

ON THE LINE

newsletter of the Workers Solidarity Alliance--New York-New Jersey Area Group

Issue # 1--new series

May-June, 1994

Rudy's Dream: Our Nightmare --editorial

While the vision of a "new New York" put out by Giuliani and friends during the election campaign may have appealed to some, it has not taken long to see what that vision is really all about. Public services cut to the bone, real estate speculators and bankers with a free hand to loot, police power with the gloves taken off--all these themes would be the key to Rudy's "revitalized City" if it were to come to pass. But like any demagogue, Giuliani knows that the people of this City must go along if his fantasy is to come true.

In order to sell this nightmarish vision, Giuliani and his cohorts must try to sugar coat it. They conjure up nostalgic images of a "happier time" when New York City was a good place to live, when the streets were safe and when people of color "knew their place", when public workers had few rights and when politicians ruled behind closed doors. The economy of the City ran "smoothly" because the plans and schemes of developers and corporate bigwigs went virtually unopposed.

But to really make the thing work Giuliani needs to use the time-honored strategy of divide and conquer. He tells white working people that the problem is the "unruly elements" (i.e. people of color), he tells people of color the problem is each other (African-Americans vs. Latinos vs. Asians) and all of the above that the problem is gays and lesbians. He tries to set one group of public workers against another in order to set off a downward spiral of givebacks and concessions that will leave little left in the way of job security or decent conditions, which have already been savaged over the last two decades.

What's needed to put an end to this political shell game and to begin to take the future into our own hands is our own return to some time-honored principles of the workers' movement:

--unity and solidarity among all poor and working people, along with a complete rejection of the lies, suspicion and hatred put forward by Rudy and company,

--militancy, which is to say a refusal to accept what the politicians and bosses define as "reasonable", but rather to demand what we know is right, and

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Hello, We're Back (Again) !

They say good things never die, and so is the case for ON THE LINE. After several years of not publishing, we're back, and this time with an attitude.

For those of you who remember us from before you may recall that we began publishing in 1979, at first under the banner of the Libertarian Workers Group. Since 1984, when LWG became the NY-NJ Area Group of the newly-founded Workers Solidarity Alliance, we have come out periodically under that banner, though not for some time. We've gone through a lot of changes over the years, but our commitment to our primary goal remains as strong as when we started.

But for all of you who are reading this news bulletin for the first time, let us introduce ourselves to you. The WSA is a national organization of working people dedicated to the principles of anarchist unionism, which we explain further elsewhere in this issue. Besides our activities in our workplaces, communities and elsewhere, we see the importance of communicating our ideas in a straight-forward way to others who may have felt the same things but didn't know that there were groups working to put these principles into practice.

ON THE LINE will be a practical, hard-hitting workers newsletter. We believe such a publication for the New York-New Jersey area is both needed and timely. Not for a long time have racial tensions, police brutality, unemployment, under-employment and attacks on workers on and off the job been as blatant as they are today. It is equally obvious to us that a new movement must arise to deal effectively with the crisis which besieges us. This must be a movement of people working together cooperatively, without self-proclaimed leaders, one which is based on mutual aid, respect and one which we ourselves control.

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Chattanooga bus workers fight racism & sexism,
Paterson silk strike retrospective, Local labor
news, WSA events

Rudy's Dream

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--democracy, not the will of our so-called "representatives", the union leaders and political hacks, but through organizations in our workplaces and communities that we run directly.

But in the final analysis what we really need is our own vision of a new society, of a City revitalized and rebuilt by all its people for their own benefit, not for the power, profit and privilege of a few. It is this type of vision that has brought us of the Workers Solidarity Alliance together, to work for and fight for a world without bosses, bureaucrats or politicians, without race hatred and with the fullest freedom for all. We are ordinary men and women like yourself, from all backgrounds, whose shared vision calls us to spread our ideas and seek common ground with others who have the same interests and concerns.

Upcoming WSA Gatherings

NY/NJ WSA will be sponsoring a Northeast Regional Gathering on May 14-15 in New York City. Beside planning and getting input for the upcoming WSA National Convention (see below), we'll be talking about co-ordinating activities in the Northeast and developing communications among WSA members and like-minded folks in the area. Observers are welcome, with prior notice.

WSA's 10th National Convention will be held in Atlanta on Memorial Day weekend, May 28-30. Discussion will not only center on WSA structure and function but on developing alternative workplace networks, fighting racism and fascism, international solidarity and a whole lot more. A party and/or public forum will likely take place as well. Observers are also welcome, with prior notice.

The NY/NJ WSA Group meets about every two weeks at 339 Lafayette Street. Our discussions are not very formal, and often quite lively, and are open to anyone who's interested. Drop us a note or leave a phone message if you would like any more information on any of the above meetings.

