

“Love and Solidarity: Rev. James Lawson and Nonviolence in the Search for Workers’ Rights,” a film by Michael Honey

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Historians look for details to make history come alive, and oral history can provide them. Over thirty years of research, my scores of interviews with black and white workers in the South opened many new perspectives for me. Southern workers undermined the myth that they did not want to organize unions; that whites would not join with blacks; that labor and civil rights struggles are always in conflict. Oral history imposed a greater sense of duty to tell people’s stories.

Following the lead of Jim Green and others, I recently plunged into using the unique medium of film to advance oral history. “Love and Solidarity” tells the story of labor and civil right organizing through a key architect of our experiments with nonviolent direct action. At age 87, James Lawson tells a story not only of the black freedom movement in the South, but struggles for immigrant rights and economic equality in Los Angeles today. Told without a narrator, the film features interviews with

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Lawson, UCLA Labor Center Director Kent Wong, SEIU organizer and leader Maria Elana Durazo, and two “dream act” undocumented UCLA students seeking a path to citizenship. This is not your grand-father’s civil rights movement, it is about now. Lawson’s commentary brings nonviolent history alive in a way that few other people can.

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To tell more about making this story as a film instead of as a written oral history, University of Washington journalist **Peter Kelley** interviewed me about the film.

What brought you to this film?

For thirty years I have been writing books using a lot of personal interviews about labor and civil rights history and how they are interconnected. In my book, Going Down Jericho Road: the Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign, James Lawson makes the observation that we do a disservice to Dr. King when we type him only as a civil rights leader. A nonviolent leader has an all-encompassing critique linking racism, poverty, war, and other structures of violence, and counterpoises to those structures movements of love and solidarity. My work has always connected the past to the present, asking us what we can learn from the past to help us organize for justice today.

How did you get involved in interviewing James Lawson? Can you tell us about him?

I served as an advisor to the Fetzer Institute in Michigan, which spreads the values of love and forgiveness. It looks for exemplars of those values in the world today and tells their stories through conferences, writing, seminars, and films. I naturally thought of James Lawson, and the Fetzer encouraged me to make him the subject for a film. He just turned 86 when I interviewed him. His life takes us back to his imprisonment as a conscientious objector during the Korean War; as a student of Gandhi in India; as the teacher of nonviolent direct action in the Nashville sit-in movement and the Freedom Rides in 1960 that sent him to Parchman Prison in Mississippi. He helped to develop mass movements throughout the South, and then the Memphis sanitation strike. He brought King into that struggle and they ultimately won, despite King’s assassination. I knew him from my days as a civil liberties organizer in Memphis in the years immediately after King’s death.

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Reverend James Lawson speaks to student interns with co-writer, Kent Wong, in April, 2015.

As with King, one cannot simply think of Lawson — an African-American Methodist minister (the son and grandson of Methodist ministers, and great-grandson of an escaped slave) — as only a "civil rights leader." The Methodist Church moved him to Los Angeles in 1974, and for the last thirty years he has helped to invigorate movements in solidarity with peasants in Central America, with black and immigrant workers in Los Angeles, and with the Dream Act students fighting for a pathway to citizenship. Lawson is primarily a teacher of how to organize around values of love and solidarity, but one arrested many times for taking a stand. He does not seek the limelight and most people would not know his story, but it is a very important one.

How does this film apply to our current heated discussions of race and equality?

The film, in 38 minutes, helps us to grasp how racism and structures of power are interconnected, and how many movements over time have challenged those structures and put forth a positive philosophy of change. It especially speaks to organizing poor workers in the civil rights movement tradition of direct action but how that tradition applies to struggles against racial inequality and oppression today. There are three strands in the film, about civil rights, immigrants, and labor organizing. People take various insights from those struggles. I have shown it to University of Missouri students who protested in Ferguson, to union organizers at AFL-CIO headquarters in D.C., to people at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, to the University of Washington and Indiana University. This historical film always makes for intense discussions about the present.

