

“We Came Together and We Fought”

Kipp Dawson and Resistance to State Violence
in US Social Movements since the 1950s

Jessie B. Ramey and Catherine A. Evans

For over sixty years Kipp Dawson has built coalitions on the front lines of major social movements confronting state-sponsored violence. Dawson’s collaborative leadership in the Vietnam antiwar campaign and movements for civil rights, women’s rights, gay liberation, labor, and education justice challenged forms of active harm and death (fig. 1). Operating alongside others, she resisted powerful systems of discrimination, staggering divestment, and purposeful neglect. Her astonishing career—and marginalized identities as a lesbian, Jewish, working-class woman from a multiracial family—demonstrates the radical power of ordinary people engaged in collective, transformative action.

In this visual essay, we share material from two new archival collections our team helped curate: the Kipp Dawson Papers, housed at the University of Pittsburgh, and over thirty interviews with Dawson, now part of the Women Miners Oral History Project at West Virginia University. These materials span the remarkable breadth and depth of Dawson’s intersectional feminist activism and suggest rethinking leadership as a concept to fully appreciate the scope, interconnectedness, and efficacy of resistance to state violence. Rather than view her work through a traditional, patriarchal leadership lens—locating a solo leader at the top of a power hierarchy—we approach Dawson’s lifetime of work through a framework of “radical collaboration.” Women have often performed the invisible labor of this intentional,

Radical History Review

Issue 148 (January 2024) DOI 10.1215/01636545-10846922

© 2024 by MARHO: The Radical Historians’ Organization, Inc.



Figure 1. Dawson's collection of buttons from movement organizing. Courtesy of Kipp Dawson.

transformational, and diffuse form of leadership. Radical collaboration prioritizes relationship building, fosters networks of community care, and redefines movement goals. In the following chronological sections, we present excerpts from interviews with Dawson along with historical context and archival items to demonstrate the role of women's radical collaboration in organizing both resistance to state violence and alternative visions for the nation.

Civil Rights Movement

In 1960, at the age of fifteen, Dawson cofounded the first civil rights club at Berkeley High School with Brenda Malveaux (now Freeman) and Tracy Sims (now Tamam Tracy Moncur). The three young women started their group, Students for Equality, in solidarity with the southern sit-in movement and the newly forming Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). After being outed for having a romantic relationship with another woman, Dawson graduated from high school at sixteen and enrolled in San Francisco State College. Convinced that socialism provided the necessary space for collective action and an alternative vision for the future, she joined the Young Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), affiliations she maintained until the late 1980s. By 1963–64 Tracy Sims was leading the Ad Hoc Committee to End Discrimination in Hiring, and Dawson helped co-organize large-scale sit-ins, including those at Mel's Diner, the Sheraton-Palace Hotel, and Auto-Row, challenging racist hiring practices in San Francisco (fig. 2).¹



Figure 2. Dawson and Tracy Sims circa 1964 at their arraignment following an arrest for a sit-in demonstration. The small black button on Dawson's sleeve says, "Ad-Hoc's COMIN'!" Unless otherwise indicated, the photographs in this essay are found in Kipp Dawson Papers, 1951–2021, AIS.2022.10, Archives and Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.

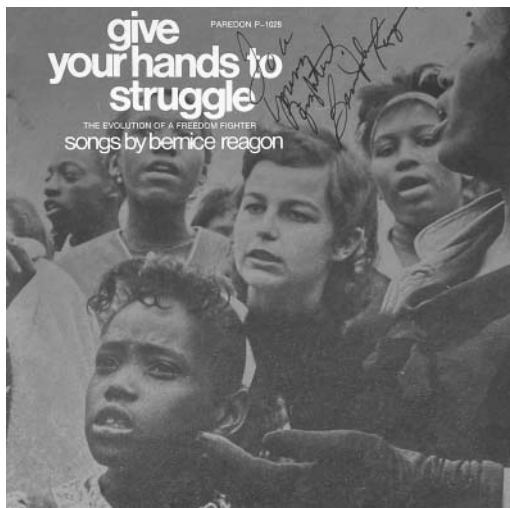
Arrested six times, Dawson served twenty-nine days in the San Francisco County Jail. During one arrest, the guards threw Dawson and two others into solitary confinement for singing in the holding cell. The remaining women protested together by rhythmically banging their mattresses on the floor, demonstrating what Dawson emphasizes as the power of solidarity to confront state violence:

