

# “Looking over their shoulders”

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*Remembering Tim Costello*

Much of what I have read about Tim lately speaks to him as a “worker-intellectual.” In another time, the words “organic intellectual” would have rolled off the tongue. But this is not a synonym. In fact, it is probably a much more accurate appellation: Tim may have come up as a truck driver who went on to write about the big ticket issues of the day, but his writing had very practical purposes. Personifying the Gramscian notion, he set out to solve general concerns of humanity-as-a-whole from the perspective of real problems of (and solutions from) working class organization and working people in their everyday lives. In this, he was a perhaps singular voice that was at once pragmatic and utopian, a labor leader who could read Sartre but also strategize about a collective bargaining agreement. This short note cannot do justice to Tim’s life, work and many contributions to our common causes. Instead it is written from the perspective of someone who has had the good fortune to work with Tim on a day-to-day basis for over three years as a fellow coordinator of the North American Alliance for Fair Employment (NAAFE) starting in 2002.

Together with Jason Pramas of the Campaign on Contingent Work, Ellen Bravo of 9-to-5, the National Alliance of Working Women, and several other national leaders, Tim had founded the network out of their concern that the rise of contingent work has a corrosive impact on the welfare of working people as a whole.<sup>i</sup> Together, they had grown the network to 65 organizations in the US and Canada and began to address issues as diverse as day-labor work and high-tech outsourcing.

Before joining NAAFE, my knowledge of Tim’s project came through the works he had co-authored with Jeremy Brecher. A co-edited volume of theirs, *Building Bridges*, helped shape the thinking of myself and many among my coworkers more than 10 years earlier, when we successfully organized over 10,000 academic student employees in California. In that effort, we were as much concerned about defending affirmative action, access to education and public education as we were about winning collective bargaining rights. In this broader reading of what it took to build a union, we were emulating the kind of labor-community alliances that *Building Bridges* celebrated.

Later, when I was working on a global network challenging a sector of transnational capital, I came to see great value in the “Globalization from Below” prescribed in a short volume that Tim and Jeremy co-wrote with Brendan Smith. In reaching out to allies in the Global South, the organizations that I worked with developed a practice and related to one another in ways that would be very familiar to readers of that volume.

In other words, Tim’s work gave such authentic expression to grassroots activism that the participants can recognize themselves and their work in the writings.

Later, after Tim left NAAFE and founded Global Labor Strategies, we exchanged ideas about the World Social Forum and were both excited by the latest edition held in Belem. In between however, together with Kim Foltz, from 2002 through 2005, I had a chance to benefit directly from engaging the man the *New York Times* celebrates as a “bona fide worker intellectual.”<sup>ii</sup>

Inspired by Tim’s writings, I entered NAAFE both driven to action but also hugely intimidated by the scale of the challenges it identified. The problems of working people in this country, I thought then, were largely organizational. What we needed were organizational forms that could connect their

energies and translate it into power. All that was necessary was the political will and related release of resources making it possible for working people to organize. This, I believed, would include organizational forms expressing the aspirations of immigrant and middle-income workers. The short 3 years in NAAFE—with Tim’s intellectual mediation—led me to a more nuanced set of expectations.

Over those few years, witnessing first an impressive but ultimately compromised strike by janitors, then through successive World Social Fora, a Global Day of Action, the start of the Iraq War, the emergence of global outsourcing as a standard business operating procedure, the fitful rise of immigrant worker centers and related anti-immigrant hysteria, successive union restructurings, and ongoing contingentization of higher education work, Tim caused me first to question these notions and search for alternatives.

In reacting to these big events and social processes, we reacted as best a network could. NAAFE convened gatherings out of which a major day-laborer network started, organized national Days of Action connecting homeless workers and the building trades to target *Labor Ready*, co-sponsored effective “Equity Weeks” on campuses in the US and Canada, explored organizing models for global solidarity among high-tech workers, and theorized about the work in carefully chosen working papers. Three that the staff co-authored really reflected the state of our thinking and practice: “Making Networks Work”; “Outsource This? American Workers, the Jobs Deficit and Fair Globalization”; “The Future of the World Social Forum Process”.

As these lists suggest, Tim and NAAFE had a lot to think about! To the pleasure and education of Tim’s co-workers, the thinking was an everyday conversation sometimes lasting hours. If Tim was a great talker, it must also be recognized that he was a great listener.

For me, the conversations were always illuminating but, to be frank, often frustrating. Where I sought clarity and definition, Tim widened the lens, reducing clarity in favor of something bigger: revelation of connections and the inter-relatedness of things. Instead of the finality sought by the organizer in me, Tim offered our conversations an open-endedness that favored greater investigation, and yes, further conversation!

