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POST POLITICS

Saul Alinsky Elementary School? How We Honor America's Radicals and Reformers

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Some day your child might attend **Saul Alinsky** Elementary School, named after the controversial community organizer from Chicago. Or perhaps **Gloria Steinem** Middle School. Or maybe **Pete Seeger** High.

Sound far-fetched?

Consider this: A daily newspaper in eastern Pennsylvania [recently published](#) an article that began: "The West Chester Bayard Rustin High School Science Olympiad team placed 14th out of 60 teams in the national competition last week."

The students at Rustin High have good reason to be proud of their accomplishments, but this prosaic story is otherwise unremarkable except that the school is named for a gay black man who was a pacifist and a socialist. Even more amazing is that it was a Republican-dominated school board, in a conservative district that's 89 percent white, that voted in 2002 to name the new school after West Chester's most famous native.

Rustin helped catalyze the civil rights movement with courageous acts of resistance. He spent most of World War II in federal prison as a conscientious objector. In 1947, the 35-year old Rustin, a founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), led a group of white and black radicals on the first freedom rides to challenge racial segregation on inter-state buses, and wound up serving 30 days in a North Carolina chain gang, one of many times he was arrested for civil disobedience. In 1963, Rustin was the chief behind-the-scenes organizer of the huge March on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech and which helped build the momentum to pass the landmark Civil Rights Act the following year.

During his activist heyday, when Rustin was much better known to the FBI than to the general public, it would have been impossible to imagine that his name would adorning a public high school, or that this year, 100 years after his birth and 25 years since his death, civil rights, gay rights and human rights groups are honoring him with conferences, museum exhibits, and other events.

At Rustin High, where a huge photo of him adorns one wall, teachers incorporate aspects of his life into their classes. Phyllis Simmons, the principal, insists, "Our students know who Bayard Rustin is."

A society that really wants to celebrate the life of an important figure -- to keep his or her memory alive in our collective psyche -- must do so publicly and permanently. We designate their birthdays as official holidays, name streets, schools and other buildings after them, teach about them in our schools and universities, and erect monuments to them (or tear them down when we want to *dis*-honor them, as Penn State just did in dismantling the Joe Paterno statue),

Bayard Rustin is only one of many radicals and progressives whose names and memory we honor in this way. Right after my book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, was published last month, I wondered how many of the people I profiled had school, streets, and other public spaces named after them. I discovered, to my surprise, that the list is quite long, although I'm sure I missed some. (If readers can identify some that I've overlooked, please post comments on this article. You can find the [list of the 100 greatest Americans](#) on the book's website).

Back in 1900, people who called for women's suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the right of workers to form unions, a progressive income tax, a federal minimum wage, old-age insurance, dismantling of Jim Crow laws, the eight-hour workday, and government-subsidized health care and housing were considered impractical idealists, utopian dreamers, or dangerous socialists. Now we take these ideas for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

How did this happen? Social movements transformed these (and many other) radical ideas from the margins to the mainstream, and from polemics to policy. Then we can honor the movement leaders, and their political allies, who have become more or less respectable.

We often forget that, in his day, in his own country, **Martin Luther King**, was considered a dangerous troublemaker. He was harassed by the FBI and vilified in the media. In 1983, fifteen years after his death, his birthday was declared a national holiday. (Even then, however, 90 members of the House and 22 members of the Senate voted against it). Every March 31, **César Chávez** Day is observed as a state holiday in California, and an optional holiday in several other states. In 2009, after the success of the Academy Award-winning Hollywood film, *Milk*, the California legislature designated May 22 as **Harvey Milk** Day in memory of the gay rights activist and San Francisco public official who was assassinated in 1978.

There are hundreds of public schools named for King. One of them is an elementary school in Milwaukee. It was originally (in 1931) named for **Victor Berger** -- a teacher, newspaper editor, and leader of the city's vibrant Socialist movement who in 1910 became the nation's first Socialist Congressman. But in 1992 the school district removed Berger's name and replaced it with King's. Not surprisingly, few Milwaukeeans today know about Berger's accomplishments and legacy.