They won and none of them thought that she had done anything really unusual because, really, she hadn't. Each of them recognized that their strength was *collective* rather than individual and that when they put their strength together they could do things that they might not have ever thought or imagined that they would ever be called on to do. And they freed us.²

The Bay Area civil rights protests activated students, leading directly to the launch of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California Berkeley, and then, under Dawson, at San Francisco State College.³ With thousands of students participating in acts of mass disobedience, the effort won the lifting of university bans on political activity and created free speech zones, further supporting movement organizing. Dawson credits the success of these reform efforts to women's collaborative leadership, especially the legacy of Black women's solidarity networks (fig. 3):

Behind the scenes, doing the grunt work—the work, really—and organizing the communication, organizing the backup, and then putting bodies on the line, too . . . it was women who stood out. . . . [Black women] established the networks of communication and solidarity that have made such huge transitions possible. . . . And just like all those women . . . who got me out of the hole in the jail . . . those women didn't stop with that event: they got energized by that, and they went on to organize other things.⁴

Figure 3. On her 1975 album *Bernice Johnson Reagon, a founding member of the SNCC Freedom Singers, featured a photo of Dawson among a crowd taken days after the Selma march. Courtesy of Kipp Dawson.*



Despite the promise and possibilities opened by organizing, resistance created perils, too. Dawson was deeply influenced by the generations of women in her family who fought state violence, including her grandmother, whose husband had been murdered in a wave of Ku Klux Klan violence empowered by the US government's Palmer Raids. Because her mother was a Communist Party member and a labor organizer and her stepsister was a founder of the Black Panther Party, government agents regularly harassed Dawson's family. The FBI accumulated an enormous file on Dawson, and a journalist, testifying before the US House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), named her a subversive and "red diaper baby."⁵ Yet Dawson kept her own prolific files, documenting radical collaboration and offering a counternarrative in the face of shifting state violence.

Vietnam Antiwar Movement

In 1965, Dawson began to focus on the Vietnam antiwar movement. She helped to found the Vietnam Day Committee in Berkeley with Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman and co-organized the first International Days of Protest against American military intervention, leading to the formation of the National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam. By the following spring, she had dropped out of college to work full-time in the movement, becoming executive director of the West Coast Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (SMC). Dawson also served on the SMC staff in New York City, co-organizing the 1967 National March on the Pentagon and the 1968 International Student Strike against the War. In 1972, she worked with the National Peace Action Coalition, raising money and support for the large April action in New York City against the war. These efforts drew hundreds of thousands of people to teach-ins and marches across

the United States and internationally and, crucially, sustained that level of engagement for several years.

Dawson explained the kind of radically collaborative efforts necessary to build a significant antiwar movement:

The reason that it was such a successful movement in the United States is that people came together with all different kinds of ways of looking at society . . . and put those aside in order to build common actions. . . . The National Coordinating Committee convention . . . happened in 1966 in Washington, D.C. . . . There were people there from the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Unitarian Church, the American Friends Service Committee, the Student Peace Union. People from the traditional pacifist organizations all came together . . . [who] had a history of calling each other opponent organizations. To get back to work took a lot of thought, and a lot of quiet discussions off the main floor meetings, and a lot of patience, but also a vision that it was possible to build something that we would all work in together. And I believe that the Socialist Workers Party's vision of that happening was one of the things that made me most excited about being involved with the SWP.⁶

Creating unity was especially difficult because the federal government sowed divisions among organizations through misinformation campaigns and outright violence. The FBI covertly released flyers accusing the SWP of harming the antiwar movement and targeted Dawson by saying she was not trustworthy because she “smiled too much.”⁷ The government campaigns were effective, and, in a particularly painful division, the SMC distanced itself from socialism, ejecting Dawson. Yet she persisted, motivated by a “deep belief in the power of people to resist, together, and sometimes even to win against repressive governmental forces.”⁸ She later raised money, as a staff member for the Political Rights Defense Fund, to support the SWP lawsuit against the FBI, the CIA, and other federal agencies that exposed COINTELPRO operations. The lawsuit was successful and—officially, if not in practice—ended government infiltration of organizations.⁹

Women's Movement and Gay Liberation Movement

Struggling with her sexual identity, Dawson tried to “live a straight life” and, in 1966, married Leslie Evans, a fellow activist.¹⁰ She became pregnant and obtained an underground abortion, as the state deemed this health care illegal. Collaborating with a network of women across the United States, Dawson and countless others took their own reproductive health into their collective hands. After moving to New York City in 1967 to work in the antiwar movement, Dawson was increasingly involved in the fledgling women's movement, connecting her own identities and movement work. She participated in the first and second Congresses to Unite



Figure 4. Dawson and her mother at the July 9, 1978, Equal Rights Amendment march in Washington, DC.

