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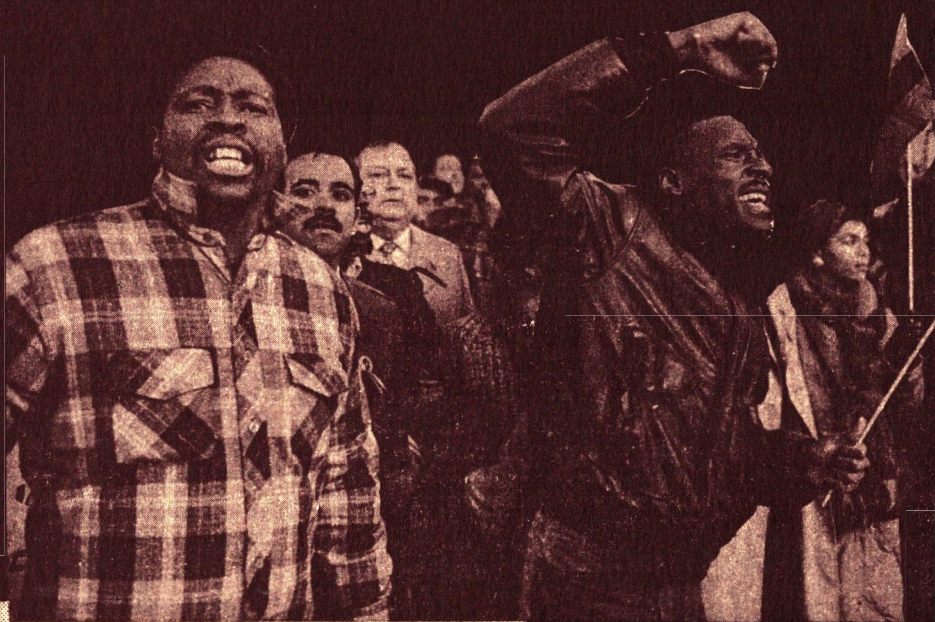
March-April 1987

A Socialist Magazine

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Howard Beach and the Black Movement in New York City

Interview with Jitu Weusi



Also...

Interview
with
Linton
Kwesi
Johnson

Forward Motion

March—April 1987
Vol. 6, No. 2

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FORWARD MOTION is a magazine of socialist opinion and advocacy. We say socialist opinion because each FM presents analyses of important organizing work and reviews of political and cultural trends. We say socialist advocacy because FM is dedicated to a new left-wing presence in U.S. politics and to making Marxism an essential component of that presence. We share these purposes with other journals, but we seek for FM a practical vantage point from within the unions, the Black and other freedom struggles, the women's movement, the student, anti-war, and gay liberation movements, and other struggles. We also emphasize building working people's unity as a political force for social change, particularly through challenging the historical pattern of white supremacy and national oppression in the capitalist domination of this country.

In this issue...

As the Black struggle goes in the U.S., so goes the battle for fundamental social change. Bringing into view the almost unbelievable heroism of the civil rights movement's everyday people, the PBS series "Eyes on the Prize" has also revealed again in that movement the germ of nearly every progressive popular trend to develop from the late '60s through the '80s. As at most other points of significant change in U.S. history, if you want to know where progressive politics are headed today, you have to ask where the Black movement is going.

Today echoes of the '60s are all around us, and not just in television documentaries or the many recent Martin Luther King celebrations. In Reagan's America we have seen the "New South" bare its fangs in Forsyth County and in the homicidal chokeholds of Florida police. We've seen a rash of violence against Blacks and other people of color on college campuses from The Citadel to the University of Massachusetts.

Finally there is the media and Democratic Party establishment treatment of Jesse Jackson, so reminiscent of Northern liberalism's chiding condescension towards the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party of 1964. Not to be caught off guard this time around, the Democrats are working hard to neutralize Jackson through loyalty oaths and utter media white-outs. It is truly amazing that nobodies such as Richard Gephardt, who commands perhaps 1% name recognition in the polls, gets ten times the publicity in the liberal press accorded a proven vote-getter such as Jackson.

History does not repeat itself, and we will not see the '60s again. The new conditions in formation now are not those which produced the civil rights movement. Lacking a federal government whose contradictions with the states could provide a shield behind which to organize their democratic struggle, Blacks and other oppressed nationalities find instead an administration primarily responsible for the climate of rising racist violence. The basic living conditions of the Black masses have changed little since the 1960s, and statistics confirm a widening minority-white income gap, racial differentials in short and long-term unemployment, and a poverty rate once again on the rise. But there is no denying that the general breakdown of segregation coupled with the creation of a small, powerless, mistreated but very visible Black middle class along Huxtable lines have altered the focus of the

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Forward Motion

March—April 1987
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Black struggle. Some might expect a Democratic presidency—not a bad bet since the advent of Contragate—to reverse the effects of the Reagan years. But the recent Black emphasis on political power through electoral politics, and the likely coming emphasis on basic structural problems affecting the Black masses, are anathema to the Democratic neoliberals who rule the Party. Gary Hart will be photographed in Forsyth County, but he won't touch the unionization of Black catfish workers in Mississippi or the structural unemployment of Black youth throughout the country.

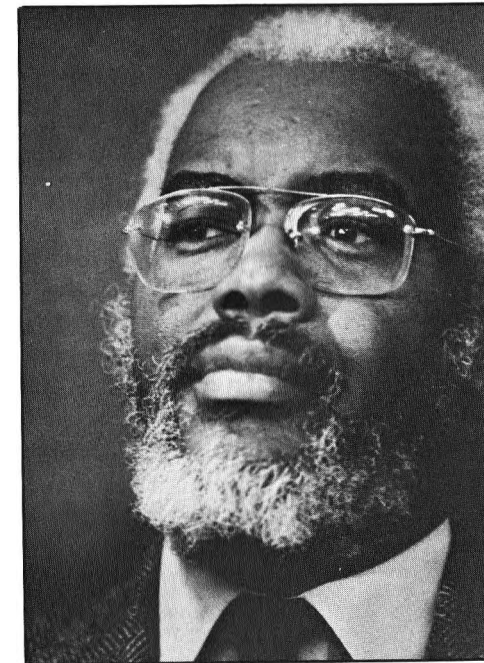
It should come as no surprise if, drawing on its electoral advances, the Black movement begins to strengthen itself once again through its non-electoral side—through demonstrations, economic boycotts and similar tactics reminiscent of the '60s. Like the Forsyth County marches, the Howard Beach struggle in New York has had this quality, and how the unfolding case is handled by the New York political and media establishment as well as by the Black community may tell us a lot about what to expect after 1988. We are therefore pleased to publish in this FM an interview with Jitu Weusi, a longtime grass-roots activist and leader in Brooklyn's Black community, and a key figure in that community's strong response to the Howard Beach murder.

Another side of the Black struggle is seen here in the FM interview with dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, who discusses Black culture and grass-roots politics in Britain. We also include in this issue a speech by Leon Watson, fired UCLA Afro-American studies counselor, also on the theme of the grass-roots Black movement.

This issue also includes a second installment in the overview of left tasks in the labor movement we began last time, along with some reflections on the recent major West Coast Kaiser Hospital strike, and here too is another comment on "Changing Conditions."

Interview
with
Jitu Weusi

Howard Beach and the Black Movement in New York City



Jitu Weusi is an activist with over twenty years experience in the national Black liberation movement and in local struggles in central Brooklyn and New York City. In the sixties, he worked with the Afro-American Teachers Association and was part of the national Black Power apparatus. In the seventies, he founded the East organization and the Freedom Now School. He was also a member of the Congress of African People and the Sixth Pan-African Congress Organizing Committee, and was active in the African Liberation Support Committee which established African Liberation Day in 1972. In 1979, he worked along with Reverend Herbert Daughtry and a number of national Black activists in founding the National Black United Front (NBUF) in 1980, and he is currently the NBUF's Vice Chairperson for Administration. In the eighties, he has been active in the Coalition for a Just New York, a Black coalition with the goal of developing Black empowerment in New York City; the 1984 Campaign for Jesse Jackson; and the Committee for a Free Press. In 1986-87, he has been part of an effort to organize a national Black Power conference and has been deeply involved in the community response to the recent killing that took place in Howard Beach, Queens. He is currently a teacher in Brooklyn.

FM: Could you describe the events that led to the death of Michael Griffith and the beating of Cedric Sandiford and Timothy Grimes in Howard Beach, Queens on the night of December 19th?
JW: These are the details of the attack as I heard them from Cedric Sandiford a day and a half after the attack: Griffith, Grimes, and Sandiford were driving back from the Rockaways when their car stalled about three blocks out of the toll plaza.

This interview was conducted for Forward Motion by Beth Lyons and John Jameson. Jameson, a transit worker in New York, helped organize a response among fellow workers to the 1984 racist killing of transit workers Willie Turks.

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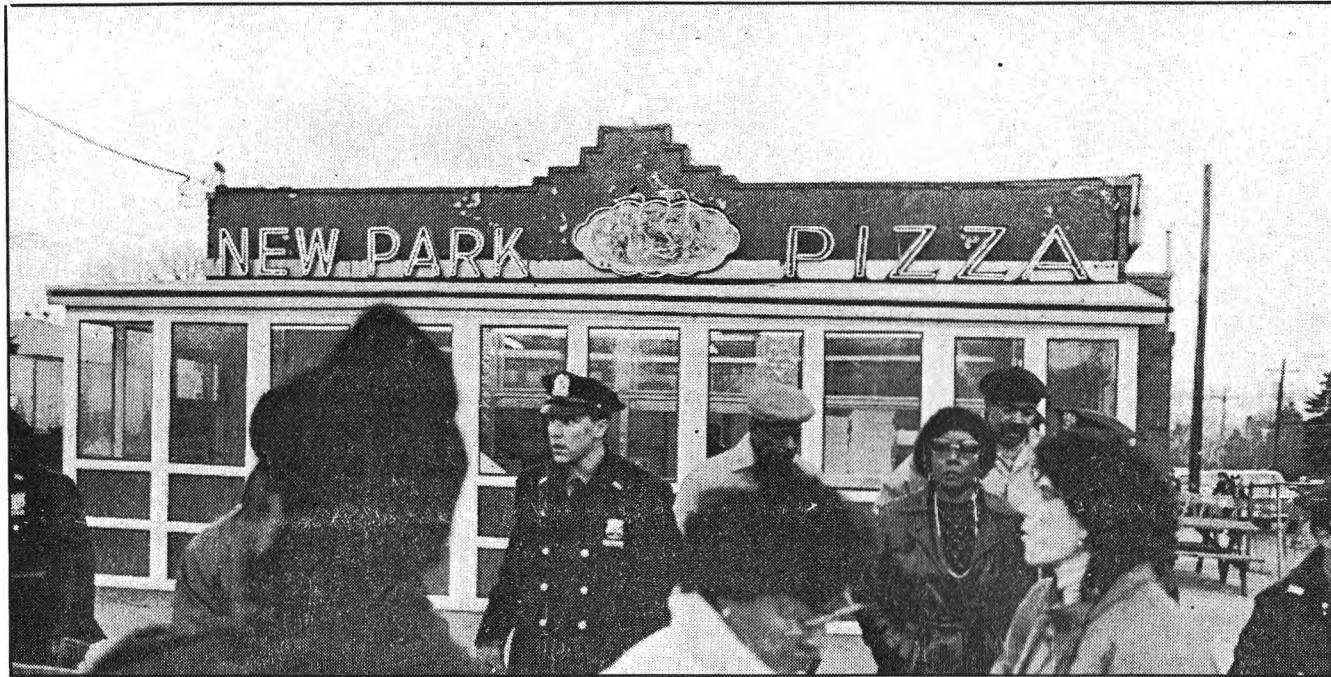
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Bill Biggart/The City Sun

Outside of this Howard Beach pizza parlor, Griffith, Grimes and Sandiford were confronted by three cars of white youth.

They asked a highway attendant to call a tow truck. From 9:30 to 11:00 they waited for the tow truck to arrive, and while they waited, they saw the police stop a number of times along the Parkway to observe them. At 11:00, when the truck had still not arrived, the three decided to walk to the nearest subway station and call a tow truck themselves.

They walked straight up Cross Bay Boulevard until they came to Howard Beach. It was about 11:30, so they went into the first place they found open—a pizza parlor, bought some pizza and sat down to eat it. When they had gotten about halfway through their pizza, two policemen came in and asked the pizza owner if he was having some trouble with a group of Blacks. He said, "No. These men have come in and purchased their pizza, paid and I have had no trouble." When the policemen left, they rushed to finish their pizza and left approximately sixty seconds after the policemen.

When they came out of the pizza parlor there were three cars waiting with white youths in them, armed with baseball bats, sticks, tire irons and tree limbs. These youths began directing racial remarks at them: "You niggers are in the wrong neighborhood." "What are you niggers doing in this neighborhood?"

They proceeded to beat them. When they hit Grimes the first time, he managed to run. He was kind of fast and he got away. But Griffith had callouses on his feet which made it difficult for him to run. Sandiford stayed behind to help Griffith.

From in front of the pizza parlor, Sandiford and Griffith ran down two blocks. The group of whites got into their cars and headed them off and beat them again. Sandiford and Griffith ran again. This time they ran down near the Parkway which is about four or five blocks from the pizza parlor.

When they got down near the Parkway, Sandiford got hit a couple of very hard blows, and he fell down and pretended he was out. Seeing this, the others ran after Griffith. They cornered him down near a hole in the Parkway and they beat him until he ran screaming out on the Parkway. Sandiford said he then saw one of the same cars that was pursuing them run into Griffith, butt him against a piece of the highway there, and hit him several times and then leave his body on the highway.

Sandiford emphasized to us that the car that hit Griffith was part of the original attack. This was not an innocent driver coming along the highway unaware of the situation; the driver of that car was part and

parcel of the attackers. He also said that this car turned out to be of the same make and model as the car allegedly driven by Dominic Blum. Blum is the court officer who left the scene of the accident and returned later; as of this date [Feb. 27] he has not been indicted. Sandiford said that he had told this same story to the police and that the police told him that this was not what he had seen. They insisted that the car that hit Griffith was a car driving along the Parkway and was not part of the attacking group. Sandiford said they were trying to make him change his story and that he was going to stand firm. He would not change his story.

...the media coverage indicated very clearly to our community that there was no intention to indict anybody here...all we were going to get was another type of cover-up that would allow the beat to go on.

FM: What is your assessment of the role of the white media in the Griffith case? We were particularly interested in the media's efforts to shift the focus away from the white perpetrators of the crimes against Griffith, Grimes and Sandiford and onto the victims themselves and their attorneys.

JW: In his very prophetic and classic book, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Harold Cruse points to the coming days of struggle in which the media will be an important weapon against our movement. This was never clearer than in the Griffith case. The media could not deny that Griffith had been beaten by the mob. But the story that was broadcast by the media was that Griffith had been beaten by the mob and that he then darted out on the highway and was hit by a random car, driven by an innocent man. Consequently, the mob did not cause his death; he caused his own death. Also the man was unknowing in hitting him and going on home and forgetting about it. So by this account the most anyone could be prosecuted for was a racial beating; hitting him with a few sticks; a little racial mischief; hardly murder.

Certain right-wing elements of the media fol-

lowed that initial story up with a constant, insidious attack on the reputation of Griffith: what he was, who he was. It was publicized that a plastic pistol and a beeper were found near his body. Now in the parlance of the media, a beeper denotes some underground activity associated with drug selling. A plastic pistol? Well, we know its significance. Then a couple of days later comes the arrest of Grimes for physical violence against his girl friend. Then, about a week later, the media announces the fact that Griffith had a warrant out on him. So there is the dead man's image being assailed constantly.

Meantime, the image of the attackers is being propped up and prettied up. We find the attackers described as three, slightly built teenage youth. We are told that one of the attackers has a Black girl friend, the clear implication being that he couldn't be actively involved in a violent racial attack. The past criminal record of the attackers is really played down.

In my opinion, the media coverage indicated very clearly to our community that there was no intention to indict anybody here; there was no intention to firmly punish anybody here; all we were going to get was another type of cover-up that would allow the beat to go on. That beat is the steady stream of attacks that have gone on against Blacks in the last twenty years. The media carried the message that it is still open season on Blacks; if you take a Black life, don't worry, the punishment will be minimal.

In my 7th grade class we've been working on social studies and we asked the students to watch "Eyes on the Prize." In the first episode, these two white men are acquitted for the killing of Emmett Till. One youngster said, "Those two white men were acquitted in Mississippi just like they are trying to acquit these white men for killing Michael Griffith here in New York City." So there is a popular perception among Blacks that there is basically no change in the level of justice that Black people can receive in New York City in 1987 from what they could expect in Mississippi in 1955.

