

Countering McCarthyism: The Struggle Continues

an Interview with Lee Ross

by Linda J. Hoover

Attempts to silence dissent began early in our country's history with the Sedition Act and continue through today via the Patriot Act. Efforts to single out subgroups for extra surveillance and punishment for dissent are a tactic used across time. One such time was the McCarthy era, also known as the second Red Scare. The McCarthy era takes its name from the Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was a leading spokesperson for those willing to broadly define treason and to make accusations of treason against people organizing for a better life for themselves and others.

Lee Ross, longtime member of Women Against Military Madness (WAMM), shares recollections and observations about ordinary people and the attempts to silence them during the McCarthy era.

Lee is the youngest of three children born to parents from Tsarist Russia. Her parents moved first to Paris and the French Riviera before relocating to the United States during the World War I era. She was born, raised, and spent her young adult years on the Lower East Side of New York City, which was also home to many progressive activists and organizations, some of which Lee refers to in this interview. Lee attended Seward Park High School, the same school that Ethel Rosenberg had attended a decade earlier. (Ethel Rosenberg was executed for treason with her husband, Julius. She is believed to have been innocent and her children are attempting to have her posthumously exonerated.) Seward Park High had the largest number of union teachers in the city at a time when union membership was illegal. Lee recalls that Seward teachers demanded that the school open enrollment to students from Harlem, thus integrating the school. Lee lived in the New York area until she moved to Minnesota in the early 1980s.

Q: When you were asked to share your perspective on McCarthyism, you quickly replied, "Only if the interview is not about me. Only if I can relate McCarthyism to today." Why the quick response?

A: It is important for people to know there is continuity in these things. Each subsequent law got a little worse and each state had their own laws.

My husband was a Merchant Marine. His licenses were revoked because he refused to sign a loyalty oath to the U.S. government. I was a nurse then. I worked part-time at a hospital in New York and also had a second job with a temporary agency and went into people's homes to give medical injections like insulin and vitamins. I met people who supported McCarthy. A city official told one supporter, "Don't hitch your wagon to McCarthy's cart because when they want to get rid of him they will."

The block on which I lived had many people who were actively trying to do away with McCarthyism. My family was visited by the FBI and I refused to open the door. A friend of mine handled it better. When her family was visited by the FBI, she said of course they would cooperate. She told the FBI to send her a list of questions they wanted to ask and she would have her attorney look them over. The FBI left them alone after that.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn [a labor activist and a feminist who played a leading role in the Industrial Workers of the World and the Communist Party USA] lived down the street from us. Many progressive organizations had storefront offices. People just walked into them for conversations. The FBI hired a homeless guy to sit in a building and make a list of everyone who walked down the street. After the McCarthy era the offices of those organizations disappeared. People were afraid.

People need to know the bulk of the people who were questioned were totally innocent. They might have been union members or helped organize a union, but it never occurred to them to be anything other than American citizens. People who wanted to see a better world were labeled communists, un-American, and enemies. A lot of lives were destroyed. The important thing to get across is that these were ordinary people.

Q: Laws allowing surveillance have been around in the U.S. for over 200 years. President Truman said that McCarthyism “is the use of the Big Lie and the unfounded accusation against any citizen in the name of Americanism and security.”¹ What role did resistance have in mitigating the impact of laws that encouraged such accusations?

A: Resistance was difficult because so many people were arrested. If you signed a loyalty oath and then somebody said you were a communist, a labor leader, or that you had attended a May Day parade you could be charged with violating your oath. Ordinary people were often convicted in court and sent to prison. Others were summoned to appear before a Senate committee or the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). [People were accused of things they may or may not have thought or done and they were pressured into telling stories about other people.] I think it still has an impact on people today and some people are still afraid to speak out. That’s why I think the young people today are so wonderful in [not being afraid with] what they are doing.

There were resisters in the 1950s but they were isolated from each other, probably because of security, so they didn’t see the ripple effect. But we did coalesce around a lot of issues. My first visit to Washington, D.C., was to picket at the White House in support of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. I had just had a child and was attending events but not organizing them. I do not know who the organizers of the trip were. I do remember that we were given a sheet with the names of restaurants in Washington that would serve Black people. We were asked to eat only at those restaurants. Can you image this [segregation] happening in our nation’s capital?!

Another example of resistance that I recall was when I was a nurse and worked in a New York hospital. Two Jewish young men came in to be treated for injuries sustained at a demonstration against the war in Korea. The doctor was anti-Jewish. He said he was going to give both patients a spinal tap, [a painful procedure and] unrelated to the treatment needed by either man. I told the patients not to sign any consent to treatment form. On my lunch break I took a cab to the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee (NECLC) office. I told them the NECLC needed to help the young men get out of there, which is what they did.

Q: In 2015, a Foreignpolicy.com article noted that “over eight years, President Barack Obama has created the most intrusive surveillance apparatus in the world.”² Comparing the 1950s with today, what about surveillance looks the same or different?

A: I would not know how to answer that. I am not that involved (Lee is 90), but it seems to be much more widespread than it was in the 1950s due to technology.

Q: President-elect Trump's Energy Department transition team requested the names of staff who have worked on climate change and also the professional society memberships of lab workers, among other things. The Department refused to cooperate. Your thoughts about this?

A: The Energy Department employees are to be congratulated for standing up to Trump, but that is only a sign of things that may come. Makes a chill run down my spine because the Energy Department is mild enough, but what happens to the other departments? [Update: After this interview, on December 21, 2016, the Trump transition team asked the State Department to provide a list about gender-related staffing, programming, and funding. The State Department complied, directing staff to provide the Trump team with all information by 5:15 p.m. that day.]

Q: President Truman said that McCarthyism, among other things, "is the rise to power of the demagogue who lives on untruth."³ What does this statement bring to mind?

A: This is what has happened because of the periods of repressions. We know that under this kind of system it is going to happen again and again and again because those in power have a vested interest in retaining power. It means that people have to be ready to struggle, to be alert.

Q: Is the stress in the immigrant communities, and I'm thinking of the Somali community in Minneapolis, anywhere near the stress that was felt among the broader population during the McCarthy era?

A: First, I admire the Somali community. They have been able to organize to achieve goals which it took other immigrant groups a couple of generations to achieve. The stress is more intense because it is a small community. In a different time there might have been a pogrom against them, and thank goodness there isn't. I think they may become increasingly frightened and afraid to take action. I hope it doesn't happen. I hope they unite with other people to struggle against what might happen.

Q: We often say, "The struggle continues." What does that phrase mean to you, and reflecting on your life as a young adult during the McCarthy era, does anything spring to mind when you think about today?

A: Any struggle continues. It goes down generations. People have to engage their children and pass on to their children what the struggle is about. I was invited to speak at a university class and was asked what I would recommend to young people. I said, Get involved, stay involved. I may not agree with what you are involved in, but get involved. When they become involved they need to understand that one must *organize* against repression.

Linda J. Hoover is a member of the WAMM Newsletter Committee and a peace and justice activist.

Endnotes:

1. Doherty, Thomas. (2003). *Cool War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
2. Bamford, James (2016, September 7). Every Move You Make: Over eight years, President Barack Obama has created the most intrusive surveillance apparatus in the world. To what end? foreignpolicy.com
<http://tinyurl.com/jlnlp9l>
3. Ibid. Endnote no. 1