issue in America.”

On the other end of this discussion, the prison abolition movement, which author Kristian Williams addresses in the new film, does not find police reform a worthwhile effort.

Meanwhile, in Portland, people of faith and people of color are desperate to see the shootings and beatings stop. The Albina Ministerial Alliance, the NAACP, the ACLU, the National Lawyers Guild, and many other groups have long protested, with pen or picket, the inappropriate use of deadly force, but to little avail.

Supposing that a trigger-happy racism infects only a tiny minority of our officers, citizens have tried for decades to pressure successive chief and city commissioners to root it out by firing those few. The Rev. Dr. LeRoy Haynes Jr., who has emerged as one of several leaders of this campaign, reminds us: “A hallmark of American democracy is the belief in civilian control over the military and law enforcement.”

But firing never seems to work, because the PPA is prepared to spend any amount of time and money litigating to get their members reinstated, usually with back pay.

A recent case in point was the firing of Officer Ron Frashour, after he fatally shot in the back unarmed Aaron Campbell, 25, in January 2010, during a police welfare check. (Campbell’s brother had died that very day.) The see-sawing back and forth of this case was excruciating to watch: Chief Mike Reese fired Frashour in the fall of 2010; the



PPA contested by filing a complaint with the Employee Relations Board; ERB arbitrator Jane Wilkinson ordered Frashour reinstated; Mayor Sam Adams, determined to go the distance, appealed back to the ERB, then in September 2012, Frashour was reinstated with back pay and 9 percent interest for the two years he was in limbo; whereupon City Council sent the matter to the Oregon State Court of Appeals, where it languishes.

Copwatch’s Dan Handelman, a dedicated full-time activist, has anguished over this question for years: “What does it take to keep an officer fired?”

The reactionary muscle of police unions is not just local. In New York, the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association recently pitted itself against Mayor Bill de Blasio who dared to campaign on police reform, principally in the area of stop-and-frisk procedures and their related racial statistics.

I can’t help thinking that hundreds of our police officers must be equally uneasy about this situation: Anonymity inside the machine of the police union must be like being trapped inside the black mask of riot gear: the good cops — their opinions, their hopes for better community relations and their very humanity — are silenced and invisible.

But I know almost nothing about police unions; only that we don’t see from them the external solidarity that characterizes other unions. We know that longshoremen (ILWU), say, or electrical workers (IBEW) would not cross an SIEU picket line if they found a hotel or restaurant on strike. Why aren’t police unions in that same fraternity

of workers?

To help understand the nature and history of the PPA, I turned to author and labor historian Norman Diamond. He’s been a steelworker, sawmill worker, machinist, university professor and president of the Pacific Northwest Labor College. He has lectured widely, in Europe and Latin America, as well as Canada and the United States. For nine years he hosted “The Old Mole Variety Hour” on Portland’s KBOO community radio station as part of a rotating group, and he continues to make guest appearances on the air. He’s the author of numerous essays on labor environmentalism, workers’ control and labor history and co-author of “The Power In Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States.” His recent publications include “Occupy the Workplace,” “Against the Current,” and “Why Teach a 100-Year-Old Strike?” in American Educator. He serves as trustee for the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association and developed a labor history tour of Portland for that organization.

Martha Gies: *Norm, is it fair to describe you as a staunch ally of labor?*

Norman Diamond: Absolutely, of both working men and women and organized labor. I began working with unions as a 15 year-old, out of the United Automobile Workers’ Solidarity House in Detroit, and that was more than five decades ago. To anticipate your next question, my