Now I'll talk about the attack of the media on the attorneys. The attorneys in this case, Alton Maddox and C. Vernon Mason, came up with a very brilliant strategy in which the key witness, Cedric Sandiford, refused to testify. [Sandiford had initially cooperated with Queens District Attorney John Sanducci. Then, because of his treatment by the D.A., he decided to stop cooperating—ed.] It was this

strategy that forced whatever kind of prosecutorial conduct has developed up until this time. On Tuesday, February 10, 1987, twelve youth were indicted for second degree murder, three for manslaughter, and six for related charges by the Special Prosecutor. People are scratching their heads because this is the largest number of people who have ever been indicted in an attack of this type.

If it had not been for this strategy, I would say that those police officers' and those civilian terrorists' plan for the cover-up of Michael Griffith's murder would have gone on undeterred. It is important to note, too, the strong stand taken behind that strategy by Cedric Sandiford and the Griffith family. Not enough support and credit are being given to them, because had it not been for their strong stand behind Maddox and Mason we would not have seen any real qualitative change in the situation.

Since this strategy has gone forward and been somewhat successful, there have been tremendous attacks on these attorneys from liberal to conservative circles. *The National Law Journal* came out with an attack on Maddox in their Feb. 16, 1987 issue; there was an attack on him in the *Village Voice* in an article by Jack Newfield in the Jan 6, 1987 issue. Now, I don't believe if it had been Bill Kuntsler who had put forth this strategy that the same kind of

assault would have been waged, which is why I see it as an attack on Black self-determination. These were Black professionals who were supposed to use their training to carry out the system's dictates. They turned their skills on the system, and I think this is what is at the heart of the attack. I think the powers that be said, "This is definitely not the kind of thing that we want to endorse by the few Blacks that we have allowed to make it in the system." They don't want Black attorneys aiding the underclass and helping them to manipulate and agitate the system. So they decided to make an example of these guys.

Another issue around which the media sought to derail the struggle was the January 21st boycott of non-Black businesses. This was not a racist tactic as they would have had people believe. What we sought to do with that tactic was to develop a concept of some type of Black economic strength. The demand was that Blacks on that day should spend their money in Black businesses.

What the media sought to do with that tactic was to say that the developers of this day were calling for a boycott of white businesses because Griffith was killed by a white mob. It was a deliberate attempt to distort the legitimate strategy and tactics of the Black community. But we can expect

these kinds of things to take place, and this is what many of the supporters of our actions have got to understand.

If they are going to look for the establishment media to defend, verify and legitimize our strategies and tactics, it is just not going to happen. Their historic role has been to misdirect, to slander and to destroy and not to give any kind of positive thrust to our movement. Those who support us have got to understand the nature of that relationship. When we put out strategies and tactics, they are going to have to look for some other form of communication to ascertain the correct nature of what is going on.

That is why we had a public meeting at P.S. 41 in Greenwich Village, a white liberal neighborhood, to inform people outside of our community. We had a variety of speakers there—people like Anne Braden of the Southern Organizing Committee for Social and Economic Justice, Howard Jordan of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, Mononya Yin of the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence—as well as several spokespeople from the Black community. We also appeared on other types of media like WBAI/Pacifica radio.

FM: There seemed to be a certain amount of confusion in the first week or so after the incident and everyone was looking to Mason and Maddox for leadership. By January 7th, *The City Sun*, one of the more respected African American weeklies published in New York City, had come out with an excellent interview that clarified and filled in the gaps. Before that people didn't know quite what was happening. People who were supportive and were active didn't know the facts. Are there things you see, in retrospect, that could have been done to avert this situation? What was going on in this period?

JW: First of all, we did not have in place a bona fide coalition or movement that could move to lead the struggle at that point. We had to put that in place on the fly, so we were naturally somewhat disorganized. Second, it was the holiday season and a lot of people were going out of town. Given these two realities, I think that things came out alright. I was worried myself about the situation initially.

Maddox's first press conference did not come across real well, for example. Sandiford wasn't there. It seemed like Maddox was saying that Sandiford wasn't going to testify, and people were saying,

"Well, why are *you* saying that he is not going to testify?" We took a beating in the press on that. People started calling. Then the press came up with a statement from Bruce Wright, a respected Black judge in New York City, condemning Maddox. People started calling and saying, "Well, if Bruce Wright is condemning Maddox, are you all sure you are behind Maddox?"

The leadership had to come together and affirm that we were behind Maddox and close that kind of credibility gap before we could begin to mount a strategy to move forward. From the time of the second press conference on Tuesday morning, December 30th, things began to shape up. Assemblyman Al Vann [the New York State Chairperson of Jesse Jackson's 1984 Campaign and a respected African-American progressive—ed.] and Assemblyman Roger Green [head of the New York State Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus—ed.] were present for that press conference, so people could see that there was some political backing. Reverend Ben Chavis, Reverend Calvin Butts and Reverend Daughtry were there, so people could see that there was religious leadership behind the case. A group of activists, including myself, was also there.

As a result, by the second press conference you began to get the feeling that there was a united community and there was a united family. (Because the Griffith family was at the press conference as well.) It was then that you got the feeling that there was some strength here and that this was a cause and a strategy that you could identify with because it was being strongly advocated. This was followed by the huge rally at Boys and Girls High School (over 2,000 people in attendance) which also gave a big boost to the movement and let the city know that this was something that the Black community was going to stand up on.

FM: What is the significance of the demand for a special prosecutor in the Griffith case and what were the conditions that forced Governor Cuomo to get involved?

JW: The demand for a special prosecutor was a key demand because of the fact that we knew from past experience that we were not going to get any kind of satisfaction from the D.A.'s office whether we were dealing with a Holtzman Holtzman [former Congressperson and currently the District Attorney of



Kwame Brathwaite/Int'l Photofeatures

At a press conference, Cedric Sandiford (right), and his lawyers Alton H. Maddox, Jr. (left) and C. Vernon Mason (center), talk about Sandiford's decision not to cooperate further with the Queens County District Attorney's office. The attorneys came under heavy attack for using this tactic to prevent a cover-up.

Kings County—ed.] or a John Santucci [District Attorney of Queens County—ed.]. We knew we were not going to get the kind of prosecution that we wanted.

Cuomo's yielding to that demand was a response to the mobilization that was going on in the Black community. There was an immediate mobilization behind the demand for a special prosecutor which had been raised in other cases as well.



One of the many marches to demand vigorous prosecution of the Howard Beach attackers.

The rally at Boys and Girls High School was the most significant event. A lot of the rallies that we had were good, and the march on Howard Beach was good. But the militant tenor at the rally at Boys and Girls High School sent an immediate message that Governor Cuomo had to respond to. It was unfortunate that this response was channeled through a group of Black leaders most of whom many people had not seen on the scene from the onset. That is something we will have to tackle down the road.

As far as whether the appointment of a special prosecutor is going to put a stop to racial violence, well, no, I don't think it will. I do think it will begin to expose another facet of the criminal justice system.

FM: Could you talk about the role of the police in the Howard Beach incident?

JW: It is interesting that we are now beginning to see various prosecutorial bureaus pull the covers off the local police departments. For at least fifteen years, activists in the Black community have pointed

to the widespread corruption, deceit, and malfeasance that has existed in the New York Police Department. We have shown evidence of various cover-ups and killings of people in our community. We have staged all kinds of demonstrations in protest. No one wanted to hear us. Now, all of a sudden, information is coming out that is tying the police department to organized crime, tying the police department to drugs, tying the police department to all the ills that have been perpetrated on our community.

In the northern cities of this country, the police play a similar role as the Ku Klux Klan played in the rural southern community. The police department today in New York City is acting as the official arm of terrorism for the state against the African-American community. They control the weapons; they control who can be on the street; they control who robs and whom they rob. We have incidents of people who have testified against the police and have come home and found their homes broken into and burglarized.

Let me talk about Ben Ward's role in all of this. He is the first Black to serve as the Commissioner of Police of New York City. This has traditionally been an "Irish job." How did Ben Ward come to get this job? About two and a half years ago the Coalition for a Just New York, in their second major strategic move, sought to highlight the issue of police brutality by supporting the coming to the City of New York of a congressional committee to investigate police brutality. The testimony brought before that committee and the report of that committee was a great embarrassment to the police department and the administration of the City of New York headed by Mayor Koch.

In order to quell the rising criticisms of the police department, a strategy was adopted of installing Ben Ward as the first Black Commissioner of Police. It is things like this which should make us question some of the strategies of past struggles which seemed to be resolved with the appointment of the first Black this and the first Black that.

Now, people had been critical of Ben Ward prior to the Howard Beach incident. However, I think it was during this incident that Ward committed his most treasonous actions towards the Black community. When Attorney Maddox outlined his strategy of not having the key witness testify in any kind of prosecutorial effort by the D.A. John Santucci,

Commissioner Ben Ward, under the direction of Mayor Koch, went on the public media to say that Attorney Maddox's motivation in taking this course of action was to have a large civil suit so that he could reap a large financial reward for the prosecution of this case.

Those of us who have known Alton Maddox over the years were furious with these comments. Maddox has been known for taking cases with no fees or retainers. He is an attorney who has a reputation for working devoid of economic gain. So these were the most false accusations that Ward could have made. When a Black leadership committee did come together around this case, one of the first things we did was to send a telegram to Ben Ward demanding an apology. We found out that our telegram was scrapped and that Ward said to an aide that he would never apologize. Since that time, increasing numbers of people have been calling for his resignation.

FM: What is your view of Mayor Koch's role in the Griffith case?

JW: Mayor Koch's role in this particular incident has been one of very high visibility...but for selfish reasons. First of all, we know that Mayor Koch's policies over the years have been the fuel upon which racist communities like Howard Beach have sustained themselves. Howard Beach is one of those enclaves where people have gone to live with the understanding that they would not be living anywhere near Blacks, and Koch has propped up these type of neighborhoods.

When Howard Beach happened, Koch was at an all-time low as far as public support of his administration was concerned. He had a bad year in 1986. His image suffered tremendously from the exposure of massive corruption within his administration. You may remember that when he first came into office he said that the only departments that were corrupt in the City of New York were those where there were Blacks stealing money from the City's anti-poverty programs. When he took office, he waged war against this corrupt "minority leadership." Now we come to find out his whole administration is corrupt!

In any case, his cover was sort of blown in 1986. So he seizes upon the murder of Michael Griffith, and in a departure from his usual, "oh, so what" response to racial violence in the city, he

jumps and becomes condemning. "This is the worst killing we ever had. It's terrible. We are going to take the maximum action." What he hoped would happen here was that Blacks would see him acting in some kind of even-handed way. However a week later, he was forced by the lawyers' strategy of non-cooperation to return to his old vituperative self and was ready to abandon whatever currency he had gained with Blacks thus far, and condemned the lawyers. The next day, he had Ward slander Maddox as a fortune-hunter. A week later he was definitely back in his expected antagonistic position, although his initial reaction was unexpected. I think he still wants to run the masses of Black people out of New York City.

In the northern cities of this country, the police play a similar role as the Ku Klux Klan played in the rural southern community.

FM: You referred to a coalition in the Black community that has emerged in response to the Griffith case. What are some of the forces involved, including the National Black United Front, Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition?

JW: One of the positive aspects of the work around the murder of Michael Griffith has been the development of a new group of folks who have accepted leadership roles within the Black community. The focus of this was the January 21st march, rally and day of boycott. We feel that January 21st was a tremendous success and that it marked a significant turning point. It showed that a more militant type of politics is beginning to take hold and find a base within the Black community. Despite the urgings of the NAACP, Mayor Koch and other Black spokespeople for those interests, we had overwhelming participation by our community. We have calculated that as much as twenty-five percent of our people participated in some way in the strategies of the day. That is, either by staying home, by marching, or by not buying. There were three areas that we know were hard hit economically: 125th Street, Fulton and Nostrand—which is the heart of the shopping area in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Jamaica Avenue—which

is the heart of the shopping area in Queens. There were also significant drops in commerce in downtown Brooklyn stores as well. So we found a lot of support. I think twenty-five percent participation—despite the fact that our demand for a special prosecutor had already been granted, and despite the fact that others were urging people not to participate—is a very high number and a number that proves our success.

Out of that day a new coalition of forces emerged in the Black community, some of whose participation especially deserve mention. For example, the youth. We have waited well over fifteen years—since the early seventies—to see a new militancy on the part of Black youth at both a high school and college level. It was interesting to see number of young people out in the streets with posters of Malcolm X and Mao Zedong. It almost brought tears to our eyes to see our young people identifying with the actions and the ideas of these revolutionaries after everybody had told us that these people were forgotten. So that is one part of the coalition that we feel very good about and want to build. We hope we are going to see a fervent youth movement develop in the Black community between now and the summer. That is going to mean a lot as far as our community is concerned, because if we can turn our youth towards politics and away from drugs, a mighty force will be unleashed in the streets of cities all across America.

A second important group which participated in the events around January 21st was the Black church. The church has a lot of power in our community, but because so many Black church spokespeople have been aligned with very conservative interests, that power has been harnessed and the Black Liberation Movement has been deprived of its strength. During the recent events, it was very positive to see that the more radical clergy like Reverend Daughtry, Reverend Butts and others have established themselves as honest and trustworthy leaders in our community. We hope to have more involvement from the Black church as it turns away from an accommodationist to a more confrontational politics. We know this is going to be a struggle. Already certain forces in this city have begun to line up Black preachers like Congressman Reverend Floyd Flake [recently elected Black congressman from the County of Queens—ed.] in opposition to the kind of role that

is being played by Reverend Daughtry and Reverend Butts.

Then there are activists like myself, Sonny Carson [an activist well-known for his work with CORE in the sixties—ed.] and Viola Plummer [one of the New York Eight, indicted by the Federal Government and acquitted of all charges in 1986—ed.]. Well, at this point I hope we have matured enough to understand that the Black liberation movement is not going to be controlled or manipulated by one particular source, that in order to be effective we must have a liberation front composed of various progressive and revolutionary forces among several segments or groups.

Some elected officials are in this group, but we would like to attract a certain quality of elected officials and not just elected officials for their own sake. Because we are envisioning politics beyond the scope of just electoral politics.

Another part of this coalition are Black professionals with a revolutionary commitment: attorneys, journalists...people who have professional training and skill but who also have a commitment to the cause of the African-American community first. That group also plays a very important role within this coalition.

FM: How about the National Black United Front, has it played a role organizationally in this? What about Jackson's role? Initially Jackson commended Koch and was not, as I understand it, in support of the boycott. Yet by the time of the boycott his position had changed. What has been the role of the Rainbow Coalition and individuals from the Rainbow? JW: As far as the NBUF, I am a vice-chairperson, and from the very inception of this incident I have been reporting to our national chairperson, Dr. Conrad Worrell, who is also the head of the Chicago BUF. The NBUF has issued several statements of support for the coalition, for the family, and for the actions that have been taken by the folks here in New York City. In fact, on January 21st, the NBUF organized activities in eleven other cities across the country in support of what was happening here. The NBUF is also helping work at a national level to develop another day of support on February 21st which is Malcolm X's birthday.

As far as the Rainbow Coalition is concerned, we have been getting mixed signals. Generally, New York City is one of the locations throughout the nation

which has been somewhat dissatisfied with the structure and organizing strategy of the national Rainbow Coalition. We were dissatisfied immediately following the 1984 elections when there was no post-election consultation with any of us who worked so hard to develop the mechanism of the Rainbow in New York state. Here in New York City we were instrumental in organizing Latinos for Jesse Jackson and Progressives for Jesse Jackson. We made the Rainbow live in New York City in the 1984 Jackson campaign.

After the campaign was over—as I was told—Jackson went to consult with Congressman Charles Rangel and Birmingham Mayor Richard Arrington (both Mondale backers.) Jackson consulted with all the politicians who distanced themselves from him. He has yet to consult with those of us who gave up precious time and resources to organize in his behalf. We have received no consultation.

Jackson hastily called together a convention of the Rainbow in Washington, D.C. in April, 1986, and—as I was told by an observer who attended—everyone was given strong representation within the Rainbow except for the grass roots Black community. I have great respect for people like Percy Sutton and Blacks who have made it in business and administration. Percy is one of my most favorite people. However, it would be a delusion for me to believe

that Percy Sutton represents the grass roots Black community. He doesn't.

When you establish a national board, and you put on the national board Percy Sutton or Joseph Jackson and other Blacks who are essentially middle class, and you don't have anyone representing activists or people who are working with folks at the grass-roots level, then that signals that we have been excluded from this apparatus. So in the organizing of the Rainbow, as far as I am concerned, the grass roots Black community, the nickel and dime Black community which provided the foundation that put Jesse Jackson first in our mind in '84, has been put last in his mind at this time. It has been a very painful thing to watch.