Women in 1969 and 1970. And as a representative of the SWP, she helped coordinate the 1970 Women's Strike for Equality, meeting in Betty Friedan's living room with Ivy Bottini, Ruthann Miller (now O'Donnell), Bella Abzug, Kate Millett, Flo Kennedy, Gloria Steinem, and others. That same year she ran for the US Senate on the SWP ticket and organized local and national marches for abortion rights, serving on the staff for the Women's National Abortion Action Coalition during the two years leading up to *Roe v. Wade* (figs. 4 and 5).

As antifeminists lesbian-baited the women's movement and Friedan famously told the media she opposed "the lavender menace," Dawson joined protesters in the streets donning armbands declaring, "We are all the lavender menace." Now fully out as a lesbian, separated from her husband, and serving as a representative of the SWP, she joined the steering committee for the 1971 Christopher Street Liberation Day in commemoration of the second anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, which became the annual pride parade. Some in the nascent gay rights movement rejected involvement by the SWP, which was known for its homophobia.¹¹ However, Dawson openly criticized the socialist leaders and women's movement leaders who attacked Kate Millett and her sexual identity following her violent outing by mainstream media (fig. 6).¹²



Figure 5. Dawson and fellow United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) women marching for abortion rights at the 1989 March for Women's Lives in Washington, DC.

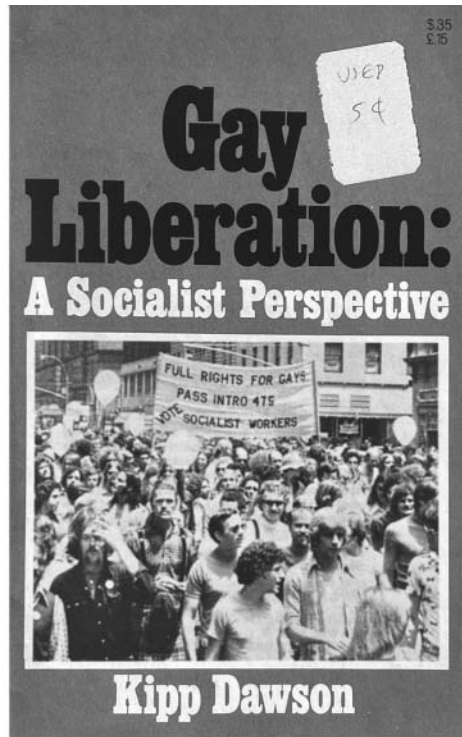
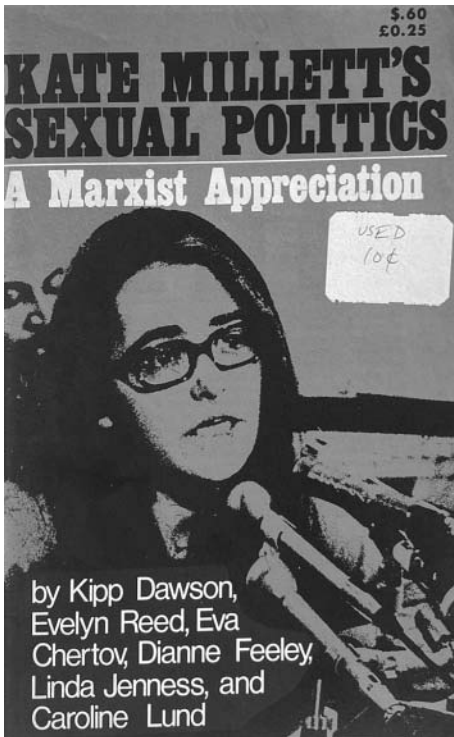


Figure 6. The SWP's Pathfinder Press published Dawson in 1971 and 1975.

