

Act of Courage

Remembering the real Norma Rae

Crystal Lee Sutton, the textile worker and union activist whose experience was dramatized in the movie *Norma Rae*, died several weeks ago at age 68.

During the late 1970s, I worked for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union as the New Jersey coordinator for the national consumer boycott of J. P. Stevens, the company that employed Crystal Lee Sutton. J. P. Stevens was the Walmart of its day and notorious as a serial violator of labor law and workers' rights.

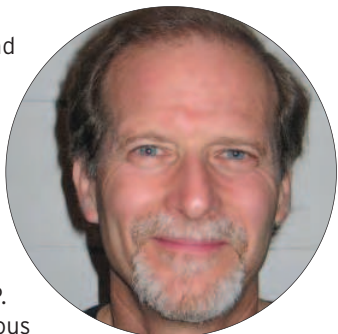
I had the opportunity to meet Crystal Lee Sutton when she came to New Jersey as part of a national tour following the movie's premiere. According to some of my union colleagues, Crystal Lee did not always adapt easily to her role as public spokesperson. She could be demanding in her relations with the union and was not as disciplined as campaign organizers would have preferred. A friend of mine who also saw her during this period recalls that she was uncomfortable when asked larger political or strategic questions. Like many of us, her life was marked by ambiguity and contradiction, no doubt accentuated by the gap between her real story and Sally Field's mythic portrayal of her on the screen.

Shortly before her death, reflecting on the events that led to her being thrust into the spotlight, Crystal Lee recalled: "When I went in the plant with my union pin, you would have thought I had the plague, and that is when the trouble started. It was truly different because a woman had never done or dared to do such stuff."

Within the paternalistic culture of the Southern textile mill town, Crystal Lee's actions, which in fact did include scrawling "union" on a sheet of cardboard and prompting her fellow workers to turn off their machines, were an audacious violation of cultural norms. As depicted in *Norma Rae*, the scene remains memorable for showing how an act of individual courage can inspire others to acts of solidarity, one of the most cherished values of the union movement. I am always moved to tears by that scene, as one by one the deafening roar of mill machines diminishes to near silence and workers revel in their collective defiance of the employer who has dominated their lives.

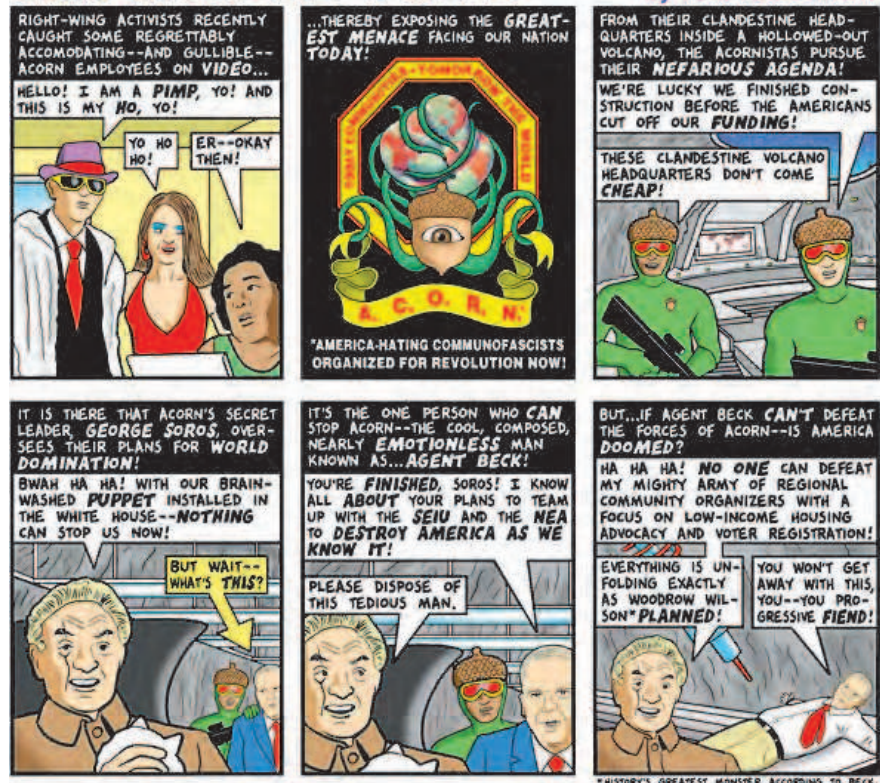
Many unions now give Norma Rae awards to honor courage and activism among their members, and I have no problem with giving these awards in the name of a fictional person. However, we should not forget that Norma Rae was a real person, Crystal Lee Sutton, who in a shining moment showed us the meaning of courage, the power of solidarity and, perhaps most importantly, the capacity of trade unionism to enable ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