This played itself out in the Howard Beach situation. Immediately after the incident, perhaps by December 22nd, Jesse Jackson had been approached to come to New York. I might say that on past issues Jesse Jackson has never needed to be approached to come anywhere. In fact, in several instances that I know of, he has actually called in advance of notification and said "I'll be there." Here, he had to be approached to come. Then he said that he would only come if he was invited.

Finally I found out he had said he would only come if he was invited to preach the funeral of the young man. The family took a position (and I was



Jesse Jackson and his advisors at the first national Rainbow Convention in Washington, D.C. in April, 1986. The excitement generated by this organizational step forward was diminished for some Jackson supporters who felt that the grassroots Black community was not strongly represented.

David Vita/Impact Visuals

in total support of that position) that the funeral was not going to be a spectacle, a national display of foolishness. They held a dignified, respectable funeral. Jesse did not come to New York.

Then when the plans and strategies were developing around January 21st, it would be expected that on one of his junkets he would have come into New York and met with the group that was developing this thing and said, "How can I be helpful like you were helpful to me in '84?" This wasn't done either. Instead, the weekend before the 21st, he came into New York. (I might say that prior to his arrival, he had, at several press conferences, laid accolades on Mayor Koch for the action that he took immediately following the Howard Beach murder.)

When he came into New York that Friday, January the 16th, he should have known that he was going to be asked about what was going on here. But claiming that he didn't know, he was tricked by a question asked by a local reporter into basically saying that he did not support the boycott and march taking place on the 21st and that he would not take part.

On Saturday, January 17th, *Newsday*—one of the city's newest dailies which is always attempting to boost its circulation—came out with a ringing headline that said "Jesse Raps Boycott; Will Not Participate." It had a picture of him on the cover standing in a sort of prayerful stance with the president of the United Jewish Appeal. Everybody I knew was talking about that when it hit the newsstands. As soon as that edition hit the newsstands, a number of people—Reverend Daughtry, Reverend Butts, Vernon Mason—called me to tell me they were going to contact Jesse Jackson right away.

The next morning, a group of us went to Riverside Church. Jesse was supposed to speak there that morning in a special King Day forum. When Jesse came in, we confronted him (there was a group of about twelve) in a little room there. He said that he had been taken out of context; that he didn't know; that they had turned his words around; and he apologized and said he was very supportive of what we were doing. He verbally agreed to three demands that we made of him that day. One, that he say from the pulpit at Riverside Church that he was supportive of our efforts. (The press was heavily represented at the church.) Two, that he go on the Black radio station on Monday, January 19th, and

make a supportive statement. And three, that when he returned to New York he would meet with us. He did the first two of these things. The third he has yet to do as of February 27, 1987.

Many of us would like the opportunity to discuss problems we had with his sermons, in particular some of the analogies he made comparing Harlem and Howard Beach as "different sides of the same coin." The reality is that people have known for years about the overt racism of Howard Beach. You can stand on the corner on Howard Beach and be a victim of a racial diatribe. You can ride down the street of Cross Bay Boulevard and be given the "Nigger Go Home" lingo. You can go into a store in Howard Beach and be confronted with prejudiced, biased treatment. If you go into a restaurant at a busy time, you'll be told there are no tables.

This is why I disagree with the analysis of Jesse Jackson when he tries to place Howard Beach in some kind of class context that downplays the traditional white racist character of this community. Since we have not had any time to discuss these things with him, it is generally the feeling among members of the coalition that, at this point, Reverend Jackson is misinformed and that his misinformation is misleading him.

FM: In addition to the coalition you have described in the Black community, you have also talked about a broader united front that goes beyond the Black liberation movement. What do you see as the potential and the pitfalls in developing such a united front? In the same vein, what do you foresee will be some of the issues and problems confronting the coalition *within* the African-American movement itself in the next few years?

JW: Everyone that I work with is supportive of the need for a united front to deal with the myriad of issues that are confronting us in America today: the issues of peace, military budgets, democracy, economic fairness, racial injustice, opportunities for jobs, better wages and working conditions. All of these issues could be better dealt with through a struggle that was truly a united front effort. So I think we desire the type of united front that could push the struggle for a truly better world forward. The question is: How can we do this? The problem that we are encountering here is a problem of credibility and a problem of trust. In the past, we have seen united

front struggles advance unevenly. We have seen certain groups reap the rewards and then turn their backs on the movement.

For example, we know that in the sixties there was a great united front effort. When we look at the seventies, however, we see that some parts of that united front—women, the labor movement, white progressives—sort of turned their backs on other elements of the front. They have said: "Well, look, we have advanced our situation, later for yours." The current peace initiative being organized for Washington on April 25th has taken no position on the issue of racial violence and has included no broad representation of the national Black community.

These continued, narrow mobilizations raise questions as to the willingness of various forces to participate in a united front. Consequently we have seen the Right-wing forces build their front and advance in this country. Now we have certain elements again saying: "We need a united front." Well, people in the Black community have always recognized the need for united front struggle. That is fundamental to us. The questions we are raising at this point are: how are we going to iron out those contradictions within the movement so that they don't again become divisive and destructive? Who do we unite with? How do we establish clearly who our friends are and who are our enemies?

On the Left, we see groups posturing as our friends. For instance there is the New Alliance Party, which tells us they want to speak for the Black community. At the same time, it is taking the *Jackson Advocate*, one of the most outspoken Black newspapers in the United States, to court in an effort to destroy its effectiveness.

As far as the coalition within the Black movement itself goes, I think there has to be more philosophical and ideological clarity here too. What are we shooting for at the end? Are we just shooting for a few faces in high places, which may be a strategy to keep us back? Or are we shooting for some broad-based democratic gains that can affect the majority of our people—like some gains in housing, jobs and job training, proper education. Those are the kinds of things that need to be developed before we get into some kind of united front.

On the one hand you see the election of Black mayors, or the first Black this or the first Black that, which says: "Hey, you are a part." On the

other hand, we see rising poverty and a gap between Black and white income that has widened. So, in spite of all the show and tell of Black progress, the reality is that the majority of our people are sinking further and further in the quicksand. And sinking further and further in this society means basically obsolescence.

The struggle for Black progress is really the struggle for Black survival. Unless we progress, we won't be here as a group. We are looking at an America that is becoming increasingly mechanized, increasingly more capital intensive, machinery intensive and less and less dependent upon labor; less and less dependent upon workers. Our struggle for progress is in fact a struggle for survival; a struggle for liberation.

Unfortunately in the last twenty years we have seen severe breakdowns in several mechanisms in our community. We have seen severe breakdowns within the mechanism of the family and the home which has caused—along with the Reagan housing policy—millions of people to become homeless.

In the face of those kinds of attacks, in the last ten years we have had some sporadic indications of our awakening and moving toward organization. They haven't been consistent and that has been part of the problem. But we have seen the founding of the National Black United Front and the National Black Independent Political Party which were indications of a desire to move in a certain direction.

In 1984 we saw the empowerment of Jesse Jackson by the Black community—again an indication of wanting to do something. We saw the tremendous support enveloped and focused by Minister Farrakhan. We have seen these expressions of power and strength, but they haven't been sustained nor have they been fulfilled. We are currently planning a Black Power Conference in New York City on May 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 1987 to examine the progress of the Black struggle over the past twenty years and to plan future strategies.

When I look down the road I see a united front developing. If we just *run into* a united front without thrashing out our views, then it is going to be a very shallow united front, and the first thing that happens is going to destroy it, and we will be right back where we started from. But I am hopeful that a new front can be developed in a principled way so it can hold together for a while and really weather the storm. ■

Howard Beach and White New York

The same December night as the Howard Beach attack, two Latino youths were set upon by whites in neighboring Ozone Park. The press would hardly have covered this incident if it hadn't been for the murder the same night in Howard Beach. The fact is that racial incidents have been happening more frequently the past two or three years in New York City, but only the most extraordinary get picked up by the mass media. Some of the rest are reported in the Afro-American newspapers.

Last Spring, the son of the Borough President of Staten Island was arrested for attacking a Black youth with a hammer along with a gang of other white youth. Staten Island is the city's smallest borough, with the smallest percentage of Black population. Last Spring's incident brought to public light the sort of thing that goes on all the time there and the authorities' institutionalized racism.

Over the summer in the Belmont section known as "The Little Italy of the Bronx," Latino youth were brutally beaten and once again it came out that people of color always need to watch their backs in that area as well. In September, a Black youth hit a white man's parked car with his bike. Two cars chased him down and then several white men, later caught and arrested, beat him to death.

On top of this mob violence are racist killings by the police with the complicity of the criminal justice system. The police officer responsible for the October 1984 shooting of 66-year old Eleanor Bumpers in her home has just been acquitted of manslaughter charges, never mind the murder charges the community demanded. In New York her name, along with that of Michael Stewart, became household names and symbols of racist repression. Meanwhile over the

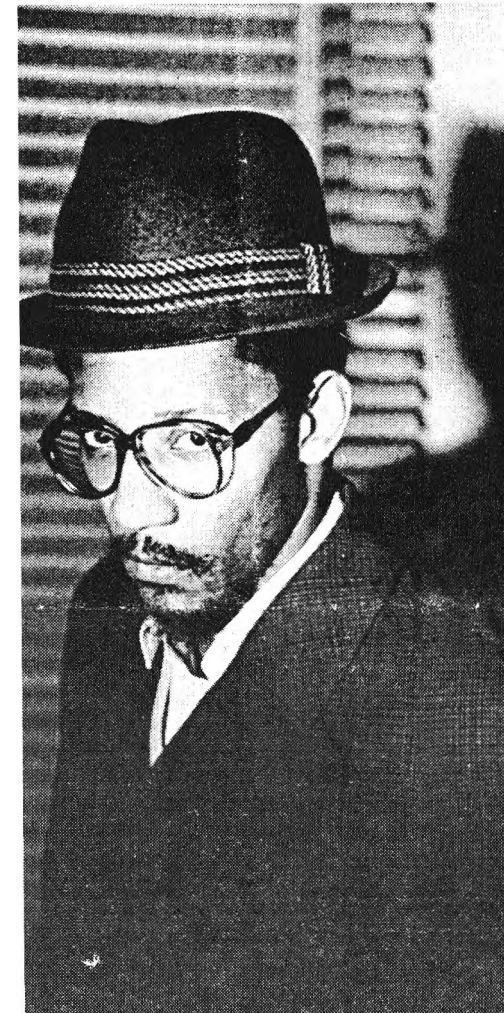
past two years, the police department has been wracked by exposure of corruption, law breaking and drug dealing. The biggest crack house in Black Central Brooklyn turns out to be the 79th Precinct house.

Against this background and the general disrespect shown people of color by the Koch administration, the Howard Beach murder spurred the Black community into action. A week to the day of the murder, three to four thousand people marched and rallied in Howard Beach to the taunts of about two hundred racist, mostly young, residents of the area yelling "Niggers, Go Home." Whites in the march got a special treat—"You're Traitors to the White Race!"—to which marchers replied, "You Should Join the Human Race."

The playing up of the crime issue by the media gives white people an excuse for being racist. If the people of Howard Beach are so worried about crime, why is it acceptable to them to have John Gotti or other organized crime figures currently on trial, with many living in their area? The word is that these people make the community safe; they only sell their death drugs in the Black community...And the crime of attacking people of color walking in the neighborhood doesn't count.

The white counter-demonstrators at the December 27 march do not speak for everyone in Howard Beach or for all white people. Some residents joined the march and rally. But white people who don't think this way really need to get out and say so loudly, and show they don't. The cancer of white supremacy needs to be brought into the open and attacked.

John Jameson



Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jamaican-born recording artist and poet, recently toured the U.S. with Gil Scott Heron. Linton and his family moved to Brixton, London in the early 1960s. As a teenager, Linton joined the Black Panther Youth League, a Black power organization similar to the Black Panther Party in the U.S. He has continued to be involved in community struggles since that time while developing an international reputation as a progressive reggae musician and poet. His albums include "Dread Beat and Blood," "Forces of Victory," "Bass Culture," "LKJ in Dub," and "Making History." His books of poetry include *Voices of the Living Dead*, published by Bogle L'Ouverture, 1975; and *Inglan is a Bitch*, published by Race Today, 1980. This interview was conducted by Vivien Morris and Bill Fletcher for *Forward Motion*. Special thanks to Bill Nevins for his help in setting it up.

Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson

Black Culture and Politics in Britain

FM: You are both a popular and a political artist. Could you tell us something about what experiences led you to use music as a medium for social change?

Johnson: Well, what I write and what I do came out of my involvement in the movement in Britain in the late 60's and 70's. Just as you went through a civil rights struggle over here in the 60's, that was our civil rights period. Although of course it's an ongoing struggle. I was a youngster in the Black Panther Movement in England and discovered Black literature. I read a book called *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Dubois. It just touched something in me and from that time onward I felt I needed to write, basically, about the experiences of Blacks in Britain.

FM: What do you think are the most important issues facing the black community in Britain right now, if you had to pick, say, three things?

Johnson: The police, number one. The power that the police have and the kind of laws that have been passed giving them more powers. These are issues which affect the population at large, but it affects us especially because of racism within the British police force. They have passed laws which have progressively whittled away at democratic rights, the rights of the individual. For example, they are trying to change the jury system, so that you are no longer allowed to object to a certain number of potential jurors. And they are passing laws that you can be held for longer than twenty-four hours without seeing a lawyer. That kind of thing. So it's the old issue of the police in general and, in particular, the police in the black community. The response has been riots which you probably have all heard about over here.

I'd say the second most important issue is unemployment

among young Blacks. Again, unemployment is a national problem, but it affects us more acutely than anyone else; unemployment figures for young Blacks are proportionately much higher than the national average.

Third: education. The educational system has gradually deteriorated over the last two decades or so. Recently they have made some attempts to bring multi-culturalism into the educational system, which they see as catering to the needs of the so-called ethnic minorities in the country. You know, instituting race awareness courses for teachers and that kind of thing. That's alright, but the problems are much more fundamental than that. The whole system is in need of an overhaul.

But, now that I think of it, in order of importance, I have actually left out one issue out which is really very, very important, even more important than the question of employment and education. That is the question of racist and fascist attacks. Since the 1950's there have been continual incidences of racial attacks. They led to the Nottingham riots of 1958. There was the 1981 massacre where racists threw incendiary devices into a house where some young people were having a party. Thirteen children died. A number of Asians have been murdered—stabbed or beaten to death. The communities where people from the Indian sub-continent live are under constant attack from young fascist thugs, and there have been numerous cases of harassment and attacks against people's homes and businesses.

In these cases, the police invariably start by saying that there is no evidence to suggest that the attack was racially motivated. And invariably the police never catch anybody. For example, in the case of the thirteen children, to date, no one has been caught and charged. So this issue of racist and fascist attacks has to be high up on the list of important ones.

FM: Who is behind these attacks?

Johnson: A number of fascist organizations like the British Movement, the British National Party, and the National Front. They come into our communities, the Black and Asian communities in the main, and break every law, and then they go to the court, and we have to struggle to get any kind of justice. Throughout the 70's there were a number of campaigns that showed that we had the capacity to do

that, to take independent political action to get justice from the courts.

FM: What kind of organizing did people do?

Johnson: For example, there is an organization called the Black Parents Movement. It started about ten years ago when some Black parents in the neighborhood got together and formed a committee called the Cliff MacDaniel Defense Committee. Cliff MacDaniel was a young fellow who was beaten up by the police on his way home from school and then charged with assaulting the police. In general, Black youth are easy prey for the police, especially if you are unemployed and you hang out on the street corner, and especially if you are confronted by an unscrupulous policeman who is looking to make his way up the promotion ladder very fast.



So the Cliff MacDaniel Defense Committee organized the case politically by informing the Black community and mobilizing to picket the courts. And they organized it legally by making sure that people had their evidence correct and so on. And then people involved in that campaign decided to go on and form an organization, the Black Parents Movement, which became active in all kinds of similar situations, and not necessarily just involving young Blacks.

The George Lindo Campaign is another example. George Lindo is a West Indian worker from the town of Bradford who was accused of robbing a shop. Some local Black people in Bradford formed a committee and, with the help and assistance of the Black Parents Movement, they organized a national campaign to establish this fellow's innocence and get him out of prison. And they did so in thirteen months; in fact, the fellow got 25,000 pounds compensation. But that only happened because of the campaign. Many similar campaigns were waged during the late 60's and 70's.