Hello, We're Back

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We want ON THE LINE to serve as a voice and contact point for folks who believe that only through collective action, our own strength and unity can a free and new society be won. We would like to see ON THE LINE help to develop links between struggles happening in workplaces and communities, between those fighting against racism, the rise of fascism and for full rights for all people. ON THE LINE will strive to publish original material on what's happening in the shops, offices and neighborhoods.

Needless to say, the input of our friends and readers is important for this to work. We really want to receive original stories or cartoons that we can share with the rest of our readers. If you like what you have read, we could use your help as well distributing ON THE LINE on your job, in your school or neighborhood.

As you probably could guess, we're not supported by political parties, big unions or wealthy backers, but out of the pockets of people such as yourself. So if this publication interests you, help us (and yourself) out by dipping into your own pocket and subscribe, or buy a bundle at a reduced rate. Our success depends on you.

We welcome any thoughts you might want to share with us, including concerns or criticism. If you're interested in getting more involved, or just meeting us face-to-face and finding out more as to what we're about, please return the coupon below to 339 Lafayette Street-Room 202, New York, NY 10012 or leave a message on our answering machine (212-979-8353) and we'll be sure to get back to you.

--NY/NJ Area Group, Workers Solidarity Alliance

____! I would like more information on the WSA

____ Enclosed is \$____ to help cover costs

____ Enclosed is \$____ for a bundle of ____
copies of On The Line

Name _____

Address _____

Chattanooga Bus Workers Fight Racism and Sexism

--Mike Harris, WSA

African-American workers employed by the Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority (ARTA), the public bus company in Chattanooga, Tennessee, are waging a campaign against company racism and sexism, as well as against the do-nothing attitude of the union leadership.

As part of a multi-level strategy to fight racism and sexism at ARTA, four African-American workers, James Jones, Ralph Williams, Lolita Blackmon and Annette Evans, who are either bus drivers or maintenance workers, filed charges of racial and sexual discrimination against the company with the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Jones was originally fired in October 1992 on a phony "accident" charge by management. Ralph Williams, a driver, has alleged for a long time that he has been threatened with being fired, like Jones, if he continued to complain about racial discrimination. At least seven other black drivers have been fired on trumped up charges by ARTA.

The two women have filed charges of sexual harassment and discrimination both against the company and the union (Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 1212). The women have claimed that the company made statements that they should be doing "women's work", rather than seeking out jobs traditionally held by men. Annette Evans, a female bus driver, was called a "smart ass bitch" by the local union president for complaining about the shabby treatment she and other women have been getting. This included a threat to "send her skinny ass back to Texas", which referred to having her fired.

There are some in the local union who want to remove Chambers, the local president, over the sexual harassment issue. But some of these folks do not want to deal with the core issues of continuing racial and sexual discrimination by the company and within the union itself. In AN OPEN LETTER ABOUT RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AT ARTA, issued by the Black Workers Organizing Project (BWOP), they state that "ARTA is known as 'the plantation' among black workers, and the union is nothing but a 'sweetheart union'....[Chambers] was made the first black union president after Jones' complaint shook up the company..."

For years before the advent of the civil rights movement the company made blacks ride in the back of the bus, even the ridership has traditionally been about 70% African-American. ARTA has also had a policy of playing white workers off against black workers, with blacks often being fired or disciplined for the slightest infraction (real or imagined) of company rules, and so on. White workers are regularly given job advancements over blacks, and the union fails to challenge these racist practices.

Knowing that filing charges against the company is not enough, the ARTA workers and BWOP are waging a public campaign against the practices of the company and the union's do-nothing attitude. This struggle also comes at a time of heightened racism in Chattanooga, with an epic number of blacks being killed by police. This blatant racism is not being allowed to go unchallenged. The ARTA bus workers and the BWOP have asked the Workers Solidarity Alliance to help them build a campaign against the company and the union. Furthermore, a movement has developed against police brutality in Chattanooga as well. This is being supported by the WSA and other groups and individuals.

In an effort to put public pressure on ARTA and the union, BWOP "call[s] upon our fellow and sister workers, the black community, and other workers in unions...to join us in a campaign to win justice for African-American employees at this company....With your help we can win!"

HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Write letters, make phone calls, or send faxes of protest to both the union and the company:

Gale Chambers, President
ATU Local 1212
1617 Wilcox Blvd.
Chattanooga, TN 37406

President
Amalgamated Transit Union, AFL-CIO
525 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20016

Tom Dugan, Executive Director
ARTA
1617 Wilcox Blvd. (corp. mail stop)
Chattanooga, TN 37406
tel. (615) 629-1411
fax (615) 698-7178

Marie Devine, Intake Supervisor
EEOC Regional Office
50 Vantage Way--Suite 202
Nashville, TN 37228

2. Write or call NY/NJ WSA for copies of a petition directed against the company's sexist and racist practices [339 Lafayette Street--Room 202, NY, NY 10012, tel. (212) 979-8353].

