

The Fierce Life of Grace Holmes Carlson: Catholic, Socialist, Feminist

Donna T. Haverty-Stacke

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Donna Haverty-Stacke's biography of socialist leader and St. Paul native Grace Holmes Carlson (1906–1992) extends and deepens our understanding of the familial and religious roots of radical politics in Minnesota and its dogged attempts but ultimate failure to capture power during the Depression and World War II, the ensuing Cold War, and the social tumult of the 1960s.

Readers interested in Minnesota political history, the labor and civil rights movements, the Cold War, women's political participation, or religious engagement in social change will appreciate her story.

In this engrossing narrative, Haverty-Stacke captures Carlson's remarkable life and steely devotion through a skilled use of primary sources, including the Grace Carlson Papers at MNHS, interviews (some from the Minnesota Oral History Project), and previously unreleased FBI materials obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Born and raised in the Catholic working class of St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood, Carlson developed a worldview deeply stamped by her family's liberal Catholic support of labor and by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who taught her from grade school through college.

"Nothing is too good for the workers," Carlson often said (p. 221). Her radicalization crystalized during the 1934 Minneapolis truck drivers' strikes and while she was completing her doctorate at the University of Minnesota. There, she became convinced that nothing short of replacing capitalism through revolution by the working class would resolve America's endemic inequalities and injustices. Her Trotskyist views led her to the Socialist Workers Party, where her



gifts as a speaker, writer, and organizer quickly propelled her into leadership.

Carlson's fierce dedication to "the revolutionary potential of the American working class" and her conviction that socialism was "the realistic program of our epoch" for systemic economic and political change prompted her to stand for Congress in 1940, 1946, and 1950 and to run as the party's vice presidential candidate in 1948. "Capitalism is a great destroyer of human lives," she said in her 1940 campaign for the US Senate (p. 84). Remarkably clearheaded and often prescient, her work advanced public advocacy for women's rights, support for the nascent civil rights movement, skepticism of both warmongering and capitalist exploitation of the war economy, opposition to prevailing anticommunist demagoguery, and of course unrelenting support for unions and the cause of laborers.

She suffered for it. During successive waves of the Red Scare, the socialists attracted more attention from the FBI than from the public, it seemed, and Carlson was convicted in 1941 under the Smith Act and imprisoned for a year for advocating the violent overthrow of the US government.

Nationally known and respected, Carlson was nonetheless harassed and hounded by the authorities for decades, even after 1952, when a religious crisis precipitated by her father's death caused her to quit the Socialist Workers Party, take up her Catholic identity again, and overcome blacklisting to work with the Sisters of St. Joseph to establish and grow a new college (now part of the University of St. Catherine). At St. Catherine's, Carlson thrived again, and there her Catholic Marxism was further leavened by Catholic feminist theology to inform her teaching and continued activism against patriarchal capitalism, the repression of women, nuclear proliferation, and the Vietnam War.

Carlson's life shows it's all about community: With close attention to recent feminist studies on the particular dynamics of political engagement, Haverty-Stacke presents Carlson's lifelong radical dedication to the working class as expressed through a succession of conversions—first in the worker-supportive Catholicism of Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903), then to Marxism, to revolutionary socialism, and to Catholic feminism. At each stage, her activism was underpinned by close community and partnership with her family (especially with her sister, Dorothy), with her embattled colleagues in the close-knit socialist networks, and finally with the Catholic community at St. Catherine's.

Dusting off this figure from the pantheon of Minnesota political history, Haverty-Stacke allows Grace Carlson to shine again. In doing so, this lustrous biography also illuminates the religious motivation, the neighborhood sources, and the grassroots resonance of radical Minnesota politics, with its ability to shape and fuel a lifetime of dedication to the well-being of others based on its utopian yet often-contested vision of justice for all.

— J. Michael West



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