

The Life and Times of Niilo Koponen - (Niilo)^{by}
(Draft for Harry Fleischman for an article in the "Democratic
Left.")

There was a time when young socialist groups were found in working class neighborhoods and in high schools, when plays were produced and dances staged in worker owned cultural halls, and families lived in co-operative houses and shopped in co-op stores. That was the New York Finnish ethnic community in which Niilo Koponen, now a four term legislator in Alaska, grew up.

At the time of the first World War, the majority of Finnish Americans belonged to the Finnish Federation of the Socialist Party. Like other immigrant communities they developed an institutional mutual support network, but unlike other minorities did not tend to cluster in any one neighborhood. Their co-op houses were scattered (Niilo's was in a predominantly Jewish working class neighborhood in the Mt. Eden section of the West Bronx) while the cultural heart of the community was in the "Tyovaentalo." the Finnish Workers Hall in Harlem. His mother, Aune Koponen, and aunt, Aira Hedman, were regularly on stage in the Finnish Theatre there, while his electrician father was in charge of the lighting. Back in the Bronx, there were street corner orators and Workmen's Circle Branches with banners on May Day.

"But despite the Socialist milieu in which I grew up, I was never aware of party labels. The newsreels - the bombing of the Panay (U.S. Gunboat on the Yangtze, sunk by Japanese in 1935?), the war in China and Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War and the seemingly inexorable rise of fascism. I can remember my father having no steady job for a decade and polishing silverware while my mother worked as a domestic. But these experiences and attitudes did not find expression until I went to the High School of Music and Art."

There Niilo met challenging teachers who encouraged students to think for themselves. One of them was August Gold, a Socialist activist and still today a member of DSA. When the Student discussion group was barred for inviting speaker such as Norman Thomas with opinions distressing to Dr. Benjamin Steigman, the principal, the group got permission to meet in the Episcopal Orphan Asylum across the street from M&A. After a year's independent existence the Music And Art Circle voted to affiliate in 1944 with the

Young People's Socialist League, the youth section of the Socialist Party USA.

At that time the Yipsel (YPSL) had some 270 members, many in prison or CPS camp for opposition to conscription, others in the armed forces or the merchant marine. Most of the finances seemed to come from the sailors pay checks, according to Virginia Clark, then YPSL National Secretary. Neighborhood groups existed in Manhattan, Williamsburg, Brownsville and Chicago while a limited number of campus organizations also existed.

"When I joined the YPSL, I was astonished to find that Finnish Federation had been part of the SP until the split in 1936-37 and that the OTC, the Finnish club to which my parents belonged, was organized around the alumni of YPSL Circle 5, Manhattan. My parents were never leaders, just active rank and file participants." (One of the other Yipsels in the West Bronx Circle at that time was Seymour Martin Lipset)

After graduating from high school, Niilo went to work in the Harlem warehouse of the Eastern Co-op Wholesale, another socialist stronghold, while attending Cooper Union night school, all the time carrying on socialist political work. This included participating in the anti-racist work of CORE, then a committee of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and in anti-war and anti-nuclear weapon protests. (I got to know Jim Farmer ^{at the Fellowship of Reconciliation} about this time, ~~but~~ ^{later} he was organizing for the Student League for Industrial Democracy which became SDS two decades later on campus)

In 1948 Niilo went to Finland to assist with refugee resettlement at a Quaker Work camp at Lieksa, Finnish Karelia, ^{near} He met with Socialist youth leaders in Finland, Sweden and Denmark while there and was impressed with the dedication of the British Labor youth to their country's reconstruction.

After his return he attended Central State college at Wilberforce Ohio, becoming the first white graduate of this previously segregated institution.

(I had been admitted to Antioch College, but lacked the money, being ineligible for the GI Bill as a conscientious objector.)

"That whole post-war period seems to have dropped out of peoples' memories. It was a time of tremendous ferment that was

blunted and distorted by Stalinism on one hand and the Cold War on the other. Several times we would have over one thousand members of the YPSL, only to split on some deeply felt issue. Can anyone imagine over 300 young people marching down the streets of Columbus, Ohio behind socialist banners, as happened when we had the YPSL convention ~~earlier~~ in 1946? But the Cold War, McCarthyism and local police "Red Raids" as at Peekskill, NY, identified all on the left as "Communists" despite the Socialists long principled opposition to Stalinism. I was even stopped by Philadelphia police in 1950 for having a Socialist bumper sticker on my car and when "subversive" literature - leaflets announcing a rally in Allentown at which Norman Thomas would speak - were found in the trunk, hauled off to jail." (The FBI "sprung" me!!)