3. Get your local union or community organization to publish an article in their newsletter and/or send letters of protest.

For more information, contact Mann c/o BWOP, PO Box 5223, Chattanooga, TN 37406 or NY/NJ WSA.

RETROSPECTIVE ON THE PATERSON SILK STRIKE

by Mike Harris

Paterson, New Jersey, which was once known as the cradle of American industry and unionism was the scene once again of a strike by textile workers who were mostly immigrants. As in days of old, the strike ended with mixed results.

Having grown up in the former textile heartland of Passaic and Paterson, and being the grandson of a textile dyer, and myself having been a textile worker, the strike was very near and dear to me.

The strike by 1800 textile dyers and finishers in Paterson, Passaic, Fairlawn and North Bergen began on October 12, 1993. For intents and purposes, it ended on January 12, 1994.

In many ways I am reminded of the failed strike of 1913, when the militant Industrial Workers of the World waged a fight against speed ups, hard-nosed management and the do-nothing unionism of the (then) AFL textile workers union, for there were many elements and features that were the same.

Despite 60 years of unionism in the industry, low-wage non-union competition is stiff. Unorganized dying and finishing plants sat next to unionized ones. The largest of the dyers and finishers locals, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union Local 1733, was dominated by two brothers, who were brought up on federal racketeering charges prior to the strike. It is claimed that they sold "labor peace" to protect their ever shrinking empire. In its way, this had the same effect as the craft structure and mentality which kept the old AFL's textile workers union from organizing the mass of unskilled immigrant workers some decades ago.

Knowing all too well that the union was ill prepared to strike, the bosses came to the negotiating table with proposals to increase the number of machines that an individual worker could run, seeking to eliminate the right to strike during the life of the contract, offering a small up-front raise (while actually creating a wage cut by increasing the number of machines), as well as other changes that would adversely affect the worker. The bosses calculated that the union would simply fold.

Despite the many, many problems going into the fight, the workers stood tall and struck. Many of the

bosses (who belong to two separate employer associations) brought in scabs from the first day of the strike. Many had armed guards posted at their plants. Fights broke out as scabs entered some of the mills. In Passaic a pitched battle broke out between strikers and police as the result of taunting by scabbing supervisors. Tensions rose as the cops came to the aid of the bosses, and as huge roving pickets marched from shop to shop in Paterson. Any experienced striker knew you were in a war zone.

As soon as it looked like a general strike with full worker participation was underway, the bosses got a court order limiting picketing size and activity. Instead of allowing the court order to dampen the workers' spirits, the union (under the direction of staff from the head office in New York City) began to find ways to keep spirits up and keep people active. Knowing what was at stake and feeling a sense of their own power, workers held many rallies and family affairs. Strike support came from many quarters, and everyone knew that the stakes were high.

As it became clear that the strike would not end quickly, the NJ State Labor Commissioner intervened. In the final analysis he hammered out what was termed a "compromise" agreement, which is being billed as the "Contract for a New Partnership". Despite significant membership opposition to this so-called "partnership" (which incorporated most of the bosses' proposals), the agreement was ratified by 10 of the 23 struck firms (covered by the Silk and Rayon Dyers and Printers Association). The other 13 firms (C.P. Associates) refused to sign and fired their workers.

With 800 of the strikers back to work, and C.P. Associates taking a hard line, the balance of the strike was in jeopardy. In fact, as it became clear that there was no end in sight for those still on strike, a mass back-to-work movement of 250 workers took place. This forced the remaining strikers to offer to return to work unconditionally. Despite this offer, the bosses are refusing to call back the workers who have earned millions of dollars for them over the last four decades of hard labor. But those who refused to surrender vow to continue their fight.

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LOCAL LABOR NEWS

by various contributors

NJ Autoworkers Hold The Line

In spite of the closing of the General Motors Inland Fisher Guide plant in Ewing Township, NJ (outside Trenton), member of United Autoworkers Local 731 have taken a firm stand against wage and benefit reductions in the event that Integrated Component Systems Inc. agrees to purchase the idled plant. Regional and state UAW leaders have agreed to the concept of capping reduced wages in order to reopen the plant and save 3,000 jobs.

Local 731's membership has rejected having wages and benefits cut from almost \$39. per hour to \$20.50 per hour.