Eugene Debs' home, which sits on the campus of Indiana State University in Terre Haute, is now a National Historic Landmark, but how many of the university's students, staff or even faculty can identify the early 20th century labor leader and Socialist Party presidential candidate was? In July 2001 the public square in front of San Francisco's Ferry Building -- where dockworkers once assembled for the despised shape-up -- was officially named **Harry Bridges Plaza**, but can anyone except labor history buffs tell you about this remarkable longtime leader of the International Longshoremens' and Warehousemen's Union?

There are many schools around the country named for **Theodore Roosevelt** and **Franklin Roosevelt**, both of whom are routinely discussed in history classes. There are many schools and buildings named for **Albert Einstein**, but how many people know that he was not only a great scientist but a committed radical? Ditto for **Helen Keller**, who is best known for being blind but who also had a radical social vision and was a committed feminist, pacifist, and Socialist.

How many students at **Jane Addams** Junior High School in Schaumburg, Ill.; **Hiram Johnson** High School in Sacramento, Calif.; **John Dewey** High School, **Norman Thomas** High School, **Fiorello La Guardia** High School and **Frances Perkins** Academy in New York City; **Thurgood Marshall** High Schools in San Francisco, Dayton, Ohio, and Missouri City, Texas; **Paul Robeson** Elementary School in Trenton and Robeson high schools in New York and Chicago, **Eleanor Roosevelt** High School in Greenbelt, Md.; **Langston Hughes** High School in Fairburn, Ga.; **Walter Reuther** High School in Kenosha, Wis.; **William J. Brennan** High School in San Antonio, Texas; **A. Philip Randolph** Elementary School in Atlanta; **Floyd Olson** Middle School in Minneapolis, Minn.; **Fannie Lou Hamer** Middle School in the Bronx, N.Y.; the **Paul and Sheila Wellstone** School in St. Paul, Minn.; the (private) **Ella Baker** School in New York, the high schools named for **W. E. B. Du Bois** in Milwaukee, Wis., Baltimore, Md., and Wake Forest, N.C.; the schools named for **Louis Brandeis** in New York City and San Antonio, and for **Rachel Carson** in New York City and Beaverton, Ore.; know much (if anything) about the lives and accomplishments of these towering progressive figures?

Some of the protestors in Madison, Wis., over the past year were reminded of their state's radical history by the bust of **Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette** that stands inside the state capitol where the demonstrations occurred.

Jackie Robinson's two alma maters -- UCLA and Pasadena City College -- named athletic facilities after their famous alum. A New York City middle school is named for the baseball and civil rights icon, and New York City renamed the Interboro Parkway in his honor. The former Brooklyn home of the Dodger great was declared a National Historic Landmark. In his hometown of Pasadena, a park, post office, and athletic field is named for Robinson, and there are huge busts of Jackie and his brother Mack (an Olympic medal winner) in front of Pasadena City Hall.

We admire these great Americans not only for their individual accomplishments but also because they were part of a mosaic of movements that helped make America a more humane, decent, inclusive society.

But there are many other radicals and reformers whose names ought to adorn buildings, streets, and statues not only to celebrate the past but to inspire us today and our children in the future. We ought to remember the good deeds and heroism of people like **Alice Hamilton**, **Florence Kelley**, **Upton Sinclair**, **Rose Schneiderman**, **Margaret Sanger**, **Alice Paul**, **A.J. Muste**, **Sidney Hillman**, **Myles Horton**, **Woody Guthrie**, **Dorothy Day**, **Arthur Miller**, **Studs Terkel**, **David Brower**, **Betty Friedan**, **Michael Harrington**, and others, as well as those who are still alive.

Americans need heroines and heroes to remind us that people and movements can overcome great obstacles and achieve great things.

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