In those days we had several Black power organizations like the Black Panther Movement, the Black Unity and Freedom Party. We were building up the consciousness of people. We'd publish a paper; we'd go door-to-door in the evenings, meet people, talk to people, discuss our problems and what we ought to do about it, how we could organize, and so on. But that isn't the trend now. That groundwork has already been laid.

FM: So where do you see the movement going now?

Johnson: Well, it's at a turning point. Overall you could say the movement consists of those who hold the "radical" and "revolutionary" position that Blacks are in Britain to stay. We're the ones who say Blacks have contributed to the building of the country; we're a part of the country and we have a stake in it; we've had an impact on every single area of British life—social, cultural, and political. Some of us see ourselves as part of a general struggle for change, but we also recognize that we didn't just come alive in Britain; we have a history of struggle against British colonialists. So we say we need to organize from a position of strength, through building independent institutions. And this is happening.

On the other hand, we also have the emergence of a Black middle class encouraged by the state, which obviously sees it as an important buffer between the Black working class and unemployed people and the state itself. A lot of young, ambitious, middle class types have joined the Labor Party. We have some Black mayors now, a lot of Black councilors, and in the next general election there is a 90 percent chance of us having the first Black member of Parliament because some Blacks have been selected to run for seats which are traditionally safe Labor seats. It is not, however, entirely clear what

will happen. At one time a Black doctor from Trinidad—I think his name is Lord Pitt—ran for a very safe Labor seat, one that Conservatives hadn't won for years. And still, the constituency chose to vote for the Conservative candidate rather than vote for him. He lost that seat for the Labor Party. So we'll have to wait and see. But I think there is a very good chance of a Black gaining a seat in Parliament this time around. Whether that will transform the material conditions of Black people overnight remains to be seen...

FM: Are radical Blacks also part of the organizing for those electoral seats?

Johnson: Some are more left than others. But they're mostly ambitious career types in the Labor Party.

FM: A lot of the issues you've been talking about are ones you've written about as well. In fact, just as you were talking now, I thought about your song "What About the Working Class?" It strikes me that in the U.S., the term "working class" is almost never used, partly because of the history of racism and its impact on the white section of the working class and also, I suppose, because of the idea of upward mobility, the idea that everybody can make it in the U.S. People, including Black people, don't tend to think of themselves as working class. Do you think that's a difference between Britain and the United States, this issue of class consciousness?

Johnson: There is a very strong sense of class in Britain. Not necessarily vis-a-vis Blacks, but everybody. People are very class conscious in England. I would agree that it's dangerous to draw too many parallels between Blacks in Britain and Blacks in America. For one thing, let's face it, we've been in Britain for about three decades, and you've been in the U.S. something like three hundred years. You have established roots which go back a long time and you have a long history of struggles in the U.S., while we began waging our struggle in the Caribbean and continued it in England. Still, there are some similarities—like the Black power movement. I suspect that what happened here was something like what happened in Britain: apart from a lot of people being killed and put in prison, most of the rest of the activists were incorporated into the state bureaucracies through projects and so on. So that's a par-

allel. But to make generalizations, I think, could be dangerous.

FM: You pointed to one big difference between our situation and yours—the number of years Blacks have been in the country. Do you think this makes for a more cohesive community in England between Blacks from the West Indies and Africa and...

Johnson: And people from the Asian sub-continent. Yes. I feel that. I don't know if I'm correct because I don't live here and I don't know enough about here, but the U.S. strikes me as being a much more impersonal kind of society. In Britain, everybody has a common struggle, because you are all thrown together and you all face a common situation of oppression, colonial oppression and racism, whether you are from Barbados or Trinidad or from Jamaica. And we all tend to live in the same kind of areas, so there's a greater sense of cohesiveness, I would say, than in the U.S.

FM: You mentioned the Caribbean. I know you've travelled there a lot. Based on your travels and your contact with progressive movements there, do you think the Caribbean is going to be, or continue to be, a cutting edge of revolutionary struggle in this period? Obviously there have been some steps forward as well as setbacks, such as in Grenada.

Johnson: I really don't know. The situation is so volatile, anything can happen down there. Grenada certainly set things back. We've never had that kind of Stalinist politics in the Caribbean before and neither have we had that kind of intervention. It seems to me that most of the regimes down there are in crisis. They can't manage their current expenditures or current finances; their economies don't appear to be economically viable. So they have to run to the IMF (International Monetary Fund) or the World Bank or the United States for help. And the consequence is to heap more oppression on the population and create the seeds for further unrest and further instability.

For example, in Jamaica, the prime minister (Edward Seaga) committed political suicide when he imposed the IMF's conditions on the Jamaican people. During the recent local elections down there, he lost every single parish council, except for one, to the Socialist People's National Party. And if a general election is called tomorrow, the People's National

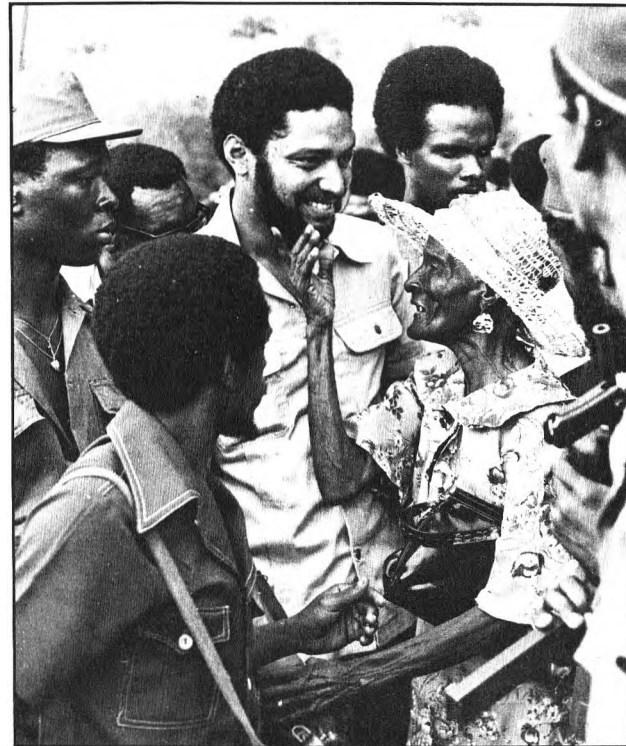
Party would win. But the question remains: how are they going to finance the economy? What is the alternative to the IMF? So the situation remains very volatile. I don't know if it is necessarily a cutting edge for revolution or radical revolutionary politics.

FM: Are there particular lessons that you think people can learn from the Grenada experience?

Johnson: Well, I suppose there must be lessons. I think the ones who most need to learn from this experience are the political parties, more than the people. Politicos have lessons to learn. That Stalinism has absolutely no place in Caribbean politics.

FM: Can you clarify what you mean when you say Stalinism? What from the Grenada experience do you identify with Stalinism?

Johnson: I'm talking about Bernard Coard and OREL (Organization for Revolutionary Education and Liberation). They wiped out nearly half of the Central Committee. That's how Stalin dealt with the contradictions within his party. And even when



Maurice Bishop, the popular leader of the New Jewel Movement. Perhaps if Bishop had gone to the Grenadian people and exposed the deep divisions within the party, he would still be alive today.

Trotsky escaped, they sent somebody down to Mexico to kill him, didn't they? That's a typical Stalinist method. It's obvious to everybody that Bernard Coard led a secret organization within the New Jewel Movement called OREL. Whereas Maurice Bishop was a popular leader of the people, Coard was the man behind the scenes, running the party and waiting to make his move against Bishop. In fact the New Jewel Movement was an alliance of MAP (Movement for Assemblies of the People, led by Maurice Bishop) and OREL.

So I think that one important lesson is that you cannot impose that kind of Eastern European style political model on a little Caribbean country—you know, democratic centralism and all that. I think a lesson that also comes out of it is that if you have the people's popular support and there are some contradictions within the political party of the organization, you go to the people. You don't keep it a secret. If Maurice Bishop had gone to the people and exposed those longstanding contradictions he would be alive today.

FM: Maybe we should talk a little now about your own work. In your album "Bass Culture," you focus on the connection between culture and the people. Culture is what ordinary folks experience. It's not something outside of ourselves and yet Black people, for example, tend to have very little self-appreciation...

Johnson: I don't know about that!

FM: What do you think?

Johnson: I think all that was changed during the 60's. There's been a lot of different movements for self-change, beginning with Garveyism, coming through to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power and this whole notion of Black consciousness and being proud of your ancestry and your roots. The amount of Americans that I see with African names that I can't even pronounce exemplifies this change. Well, I know there has been a certain regression: the Afro has been replaced by the curly perm, the so-called wet look and all that. But I think at the end of the day one can see that Black people internationally have a far greater sense of themselves now than they had maybe 25-30 years ago.

FM: I think that your artistic contributions definitely helped us move in that direction.

Johnson: Your contributions helped us. Both in Britain and in the Caribbean we took inspiration from what was happening over here. "Say, those Blacks over there in America are getting their thing together. Why can't we do something to get these people off our backs, too?" In the poem "Bass Culture" I was just trying to say something about the relationship between what we experience in our everyday lives (and all that gets condensed if you look into different forms of artistic expression) and then when we come to those pieces of artistic impression—whether it be theatre, poetry, a novel or whatever—that it has another impact on our lives at another level. I'm talking about that circular relationship.

FM: How do we get more control over that circular relationship? It takes artists with a progressive sense of themselves and their community to make those reflections for us in artistic forms and we seem to have so little control over the mass mediums of expression, like television.

Johnson: Well, we need to get some control over that. It's an electronic age we're living in and we can't ignore it. It is very powerful. For example, it looks as though people don't do much direct election campaigning over here—like going into the community and that kind of thing. They campaign mostly on the television. So you have to deal with that. It's very important. We need access to mass media and we have to organize to win it. In Britain, for example, we have a couple of left programs on the television and some Black people reading the news and that kind of thing is commonplace. But that was won through the riots. It was only after the riots we got all of that and I suppose that's what often happens over here. The working class and the unemployed must insurrect in order to obtain more viable benefits.

FM: I was thinking about the radio series that you did in England on the history of Jamaican music. Using the radio to reach youth here is key, especially with the advent of Sony Walkmans and all these headphones and blasters. Young people listen to so much radio and yet there is very little progressive programming and very few Black stations in the U.S. We don't use that medium enough for education.



England has always had a strong radical cultural movement. This is an 18x20 foot billboard by Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson erected in one of London's working class neighborhoods.

Johnson: I suppose that's the way things are over here. Everything is the dollar, isn't it? The power of the almighty dollar!

FM: One of the problems that a lot of progressive cultural workers face here is just getting their things out. In Britain do you have ...

Johnson: Let me anticipate what you are going to say. The answer is no. The situation is a lot different in England. There continues to be a popular movement of alternative culture, left culture, left radical culture which is very old. It didn't just happen since Blacks came to England but goes back centuries. Radical culture has always been there. And then again, if people can make money out of it, they'll deal with it. Like during the 60s for example, radical literature was selling like hot cakes—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or Che Guevara or Fidel Castro and what not. Do you know what I mean?

FM: What can progressive artists do now to get their work out? Take artists like Gil Scott Heron, who you've been touring with. His album sales are so determined by what is pushed on the radio stations. I suppose a lot of compromises get demanded of artists.

Johnson: But it depends on what you are aiming at. If you are aiming at the millions or if you just want to reach some people who you think ought to get this message or whatever, then you approach it differently. You take a group like Serious Business from New York. They make their records and they go around and they do community type gigs and they sell their records at the show and they make a little. They are not big stars but they get by. So again it depends on the artist and what he's aiming at. Sometimes you might have very modest expectations and somebody says, well this could sell and they

market it for you. And maybe you get a bigger volume of sales. But it depends—there are a lot of different factors involved there.

FM: You were saying something a minute ago about the history of radical artists in Britain. I assume there is some kind of mutual support organization of progressive artists.

Johnson: What's happened is that we've built an independent Black cultural movement in Britain that exists alongside radical cultural movements. For example, Britain has a tradition of agit-prop theatre. This is an alternative theatre to mainstream western type productions. They put on political plays which they conceive as social commentary and that kind of thing. We've established a Black theatre movement independently of white left artists. We didn't get much help from them to establish a theatre movement. That was our own independent cultural initiative. Reggae music, for example, is a part of the British cultural scene. It is no longer Black people's music in England. It's part of the British pop scene. But we've established a base for it independent of anybody. In art there's now a Black visual artistic movement. Again that was through independent activity. And then we've had to organize and mobilize people to get grants. We argue that we are tax payers and rate payers like everybody else and the arts are subsidized so therefore we are entitled to the same subsidies as the rest of the population. We've been effective in getting some people grants. When the Greater London Council (a local government structure for London) was in operation it was run by a left wing Labor regime. They made a special effort to fund the Black cultural projects and so on because it was a part of their strategy to form a kind of coalition, kind of a rainbow coalition if you like, of Blacks, single parents, gays, lesbians, and what not. So they gave us some money. But Mrs. Thatcher abolished them. If you can't beat them and you don't like them, you abolish them.

FM: What kind of relationship is there, if any, between the Black population in Britain and the Irish?

Johnson: There isn't any relationship as such between the Black and Irish struggle, but insofar as we live in Britain and we are part of the British population Black people generally have a view about it. Also some Blacks might be in the army and

might be sent there to fight. In general, Blacks sympathize with the Republican struggle simply because we have a similar colonial experience with the British state and therefore can identify with any anti-colonial struggle being waged by anybody. Secondly, I don't think people are generally sympathetic to some of the methods of the IRA but they generally identify with the ends of the IRA. Not necessarily with the means, but with the ends. I think that's the relationship between us and the Irish.

FM: One of the reasons I'm asking this is here in Boston, as you probably know, there is a large Irish population and relations between Blacks and Irish in Boston, at least going back to the Civil War, have been rough.

Johnson: That kind of relationship doesn't exist in Britain at all. In fact on the contrary, whenever there are social relationships between whites and Blacks they are invariably between Irish whites and Blacks. This happens because we work together in the buildings, and so on. We do a lot of the heavy, dirty work and people who work together become friends. And of course, before we arrived in Britain, it was the Irish who were the niggers. They took the brunt of British racism. So, again, we had that in common. Blacks and the Irish get on fine. In general, we don't have a serious race problem in Britain, in terms of Black and white. Racism is at an institutional level. People can deal with the everyday racism—somebody doesn't like you and they call you a Black bastard, you call them a white bastard and that's that. And if it's a fight, it's a fight. People get on, people live together. If this one doesn't like you or you don't like him, the feeling is mutual and that's that. What is important is the racism within the educational system. The racism in the courts. The racism in terms of employment. The racism in the police force. Institutionalized racism. Again, extreme racists, the extreme elements like the National Front and the British Party.

FM: Is it too rhetorical to say that racism has stepped up as British imperialism has gotten into worse and worse of a crisis? Is that accurate?

Johnson: I don't know if it could be measured in those terms. I don't know. But of course it obviously has an objective basis in the presence of Blacks in the country. Because by and large when Blacks be-

gan to go to Britain it was a time when white labor was strong. There was a shortage of labor in the post-World War II reconstruction period and so Blacks were brought in not only as cheap labor but also to weaken the power of organized labor. I don't know whether you could call it a conspiracy or anything like that, but that's how it worked out objectively. You've just come in from the Caribbean and so on, and you used to work for maybe 5 shillings a day. You are offered a job for 7 pounds a week and you take it because it's better than what you had before. The weakness of labor, because of the racism within the trade union movement, is another struggle we're involved in. Because of racism the mistake was made of not opening the doors of the unions to Blacks and educating us about workers rights so as not to undermine the position of unionized workers. In the end their position was never undermined because Blacks wised up soon and fought for the same conditions as whites—the same wage, the same holiday pay and the same everything. Before, in the initial stages, we would be getting less money for the same work as our fellow English worker. So I think that's the objective basis for racism. Obviously racist images of Blacks had been cultivated over a long historical period—in books and in society gen-

erally—but I've been describing how things work now.