Bob Bussel is an associate professor and director of the Labor Education and Research Center at UO.



THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OUT, DAMNED BUBBLES

I read with interest your article on Eugene's carbon footprint in the Sept. 17 *EW*. It is interesting to watch a city which is on one hand claiming to be striving to be sustainable while on the other hand developing its infrastructure around the automobile. Since it is obvious that the auto is here to stay for a long time, there are other options.

According to a recent survey, Americans consume an average of 3.78 liters of soft drinks per week. With the population of Eugene being around 140,000, this equals 27,554,800 liters of soft drinks consumed in the city annually. The average liter of soft drink contains 6 grams of CO₂; therefore; Eugeneans are responsible for the release of 169,425 kilograms (or 279 tons) of CO₂ from their soft drinks annually. To reduce the carbon footprint of Eugene, I propose a ban on soft drink sales and consumption. This ban would also reduce childhood obesity as well as improve the general health of our society.

*Allen Hall
Eugene*

THE VOTING RACKET

Rob Bolman's "Denial and Delusion" Viewpoint column (10/1) says that "we need a complete bottom-to-top restructuring of human civilization, and we need it right now." But he concludes that politicians "need to get serious" or we'll vote them right out of office.

Which is it, Rob Bolman? To even begin to take on civilization would, in my opinion, call into question the existence of politicians and the mass society of which they are a by-product. For starters, not to mention all of the basic dynamics of civilization, including domestication and industrialization that create the deepening spiral he rightly refers to.

You're on to something. Why mock your insight by falling back into the voting racket, a key mode of modern domestication?

*John Zerzan
Eugene*

EUG-NIQUENESS

I have been getting increasingly concerned about the proposals for the revival of downtown. I can understand the need for a more active and aesthetically pleasing downtown. What I can't understand is how people could be supporting something so atrocious as the KWG proposal. The developers have claimed that they want to "upgrade the character" of downtown to make it "upscale." I nearly vomited when I read such things. KWG is clearly stating that our town's character is not up to par with their standards. I'm sorry, but I cannot accept that as a good enough excuse to give a bunch of free money on tax breaks and subsidies for someone to put a bunch of national stores and parking structures downtown, replacing local shops (that worked hard to be where they are) due to high rent.

What kind of people are the people in power representing? Clearly giving subsidies to a big developer to eradicate our unique culture and replace it with mindless consumerism. Is your idea of a better downtown to have a mall in it? Does your idea of "community" consist of Gap, movie theaters and parking structures that never fill?

Why should we worry about Springfield having a bigger Cinco de Mayo party than Eugene? Why are we always concerned with what other people think of us? I want a downtown that I can walk/bike to, where I can buy local products that don't support sweatshop labor, where I can talk to someone who cares about their community and does not need to have a nice set of clothes to feel content and to feel part of something.

*David A. Gomez
Eugene*

FIGHTING ALLIGATORS

Commissioner Bill Fleenor campaigned on a platform of transparent government. He is far superior to his predecessor, but he continues to fail to mobilize the citizens he represents to help correct the many failures of Lane County. He ignores the intelligence and capability of those he represents. He is

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