

**Excerpt from oral history interview with civil rights leader and union organizer
Jack O'Dell (August 5, 1993)**

There were lynchings going on in the south of veterans returning from World War II. Segregation was still up. What had begun to emerge in the country was an assault on racism coming out of World War II by the NAACP and Unions. And the segregationists defended segregation by saying they weren't against blacks —they weren't against equal rights for blacks —they were against communism. But their interpretation of Communist was anybody who supported the right of blacks to have civil rights. While most blacks didn't join the Communist Party, they understood that the Communists were the fighters. And they knew individual Communists who were fighters, and they were black and white and Latino, and so forth. And with this anti-Communism that now was becoming the state religion and with the persecution of the Communists, I just said, well to show where I'm at I'll join the communists. I'll join the Communist Party. And I did, and I remained an active member of the Party for about seven years.

I was first and foremost a person with the African-American experience. I knew living in the north and I knew living in the south and I knew the contradiction that this country was living with great hypocrisy. Secondly, I was viewing this as a trade Unionist because militancy of the trade Union movement appealed to me. I knew you had to fight and you had to fight in an organized way and you had to fight with a weapon. And for me the weapon was the Union. So the fight to keep the Union true to the course that it had set for itself was of great priority. Thirdly, I found within the Union a left called Communists and other variations of that which I respected....

I've never taken a census, but I never met a black person who was in the Communist Party because of the Soviet Union. We joined the Communist Party because they fought against racism and they were dependable in that fight. And they were Union builders. They were mass movement organized builders. And I knew that as an individual you were strengthened by the fact of unity with other people. So it was precisely that perspective that led me into a relationship to the left.

Source: Jack O'Dell, interviewed by Sam Sills, August 5, 1993, transcript. Available at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6927/>. Last Accessed December 5, 2008.