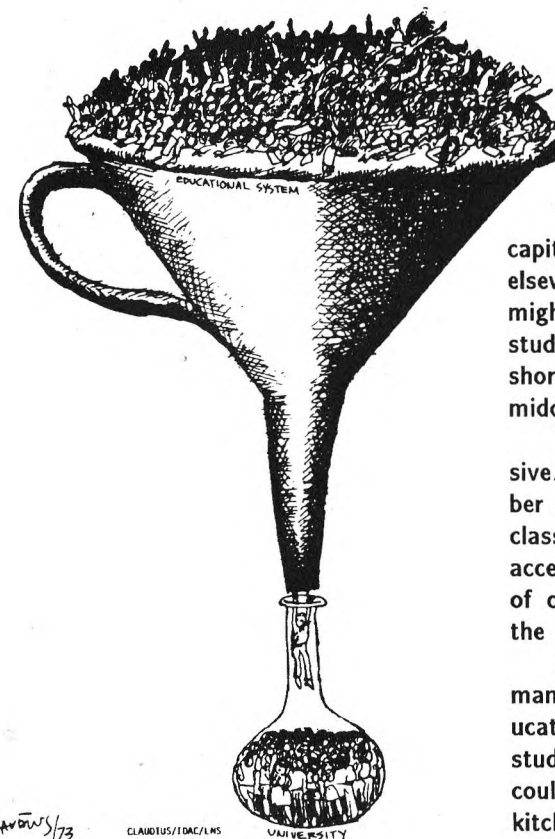
FM: I have one more question. What kind of impact has the situation in South Africa had on the Black population in Britain?

Johnson: It has had a tremendous impact. Needless to say I think you'd be hard pressed to find a Black person in England who is not for the liberation of Black people in South Africa. The anti-apartheid movement itself has by and large ignored Blacks and by-passed Blacks. It's basically a white organization which has never really sought to involve the Black community in its activities. So when they have rallies and so on Blacks go anyway because of how we feel about South Africa. We want to show our solidarity. But since the struggle has been intensifying, Blacks have been organizing independently of the Anti-Apartheid Movement which is the official anti-apartheid organization. When things happen in the street, for example, a policeman would be trying to arrest somebody wrongfully, people would interrupt and say "Well, you're not going to get away with it. Do you think this is South Africa?"

FM: Linton thank you very much for this interview.

Johnson: Thank you. ■

LIFT
EVERY
VOICE



Leon Watson was a staff member in UCLA's freshman summer program in 1985-86. In September 1986, he was replaced on grounds that, among other things, he was "activating students." A video about the struggle in defense of Affirmative Action at UCLA and in support of Watson and other activists will be available soon. Contact FM for details. This is an edited version of a speech he gave to freshmen at UCLA.

An Ebony View of the Ivory Tower

by Leon Watson

The educational system and American universities have served capitalist interests well by perpetuating inequalities generated elsewhere in the capitalist system. Operating in a manner which might best be called "institutional classism," they divide and rank students for later entry into a highly hierarchic job market. In short, higher education has a virtual monopoly on entrance to middle and upper level positions in the class structure.

The effectiveness of this educational system is most impressive. A 1979 study by Richard H. deLone showed that the number of years of schooling attained by a child depends on the social class standing of the father!¹ But even more important is the acceptance by most people in this country of the myth of equality of opportunity through education. This has legitimized the role of the universities in producing the existing social division of labor.²

Within this, there are the most elite institutions whose present mandate was defined by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1969. This commission was formed at the height of student unrest and rebellion to figure out ways the universities could stay the course without giving away everything but the kitchen sink. With one exception, every one on this commission was industrialist, white, over 45 and male. And this is what it came up with:

Elite institutions of all types—colleges and universities, should be protected and encouraged as a source of scholarship and leadership training at the highest levels. They should not be homogenized in the name of egalitarianism. Such institutions, whether public or private, should be given special support for instruction and research, and for the ablest of graduate students; they should be protected by policies of differentiation of function.

It concluded with a most telling "white"—centric statement:

All civilized countries...depend on a thin clear stream of excellence to provide new ideas, new techniques and statesmen like treatment of complex social and political problems.

Socially conscious people in academic environments must make a decision when faced with the situation I've just described. Are we going to go along with this program and mandate and basically internalize a value system that is antithetical to the needs of the people? Or will we struggle to maintain our role as "a servant of the people"?

Today this country, on the surface, is gripped by the forces of extreme reaction and blatant racism. It has become fashionable for some blacks to espouse a conservative ideology. The walls of academia drip with racist epithets while elite snobs in academia are ooze out of the woodwork to voice their opposition to equal opportunity. It is easy in this atmosphere for activists and concerned people to become myopic. We begin to think that we can and should struggle only for the least because only the least is possible.

Affirmative action was born out of an intense struggle for equality and freedom. It was born at a time when hundreds of thousands and even millions of people were caught up in that struggle. Not an insignificant number shed and were ready to shed their blood.

It was a time when Blacks, youth, students and women all stood up and said, "to hell with your system"—a system that rained down napalm on babies in Vietnam as it is now doing in El Salvador and Nicaragua. They stood up and said, "to hell with your equality that shoots down kids in the street for being Black, or Chicanos because they speak another language. To hell with your so called democracy."

Now there is an attempt to reverse the verdict of the 60's, a verdict which showed this society racist to the core and exploitative in every fiber of its existence.

Affirmative action today is under fire and being dismantled on every front. Ethnic studies centers, which once directly challenged the Western European and Anglo Saxon biases of the universities and segmented, linear modes of thought, have been turned into isolated research centers. Tenured faculty from minority nationalities have become as rare as a dodo bird. Retention services have been mainstreamed so that they are no more than blond-vanilla carbons of adjunct services on the campus. These programs and



N.Y. Times/Chester Higgins Jr.

A new generation of student activists is coming of age in the anti-apartheid movement.

services, born to combat the oppression of minority nationalities in the academic arena and link our activities to all those who struggle, have been separated from the struggles that birthed them. They treat students like sheep, only to be called on to raise some springtime hell when the programs themselves are endangered. They have become so professionalized that people easily forget that our only function is to serve as conduits for empowering students collectively and individually to stand up and continue to struggle.

Racist national oppression is still a fact of life for third world people, and affirmative action programs had better remember that. New university strategies for dealing with affirmative action under such code words as "selectivity" and "parity" are nothing but the same old strategies for excluding oppressed nationalities. This system has not given up its super-exploitation of Black, Chicano, Latino, Native American, and Asian people.

Today we're actually part of and experiencing

some very important developments that serve to lift our sights and, for some of us, enliven our spirits. There is an upsurge that is sweeping the U.S. and in support of the struggle that the Azanian people are waging. This development points to a couple of very important things that we really have to understand in this period. One is the inter-connectedness of the struggles against the same enemy, the system of imperialism, and the other is the fact that a sharp stand taken by the people of Azania has been able to call forth all kinds of support all around the world including right here in the U.S., right in the belly of the beast.

I'm sure we've all heard the popular analysis of where things are at with students—"designer brains to go along with designer jeans," "all the kids today are Reaganite Republicans." But it seems that the surveyors missed something in their survey of where the youth are at. They didn't quite seem to catch on that there was the potential for something like the anti-apartheid movement to take off. Some seeds

were waiting to blossom, and they are blooming right now. They will have to be taken further, but they are blooming right now and it is very fine to see that.

I'm confident that the struggles on all fronts against oppression *will* continue to grow and that one day we are going to walk up to the oppressors, tap them on the back, turn them around and say, "Up against the wall motherfucker. We've come for what's ours." ■

Notes

1. Richard H. DeLone, *Small Futures: Children, Inequality and the Limits of Liberal Reform*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1979.
2. Monte Diliawsky, *Exit 13: Oppression and Racism in Academia*. Boston: South End Press, 1982.
3. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, *Priorities for Action: Commission on Higher Education, Final Report*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1973.

Fight

by Collette Armstead

I am a fighter, always have been. While away at college being immersed in the American ethic, while struggling to politicize my way out of it, I find myself consistently confronting people who step on my toes in hardly crowded elevators. Pudgy, pink-faced studiers who drag my clothes from spinning machines onto laundromat floors. I think it is all accidental. I believe myself to be clumsy. I study dance.

The dance instructor tries to kill my sway. It took me and Big Sister half a summer to get my sway down. Sway or A?

I sway to classes along wide pavements. I get elbows, pushes, shoves. Next semester, I study self-defense.

June 1978: The Supreme Court declares Allen Bakke has been reversely discriminated against.

March 1979: Susan (Suzy) Waspooon, with the aid of her father, declares me a case of too much bad black talk. Mr. Waspooon contacts university administrators. The word is telephoned down to me, through a Black Studies professor, to remember that I am a mere guest in this country of classroom, better that I not express my opinion, lest I be deported.

Following my unofficial censorship, Ms. Waspooon tries to act as if I am invisible behind the classroom door. I play my part well. Quick. Quiet. Hand wrapped in hair. Flesh against bone. I gouge and pound. Her body is bloodless.

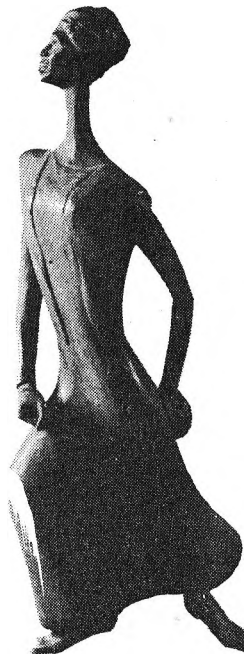
I am declared tacky by political, social and cultural organizations. I am also expelled.

At the university I am vulgar and unrefined. At home on East 93rd street, I am someone who can take care of herself. At home, I understand. It is a hand-me-down from my great-great-grandmother. I carry engraved pictures of her striking back. Beating fists against broad backs that pretend to feel no pain. Punching. Slapping. Opening flesh with long fingernails. Teaching, *Fight, if you can't fight, kick.**

Collette Armstead is a Chicago poet and short fiction writer. She is also a professional member of the Organization of Black American Culture.

*Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America*. New York, Vintage.

A Vignette



CHANGING CONDITIONS

New Phase for US In Central America?

by Dennis O'Neil and Lee Ornati

The alarm is being raised again: The U.S. is planning to invade Nicaragua this spring or soon thereafter.

But since various progressives have raised this particular cry time and again over the last eight years, there's a strong tendency not to bother even looking around for a wolf. Common sense suggests that the Contragate scandal has eliminated the Reagan Administration's ability to undertake such a drastic step.

Common sense, however, also reminds us that Reagan's way out of the Beirut bombing debacle was the invasion of Grenada. The concerns voiced by the Sandinista government, by the movement grapevine, and by articles in the left press are backed by some unsettling facts. A long piece by Jay Levin in the *LA Reader*, picked up by *In These Times* (Dec 24-Jan 14 issue) detailed military preparations and extensive quotes from a high ranking Green Beret officer opposing what he calls a "planned invasion." Rightist scenarios for the establishment of a contra "government" inside Nicaragua's borders which could invite U.S. intervention Recent Op Ed pieces in the *New York Times* alongside liberal ditherings about diplomatic pre-intervention groundwork being laid in Europe. What little the official Democratic Party "responses" to Reagan's State of the Union Message had to say about Nicaragua displayed all the backbone of a slime mold.

If the danger does seem grave, American progressives have the obligation to devote maximum effort to this struggle. It might be time to play down that shop steward election in favor of the local Labor Central America Solidarity Committee. On the other hand if the danger is more remote, the actual harm that crying wolf does (and has done) to anti-intervention work should be pointed out.

In the last *FM*, "Changing Conditions" argued that the



Dennis O'Neil and Lee Ornati are members of Freedom Road Socialist Organization living in New York City.

Contragate Scandal had shattered what the bourgeoisie thought was a developing foreign policy consensus. It is even clearer now that they are badly freaked out by the covert antics of the NSC and the Administration's current paralysis. As exposure follows exposure, the Administration's competence has become subject not merely to question but ridicule. The White House staff appears to have adopted what the *Nation's* Alexander Cockburn calls the "Bananas Defense." for Reagan: he was too: a) vague, b) concerned about the hostages, c) sedated, or d) senile to know what was going on. Bud McFarlane, for several years the real power in foreign policy, tries to do himself in with, what was it, three bottles of St. Joseph's Aspirin for Children?

Meanwhile, the situation in Lebanon is worsening, the Iran-Iraq war is heating up, international currency markets are shaky and Gorbachov is on a major propaganda offensive. The U.S. government has no clear program to deal with any of it. Any White House sounding of opinion among the rich and powerful will not find a chorus of "A land war in Central America? Thought you'd never get around to it. Good show."

If the American ruling class is not ready to break out the John Philip Sousa records, the rulers of various European powers are considerably more reluctant, especially since Contragate broke, to back even current U.S. policy. An invasion would risk throwing the already uneasy Western Alliance into political crisis.

Central to plans is the military, of course. Here there is evidently deep divisions. Some hanker to wipe out the memory of Vietnam with a solid military victory in Central America. They predict a relatively easy victory in Nicaragua, with a population considerably less than one-tenth that of Vietnam, lacking a friendly and powerful bordering nation like China, and located at the end of very short supply lines to the U.S. Others, including a majority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and top Pentagon officials, draw different lessons from the Vietnam war. They don't want to get involved in any conflict that doesn't have broad support from a substantial majority of the American people. (Admiral Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, recently called for cutting off aid to the contras if they didn't clean up their political and military act and "do the kind of thing the American public wants.") They know damn well that that base of support hasn't been created.

In fact, the American people comprise the biggest single roadblock to a military adventure in Central America. As polls show again and again, Americans oppose any direct U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua and, by smaller margins, even support to the contras. The confusion and corruption revealed by Contragate has deepened these feelings. Even after years of Rambo, the considerable success of the Vietnam War movie *Platoon* both reflects and reinforces popular sentiment against American military engagement in the Third World. Within the population as a whole there is a far larger and more conscious core of opposition than existed when the Vietnam War began. This core is not restricted to the residual left from the upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The ongoing wave of assaults on CIA recruiting on college campuses shows the potential force that youth still has in the event of an invasion. Also worth mentioning are the tens of thousands of Americans from all walks of life who have visited Nicaragua and returned inspired by the gains the Sandinista revolution has won in the face of unrelenting American hostility.

The range of forces arrayed in active or passive opposition makes direct American intervention under present circumstances unlikely. But the fact that the movement need not go on war footing doesn't mean that we can afford to relax our vigilance. The work of Central America activists in C.I.S.P.E.S., religious groups and other organizations has helped create and maintain the political climate which makes intervention a dicey option for the administration. Moreover, unlikely doesn't mean impossible. This country's rulers apparently calculate that if they invade, they'll have about four days to have the job more or less in hand. On day five, America will be headed toward a political crisis, toward ungovernability. Today, our job is to keep that threat alive. If an invasion happens, it will be to make it real. ■ —February 20, 1987

Response to Thale

Directions for Labor's Left Wing

by Chris Curran



Geoff Thale's article on the "Crisis of American Trade Unionism" (*Socialist Politics* No. 5, Spring 1986), offers a welcome discussion of the direction socialist trade unionists should take in this traumatic period for the trade union movement. He places the current crisis of the movement in an historical perspective.

He characterizes periods of relative stability in American capitalism, especially the most recent period, as times when the system is able to establish a fairly stable set of institutions such as capital markets, labor markets, commodities markets, and the legal and other state machinery to support these institutions. In other words, periods of relative stability are those when, in its way, the system "works": capitalism carries out its exploitation and oppression in some kind of orderly fashion.

In doing so, Thale rejects crude crisis theories. A wistful pursuit of Armageddon has dominated much of the left in recent years: The expectation of imminent collapse and an underestimation of the durability of the capitalist system led to disillusionment among many of the new socialists who came out of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, few would have predicted or could explain why the decadent "moribund" system could still produce the massive technological revolution now taking place. And few would have thought that the US economy could relatively smoothly survive the crippling of "basic" industries such as steel.

Thale provides a summation of a theory of class consciousness and ideology, drawing upon Gramsci and Goran Therborn, which is enlightening in several ways. Fundamentally, Thale dispenses with a "straight-line" approach to class consciousness, and treats the subject with the complexity it deserves. He describes workers' self-conscious roles as family members, as



Chris Curran is an East Coast Trade Union activist.

members of racial and ethnic groups, etc. He argues that these roles are more decisive ideologically in relatively stable periods of capitalist rule. "Non-class" ideologies are based on aspects of reality, and affirmed by the social and cultural structures of the ruling class. The development of class-consciousness requires protracted and conscious effort, not simply sweeping away "false" consciousness.

Some of Thale's specific suggestions for trade union activists are on the mark, as well. Demands on the state for social advancement as opposed to one-sided reliance on collective bargaining by "Big Labor", would sharpen class interests and provide a better basis for alliances with other social groups. And Thale repeatedly emphasizes the approach of "involving others on the basis of a shared vision, rather than on the basis of rational class self-interest." Any lasting alliance of progressive social forces which have both conflicting and unifying interests will depend on some ideological glue. The bartering between unequal partners which characterizes the pale version of the Labor/Minority alliance that survived the New Deal will not suffice.

