

Guide to the Caroline Decker Gladstein Oral History

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- California Historical Society
- North Baker Research Library
- 678 Mission Street
- San Francisco, California 94105-4014
- Phone: (415) 357-1848, ext. 220
- Fax: (415) 357-1850
- Email: reference@calhist.org
- URL: <http://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org/>

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Biography

Born in 1912 in Macon, Georgia, of immigrant Jewish Eastern European parents, Caroline Decker Gladstein became involved with radical politics and trade union organizing in her early teens through the influence of her older brother, then a student at Columbia University in New York City, and her older sister who was a national officer of the left-wing Workers' International Relief organization. After moving with her

family to Syracuse, N.Y. at age 12, Gladstein met many of the leaders of left-wing organizations who were offered hospitality in her parents' home. She joined the Young Communist League in her teens, helped organize cigar workers and shoe workers in Binghamton, N.Y. and became a speaker at such events as International Women's Day.

She took part in the first New York State Hunger March and in demonstrations of unemployed in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area at the start of the Depression and became active in organizing unemployed councils and foreign language-speaking groups of workers in Syracuse, N.Y. She took an active role in the first National Hunger March on Washington, D.C. and had the responsibility of finding food and shelter for 2000 marchers who came from the West Coast.

Through her sister's involvement with relief efforts for the striking miners in Harlan County in 1930, Gladstein went South to work at the Harlan County Strike headquarters in Knoxville, Tennessee, helping organize miners and textile workers in that area and working on obtaining support and relief funds. Following this period, she returned to the Pittsburgh area and served as secretary to the Communist Party district director, working to organize unemployed councils and steelworkers unions in that area. During this period, she took an active role in the International Youth Day March to Youngstown, Ohio, which became a bloody battle when marchers were attacked by the "iron and steel" police employed by the steel corporations.

Early in the thirties, Gladstein went to California with the Free Tom Mooney Delegation and became involved with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, as its secretary, organizing migrants in camps throughout California and taking part in the 1932 Cherry Pickers' Strike, the 1934 Apricot Pickers Strike and the Cotton Pickers' Strike of that period. She organized a national 30-day training school in agricultural organizing for workers and Communist Party members which lasted for a few years.

In 1934, Gladstein was sentenced to prison under the California Criminal Syndicalism Act and spent three years in jail. Following her release, she became a legal secretary, married Richard Gladstein, a labor and civil rights lawyer, and raised four children. She considers herself primarily a trade union organizer who feels strongly that "workers will learn from experience" and that "if there are radical social changes, it will come as a result of the experiences that they [the workers] have had, not because somebody is going to superimpose it from the top."

- American Federation of Labor (AF of L), 89-92 Nathan, -, 89
- Anarchists, 69
- Associated Farmers, 19, 75
- Blacks, 10, 28, 41, 55, 60, 65
- Black Lists, 22-23
- Books
 - *Factories in the Fields* (Carey McWilliams), 19
 - *War and Peace* (Leo Tolstoi), 52
- Browder, Earl, 91-92
- Callahan, Pat, 69, 73
- Chambers, Pat, 71, 76, 86, 94
- Communist Party, USA (CP), 37, 40, 42, 44-45, 48-55, 60, 65, 67-70, 77, 79, 83, 89-92, 94-97
 - International House, 32
 - Red International of Labor Unions, 29
 - See also Organizing; Unemployed Councils; Young Communist League
- Communists, 22, 25, 28, 37, 39, 50
 - Bloor, Mother, 48
 - Flynn, Elizabeth Gurley, 48
 - Jackson, Harry, 55
 - Johnson, Rudolph, 37
 - Johnson, Tom, 58
 - Johnston (e?), Jack, 65
 - Michaelson, Clarissa, 60
 - Mooney, Tom, 67
 - Radek, Karl, 91
 - Stephens, Lincoln, 83
 - Winter, Ella, 83
 - Wright, Jack, 76
 - See also: Communist Party, USA