Figure 7. Dawson participated in UMWA strikes against Massey and Pittston and supported numerous other labor events, including the air traffic controllers (PATCO) in 1981.



While much of Dawson's movement leadership was public, her work with the growing LGBTQ+ movement shifted to the personal level. For instance, Dawson and her partner fought for recognition as a family unit in a groundbreaking legal case; the precedent-setting victory allowed her to adopt her own child and legalized gay families in Pennsylvania.¹³

Labor Movement and Education Justice Movement

Still active with the SWP, Dawson moved to Pittsburgh and, in 1979, started working as a coal miner. During her thirteen years in an underground mine, she organized with other women leaders through the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and the Coal Employment Project (see figs. 7 and 8). Dawson's efforts also extended internationally: she traveled to El Salvador and to South Wales and England to support Women against Pit Closures (see fig. 9).

After Dawson's final layoff from the mines, she returned to college, finished her degree in history, and taught in public schools for twenty-two years. Becoming

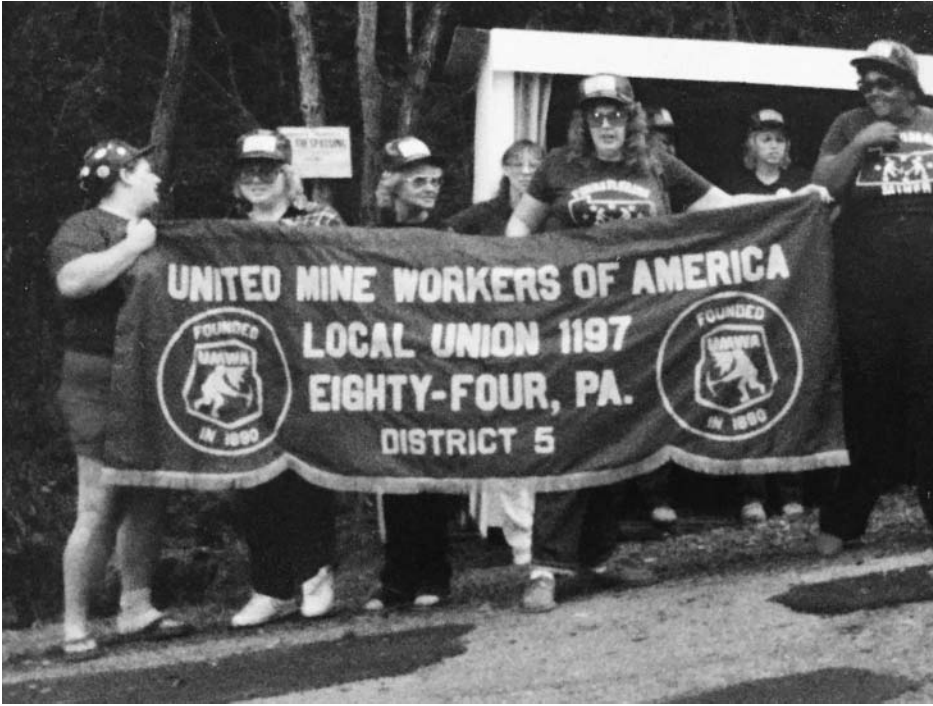


Figure 8. The women of UMWA Local 1197 consistently used radical collaboration to support striking workers, their families, and each other.

active in the education justice movement, she advocated against massive state divestments in public education and served on the executive board of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (fig. 10). Dawson also cultivated coalitions to fight the devastating impact of such government policies as high-stakes testing mandates, overpolicing of students, and the school-to-prison pipeline, all of which disproportionately harm BIPOC children. While she considers electoral politics “too swampy,” she consistently emphasizes the importance of elections and voting and more recently has worked to build movements by energizing people within campaigns, ranging from local school board races to congress. Advocating door knocking and phone banking to cultivate solidarity among people, Dawson believes that it is not the individual elected official who will make the change but “an aroused and mobilized populace and movement of people who are trying to get things to happen.”¹⁴

Dawson continues her activism today, rooted in the same motivation she has had since the 1950s: “When people can experience and feel the beauty of struggling together for one another and leave behind the ‘me-myself-and-I’ paradigm at the heart of exploitation and isolated misery, all good things are possible.” Though she parted ways with the SWP, she maintains that her work in every movement “deepened [her] belief that the future of life on the planet, and of human



Figure 9. In 1985, Dawson (*center left*) was among a delegation of US unionists whose presence ensured Salvadoran unionists' safety in an above-ground conference where Febe Elizabeth Velásquez (*center*) was elected president. Four years later, Velásquez was killed in a bombing of the FENASTRAS union headquarters.