Thale's search for class consciousness, however, takes a detour around the economic struggle, a detour which labor activists should not, and in fact cannot, follow. Thale uses the predicament of the auto industry to describe the weakness of the strike as a tactic to strengthen labor's hand in collective bargaining. And he criticizes labor activists who fantasize about the sit-down strikes of the 30s, oblivious to the fact that as often as not strikes today, in his view, are weapons of the employers against their unions, rather than vice-versa.

But the problems of a national strike in auto today (or the recent disaster at USX) are not typical of the strike weapon in any and all situations. And where traditional weapons in the economic struggle are ineffective, workers will search for others. It is our job to assist in that creative process. And the naive devotion to simple militancy Thale dismisses is not a fair characterization of the thinking of anti-concessions fighters in the trade union movement today.

The Economic Assault

To understand the importance of the economic struggle for socialist trade unionists, it is helpful to

first look at the scope of the economic attack on today's trade union members.

It has been argued effectively that "the shift from manufacturing, as well as many lesser developments, indicates much strength and resiliency in American capitalism."¹ Thale seems to share this opinion.

Yet the continuing inability of the bourgeoisie to develop a new dominant consensus, either an economic policy or a political realignment, indicates the severity of the current crisis and indicates the drastic options facing American corporations (and the labor movement as well). And any foreseeable road to a new period of capitalist stability runs through a drastic reduction of the standard of living of the American working class. This means the destruction of the current social structures, established after WWII, which support that standard of living.

Piore and Sabel, in *The Second Industrial Divide*, summarize the national wage stabilization structures stemming from the post-WWII period as follows:

The system of wage determination in these industries was defined by five principal elements: the model automobile contract formula, established in a 1948 United Auto Workers-General Motors agreement; pattern bargaining, which spread the automobile settlement to the rest of the unionized sector; federal labor legislation, which facilitated unionization and thus forced nonunion employers to increase their wages at the collectively bargained rate, or else run the high risk that their firms would be organized; minimum wage legislation, which forced up wages at the bottom of the labor market in step with wages at the top; and wage-setting mechanisms in the public sector, which linked the movement of salaries paid by the government to that of union workers.²

A survey of the status of these five elements today demonstrates that each of them stands somewhere between destruction and disrepair. Business Roundtable economist Audrey Freedman stated firmly back in 1982, "Even after the recession abates...union bargaining will not be able to return to the formula wage of COLA-plus-3% annual increase nation-wide [the GM formula]...We are returning to [custom-fitting contracts to] the individual enterprise, for good."³ And she, of course, proved to be a much more able forecaster than those labor leaders who characterized the advent of concessions bargaining as a temporary adjustment.

Pattern bargaining has unraveled at breakneck speed. The Steel Basic Agreement is no more. The auto contract has given way to competing bids, local by local, for investment, and this trend will likely accelerate with the recent announcement by GM of further massive plant-closings. From the Teamsters' Master Freight Agreement to West Coast ship-building, the picture varies little.

The minimum wage, described by Piore and Sabel as "the principal constraint on the nonunion competitors" of the low-wage unionized industries, has fallen drastically. Where it traditionally was set at about half the average private wage, it is now at about 40%, and at its lowest real level since 1955.⁴ Prevailing wage laws, part of the mechanisms to extend the reach of union wage agreements, still stand. But they face persistent attack, with Democrats sometimes taking the initiative.



Leftists and labor historians have compared the 1920s to the 1980s, particularly the widely trumpeted introduction of "new," non-adversarial models of labor relations and the demise of the unions and strikes in both periods. Both decades also feature renewed attacks on oppressed nationalities at home and a general offensive by the corporations on the cultural front. But one big difference is often overlooked.

Factory workers in the 1920s, working harder and faster than before, gained a 26% real increase in income.⁵ The bitterly anti-union Henry Ford, for one, adopted a high-wage strategy that was to a degree the forerunner of the broader wage and con-

sumption structures which were implemented after WWII. In contrast, average hourly earnings have *dropped* 4.5% (or up to 10%, depending on what figures you use) in the last decade, as the concessions steamroller drives on.⁶

Driven by the uneven development in the world economy ("foreign competition") and the revolution in the means of production (communications and information processing), the standard of living of American workers is steadily sinking. Corporations talk freely of the need for American workers to compete with workers of the Third World in wages, a concept that would have been ludicrous just a few years ago. And with the wage structures of the post-WWII period shattered and no new set-up even under serious discussion, there is no floor yet in sight.

The Economic Struggle

In these circumstances, trade union activists are, as would be expected, engaged in a desperate struggle to maintain some bargaining power. Socialist trade union activists can afford to do no less. Thale's formulation on the task of the left in this regard is wrong, and potentially very damaging. He writes:

...the issue is not really finding prescriptions for what the [trade union] movement as a whole should do. The real need is for the left to analyze what role the left should play, what it should do to get a hearing for its programs, and thereby begin to overcome its marginalization. (p. 11)

Is it conceivable for the "programs of the left" to gain a hearing if they are not of some help in figuring out what the labor movement as a whole should be doing? The proposals in Thale's article are themselves, as they should be, proposals for what labor should do—i.e., linking workplace struggle to the community, formulating struggles in terms of demands on the state, pushing for political initiatives by the union leadership that will mobilize the rank and file, etc. Separating that task of the left and prescriptions for the labor movement as a whole in this way would itself lead to further marginalization.

The socialists' broader vision of a progressive trade union movement—and of a socialist society—needs to be developed and presented in the context of their fellow trade unionists' day-to-day struggle, including the economic struggle. And that economic

struggle is a cauldron of setbacks and experimentation that Thale overlooks.

Strikes themselves are still a powerful weapon in many circumstances. In Lynn, Massachusetts 8300 IUE members at General Electric struck for a month in February of 1986 over the breakdown of the grievance procedure. The strike cost GE \$20 million dollars in one division alone, reduced the grievance backlog, and established some protection for stewards engaging in shop-floor bargaining over grievances. A few miles away in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a group of seventy mainly Hispanic immigrant workers struck the NASCO Box Spring Co. last November for union recognition. After five weeks on the line, they won where four traditional union drives had lost over the preceding fifteen years.

Corporations talk freely of the need for American workers to compete with workers of the Third World in wages, a concept that would have been ludicrous just a few years ago.

In Texas, meatcutters and clerical workers of the UFCW used innovative part-time strikes, where different sections of a bargaining unit struck on a rotating basis, and partial strikes, where a strategic section of the workforce struck and was financially supported by those working by special assessment so they could outlast the company. In Minnesota, it seems likely that UFCW Local P-9 could have been successful in its struggle against the Hormel corporation if the International Union had sanctioned their roving picket lines at the other Hormel plants.

In Connecticut, the Hotel and Restaurant Workers waged a successful strike and won wage increases for the largely female workforce at Yale. In Boston, the threat of a strike by the same union at the major hotels won major contract language advances allowing oppressed nationality workers to get out of the low-pay, low-status "back of the house" jobs for the first time. In both cases, the organizing issues were around sexual or racial equality and corporate "social responsibility."

Of course, these examples of recent strike activity took place where there was still some economic

leverage to be exerted. But at least as important is the fact that in each case the activists were able to frame their demands in a moral way that drew clear lines between justice and oppression, and allowed the unions to successfully appeal to the labor movement, the community and in some cases other social movements. It can certainly be said that simply withholding your labor in today's economic conditions is often not an effective tactic, and that waging a traditional strike where your people walk out and lean on their picket signs watching management, scabs, and time pass by is virtually never effective anymore.

New Tactics, Politics, Class Consciousness

Where strikes are not an effective tactic, creative unionists from the UAW, Boilermakers, UE and others have developed the in-plant strategy, or "running the plant backwards." This goes way beyond traditional "work-to-rule" job actions and by working without a contract in some cases avoids the NLRB restrictions on concerted action. The strategy of the corporate campaign, pressuring the financial institutions backing a particular employer, has proven applications in certain struggles. The leaders of the struggle at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minn. and their advisors Ray Rodgers and Ed Allen not only revived the roving picket line but introduced the Adopt-A-Family tactic to gain financial support.⁷

Socialist labor activists have to be in the middle of all this, leading and learning. In the first place, the people they represent aren't about to let them do otherwise. Those of us who do not provide some answers, some methods of struggle both tactical and political, will not gain much credibility for whatever else we might have on our minds.

These new forms of economic struggle, often born of desperation and defeat, are a challenge to the conciliatory direction of the AFL-CIO leadership, which managed to write their report on "The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions" in February of 1985 without even mentioning concessions.⁸ As a result, many of the leaders in these struggles, as in the UAW and Cement Workers (now merged with the Boilermakers), not to mention the leaders of Local P-9, become objects of attack from their own International leadership as well as the



Strikes are still a powerful weapon in many situations. Above, IUE members at the large GE complex in Lynn, Massachusetts wage a successful strike over the breakdown of the grievance procedure. At the right, a successful strike for union recognition at the small NASCO Box Spring Co. in Chelsea, Massachusetts.



corporations they are confronting. The direction of the unions themselves is being fought out over these tactical questions, which stem from broader strategic and philosophical differences.

And more, the economic struggle today contains the seeds of the restructuring that will follow the present crisis.⁹ For example, Piore and Sabel pose the possibility of a restructured economy based on flexible specialization in manufacturing, with the revolution in the means of production harnessed in new work structures. This would include a new craft worker whose wages would be based on a pay-for-knowledge model instead of the pay-for-type-of-work-done which has characterized US labor relations since the defeat of the craft unions and the introduction of Taylorism and mass production.¹⁰ The terms of this possibility, as of others, are being fought out today in microcosm in the conflict over contract language and grievances.

It is also difficult to see how organized labor can achieve its political agenda while being routed in collective bargaining. Such demands on the state as a very modest Labor Law Reform proved to be out of reach under a Democratic President with a Democratic Congress back in 1977. Part of the problem was that the effort was basically limited to traditional lobbying. But it is hard to imagine more success today, especially in legislative affairs, with labor losing members and passively accepting wage cuts. The spectre of Gary Hart nearly clinching the Democratic Party Presidential nomination while bashing

organized labor as a "special interest" is evidence of the depths to which the trade unions have sunk in their traditional political arena. Among other problems, workers are less likely to follow labor leaders in political efforts who have proven incapable of mounting a strong defense on the economic front. "Mounting a strong defense" does not necessarily mean winning. But it means drawing the class line in the dirt as opposed to the Munich peace through conciliation line of some trade union leaders today.

The AFL-CIO leadership, with the whole system they inherited in shambles all around them, tells their members they must find a political answer (in their case, this means electing Democrats). In the absence of the economic struggle, this is a fraud. We should not make a similar error coming from a progressive "let's get political" angle. Thale and others on the left tend to do this.

Finally, it is often on the basis of protracted and bitter economic struggle that advances in class consciousness are made. Non-class ideologies, as Thale calls them, which define people's roles as a father or mother, or a white person, or an American, take on new content as a bitter struggle between employer and employees stretches on. Who are our friends, who are our enemies? What strategy and tactics are best for the situation? These questions are sharply posed in the economic struggle as well as in other arenas. And often new answers are found, and class consciousness is developed.

To take an obvious example: Tens of thousands

of American workers have been, and continue to be, directly affected by the struggle of the Hormel workers of the original UFCW Local P-9. Anyone who meets their active core is inspired by their political sophistication and class consciousness. And it is inconceivable that this could have happened except on the basis of the bitter and determined economic struggle they waged against the Hormel Meatpacking Company. To be more clear, the ties between the members of UFCW P-9 and other meatpackers, other workers, students, Black activists, the African National Congress and trade unionists from the Phillipines to England that socialists find so inspiring would never have happened if someone hadn't thought up the Adopt-A-Family program. Because Hormel would have starved them back to work in a couple of months.

Thale begins his essay by reasserting the importance of the labor movement and the trade unions as an area of work for the left, against those socialists who have thrown up their hands at the conservative nature of the mainstream of the labor movement. This is welcome, and if anything, understated.

I would also emphasize another view that was more common during the radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s: the centrality of the struggle against national oppression in the trade union movement. This means both the struggle to unify the working class, and the building of the alliance between the multi-national working class and the multi-class movement of the oppressed nationalities in the United States.

Struggle Against National Oppression

While Detroit is no longer burning and the national question in the US has assumed the quaint currency of the hoola hoop among many white leftists and trade unionists, it has in fact lost none of its impact on trade union work. The struggle against national and racial oppression in the labor movement is a moral and ideological struggle of the kind to which Thale would direct trade union activists. The "shared vision" he mentions is nothing in the United States without the vision of a united working class. Practically speaking, the central importance of this issue today rests on four main pillars: organizing the unorganized, the Sunbelt Strategy of the bourgeoisie, the Black electoral offensive, and the struggle to effect the restructuring of the economy.

A study of the attitude of unorganized workers towards trade unions published by Professors R. B. Freeman and James Medoff showed an astonishing difference between the attitudes of white and non-white workers. The question was asked, "If an election were held with secret ballots, would you vote for or against having a union or employees association represent you?" Twenty-nine per cent of the white workers said they would vote for. Sixty-nine percent of the minority workers surveyed said they would vote for.¹¹

The retreat of the Democrats, if it is not reversed by the current disarray among the Republicans in the wake of the Contragate scandals, has left a tremendous void which Jackson can fill.

Perhaps it is to be expected that the AFL-CIO Executive Council "Changing Situation" report would not mention of this statistic or draw any conclusions from it. But the omission is very telling since Freeman and Medoff were the ones who did much of the research that the Report was based on so the Council was clearly familiar with their work. Even to confirmed critics of the AFL-CIO leadership, however, it was outrageous that Council never even mentioned minorities in the report. After all, the purpose of the Report was to offer recommendations "to continue the never-ending process of renewal and regeneration that has enabled and will enable unions to remain the authentic voice of workers".¹²

The importance of reaching out to oppressed nationality workers goes beyond the willingness of those workers to reach out to the labor movement. The "Sunbelt Strategy" of the US bourgeoisie also gives the issue strategic importance. "The US has undergone a massive demographic, industrial and political shift to the Sunbelt...an effort to counteract the decline of the economy in the older regions of the US, and offset the shrinkage of the US market internationally."¹³

This shift shows up demographically in the fact that 85% of the growth in the US population has

UFCW P-9 workers have shown tremendous determination and creativity in their struggle against Hormel, in the face of opposition from the International leadership. Here they are picketing the AFL-CIO winter executive board meeting in Bal Harbour, Florida to get its support in resolving their strike.



UPI

been in the Sunbelt. It also shows up electorally in the shift of representation in Congress to the Sunbelt states from the Northeast and Midwest. Federal employment and manufacturing will increase dramatically there in the next few decades, following those demographics, and spurred by the effort of US corporations to flee Northern-based unions and to capture the 12% wage differential between white and Black and Mexican-American workers.

Inevitably, the bourgeoisie's Sunbelt Strategy will run up against the concentration of the Afro-American and Chicano peoples in the Sunbelt. Most exploited, most inclined to unionization, and growing fast, these peoples are also engaged in national movements for self-determination and to defend their cultures and land. Added to the tinderbox is the influx of immigrant workers in the Southwest from Mexico, Central America and the Pacific Rim. These immigrants, like the European immigrants of an earlier generation, often bring with them a more advanced consciousness than that of the native-born workers.

It is an explosive combination, and stands directly in the path of one avenue to the restoration of American "competitiveness". The Left in the labor movement has in the past served as a link between the trade union and national movements. "Operation Dixie," the drive of the CIO to organize the South, was still-born in part because the CIO cut that link, and diverted most of its organizing resources in the late 1940s and early 1950s to the all-consuming task of raiding the UE and the other left-led unions. Socialists should be in the forefront of the struggle to make the trade union movement take up its own Sun-belt strategy against the bourgeoisie's. It is hard to see who else will do it, and hard to see the rejuvenation of the trade union movement without it.

Jackson and the Rainbow

Another pillar of the national question in trade union work is presented by the electoral direction that the Black Liberation movement has taken recently. Some of the arguments for taking up the Jackson campaign in the labor movement have been laid out elsewhere. [See, for example, "For Fire Next Time," *FM* Oct-Nov 1986 and "Old Visions, New Visions," *FM* Jan-Feb 1987—ed. note] Suffice it to

say that the Jackson campaign offers the labor movement the strongest opposition to Reaganism and its Democratic shadows on a broad spectrum of issues from concessions to affirmative action to intervention in Central America to the conflict in the Middle East. It is an opportunity for the left in the labor movement to develop and air a left trade union program on a national basis. And it is an opportunity to begin to transform the labor movement politically so that it can unite the working class and have something to say about the restructuring of the economy now underway.

