



Wellman in later years.

Comrade in arms

**Honoring Saul Wellman:
War veteran, political
activist and professional
revolutionary**

by **Eric Waggoner**
5/18/2005



Saul Wellman in the Spanish Civil War.

[E-Mail this story to a friend](#)

[Print this story](#)

SEE ALSO

[More Film Stories](#)

[Document it yourself](#)
(5/18/2005)

[Crash course](#) (5/18/2005)

[Art bar](#) (3/9/2005)

[More from Eric Waggoner](#)

[Urban renewal](#) (5/11/2005)

[To be young, gifted and black](#) (5/11/2005)

[Living protest](#) (5/4/2005)

In March 1930 in New York's Union Square, the Communist Party led a massive worker demonstration, the largest in American history at the time. The clash between police and demonstrators made its way into newsreels nationwide. Saul Wellman was there.

During the Spanish Civil War in the '30s, the commissar of the volunteer army organized to fight the fascists was killed in action. Wellman was promoted in his place; he was later shot in the leg. Following Pearl Harbor, Wellman enlisted in the Army as a paratrooper; he went to Belgium to fight in the Battle of the Bulge, where he took shrapnel in the heart.

When the president of the Michigan Communist Party was jailed during the McCarthy era, Wellman assumed the office. He was later arrested, along with five other party leaders, under the Smith Act, which made it a federal offense to "knowingly or willfully advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability or propriety of overthrowing or destroying the government of the United States." The Michigan Six spent six months in Milan Prison before the high court overturned the convictions.

Metro Detroit might seem an unlikely adopted home for a man who, at age 16, decided to become a "professional revolutionary." But throughout his life, Wellman, who died in 2003 at age 90, went where he felt he was needed. When the Communist Party sent him to Detroit to get involved in the UAW, he came and stayed, even after the horrific revelations about Stalin's regime moved him quit the party in 1958.

That didn't curtail his activist passion. Eventually Wellman, a two-time veteran easily a generation older than most of the civil rights and Vietnam-era radicals, went looking for the kids.

One of those was Ron Aronson, an activist teacher at Wayne State University who'd been booted from his job in 1974, after failing his tenure review.

"I was feeling whipped," Aronson says, "and I had an offer elsewhere, and didn't much feel like fighting. But I told Saul about it, and he said, 'You can't leave, this is your home. You *have* to fight it.'"

Aronson — now distinguished professor of humanities at WSU — laughs sharply. "I *hated* to hear that, because sometimes you'd rather just turn tail and slink away. But he then said, 'OK, so who should we contact?' And he took out his list of addresses, and we started organizing the movement for the reversal of my tenure decision."

Aronson's was the first collective bargaining grievance under the representation of the American Association of University Professors. He returned to Wayne State in 1975 — with tenure.

"And Saul was the quarterback for that project," he says.

With the help of several friends and colleagues in Michigan's activist community, Aronson has now returned a life's worth of favors. *Professional Revolutionary: The Life of Saul Wellman*, directed by Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Judith Montell and co-produced by Montell and Aronson, premieres Sunday at WSU.

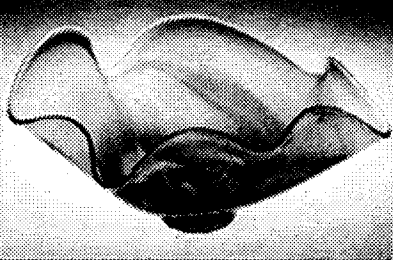
Over the film's dense 65 minutes, a remarkable story unfolds. It begins in Brooklyn before the Depression, then moves to Spain's Aragon front, then to Belgium and then to Detroit.

After being approached by Aronson to direct the film, Montell was first engaged by "the concept of this man as a fighter, both literally and figuratively, for social changes throughout the 20th century," she says. "And the great people in Detroit, the men and women Saul had mentored over the years, convinced me that this

ADVERTISEMENT

TOUCH OF LIGHT

Studio & Galerie of Handblown Glass



Glassblowing
Classes

Hours:
Tues. thru Fri.
11am - 6pm
Sat.
10am - 5pm

23426 Woodward Ave. Ferndale, MI 48220
(248) 543-1868 www.touchoflight.com

man's life should be documented not only as a tribute to him, but more importantly as a message to others: One man can make a difference, and impact a whole generation of others so they will work to make a difference."

Most impressive about Wellman was his commitment to helping young activists. Kate James, a Michigan activist who graduated from college four years ago, worked on the film as a research assistant and spoke with Wellman frequently.

"I had come from a college where I was involved with a lot of political issues," James says, "and I'd been very frustrated by that experience. But Saul encouraged me to see the positive elements of the work I'd helped do, and to see it not as a limited failure but as a necessary part of a larger, continuing struggle.

"He was more interested in *listening* to younger activists than in living in the past," James says.

Montell, who'd briefly considered calling the film *One Man in His Time*, went to Wellman himself — as so many did — for the final word.

"The title, *Professional Revolutionary*, comes from Saul. That's how he saw himself, how he continued to see himself. I found that very inspiring. And I hope audiences do too."

3 p.m., Sunday, May 22, at 100 General Lectures Building on the WSU campus.
For more info, visit professionalrevolutionary.org.

Eric Waggoner is a freelance writer. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com.

[\(Work at Metro Times\)](#) [\(Contact Us\)](#) [\(Place Classified\)](#) [\(Place Personal\)](#) [\(F.A.Q.'s\)](#)

©2005, Metro Times, Inc.