But this also had great practical application. Combining his careful listening with a street-smart shrewdness with respect to intentions, Tim could often foster working compromises and valuable cooperation between seemingly disparate forces. It was always a matter of careful framing... In this sense, he anticipated but went well beyond the Lakoff-inspired clichés popular at the time. At a conceptual level he was inspired by the work of Alberto Melucci—an Italian social psychologist who understood the socially constitutive role of our frames; but in day-to-day negotiations, Tim readily uncovered motives and ambitions. I came to see him as a kind of “Kremlinologist” of everyday life—quickly surmising meanings and uncovering paradoxical actions. So it was that in choosing a newsletter headline or writing an e-mail to two opposing factions, I could always turn to his cubicle for a suggestion.

In a frank moment, Tim explained the practical value of ambiguity and his characteristically open-ended formulations. In a world where one holds a somewhat unique perspective, one not necessarily shared by others, it is possible to collaborate and work together only with a certain amount of “finesse,” a favorite word of Tim’s. In working with day-labor organizations representing mostly undocumented immigrant workers and contingent faculty groups representing mostly highly credentialed professionals, the value of Tim’s “finesse” was to prevent messy details (of the immediate and short term) from obscuring the

fundamental social truths uniting working people. In these matters he regularly returned to Sartre's distinctions between "series," "fused groups" and collectives.

But common sense born of everyday life meant that hard conversations were needed and much of what we confronted in NAAFE required these. What Tim recognized before many others is that much work must be done to create the space needed for these conversations. One topic, for example, that he always demanded that we think about carefully concerned how we balance our commitment to a wage floor with the rights of immigrants to employment. But Tim never surrendered the fundamental rights of immigrants in a globalized economy based on the "global jobs deficit" (a phrase Tim borrowed from the International Labor Organization).

Going to India, at the start of 2004, we asked the same question as we worked on the problem of outsourcing and its impact on the welfare of workers. We were able to convene a meeting involving British service workers' unions, a new Indian trade union organizing projects and Indian intellectuals concerned about the deeper implications of new software. We often had to interpret between different intellectual traditions and new technological developments. In one challenge, we had to connect someone working in the traditional Marxist framework concerned with the development of "productive forces" in the "base" with a software engineer thinking about free and open source software. In this Tim was a quick study, readily assimilating the concepts of the then nascent Web 2.0.

In fact, although he could often find web sites bewildering, Tim enthusiastically embraced its opportunities which connected easily with his wide range of interests and ability to switch between issues, between windows.

Just as easily as the last few paragraphs moved from the topics of globalization, migration, outsourcing and technological transitions, so too did NAAFE have to act as a network. In Tim's words, a "network had to turn on a dime" - a n amusing analogy for a trucker! We explored this point in the "Making Networks Work" paper. But, of course, this has severe (even dire) organizational consequences. It means challenging past praxis (the "practico-inert" that Tim's favorite thinker identified) in order to be authentic to current demands. Tim's protogé, Jason Pramas would later develop this idea in a somewhat different direction, dubbing it, with characteristic flair, "the kamikaze non-profit." In both cases, they were concerned that organizations not display a bureaucratic unwillingness to change because the organization had accrued certain resources, relationships or interests. As Tim put it to Kim Foltz and myself in 2005, "when you see an opportunity, you must jump on it."

Tim saw the network form of organization as equal to this task. NAAFE, he insisted had to remain extremely lean, deepening connections between its members but never becoming the mediator of these relations. We explored this in great depth and recognized the gaps that existed. We agreed on an unsatisfactory and unsettling idea that I proposed: the organizational form of the network does not guarantee that its managers will behave in ways that foster network-style solutions. Indeed, the contrary is very likely: they could substitute themselves for the network even while acting in good faith to promote the network. The solution we spelled out in "Making Networks Work" was to develop an *ethics* of network management. We framed this in terms of a number of norms or "netiquette."

This stewardship of the network idea and NAAFE was a direct response to the life cycle of social movements that Tim took out of Sartre: the network may propel a passive "series" of organizations and individuals (Sartre's illustration was the line of people waiting for the bus; it is a group but the individuals therein are not connected with each other) into a "fused group" in which there is a unity

(though not necessarily of purpose). Here the framing and communication functions of the network are the drivers. However, because it allows groups to opt in and out, the network does not move inevitably onto becoming a “pledged group” held together by a set of rituals or charismatic authority. But organizations, which I believe Tim saw as “pledged groups,” could never exert control over his conscience. In the run up to the Iraq War, when we were desperately concerned with keeping the organization financially afloat, Tim could concentrate his attention on the issues that were most pertinent to our deeper human commitments. So every morning for the first 3 months of 2003, Tim would be glued to his monitor interrupting others only to let them know about the latest developments in the war drive. His lunch break was an opportunity to summarize and analyze the morning’s war frenzy in a social way. He discovered the best sites on the war and shared these widely. Early on he found a brilliant Russian site (now disbanded) called [www.IraqWar.ru](http://www.IraqWar.ru) and used it to tease out the realities obscured by the electronic propaganda machine. I recall several journalists following up with him to get the source for this or that fact *about the war*.

