

Abraham Johannes Muste, born on January 8, 1885, died on February 11, 1967. Known to the public as A.J. Muste and to his friends and associates simply as "A.J.," he was a remarkable and in some ways enigmatic figure bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Born in Holland, he was brought to the U.S. as a child of six and raised by a Republican family in the strict Calvinist traditions of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1909 he was ordained a minister in that church, and married Anna Huizenga, with whom he was to share the next 40 years and raise three children. In the normal course of events Muste would have lived out his life within those conservative limits, perhaps with theological distinction, but without great impact on the temporal world. His record at the time of his ordination: class valedictorian at Hope College, captain of the basketball team, a magna cum laude degree from Union Theological Seminary.

Yet, A.J. soon made a decision that would begin a lifetime of carefully considered radical activism. In the 1912 presidential election he cast his vote for Eugene Victor Debs. In 1914, increasingly uncomfortable with the Reformed Church, he became pastor of a Congregational Church. When war broke out in Europe, A.J. became a pacifist, inspired by the Christian mysticism of the Quakers. Three years later these beliefs cost him his church. He then started working with the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union in Boston, and took a church post with the Friends in Providence. In 1919, when the textile industry strikers appealed for help from the religious community, he suddenly found himself thrust into the center of the great labor strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts. In the early 1920s A.J. became director of the Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York. This school was of enormous importance in labor history; its curriculum consisted of the theory and practice of labor militancy—so much so that the American Federation of Labor found Brookwood Labor College a considerable embarrassment. The young Dutch Reformed minister had become a respected—and controversial—figure in the trade union movement.

For several years during the 1920s he served as Chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation but steadily drifted toward revolutionary politics, and in 1929 he helped form the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA), seeking to reform the AF of L from within. When the Depression broke like a storm over America, the CPLA became openly revolutionary and was instrumental in forming the American Workers Party in 1933—a "democratically organized revolutionary party" in which A.J. played the leading role.

A.J. had now completed one stage of his evolution, from conservative young pastor to revolutionary American Marxist. He abandoned his Christian pacifism and became an avowed Marxist-Leninist. He was a key figure in organizing the sit-down strikes of the 1930s and, cooperating with James Cannon of the Trotskyist movement, he merged his own political group with Cannon's, forming the Trotskyist Workers Party of America.

At this point something occurred in A.J.'s life which cannot be fully explained. In 1936, troubled by certain questions regarding



revolutionary activity, he took a ship to Europe, where, in Norway, he met with Leon Trotsky. He had left the U.S. as a Marxist-Leninist, but returned that same year as a Christian pacifist. It is not clear what caused the religious experience he had on the trip, but he was deeply changed. For the second time in his life, A.J. burned his bridges behind him, although he did remain active in the labor movement, heading the Presbyterian Labor Temple on 14th Street in Manhattan. In 1940 he became Executive Secretary of the religious pacifist organization, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a post he held until 1953.

The period from 1940 to 1953 was, in its own way, as turbulent as the 1930s. It covered the war years, the beginning of the Cold War, the McCarthy period. Under A.J.'s leadership, FOR stimulated the organization of the Congress on Racial Equality, the first of the militant civil rights groups. At the age of 68 A.J. "retired." The year was 1953 and for most persons life would have been filled with enough risk, enough drama, to permit settling into a respected twilight period. He had lived through the Depression as a major radical leader, heavily influenced the labor movement, and had opposed two world wars. He had rallied American pacifists in their darkest hours of World War II, defending young men who refused military service, fighting complex theological battles with those who sought to place the moral weight of Christianity at the disposal of the State. Yet, he remained virtually unknown to the general public. He was considered by those who worked with him to have one of the sharpest political minds in America. But it was an almost perversely prophetic mind, taking him always one step beyond the point the general public—or even his followers—was prepared to go. His associates learned from him directly—from discussions, the dialogues, and actions which marked their relationships with him. He wrote several books, but he communicated—and influenced—best on a personal level.

A.J.'s life after retirement was not rich with honors but with action. He continued for nearly another twenty years to trouble the society around him. He became the leader of the Committee for Nonviolent Action, an organization whose members sailed ships into nuclear test zones in the Pacific, hopped barbed wire fences into nuclear installations in this country, and went out in rowboats to try to block the launching of American nuclear submarines. In 1961 a team of pacifists completed an extraordinary walk all the way from San Francisco to Moscow, and thanks largely to the diplomacy of A.J., was able to carry the message of unilateral disarmament not only to towns all across the country, but even into Moscow's Red Square.

A.J. was close to the emerging liberation movements in Africa, and helped organize the World Peace Brigade which worked closely with Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. African leaders often met first with A.J. on their visits to this country—and only later with the State Department. A.J. served as close friend and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife, Coretta Scott King.

But it was with the onset of the Vietnam War and its fierce popular opposition that A.J. entered what may have been the most active