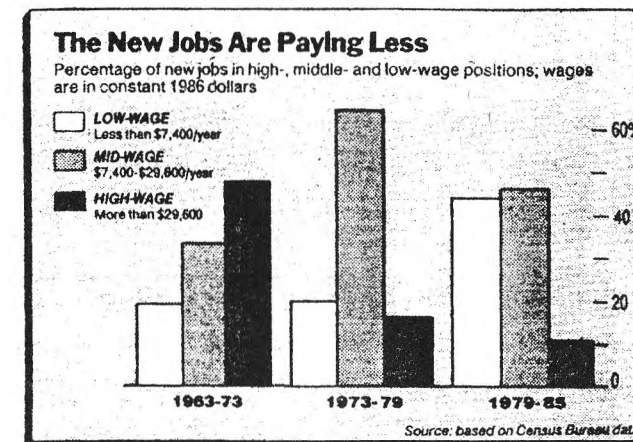
The retreat of the Democrats, if it is not reversed by the current disarray among the Republicans in the wake of the Contragate scandals, has left a tremendous void which Jackson can fill. There is no strong voice in the Democratic Party which is speaking to the economic assault on the working class described above, nor to the oppressed nationality workers or people. No strong voice, that is, except Jesse Jackson.

Since the 1984 election, Jackson has positioned himself in the middle of the anti-concessions fight, marching on the front lines from Austin, Minnesota to Watsonville, California. He has brought the moral authority and breadth of mind of the Black freedom movement to that struggle, calling the struggle against concessions "the civil rights movement of the 80s." In doing so, Jackson has challenged labor activists to return the favor. For white labor leftists to retreat from Jackson in favor of a more acceptable (read white) candidate who has no program even close to Jackson's, would be more than a disgrace. It would also be self-destructive.

The argument from some left quarters that Jackson should not be supported because he is a Democrat, and not a representative of a would-be Labor Party, is ignorant of American reality. The fact that the US working class has always been divided along national and racial lines is one reason there has never been a mass social-democratic alternative in this country.¹⁴ And it is unimaginable that an alternative progressive political party with any hope of mass influence will develop in the US that is not tied to the progressive political thrust of the oppressed nationality peoples which already exists today.

Big Labor, Little Labor

The alternative to the struggle to unite the working class is acceptance of accelerated divisions between a shrinking primary workforce and a growing secondary workforce, which will make labor's economic and political struggle very difficult. By all accounts the declining number of relatively well-paid industrial jobs will be augmented only by a thin layer of technical and skilled jobs.



On the other hand, the vast majority of new jobs in the American economy will be low-paid and low-skilled. One government study reported that 58% of the eight million new jobs created between 1979 and 1984 paid less than \$7,000 dollars a year. During the same period, the total number of jobs paying more than \$14,000 a year declined by 1.8 million. And the large pool of unemployed and semi-employed is likely to grow.

There have been efforts by some employers in the United States to bring the job security and "worker involvement" trappings of Japanese managerial practices to the workplace. The Saturn auto contract is one example, and there are others at union shops and unorganized employers such as Digital.

More common, however, is the unvarnished downside of the Japanese model: the growing tendency to use "secondary" workers, who do not enjoy standard wages and benefits, even in basic industrial unionized shops. Larry Regan, President of USWA 1014 at USX's Gary Works, estimates that his remaining membership of 3,500 is supplemented in the plant by nearly 2,500 outside contractors working at many of the same jobs. The reliable Audrey Freed-

man of the Conference Board estimates that 25% of the workforce is now made up of "contingency" workers (defined as those who work part-time, for outside contractors, or at home).¹⁵

This growing division in the United States of course has a racial and sexual bias to it. The secondary sector has a much higher percentage of female and oppressed nationality workers than the primary workforce. Some service workers, such as teachers and nurses, have taken advantage of political trends and labor market shortages to increase their wages, and the gap between wages in the service and manufacturing sector has diminished some since manufacturing has taken such a beating in the last few years. Still, the shift from manufacturing to service and the restructuring within manufacturing will mean the gap between a shrinking "privileged" sector and a growing low-pay, low-benefit sector will continue to expand. And this will mean the struggle against national oppression in the trade union movement will be more important than ever to bridge that gap and bring labor's united power to bear.

Deal with the Crisis

Thale's article has much to offer. It gives hope that socialists in the latter part of the 80s can renew the debate over the tasks of leftists in the labor movement on a much more sensible, materialist basis than the destructive swapping of stale formulas which characterized much of the debate of the last two decades.

This article has argued that the task for the left in the labor movement is to provide some direction for the trade union movement itself. A key in that effort is for leftists to bring all their skill and energy to bear in the effort to defend the standard of living of American workers, who face an accelerating assault in any foreseeable set of circumstances, given the present crisis of the American economy.

Alongside the economic struggle, and essential to the economic struggle as well, must be the struggle against the oppression of the minority nationality workers. This means also a struggle among the white workers to understand their interest in this. This will come down around policy issues in the trade union movement, such as affirmative action, organizing the unorganized, and defending the relative privileges of a shrinking "Big Labor" as against

fighting to unite the working class as a whole.

On this question and in labor's political fight in general, it is necessary to link up with the progressive Black electoral political movement. This is not only a just democratic movement itself. It is an alternative to Reaganism on economic and foreign policy, and the political vehicle of the moment which can position labor and the oppressed nationalities in the struggle for the most favorable possible outcome in the restructuring of the economy now underway.

Both of these battle lines mean confrontation with the current policies of the AFL-CIO, especially at the International level. It is a leadership entirely unprepared to deal with the crisis facing American labor today, let alone the destructive forces looming in the immediate future.

Today's crisis conditions have brought forth creative tactics and sophisticated political directions, enlightened by a growing class consciousness, in the pockets of resistance which exist primarily at the local level. If we are located there in those centers, if we can create more of them and link them, if we can heal the division in our trade union movement, our efforts will bear fruit. ■

Notes

1. Dennis O'Neil, Lee Ornati, Michael Zweig, *Forward Motion*, August-September 1986, p. 24.
2. Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide*, New York, 1984, p. 79-80.
3. Cited in Jane Slaughter, *Concessions and How to Beat Them*, Labor Education and Research Project, Detroit, 1983, p. 6.
4. Sar Levitan and Isaac Shapiro, "A Weaker Net Under Workers", *New York Times*, September 1, 1986.

5. James Green, *The World of the Worker*, New York, 1980, p. 111.

6. Vicky Cahan, "The Shrinking Nest Egg: Retirement May Never Be The Same", *Business Week*, Dec. 8, 1986, p. 114. "Erosion of Real Wages", *The Unifier*, National Rank and File Against Concessions, No. 3, Sept. 1986.

7. *Labor Research Review*, #7 & #8, Chicago, Midwest Center for Labor Research, has articles on many of these struggles.

8. AFL-CIO Executive Council, Evolution of Work Committee, "The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions," Feb. 1985.

9. I have accepted for the purposes of this article Thale's argument that the immediate goal of the current struggle in the trade unions is the most favorable possible outcome of the current crisis, meaning a more favorable restructuring of the capitalist system. I don't accept this as an absolute, especially since I don't yet see the outlines of an end to the crisis. But it wouldn't change the content of this article, anyway. Of course, socialist have other tasks in all areas of work in any period, such as propagating socialism and building socialist organization. This is true of socialist organizing in the trade unions in the 80s as well.

10. Harley Shaiken, Stephen Herzenberg, and Sarah Kuhn, "The Work Process Under More Flexible Specialization", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Spring 1986, University of California, p. 167-82. This article presents evidence that the new craft worker is a rare breed, at least as yet. This is also my own experience in the metal-working industry.

11. R. B. Freeman and J. L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?*, New York, 1984, p. 29. 12. AFL-CIO Executive Council, *ibid.*, p. 7.

13. William Gallegos, "The 'Sunbelt Strategy' and Chicano Liberation", *Forward*, No. 5, Spring 1986.

14. Roxanne Mitchell and Frank Weiss, *A House Divided: Labor and White Supremacy*, New York, 1981, pp. 34-39.

15. Michael Pollack and Aaron Bernstein, "The Disposable Employee is Becoming a Fact of Corporate Life", *Business Week*, Dec. 15, 1986, p. 52.

Northern California Hospital Workers Strike

Rank and File Movement at Kaiser

Michael Kellard and Edward Freeman

On October 27, 1986, Northern California hospital workers, 9500 in all, struck twenty-seven sites of the Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, the largest health maintenance organization in the U.S. The bulk of the strikers belonged to SEIU Local 250. Also represented were SEIU 505, with 150 Kaiser opticians, and Engineers and Scientists of California (MEBA), representing 600 lab techs. From the start, OPEIU 29 with 1400 Kaiser workers, the California Nurses Association with 5600 members, as well as six other smaller unions, walked out in a sympathy strike and played a major supporting role. For seven weeks, the unions took Kaiser by surprise and stayed out over the strikers' main issue—a divisive two-tier wage system giving new hires lower rates. The strike ended mid-December with a partial victory against the concessions and a much invigorated rank-and-file in both the striking and support unions. To prepare this report for *Forward Motion*, I spoke in January with three workers active in OPEIU strike work in Oakland, the heart of the rank-and-file mobilization.

The Kaiser corporation leads all HMOs with 1985 revenues of \$4.1 Billion, earnings of \$200 million (a 20% return—twice the average), and five million members in five states (a quarter of HMO membership in the U.S.). Although a non-profit corporation, it ranks among the Fortune 500 corporations.

In this strike, Kaiser workers were up against a substantial management war chest. In response, Local 250 mounted a "community strategy." Contacting 270 Northern California unions with 600,000 members, the local worked to involve other unions in affecting Kaiser financially. In pursuing its version of the increasingly familiar corporate strategy, the Local 250 leadership had a point. But they ended up almost completely discounting the power

of strong picket lines in laying a foundation for any outreach strategy.

Sheila, an OPEIU strike activist, commented: "The leadership's reasoning was that a regular strike couldn't defeat Kaiser because of the prepaid health plan, so we had to find another way to hurt them financially. They relied on what they called their corporate strategy. This included not only getting support from community groups, but asking other unions not to pay their premiums on health plans for their members.

"But one thing the community looks at almost immediately is what kind of picket line you have out in front of the hospital. If you are looking for support, the public is wants to see if people are really serious about the strike. In the early days of the strike, it might have been possible to shut down Kaiser, but it was never full organized, not even for a single day's try. In fact, reps from 250 really downplayed picketing even to the point of telling people it was better for them to do other things than actually being there on the picket line! Considering the difficulty of getting the bulk of the membership to do picket duty in the first place, that was really disastrous.

In pursuing its version of the increasingly familiar corporate strategy, the Local 250 leadership had a point. But they ended up almost completely discounting the power of strong picket lines...

Brent, an OPEIU steward elected to the joint rank-and-file strike committee added:

"In the Southbay, in Hayward, the union rep and some of the rank-and-file from our union and Local 250 went to the City Council and they visited other unions. That was a good idea, because a union on its own can't win in these anti-union times. You need to get other unions involved not just to stop insurance payments but to be on the picket line. You need to target one day when you shut it down, and mobilize a large part of the membership. Local 250 never had that in their strategy."

You can get a feel for the atmosphere in the first part of the strike—the "passive" strike, as some of the rank-and-filers called it—from a tragic sidelight. A lot of the Kaiser workers to this day aren't aware that a striker was killed while on picket duty early on in the strike. The woman was crossing the street back to the line with food in her hands and a car hit her. The union allowed the media to treat this as a minor, unfortunate incident—two inches in the newspaper. Giving her the major memorial march she deserved might have also turned around the strike at that initial point.

Throughout, the sympathy strikers from OPEIU put greater emphasis on waging a more mass campaign. When proposals were made on the rank and file strike committee for an all-labor march against the two-tier wages, the SEIU 250 reps by-and-large refused to try and organize it. Yet the strike had been gaining support from other unions, and there was good reason to think it would have been a winning tactic.

Instead, the march that took place was nearly all Kaiser, about three or four thousand people. It was held mid-week when the bulk of the community was working. It was an inspiring demonstration, for both marchers and those who came out to watch. But activists grumbled that two or three times as many would have turned out on a Saturday.

A rank-and-file strike committee grew up in the vacuum left by this leadership indecisiveness. It started in the support union, OPEIU 29. Large groups of strikers, as many as thirty at a time, would gather in a nearby coffee shop to talk through problems on the picket line. Stewards took the initiative, and then set up committee meetings at the union hall, which was a ten minute drive away. The local leadership, which was relatively accessible and maintained a reasonably democratic atmosphere, allowed this rank-and-file initiative to happen and develop. Rank-and-filers from SEIU 250 joined in and soon were trying to establish something similar with their leadership.

A major turning point did come five weeks into the strike. SEIU members in Oakland and to some degree in Hayward were now quite upset with their leadership.

Brent again: "What was happening on the picket lines was that another union was giving all the direction and leading all the rallies. The SEIU folks

were saying, 'How come our union leaders don't know how to lead a march? How come they don't suggest something that would work?' And so they had a steering committee meeting on a Saturday, to which some people came from the other unions. Members chewed out their leadership."

The result of that meeting was an elected steering committee including members from the support unions (three SEIU 250 strikers plus one from a support union at each facility). The committee in turn began meeting the following Monday and instituted roving picket lines and other more energetic initiatives.

Coming at a time when things had gotten fairly demoralized, the formation of the steering committee raised morale and expanded participation. Cora, from one of the clerical departments, commented: "If the steering committee had started the first week, the strike would never have lasted as long as it did, and the two tiers idea might have been off the table. This was the kind of activity that needed to happen with the corporate strategy. By the last week, Kaiser had a very difficult time dealing with the massive,

militant picket line out there. So each piece by itself might not have worked, but the combination of the more militant roving picket plus the corporate strategy probably would have ended the strike sooner."

It does appear that the stepping up of strike activity in the last two weeks of the strike had an effect on management. The Kaiser team had started out quite confident, holding a victory party the day of the first contract vote (December 4). When the vote went against them (55% rejecting), they were put in a weak spot. Over the first five weeks of the strike, they had stuck to the two tier system, though they had dropped the percent differential from 30 to 15%. Then the momentum shifted back to the union side, with the vote to reject. A week later, however, the International stepped in and forced a second vote to end the strike.

The results of the strike were mixed. Two tiers were established but the differential was dropped to 15%. A compromise was struck on another major issue, subcontracting out. Kaiser got unlimited subcontracting at new facilities after three years, but only limited subcontracting at all existing facilities.

When a militant picket line really got going in the last week of the strike, Kaiser had a difficult time dealing with it.



AFL-CIO News

Other, smaller concessions were dropped or also compromised. Given the atmosphere in labor relations these days, the outcome was fairly positive. Despite the problems early on, the Kaiser strike can be counted among the better fought strikes of the last few years.

For union activists at Kaiser, the strike was also a success because fighting the good fight has brought a lasting change in the political mood within the workforce. The SEIU 250 Steering Committee is continuing to meet independently of the regular elected leadership and is sponsoring new activities. The OPEIU local recently held a film showing on COSATU, the South African union federation.

"The atmosphere in the shop has changed," commented Brent. "People are walking around with their heads held high...When I came back people had yellow ribbons on that meant you spent the whole seven weeks of the strike out in support. This is the kind of initiative that means the strike was a success."

Meanwhile, in early January, the International put SEIU 250 into trusteeship with charges against the old leadership of gross mismanagement. These included possible pre-strike depletion of the strike fund. A reform slate had already come together out of the rank-and-file movement and is challenging the local leadership, which is now perceived as bureaucratic and ineffective. Whether the scheduled election will be allowed to take place remains to be seen.

But in any case, an active rank-and-file seems ready to keep going. Sheila looked ahead to the upcoming OPEIU contract in the light of the SEIU strike: "A lot of the rank-and-file organization in Oakland that came out of the strike is moving on, and the next goal is around negotiation of our new contract. The rank and file committee is moving to deal with the contract, making proposals and trying to get new language and so on." But Sheila also referred to what some perceive as the "whole union vs. Oakland" problem. "Oakland has become relatively mobilized and organized now. That is good.