Our film team wanted to make Rev. Lawson's insights available to the current generation fighting to make sure black lives matter, to organize against economic

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inequality, and for worker and immigrant rights. I think the film successfully shows how his nonviolent philosophy of love and solidarity applies to all people organizing for nonviolent social change. I hope it causes people to dig deeper. We also created a website that provides more interviews and an array of written material, at solidarity.com.

How did you learn how to make a film? In making this film, who did what?

My co-producer Errol Webber is a young black man, second generation from Jamaica, who grew up mostly in Baltimore. Errol was the videographer for "Prudence," a film about throw-away children with diabilities who triumphed by forming a beautiful singing group in Africa. It won the Academy Award for best short documentary in 2010. He is now making films in Hollywood. The Fetzer Institute put me in touch with him and we put this project together. Errol handled the camera and organized production; his editor Adam Mizrahi did an amazing job of fitting primary sources together; we all did the storyboard and editing. Adam Nolan, a history graduate from UW Tacoma, did unstinting photo and music research. I conducted interviews, wrote the overview, and edited and directed the film. I now do most of the travel and speaking about the film, but what I learned is that making a film is a group project. As a historian, I can only do as well as the rest of the people make possible.

What is your hope for this film,and how do you feel about it?

The Fetzer purpose and my purpose is to further an educational discussion about the role of nonviolence, love, and solidarity in remaking our lives on this planet. That is imperative. Given the wars, the ecological crisis, and the powerful influence of "the addicted people of violence and wealth," as Lawson puts it in the film, and as he concludes, we need a mass nonviolence movement such as the planet has never seen before. A book take years to make and years before you get a response, but we need to talk about these issues now. That's why I so enjoy these showings. The film helps us to sort things out and think about what we each need to do to bring about meaningful change. I have shown the film before today's students at numerous univerities, at the AFL-CIO national headquarters, at the National Civil Rights Museum, and before small labor audiences. It always elicits a great discussion. It remains a strictly non-profit, educational endeavor. I think it will be a good discussion piece for a long time to come.

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Striking members of Memphis Local 1733 hold signs whose slogan symbolized the sanitation workers' campaign in 1968.
1968. Source: Walter Reuther Library.

Film and the Oral History Tradition

Oral history, when it is available to us, helps us to humanize the past. Of course, memories are not themselves history, as students in my oral history class sometimes imagine. Rather, I stress that an individual's power of remembering must be linked to historical research and writing. The oral historian's job is to ask good questions, not get in the way of the answers, and strive through primary research to be an expert on the story at hand. How someone remembers something is often as important as what they remember. The "shared authority" of the historian working with a historical actor should enhance the power of remembering and not get in its way.

Before working on the James Lawson film, I spent years interviewing him and researching the story of labor and civil rights in the South and in Memphis, where Lawson was a key figure in the 1968 sanitation strike. Just prior to working on the film, I practiced my craft by researching and linking oral interviews of John Handcox with his songs and poems to provide an African American and insider's view of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in the 1930s. It took as much effort as if I had written a book about the STFU itself.

The benefit of bringing bringing such memories to film is the immediacy they provide. We don't have to wait for our audience to read a book. They can access and understand a story and immediately move into conversation. I have been pleased to see how "Love and Solidarity," in various showings from Bloomington to

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Memphis, from Washington State to Florida, has opened a historically informed way to intervene in current discussions about racial and economic injustice, and the role of nonviolence in social movement organizing. When put into its historical context, the power of remembering can provide a potent antidote to what Gore Vidal called “the United States of Amnesia.” In this presidential campaign year and the era of Black Lives Matter, what could be more important?

For a film preview and more information, go to LoveAndSolidarity.com.

Please note: A discount price is available for labor and community organizations; contact Bullfrog Films for pricing information. For campus and community screening rights, please visit Bullfrog Communities.

Author



- Michael Honey

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