

New York Labor History Association Honors

✦ Labor Movement Advocates ✦

Labor Historian/Archivist Jane LaTour & Folksinger Peter Yarrow

On Friday November 30, 2012, Women's Press Collective (WPC) Operations Manager Lisa Daniell and Education Coordinator Courtney Francis were among the 200 people gathered in the 1199/SEIU (Service Employees International Union) penthouse in midtown Manhattan to honor the latest recipients of the New York Labor History Association's John Commerford Labor Education Awards: Jane LaTour and Peter Yarrow.

Female firefighters and tradeswomen in attendance to honor LaTour included electrician Cynthia Long, tile layer Angela Olszewski, and retired FDNY captain Brenda Berkman. LaTour has championed the cause of women in non-traditional employment through oral history projects, archives, and books as well as through her Associate Editor position with *Public Employee Press*, the publication of DC-37, AFSCME.

WPC was introduced to LaTour at a retirement party for Berkman in 2006 by a WPC volunteer who had been featured in LaTour's book, *Sisters in the Brotherhoods*. In 2010, LaTour provided the film, "Taking the Heat: The First Women Firefighters of New York City," to be shown at WPC's International Women's Day Celebration, and recruited Berkman, who was featured in the film, to attend the event and speak after the film. In 2011, LaTour was the featured speaker at an International Women's Day event WPC held at NYC College of Technology, co-hosted by two campus women's organizations. LaTour has since this event joined WPC's Board of Directors.

At the November 30 event, Captain Berkman introduced LaTour, speaking of LaTour's life of activism. Berkman noted that "despite changes in laws, tradition still segregated employment by gender," and that LaTour's oral histories and

writing, "captured the human side of an issue... preserving the stories of everyday working people." Berkman described one of the accomplishments of LaTour's work as: "to bring the unknown and



WPC file photo

Jane LaTour (left) and Peter Yarrow (right) speak after receiving awards from the New York Labor History Association

forgotten workers out of the shadows and into the light of history."

The audience rose to their feet in a standing ovation as LaTour took the podium. LaTour described life experiences that developed her class consciousness: from the tobacco workers in the fields of her native New England to working in factories herself and seeing the effects of white lung disease.

Her speech exemplified her solidarity and devotion to the cause of working people as she expressed appreciation for the accomplishments of *others*, even on a night when she was the one being honored. She asked audience members featured in her book to stand, and about eight women stood up to a round of

applause. She stated that she will always advocate for trade union women.

LaTour described how just that day she had attended the funeral Thomas Moran, a friend who, as a member of Local 1-2 of the Utility Workers Union of America, had forced Con Edison to face the hazards of asbestos. She extended honors to Russell Smith, who has organized thousands of workers into Local 100, Transport Workers Union of America, organizing workers at the NY Waterways and school bus drivers in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

With a clear understanding that there is much more work to do to advance the cause of working people, LaTour stated, "More than ever, we need a labor movement; one that encompasses the whole working class."

Harry Belafonte, famed singer and now President of Bread and Roses, the not-for-profit cultural arm of New York's Health and Human Services Union 1199/SEIU, introduced the next honoree, his long-time friend and comrade in the civil rights struggle, Peter Yarrow, of the folk group Peter, Paul & Mary.

Belafonte spoke of their mutual participation in the civil rights movement and the very real dangers faced by civil rights workers. He described a KKK threat in advance of their participation at a performance that "If we come we should be concerned about [the] condition how we would leave." A civil rights worker was killed that very night.

Contrasting the commitment to struggle and willingness to put oneself at risk demonstrated by artists of that era with today's artists who entertain, but do little to speak about conditions in the world, Belafonte put out a clear call to artists and performers to "bring culture and activism together in ways that the rank and file will be rewarded."

Belafonte told the audience a story of

his decision to retire from performing and to “delve into labor, with the organization I had the most history with and which meant the most to me – 1199.” Describing the early years of his organizing with 1199, when it was a much newer organization with about 6,000 members, half white and half black, he noted the growth of the union representing service sector workers, stating, “Today those numbers are half a million in this local and 2.3 million in SEIU.”

Belafonte described his decision to “volunteer and do whatever I could for the union,” and of how he was humbled and honored to work around some of the thousands of people who do the nitty-gritty work in New York City, members of 1199.

When Peter Yarrow came to the podium, the two embraced and then Yarrow spoke, sang and played the guitar, leading the audience in singing “Roll the Union On,” “Talkin’ Union,” “Union Maid,” “We Shall Not Be Moved,” and many other labor and civil rights songs, stating, “My work is rooted in the union movement.”

Yarrow spoke about his daughter volunteering in the Rockaways, doing Hurricane Sandy relief, and his participation in an Occupy Sandy meeting, singing to volunteers who’d been working long hours for weeks gutting and cleaning damaged homes and delivering food.

Referring several times to the 1963 March on Washington, Yarrow described its momentous significance and also described it as “the most important event in Peter, Paul & Mary’s history.”

At the March on Washington, Mary took his hand and said, “Peter, we’re watching history being made.” Yarrow stated, “We knew this was a lifetime commitment.” ■

NEW YORK LABOR HISTORY ASSOCIATION AWARDS



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1. Jane LaTour is surrounded by women in non-traditional fields and other supporters who came to honor her. 2. Peter Yarrow (left) and Harry Belafonte (right) spoke and reminisced at the event about their work together in the civil rights movement. 3&4. Peter Yarrow with (left) WPC Administrative Assistant Courtney Francis and (right) WPC Operations Manager Lisa Daniell.

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