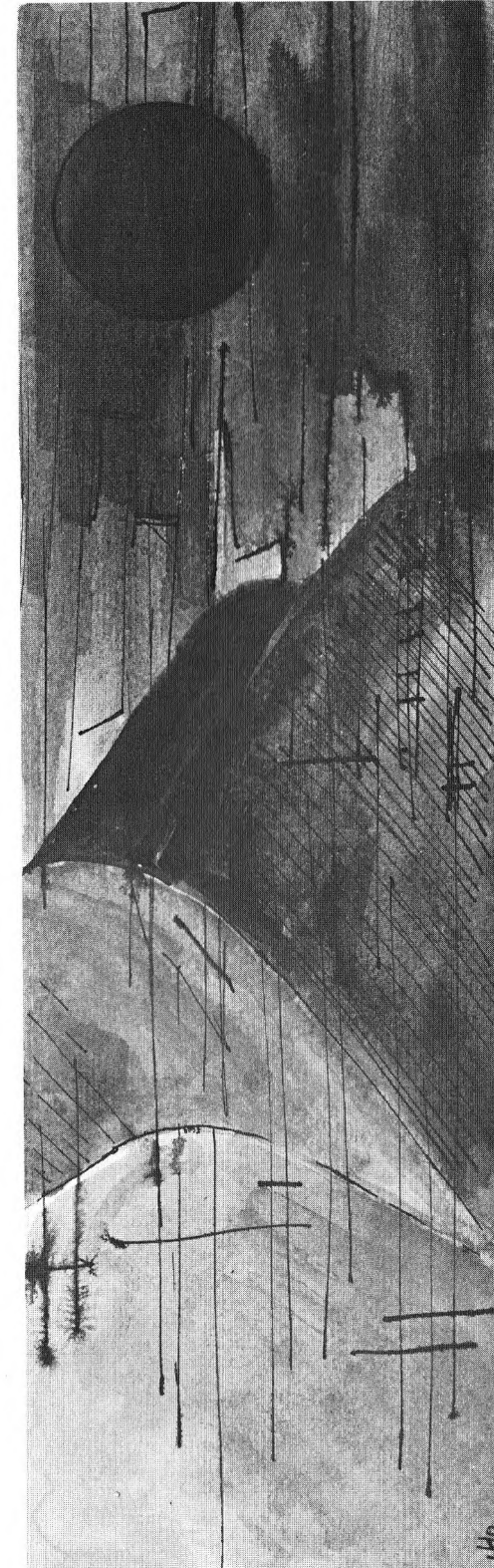
But it puts us in a contradictory position vis-a-vis a lot of the rest of the union. There is a perception that Oakland is trying to run things, or has gone crazy. A lot of attention has to be paid to what the best way to deal with that is."

Cora offered some thoughts on what lies ahead: "One thing we need to get organized on right now is that Oakland is ready to put forward more rank-and-file leadership along with more traditional local leaders, whereas the 'outlying areas' still look only to traditional leadership. And that is our problem at the moment. We need to bring the outlying areas to the point that the rank and file do not hesitate to come forward and become leaders themselves, something they are not used to. We have had three rank-and-file meetings since the strike and we have been trying to invite other regions to come, at least to the last two. Basically only Berkeley has come through so far."

Beyond this important gap to overcome, union activists seem to have learned a number of lessons for keeping up a wide range of contacts established during the strike. Cora continues:

"I would put it, don't burn your bridges behind you. Even with people who scabbed from day one, don't cut them off completely, because you need to bring them back to the union. Whether they want to discuss things or not is beside the point, what you can do is always to keep them informed. They may not want to talk...with you about what happened, but they will take a leaflet and they will read it. You need to keep going back to them and at least leaving them some kind of information that tells them they are still included along with the people who didn't scab. This is especially true of workers who don't have a steward in their area or are in a single office off to the side. Remembering them and pulling them back into the unit is quite important, along with listening to them and not making anyone feel they have to be on the defensive now.

Our plan is to educate and increase participation, and that is the main thing. And I think we will end up doing it!" ■



Adirondacks Revisited

by Bob Peterson

A mere year has lapsed
since I last
hugged the hills of the Adirondacks
and yet I see a new flower
in permanent bloom where before
Queen Ann's Lack and Purple Loose Strife.

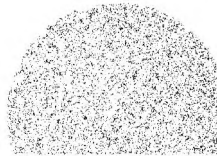
I still hear the echo of last night's rain
cascading carelessly over glacier-rounded boulders
rushing down the mountains to fill
the fresh lakes gently caressing the curved valleys.

The quivering whispers from the deciduous leaves
provide a cover for the inaudible sounds of the
newly constructed metal mesh flowers—
standing at attention to a new godless idol,
unlike the brethren of the Queen's Lack that follow el sol.

White mesh
instead of silky petals,
black mesh
instead of fragrant blossoms,
mechanically rotating to the southwest
not towards the sun,
or the morning star
or even a golden calf
but rather to a sophisticated mirror of
artificial unintelligence
in concentrate from—
just add 3 cans of empty brains and choose

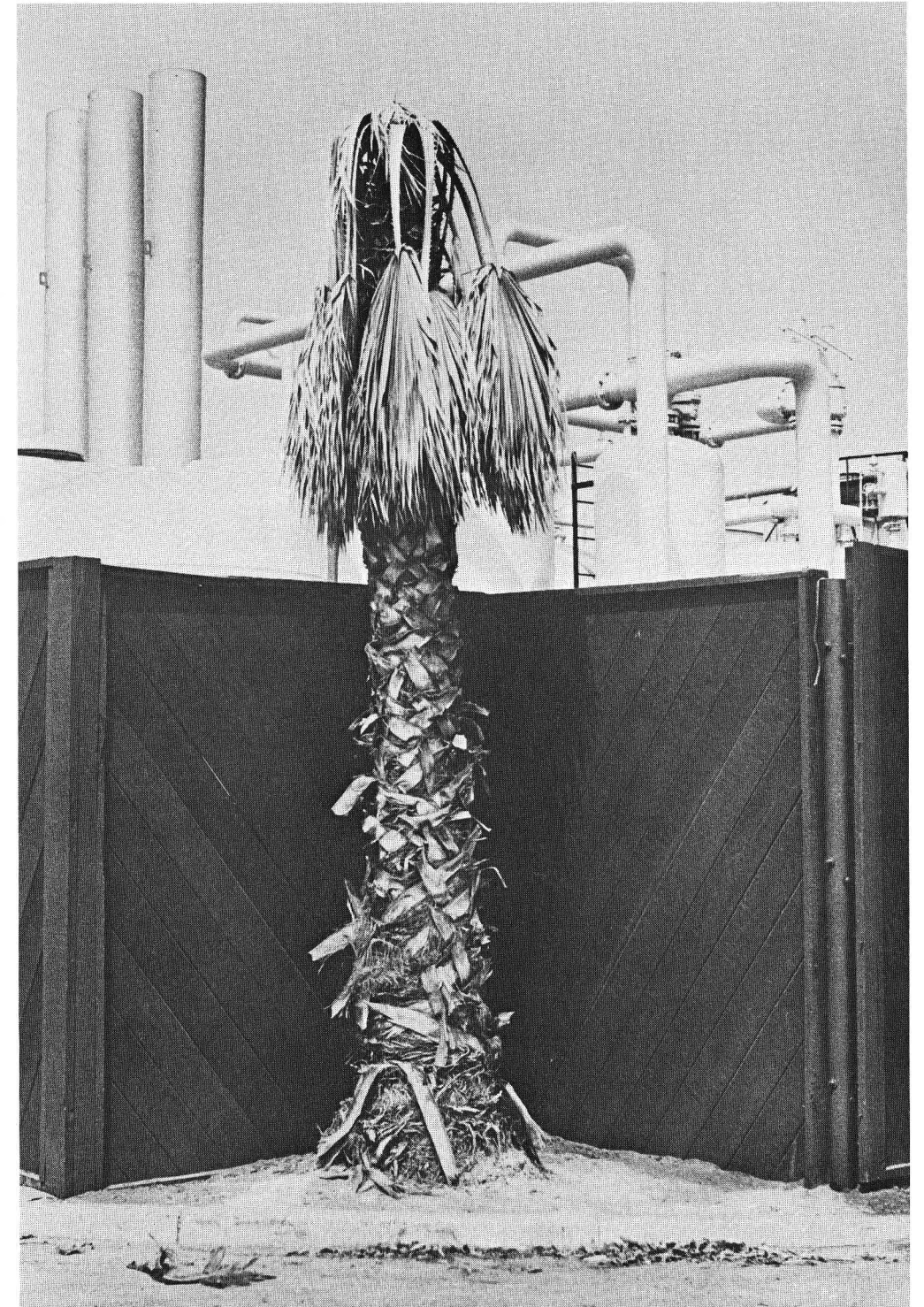
the flavor or your new thought
 from over 89 varieties
 of heinous
 soap operas
 gladiator sports
 bread and circuses
 computer chip dip
 human land fill sties
 now permanently bound
 in plastic
 for your own living room mortuary.

But even this new flora
 with a steel stem,
 concrete roots,
 and wire pedals
 will be no match
 to the wind,
 the rain
 the lightning,
 the root hairs of mother earth,
 who, without knowing,
 know that this new flora has
 no future in our web of life.

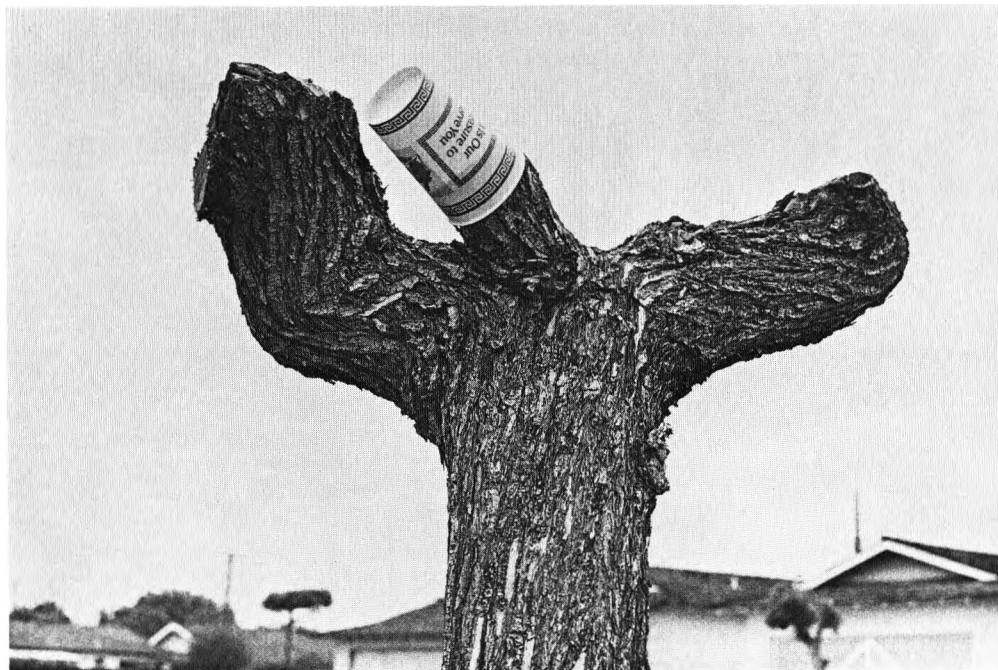


Southern California Blues

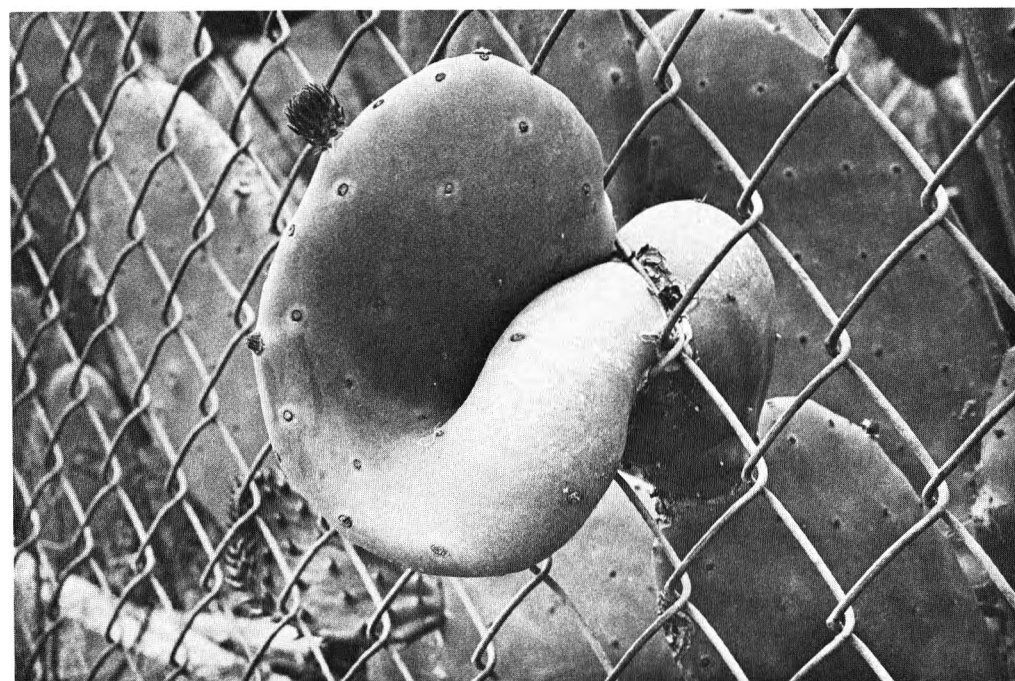
David Stock



Dead palm. 1984.



It is our pleasure to serve you. 1986.



Cactus. 1984.

FM Editors:

The shifts explained in the article "Big Changes: Reaganism and the Post War Economy" [FM Aug.—Sept. 1986] from manufacturing to service and finance, and from the northeast to the Sun Belt likewise increase the burden of exploitation onto women and especially national minority women. Tens of thousands of single mothers must work at these minimum wage jobs, with no protection, and under harsh conditions, while society ladens them with more hypocrisy. A recent Supreme Court decision upheld the right to maternity "disability" leave, and the following week this hallowed court denied these same women unemployment benefits should they lose their jobs after taking "voluntary" maternity leave. At the same time, women's reproductive "rights" are being viciously attacked, demonstrated by the bombings of abortion clinics; and coercive pregnancy "counseling," where unsuspecting women are subjected to emotional and sometimes physical abuse at "right to life"—sponsored clinics. But once the child is born, it may as well be disposable. Instead of calling for "reproductive rights" (i.e., the right to an abortion) alone, we must demand the right to have healthy children!

The "Big Changes" article points out the tremendous technological revolution in the communications industry which has led to the increase of manufacturing being shifted out of the U.S. and ending up in some Third World country. The communications industry itself has undergone a dramatic shift since 1984, when the Silicon Valley reached its economic peak. Since then, most of the industry has moved South of the border to the *maquiladoras* in Mexico. Two hundred and fifty thousand workers, mostly women, are employed in these modern technology sweatshops. As one report has stated:

Eighty to ninety percent of these low-skilled jobs now go to women, unlike the earlier pattern where mostly men were hired. Why the change? Women are paid less than men... The majority of these women live at or near

subsistence level, in crowded quarters, often shared by several shifts. At work, conditions are likely to be not only tedious, but dangerous, given the general lack of health regulations...

Management encourages high turnover to avoid paying higher wages to "older" workers (twenty-three to twenty-four years old is considered old).¹

The article also points out that these women suffer from reactions to the toxic substances they work with, develop eye problems, and many other problems related to stress.

Nearly ninety years ago, these exact conditions were described by Clara Zetkin, founder of International Womens' Day...

The cruelty of capitalism has not changed in the past century. It has increased its scope, and shifted the bulk of exploitation onto the backs of Third World workers, and in particular, onto the backs of women workers.

Clara Zetkin is a model for us today. Besides editing *Gleichheit* (Equality), which was the official publication of the International Socialist Women, she worked tirelessly for trade union organizing, "she wrote and distributed handbills, collected money for workers during layoffs and strikes, and helped plan national and international trade union congresses."² And, she was also a leading member of the Spartacist League, with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

We must expand our understanding of the exploitation of women throughout the world, and I call upon the editors of *Forward Motion* to reserve a section of its pages for the discussion of this critical issue which, including children, affects the majority of the people in the world.

Mary O'Shea, San Diego, CA

Notes

1. Organization for Revolutionary Unity, *Working Women and the Struggle for Women's Liberation*. 1984. p. 19.
2. Clara Zetkin, *Selected Writings*. New York: International, 1984. pp. 27-28.

Corrections:

Much to our chagrin, Jose Maria Sison's first name is misstated on the cover of our last issue and in the table of contents (although not at the beginning of his speech we printed).

The SEIU local that Celia Wcislo, author of our last issue's "Old Visions/New Visions," is president of was incorrectly described. SEIU 285 in Massachusetts should have been described as a statewide private health care and public employees union.

Forward Motion

June-July 1986

FM interviews

Bernadette Devlin McAliskey

"Forward Motion contains thought-provoking analysis and a good progressive point of view... If it wasn't worth reading, I wouldn't buy it. Forward Motion is worth it."

— Mel King

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Big Changes: Reaganism and the Post War Economy

Dennis O'Neil, Lee Ornati,
Michael Zweig

Telling the People's Story
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