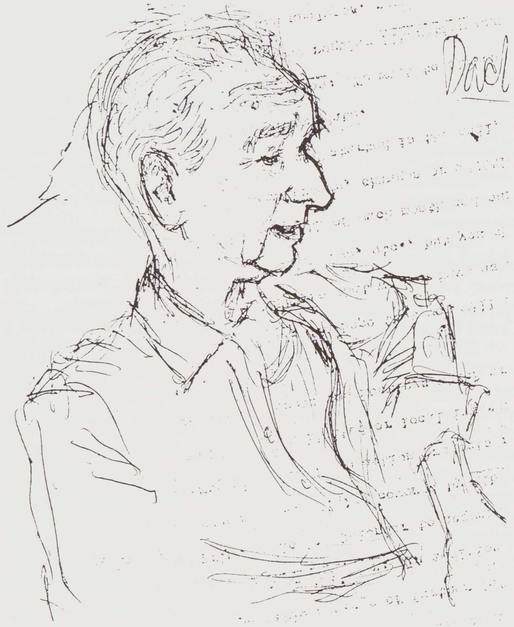

Jim Forest

At an editorial meeting of *Liberation* magazine, 1963.

A.J. Muste

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. 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 he soon began to veer onto a path that would ultimately take him, only weeks before his death, to a meeting with Ho Chi Minh in the Old French Governor's Palace in Hanoi. In 1912, just four years after his ordination, he cast his vote for Eugene Victor Debs. In 1914, increasingly uncomfortable with the Reformed Church, he became pastor of a Congregational Church and, when war broke out in Europe, A.J. became a pacifist, inspired by the Christian mysticism of the Quakers. Because of his pacifist beliefs, he lost his church in 1917. He

started work with the fledgling American Civil Liberties Union in Boston, took a church post with the Friends in Providence. In 1919, when the 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 1920's A.J. became director of the Brookwood Labor College at 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 A.F.L. found Brookwood Labor College a considerable source of embarrassment. The young Dutch Reformed Minister had become a respected – and controversial – figure in the trade union movement.

For several years during the 1920's he served as Chairman of the Fellowship of Reconciliation but he steadily drifted toward revolutionary politics and in 1929 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 in 1933 was instrumental in forming the American Workers Party – 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 30's 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, a man whose name is forever associated with the turbulence of radical activity in the 1930's. He returned to the U.S. that same year as a Christian pacifist. It is not clear what caused the religious experience he had on the ship – but he was deeply changed and he had, for the second time in his life, burned his bridges behind him. 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 Fellowship of Reconciliation, a post he held until 1953.

The period from 1940 to 1953 was, in its own way, as turbulent as the 1930's. It covered the war years, the beginning of the Cold War, the McCarthy period. Under A.J.'s leadership, FOR stimulated the organization of CORE, 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