Across these experiences, travels, and sharing of perspectives, I came to understand, accept, although never *fully* agree with, Tim’s thinking about how people change the world. To the frustration of many, Tim rejected what all of us called the “organize-organize” model. Tim thought working people organized themselves. Period. Not unions, not political parties, certainly not NGOs nor intellectuals.

But he was sympathetic to a wide variety of organizing experiments. He believed that working people may find value in one or more of these projects. But here’s the rub: were this or that model to resonate with people, he often pointed out, it would be *in spite of the intentions* of the organizers. Modern organizers he thought should be about connecting efforts and when projects or practices emerged that seem promising, it was the duty of network organizers’ to share it with the world. This diffusion of practices may help spur the growth of authentic social movements.

But this was something that was hard to share with potential funders. Although Tim was personally close to and fond of several foundation program officers, by and large, he was deeply cynical about their world. Together the NAAFE and CCW staff bemoaned the unwillingness of funders to come to terms with futility of the “organize-organize,” “outcomes-oriented” mentality. This often resulted in an impossible dualism across many relationships.

For NAAFE, this perspective on foundations, their officers and consultants engendered an unfortunate fatalism. As program officers changed, as fads masquerading as “strategic rethinks” came and went, the challenges facing working people remained. Organizations, their leaders and their wards, rose and fell, the desperation remained. In more cynical moments, Tim joked about new frames to lure funding, but more seriously, he was concerned about developing a new frame adequate to a moment defined by the end of neo-liberal globalization and the rise (at that time) of neo-conservative adventurism and an over-reaching imperial America. To this reality, he had to educate many an impatient foundation program officer.

I think that Tim saw himself playing a role similar that which Jameson assigns to Sartre as a philosopher. In relation to social scientists and historians, Jameson writes that Sartre was, “looking over their shoulders.” In looking at the world mediated by organizers and funders, Tim was a diligent watchman always identifying what was valuable for the rest of us, but also confiding his concerns.

One thing that we bemoaned was the failure of organizers to challenge the dominant world view and present their concerns as problems at the heart of society... And the solutions to their problems and the

solutions to society's problems. We had always expected, for example, that the contingent academics would connect the rise of precarious employment on the campuses as intimately related to the need to defend public education. Unfortunately, this occurred in only isolated cases, with neither of the major collective bargaining organizations in higher education taking this up. Instead, mechanistic models of social change which ignored ideas and opportunities prevailed. And the same perspective was reinforced by the foundations in a self-fulfilling cycle of funding, organizing and "victories."

In all of this, Tim always maintained a strong sense of humor while being strongly opposed to the sentimentality of our social change movements. This outlook extended well beyond the borders of the US. I can remember walking, in 2003, into Gigantinho (a large stadium used by the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre). It was rich in political symbolism... Thousands of young Brazilians enthusiastic about Lula's election victory, singing John Lennon's "Imagine" and providing Noam Chomsky with a rock star welcome. Through it all, Tim smiled to himself and commented on the irony that all these individuals promised something authentic—indeed a world without illusions—but even at as heady a gathering as the World Social Forum they became symbols of themselves. This prompted his characteristic chuckle and shrewd grin!

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<sup>i</sup> The network understood contingent work to include temp work, day labor, contract employment and part-time work. It is also sometime referred to "precarious employment"; in practice, NAAFE came to understand high turnover, low-income jobs, forms of domestic labor and work under threat of outsourcing, as "contingent" or "non-standard" employment.

<sup>ii</sup> Steven Greenhouse "Tim Costello, Trucker-Author Who Fought Globalization, Dies at 64" <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/us/26costello.html>. Of course, Tim would have quibbled with the title, he embraced globalization while rejecting the corporate domination driving the process in preference for the global networking of labor, peace, environmental and social justice movements. But the article is worthy of both its author and subject, concluding as it does with a line that that could have come from Tim: "He thought that if you're on the left... you'll be working at it for the rest of your life, and you may not be successful, but it would be worth the effort." That was it: at once inscrutable yet somehow true to our intuition.