That year Niilo was the state organizer for the Socialist Party of Pennsylvania, traveling about in a 1938 Plymouth, finding former members who had fallen away, organizing new locals and distributing campaign material for Robt. Z. Willson and Hans Peters. While both they and Darlington Hoopes, running for Congress from Reading, PA, did well, socialists in the larger cities had begun to work with Reform Democrats to throw out the corrupt machines there.

"One YPSL project in those years were the "Labor Teams" in Flint, Michigan and Reading, Pennsylvania. Drawing on the Quaker "Interns in Industry" and work camp experiences, groups of young socialists set up co-operative housing units, found jobs in local industry and carried on political work in the local communities and labor organizations. The Reading team included myself, Bogdan Dennitch ~~✶~~, Joe Schwartz, Dick Fredrikson, Barbara Graymount and other comrades whom I can't recall by name. Unfortunately, our help was not enough to re-elect George Stumpf, the Socialist mayor of Reading. (The Philadelphia Mafia helped finance the "American Coalition" of old party hacks so they could control gambling).

" I'd known Ernest and Elizabeth Morgan since the 1946 YPSL Summer Summer school held at their home in Yellow Springs, Ohio. When I first went to Ohio after returning from Finland, I lived with them and was active in the Ohio Socialist Party. Both there and in Pennsylvania I found groups of Socialists and Quakers who had developed various forms of "intentional communities" and other co-operative activities. It always seemed to me that socialism as a movement had to use three principal organization tools - political (electoral) action, industrial (union) action and economic (co-

operative) action and to develop a distinct co-operative culture. Failing that we could only attack the problems of capitalism, racism, war and injustice one by one. Successes were possible, but hard to consolidate.

"By 1951, I had determined to move to Alaska, where I felt I could play a more effective individual role. My fiance, Joan, who I had met at Antioch, agreed and we were married in December, receiving as wedding gifts all kinds of tools and items suitable for homesteading. One last organizing tour for the Socialist Party remained: we toured the New England and Mid-Atlantic states signing on "electors" to represent the party's presidential candidate on the 1952 ballot. Then off to Alaska in our truck, staying with Socialist comrades, co-operators and union members en route. In Canada we stopped off at CCF Headquarters (Saskatchewan had the first Socialist Government in North America) where we found them.

"We settled in Fairbanks, staying first with Antioch College alumni and then in a cabin in the gold fields in a valley inhabited by elderly Finnish miners whose world view was informed by the "Industrialisti," a Finnish language IWW paper published in Duluth. I went to work for the mining company as an electrician's helper, becoming active in the Fairbanks Mine Workers Union (IBEW 1550) and being elected vice-president and chief grievance man. Efforts to revive the SP proved fruitless, but...

(MISSING PAGE)

active in move for State Constitution	1953 -
54	
ran for Constitutional Convention	1954
ran for Territorial Auditor as "Alaska Party"	1959
went to Graduate School at London School of Economics	1958 - 59
Nuclear Disarmament march, Aldermaton to London;	
founding member of American Federation Technical	
Engineers (surveyors union), AFL-CIO local 168.	1957 -
Struck for recognition and won!	
delegate to founding conference of NEA - Alaska	1960

1962 - back to East Coast: entered graduate study at Harvard Graduate School of Education - renew acquaintance with Mike Harrington, who was on a speaking tour for his book, "The Other America"

*helped organize
ALASKA
NATIVE
Land Claims
movement*

took part in "March on Washington" opposing Vietnam War
developed school integration plans (Metro ~~SP~~) in Boston, Project
Concern in Hartford, CT, active in Boston SP)

"Returning from Harvard in 1966 to a job as elementary school principal, I found that the right wing had organized more strongly than ever. Despite everyone's efforts by 1970 they controlled the schoolboard and two years later had replaced the Superintendent and all of the progressive staff and faculty they could. I resigned and took over the directorship of the Head Start Association, which I had helped set up in 1967.

"Some years earlier, in 1960, I had been involved in a battle to mobilize the NEA at their founding convention against the non-communist oath teachers were required to sign. We lost that first battle, but our progressive caucus included a number of remarkable people, including Nick Begich. Nick and several other teachers, including current congressman, Don Young, ran for the legislature and won. I was chair of the Political Action Committee for Education (PACE) and supported Nick in his subsequent campaigns for congress. Nick, AFL member from Northern Minnesota followed a very progressive political line, as did Alaska's Senators Gruening and Bartlett. Bartlett, in 1962, was the first Senator to call for recognition of Red China, while Gruening, who had directed the LaFollette 1924 Presidential Campaign press effort, was one of the two Senators to oppose the Tonkin Gulf resolution whereby Johnson embroiled us deeper into the Vietnam War.

