

ABRAHAM
JOHANNES
MUSTE
1885-1967

A.J. Muste's passion for peace and equality provide the Institute with a spiritual core. His activism, which remained energetic until the day he died, is a model for our projects. And his lifelong ability to question and change informs our own dynamism.

A.J. was born in Holland but raised in the United States by parents who believed strongly in the Calvinist traditions of the Dutch Reformed Church. He himself was ordained a minister in that church. Soon afterward he married, and he and his wife became the parents of three. His young adulthood was characterized by the traditional and conservative.

By the time he turned thirty, however, A.J. had made fundamental changes in his belief system, from voting for presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs to becoming a Quaker and preaching pacifism to his Congregationalist congregation. He also was working with the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union and providing support for the great labor strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Union activism led him to the directorship of the Brookwood Labor College at Katonah, New York, an educational institution of major historical importance whose curriculum consisted of the theory and practice of labor militancy.

Next, A.J. helped form the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, a revolutionary group. This marked the beginning of a period in his life when he abandoned Christian pacifism for Marxism and actively worked for revolution within the United States. In the 1930s he merged his own political group, the American Workers Party, with James Cannon's Trotskyist Workers Party of America.

Apparently not totally comfortable



*A.J. Muste
speaking at a
rally at the
Pentagon, 1965.*

with his sharp political shift, A.J. travelled to Europe and met with Leon Trotsky. By the time he had sailed home, A.J. was once again a Christian pacifist. He became head of the Presbyterian Labor Temple on Fourteenth Street in Manhattan and Executive Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a post he held until 1953.

For the next two decades, A.J. immersed himself in the controversial political issues of the times. He was a fervent supporter of World War Two conscientious objectors and resisters, an equally vociferous opponent of the Cold War politics that characterized the 1950s, and a militant resister of the growing nuclear arms race. His efforts to promote unilateral disarmament were coupled with civil rights activities; under A.J.'s leadership, FOR helped found CORE, the first of the militant civil rights groups. Later, A.J. served as mentor to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King.

Although A.J. certainly had a full agenda by just working against inequality and militarism in the U.S., he