

# Abraham (Al) Nash

*September 16, 1915 — August 3, 1996*

Al Nash is remembered by his friends and colleagues as a social activist, an inspirational teacher, and an insightful writer on political and labor related issues. He was born in Baltimore, Maryland to parents who were working class immigrants from Italy and Russia. His family moved to New York City where Al attended De Witt Clinton High School. After graduation, he became involved in radical politics. Like many of his generation he was initially inspired by ideals of the Russian revolution but later disillusioned by the results. When he managed a labor bookstore in Greenwich Village, he was reputed to read every title that came in the store. Not only well read but also highly articulate, Al spoke on street corners and organized anti-Nazi and pro-socialist rallies and meetings.

At the outbreak of World War II, he went to work at the Brewster Aircraft Plant on Long Island where he was elected as a steward in the United Automobile Workers, a union connection he maintained throughout his life. Drafted into the army, he found it ironic that he was assigned to guard former Nazi officials in a prisoner of war camp in Germany. He also tried to organize his fellow soldiers into a union. After discharge from military service, Al moved to Detroit to work in the Chrysler Corporation's Jefferson Plant where he was elected chief steward of UAW Local 7. His subsequent career encompassed staff positions in several unions where he organized and represented diverse occupations including electrical manufacturing, municipal employment and social workers.

From his earliest years in the labor movement, Al gave priority to worker education and was increasingly involved in teaching not only in the unions with which he was affiliated but in university sponsored courses at Rutgers and Cornell University. His thirst for knowledge led him to complete his formal education enrolling at age 40. He earned a B.A. degree from Columbia College, an M.A. degree from New York University, and a Ph.D. degree in Sociology from Columbia University, graduating at age 57.

In 1966, he joined the ILR Extension faculty in New York City where he continued until his retirement in 1985. He was revered by the labor union leaders and activists who participated in his classes. For example, when Harry Van Arsdale, Jr., headed the New York City Central Labor Council, Al Nash was asked to train leaders of newly organized Taxi Drivers and Hospital Workers and was credited with playing a key role in foundation of these unions.

Always the social activist, Al Nash conducted Cornell conferences that dealt with controversial political and economic issues. For example at a time of conflict in the 1960s, he organized a major dialogue between leaders

of the civil rights movement and labor unions. Dedicated to building union strength, he was also committed to union reform, serving for many years as an active board member of the Association for Union Democracy which monitors union practices and provides assistance to union members who seek to exercise their democratic rights.

In 1974, in recognition of his excellence in teaching and scholarship, Al Nash became a full Professor in the ILR School's Department of Extension. His published works dealt with adult and labor education, organizational change and quality of work life.

Among his accomplishments as a labor educator at Cornell was the leadership he provided in the establishment of courses for university credit for adult students in New York City. He directed and taught in the Labor Relations Certificate Program, which ILR offered in cooperation with Empire State College (SUNY). Citing his contributions, Empire hailed him as "a distinguished labor educator who dedicated his life to the advancement of working people." The United Auto Workers, with which he had an association throughout his adult life, paid tribute to him as "a labor organizer, teacher and writer whose vision of social economic justice in a world of peace inspires us all."

Most of all, he was admired by the hundreds of students for whom he served as mentor and role model and with whom he empathized as a lifelong labor activist who completed his own education while working full time.

Al Nash is survived by two children, Paul and Margo, who have endowed an essay prize for labor studies students in his name, a fitting tribute to their father.

*Ron Donovan, Phil Ross, Lois Gray*