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2008

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Bennet Zurofsky sings the praises of the labor movement—literally

by STAN SINBERG

photography by LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

LOOK

for the Union Label

The Christmas shoppers outside the Walt Disney store in a South Jersey mall were initially delighted by the merry band of musicians performing what they thought was “It’s a Small World After All.” But then they read the leaflet protesting sweatshop labor conditions in Haiti and realized the group was singing, “It’s a small *wage* after all.” Someone called mall security and a security guard asked who was in charge. With a wave of his right hand, Bennet Zurofsky, career labor and union lawyer, indicated he was. With his left, Bennet Zurofsky, political activist and director of the Solidarity Singers of the New Jersey Industrial Union Council (NJIUC), continued conducting.

THE SOLIDARITY SINGERS formed in December 1995 when Zurofsky and the NJIUC were busing around New Jersey, going to a variety of demonstrations in support of strikers in Decatur, Ill., “a war zone between management and labor.” Several companies in Decatur were targeted for their employee practices, and Zurofsky and other activists demonstrated at places in New Jersey where they had branches or sold products. On the picket lines they sang Christmas song parodies from a book Zurofsky brought along. It was such a hit they formed the group, which has between 10 and 30 members and averages about 35 mostly unpaid gigs on picket lines and protest rallies a year. “We generally go where we’re invited,” he says. But even organizers can have difficulty organizing. “It’s harder to get members to rehearsals than to demonstrations,” he says.

With his long gray beard, passion for picket lines and Eastern-European-sounding name, Zurofsky seems a direct descendant of a wild-eyed Bolshevik revolutionary. But he isn’t. The 57-year-old labor and employment lawyer at Reitman Parsonnet was born in Newark, where his father, Jack, worked as a ghost writer for the Jewish Federation of Essex County and later for the

Anti-Defamation League, working with the speechwriters for such prominent politicians as Hubert Humphrey and writing speeches for Hollywood stars like Elizabeth Taylor, “making them sound like they knew what the issues were.” His mother, Lillian, taught disadvantaged Title 1 students and volunteered for SANE, a nuclear disarmament group. “Both my parents had a real dedication to doing some good.”

His parents took him to a Pete Seeger children’s concert when he was 6 and when he was about 12 gave him a subscription to *Sing Out!* magazine, which was founded by Seeger, Woody Guthrie and Paul Robeson, among others. Zurofsky immediately fell in love with the folk music and taught himself to sing and play along. His political engagement, he insists, didn’t coalesce as quickly. “My politics developed organically through the years,” he says, noting, “I started to get involved after JFK was assassinated.” He took part in Vietnam War protests.

Zurofsky graduated from Rutgers in 1973 and decided to pursue music professionally. He sang in churches, synagogues, historical societies, school assemblies, wherever he could find an audience. “Just like you need a certain number of plumbers, I was trying to fulfill northern New Jersey’s need for folk singers,” he says with a laugh.

After several years, he realized folk singers had limited career trajectories, and he wanted to find his own way to do some good. Law school made sense. As a byproduct of his decision, “I made my parents very happy,” he says.

During his first year at Rutgers Law School, he met Susan Vercheak, whom he married in 1979, and who, later, serving as section chief for the public utilities section of the New Jersey attorney general’s office, was successful in stopping an Exelon-PSE&G merger. “She’s a more powerful lawyer than me,” he says. Today the couple has a set of twins in their 20s.

Zurofsky averages
35 picket-line
performances a year.



Knowing he wanted to be a “movement lawyer” but not knowing what kind, Zurofsky took the advice of U.S. District Judge Harold A. Ackerman, for whom he clerked after graduating from law school. Ackerman told him, “Labor law firms are the only institution on the left that supports lawyers with a decent living, and will be tolerant of your views on other issues.” Ackerman recommended Zurofsky to Sid Reitman, who hired him.

Zurofsky’s time as a labor lawyer has coincided with a decline in the strength of unions in the United States. When he began practicing in 1982, New Jersey was home to one GM and two Ford plants, numerous electronic manufacturing plants and a thriving garment industry. Today, they’ve all shut down or migrated overseas.

singing, giving speeches and helping with legal issues. And in his spare *spare* time, he listens to classical and jazz music.

But really, what gets him up in the morning is keeping the labor movement alive and relevant, especially to young people.

“A great failure of American education is students are taught very little about work,” he says. “High school graduates don’t know the first thing about what it is to be an employee in terms of rules, their rights or what a union is, let alone a history of how those rights got to be there. It’s a big job.”

He exhales, and in his office adorned with pictures of such labor luminaries as Woody Guthrie and Joe Hill, looks at the pile of paperwork before him. Then he laughs.

“But first I have to organize my desk.” ◀

“We were involved in negotiating the shutdown of the last silk mill in Paterson, which used to be known as ‘Silk City.’ It’s very sad,” he says.

But he dismisses suggestions that unions are to blame for industry flight. “Non-union shops in the garment industry closed faster than union shops, and the industry doesn’t exist anymore in North Carolina, which is a notoriously non-union state,” he says.

He considers advanced mechanization, cheap overseas labor and lax environmental regulations abroad to be the primary causes of declining union rolls. “Look at China,” he says. “They throw their waste wherever they want.”

Not making things any easier, he says, megacompanies like Wal-Mart, which Zurofsky describes as “extremely union-hostile,” build primarily in rural areas with widespread populations, making organizing more difficult. “To have strength, you need numbers,” he says.

Still, he proudly notes that New Jersey has retained twice the national percentage of unionized workers.

IN HIS SPARE time, he makes himself available to various groups involved in the “Impeach Bush-Cheney” movement by