"I joined the fight within the Democratic party and became chair of Chena Precinct, the largest in the state, organizing it for Gruening and Begich and against the Vietnam War and the right wing. At an exhausting, nearly week-long convention⁹⁷² on the University campus the Democratic Party of Alaska came out against the Vietnam War, losing many conservative Democrats in the process. *(this made the Alaska Democratic Party the only state party to oppose the war. We have received no real*

support from the National Party since
"In 1975 I went to Minneapolis for the founding of the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies. Mike Harrington gave the keynote address, Ruth Messinger and other DSOC members who were elected to public office werethere. Also present were Deborah Mieirs with her successful education policies and Kaarina Suoni ~~SP~~ SDP member of the Finnish Parliament, who later served as Minister of Education.

From there I went to Toronto to attend the Conference on the Finnish Migration to North America with Harry Siitonen, an old Yipsel comrade from Massachussets, then still with the California SP. I stayed to attend the NDP conventions a fraternal delegate with a dozen DSOC and SP members. I fraternized exclusively with the Yukon delegation, getting to know Tony Penikett who is now (1988 and 1992) in his second term as leader of the democratic socialist government of the Yukon. It was an eventful and inspiring summer, for my wife, Joan, and I capped it off with a three week tour of Portugal which was still in revolutionary euphoria having overthrown the oldest fascist regime in Europe. (I have to say, however, that I did have the impression that the upper-middle class youth had joined the revolution so that liberalization of monetary controls would permit them to buy foreign automobiles. They all seemed to have learned to drive from watching Italian movies!)

"Most of the decade of the seventies I spent in grassroots organizing efforts and lobbying for progressive causes. I helped organize Head Start and Child Care programs, food banks, interracial community groups, volunteer fire and emergency medical services, the Crisis Line telephone network, community garden, an energy efficiency movement, and was active in the environmental movement.

"During that period the Socialist Party split and, by mail, I became an early member of the DSOC. Although I'd remained a dues paying member I had found little in the Socialist party press as published under the leadership that became the Social Democrats -USA, ~~USA~~ that was in any way relevant to the condition of people in Alaska. I was able to recruit a few comrades from my community work to DSOC and so DSOC/Alaska was born. In my visits to my parents in Oregon, I came to know DSOC and NAM members in that state and became an advocate for unity.

"I ran for the Borough Assembly in 1979, losing in a run-off election in which fewer people turned out than had voted for me in the general. I ran for the Legislature in 1980 and despite the Reagan landslide, was declared elected by 200 votes.. However, absentee ballots tipped the election requiring two recounts before another Democrat was elected. Fairbanks was an at-large district at that time and sent three Democrats, two Libertarians, and one Republican to

Juneau. Two years later, after redistricting, I ran against one of the Libertarian incumbents and was elected by a good margin.

"In my first term I was in the 13 member die-hard Democratic minority. Seven "bush" Democrats were joined in a coalition with 20 Republicans, run by the right-wing. The coalition Democrats were primarily interested in control of the Finance committee so that they could funnel the oil boom monies to their districts. The conservative Republicans, who, were on a spending spree and tax anything spree. With good leadership and excellent esprit, the Democratic minority was able to accomplish a great deal in co-operation with a Democratic Governor and a (then) moderate coalition Senate. I found the inter-parliamentary visits with the Yukon and Northwest Territories legislatures particularly useful, affording the opportunity to renew acquaintance with Tony Penikett and other NDP members. The Yukon and Alaska, particularly, have a number of joint projects in Tourism, transportation, fisheries, education, etc.

"Electoral activity is all absorbing - legislative work, active problem solving, likewise. However it leaves little time for DSA and related activity. Organizational maintenance suffers (even a little thing like seeing that everyone keeps their dues up to date) although May Days and other opportunities for social events keep us in contact with one another.

" In my second term we had a Democratic dominated coalition, and a straight Democratic majority in my 3rd and fourth terms.

1982 - campaigned for rural subsistence - it passed and I got elected

1986 - got nuclear freeze resolution thru Legislature - put up as referendum and approved by voters -