-
- Cannery and Agricultural Workers International Union (CAWIU), 50, 68-69, 71-72, 79, 82, 86-87, 89, 93-94
See also Strikes
 - Chavez, Cesar, 18a, 82, 93
 - Childbirth, 13-14
 - Colleges and Universities
 - Columbia University, 21
 - Merced State University, 18a
 - Mills College, 84
 - Syracuse University, 21, 27-28, 31-32, 45
 - University of California, Berkeley, 67, 88
 - Companies
 - Appalachian Textile Mills, 60
 - Ornamental Tronworks, 40
 - Youngstown Sheet and Tube, 66
 - Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), 91-93, 50
 - Cowley, Malcolm, 47
 - Criminal Syndicalist Laws and Trials (cs laws), 25, 39, 50, 70-71, 79, 90, 99, 103
 - Darcy, Sam, 68, 70, 79
 - Dreiser, Theodore, 59
 - Early Influences
 - education, 29, 31-32, 34-36, 45-46, 48, 101
 - first job, 100-101
 - moving, 26-27
 - Engels, Frederick, 40, 51
 - Family
 - aunts, 5, 8-9, 11-13, 15, 17-18, 24-26
 - children, 25, 101-103
 - cousins, 24, 26
 - father, 3-11, 14, 16, 21-23, 25, 32, 34, 78
 - grandfather, maternal, 1-3, 6-9, 13, 17-18, 20, 24
 - husband, 25, 37, 41, 84, 93, 102-103
 - mother, 1-18, 20-27, 30, 33-34, 42-43, 78
 - siblings, 8, 10-11, 17, 20-23, 29-32, 35, 42-44, 47-48, 50-52, 54-55, 57, 66, 77-78
 - uncles, 2, 4-10, 17, 24-26, 30, 41, 102
 - Farben Industry, 22-23
 - Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 62, 90
 - Feminism, 28-29, 33, 80, 82
See also Women Workers
 - Field, Sarah Bard, 47
 - Foster, William Z., 42
 - Geer, Will, 67-68
 - Gorky, Maxim, 7
 - Great Depression, 7-8, 21-22, 29, 32, 35, 45, 75, 77-78, 101
 - Hamburg, Alice and Sam, 88
 - Harlan County (Kentucky) Coal Strike (1930-31), 19, 28-29, 38, 47, 54-56, 58-62, 64, 78
 - Hitler, Adolph, 92
See also Nazism
 - Housework, 11, 15-16, 20-21, 27

-
- Hunger Marches, 36-39, 48, 50-51, 62, 100
 - International Women's Day, 33-34, 36, 52
 - International Youth Day, 51, 66-67
 - Jewish Community, 7, 17-18, 21, 24, 88
 - education, in, 3, 20-21
 - pogroms, 1
 - Russia, in, 1
 - Southern U.S., in, 2, 9-10
 - Syracuse, N.Y., in, 27-28
 - Ku Klux Klan (KKK), 10, 28, 55-56
 - Lenin, Nikolai (Vladimir), 35, 39, 40
 - Lenin Institute (Moscow), 48-49
 - Lincoln, Abraham, 60
 - Lovestone, Jay, 42
 - Macon, Georgia, 2, 4-5, 7, 9, 16, 24,
 - Malloy, Fred, 85
 - Marx, Karl, 40, 51, 94
 - Nazism, 22-23, 71
 - New York, 2, 4, 14, 21, 36
 - O'Neal, Louis, 73, 74
 - Organizing
 - Binghamton, N.Y. (cigar and shoe workers), 52-54, 68, 101, 103
 - Knoxville, Tn. (textile workers), 28, 56, 58-59
 - Pacific Gas and Electric (PGE), 19, 87
 - Pearl Harbor, bombing of, 101-102
 - Periodicals
 - The Nation, 86
 - San Francisco News, 72
 - Scripps Howard papers, 54, 56, 58, 71
 - Reed, Dr. Elsie Mitchell, 47, 64
 - Roosevelt, Franklin, 36
 - Russian Revolution, 4, 35
See also U.S.S.R.
 - Shaw, Bernard, 40
 - Simms, Harry, 47, 55
 - Stokes, Rose Pastor, 32, 42-44
 - Strikes
 - Brentwood (apricots) 1934, 89
 - Cotton, 18a, 70, 72, 74-76, 78, 83-87
 - Grape, 74-76, 83-84 Passaic, N.J. (textiles), 42
 - Salinas (lettuce), 74
 - San Francisco (longshoremen) 1934, 71, 79, 90
 - Santa Clara (cherries), 69, 71-72, 75
 - Santa Clara (pears) 1933, 28, 72-75 Tagus (peaches), 76, 94
 - Strong, Anna Louise, 47
 - Thomas Edison Company, 4
 - Tolstoi, Leo, 7
 - Trotskyites, 89-92

-
- Mini, Norman, 90
 - Nathan, -, 89
 - Solow, Herbert, 90
 - Unemployed Councils, 28, 31, 40, 48, 56, 62, 65, 68
 - Unemployment Insurance, 28, 38-39
 - U.S.S.R., 1, 20, 34-35, 46, 91-92
 - Unions, 28-29, 36, 39, 52, 94, 96, 103
 - International Ladies Garments Workers Union (ILGWU), 42
 - International Workers of the World (IWW), 47, 94
 - National Miners Union, 54-55
 - United Mine Workers (UMW), 66See also Cannery and Agricultural Workers International Union; Strikes
 - U.S. Government
 - Justice Department, 90
 - Social Security, 28 State Department, 23
 - Wagenknecht, Alfred, 30, 47-48, 78
 - Warnick, Jack, 67-68, 71, 79, 84
 - Weisbord, Albert, 42
 - White, Pearl, 74
 - Williams, Tennessee, 57
 - Women Workers, 53, 60, 80-84, 100
 - Workers International Relief (WIR), 29-30, 48, 55
 - World War I, 11, 14, 46, 64
 - Young Communist League, 33, 36, 50, 52, 65
 - Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), 30