Figure 10. Dawson (*center*) with fellow teachers at a 2013 rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Courtesy of Kipp Dawson.

society, demands replacing capitalism with a society based on human and planet need, as opposed to privatized property and personal wealth.”¹⁵ Dawson consistently references the love, hope, and joy that powered and continues to nurture her collective work. Reflecting on the central role of radical collaboration, even when wins were elusive, Dawson notes, “The biggest victory is that we did fight . . . that we came together and we fought. And that we have that history to build on.”¹⁶

As the documents and interviews in the new archival collections represented here demonstrate, women like Dawson have radically collaborated to lead coalitional movements against state violence since the 1950s. Her lifetime of labor illustrates a long tradition of intersectional organizing, persistence in the face of intramovement bigotry, and optimism for the future despite devastating setbacks. Her movement work is also a call to action for today’s activists, inspiring a new generation to understand the stakes and to refuse to cede power to systems of harm. As Dawson reminds us: “Our history is not one straight line . . . not a direct line from bad times to good ones. . . . It’s a spiral, and sometimes as we’re going up the spiral, we’re going what looks [like] backwards. But we are still moving forward.” Dawson insists that we do not know when the spiral ends, “but we know what the goal is: a world where everyone and the planet itself are shared with love and dignity.”¹⁷

Jessie B. Ramey is the founding director of the Women’s Institute and associate professor of women’s and gender studies at Chatham University. She is the author of *Childcare in Black and White: Working Families and the History of Orphanages* (2012).

Catherine A. Evans is a PhD candidate in literary and cultural studies at Carnegie Mellon University. She served as the archival intern for the Kipp Dawson Papers.

Notes

We would like to thank Kipp Dawson, a teacher and librarian by training and historian at heart, for preserving an extraordinary archive of social movement work and for her continued leadership, mentorship, and inspiration.

1. Alqatari, “Ad Hoc Beatniks.”
2. Dawson, interview, October 10, 2021. All interviews cited in this essay are found in Kipp Dawson, *Interviews (2021–2023)*, Women Miners Oral History Project, West Virginia and Regional History Center, West Virginia University.
3. Freeman, “From Freedom Now! To Free Speech.”
4. Dawson, interview, October 10, 2021.
5. HUAC, *Subversive Influences*.
6. Dawson, interview, March 9, 2022.
7. Dawson, interview, March 9, 2022.
8. Dawson, email to Jessie B. Ramey, January 31, 2023.
9. Blackstock, *COINTELPRO*.
10. Dawson, interview, March 30, 2022; Evans, *Outsider’s Reverie*.
11. Dawson, interview, March 20, 2022.

12. Dawson, *Kate Millett's Sexual Politics*.
13. Dawson, interview, April 6, 2022.
14. Dawson, interview, March 15, 2023.
15. Dawson, email, January 31, 2023.
16. Dawson, interview, April 13, 2022.
17. Dawson, interview, April 6, 2022.

References

- Alqatari, Ammar. "Ad Hoc Beatniks." FoundSF: Shaping San Francisco's Digital Archive, 2019. https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Ad_Hoc_Beatniks.
- Blackstock, Nelson. *COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom*. 3rd ed. New York: Pathfinder, 1988.
- Dawson, Kipp. *Kate Millett's Sexual Politics: A Marxist Appreciation*. New York: Pathfinder, 1971.
- Evans, Leslie. *Outsider's Reverie: A Memoir*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Self-published, 2019.
- Freeman, Jo. "From Freedom Now! To Free Speech: How the 1963–64 Bay Area Civil Rights Demonstrations Paved the Way to Campus Protest." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, San Francisco, CA, April 19, 1997. <https://www.jofreeman.com/sixtiesprotest/baycivil.htm> (accessed July 22, 2022).
- HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee). *Subversive Influences in Riots, Looting, and Burning. Part 6, San Francisco–Berkeley: Hearings before the United States House Committee on Un-American Activities*. 90th Cong., 2nd sess., June 27–28, 1968.