Jersey Shore Nurses Strike

Nurses at Jersey Shore Medical Center in Neptune, New Jersey have been on strike since December 4, 1993. The nearly 600 registered nurses, who are the only unionized group in the hospital and among the area's hospitals, are engaged in a fight that is no different than the struggle that industrial workers have been engaged in for the last decade. They too face open attempts by management to cut wages and break the union.

At the heart of the issue is a management proposal to end negotiated pay raises and to implement instead a "merit pay" system.

According to Wendy Edelson, president of Local 5058 of the Hospital Professionals and Allied Employees Union, the Jersey Shore "merit pay proposal is an attempt to silence nurses who would otherwise speak up when they see problems affecting the quality of patient care."

In an attempt to force the nurses back to work, the hospital has "permanently replaced" some of the strikers with scabs. To date

the picket line has held firm.

It just goes to show that workers are still workers regardless of whatever skill or lack of skill they possess. The boss knows it sometimes better than the workers do. Isn't it time that all workers in any workplace get together and stand up against their common enemy?

Just Call Me Gumby

As of February 1, New York-New Jersey dockworkers will work under a new 'flex time' scheme agreed to by the bosses and the union. Under the new scheme, the 3,00 dockers will have to work from as early as 6 a.m. up to 5 p.m., without a lunch break. Previous hours were from 8 to 5, with an hour for lunch.

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PATERSON SILK STRIKE (from previous page)

For some, it's easy to write about strikes that, in so many ways, are distant from their lives. But having walked many a picket line during this fight, having "broken bread" with many a striker, and having grown up in the shadow of the giant mills, listening to the table talk of the early strikes, and having worked in a shit mill myself (Dye Tex), it is clear to me that what continues is the saga of American capitalism, undemocratic and false unionism, and a judicial system that serves the bosses interests.

As with the 1913 Paterson IWW strike, a different generation of workers has again had a chance to see that no matter how tall they stand that they cannot stand alone. They must always be prepared for a fight that goes beyond wages and hours, toward a continuous struggle against everything that stands in the way of our achieving a life which we own and control and not one which is owned by someone else.

Gumby (continued)

Rather than take the position that less time is needed by workers to provide greater employment opportunities for the unemployed, the union leadership (International Longshoremen's Association, AFL-CIO) agreed that workers should simply be paid time-and-a-half for working these hours.

Since this seems to be the age of the "flexible worker", all we can say is just call me Gumby.

Militancy In Action

Just when you thought you had heard it all, along comes the New York City Central Labor Council, comprised of New York city's local AFL-CIO affiliates, and comes up with something new. It seems that the CLC has decided that Labor Day parades are just a little too much trouble, so they've decided to hold them every other year. Maybe the opportunity for the City's workers to get together and get loud and militant too often doesn't suit them, hmm?

However, not to fear. The CLC has agreed to continue to hold its annual Labor Day breakfast every year. (Just when was the last time you were invited?) So it's solidarity forever, and pass the cream cheese please.

Don't Spend It All in One Place

Although it occurred a few months ago, an interesting little tidbit passed by the press which we thought we'd share with you. At the last Public Employees Federation (primarily representing professional and technical workers for the State of New York), union President Howard Shafer came up with what would have appeared to be a highly popular idea among his approximately 50,000 members. Shafer proposed a dues reduction of \$2 million over the next two years.

Now before PEF members' mouths starting watering, they were able to do some math and figure out that divided over the union's membership over a two year period, the reduction amounted to a whopping 25 cents per

week per member. It also dawned on them that the fact that Shafer was coming up for reelection in a few months might just have something to do with his concern for the members' wallets. Needless to say, the motion was overwhelmingly defeated by the delegates who were elected by the rank-and-file.

Militancy In Action (Part 2)

The leadership of the AFL-CIO didn't want to be outdone by its New York City affiliates, so they too decided to call for militant action. This time, instead of breakfasts they are calling on union members to lobby for a postage stamp in honor of Mary Harris a.k.a. "Mother Jones", who was a truly heroic union agitator and organizer among mine workers and other industrial workers in the early 20th century.

Now we have nothing against postage stamps (some of us even collect them), and certainly Mother Jones deserves one a lot more than a lot of other people. However, we find it just a trifle ironic that a union leadership with six figure salaries, almost all of whom have worked in a shop or office since who-knows-when is all of a sudden interested in keeping the spirit of Mother Jones alive?

Mother said it best herself: "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living!"

INTERNATIONAL LABOR NEWS

As US Caterpillar workers wage a 2 year long fight for a new contract, Caterpillar (a leading multinational manufacturer of heavy construction equipment) is also engaged in a struggle of its own. After failing in its effort to break the will of the workers on the shop floor (where the struggle is being waged through a variety of direct action tactics), CAT is taking an international approach in its worker bashing tactics.

Unionized workers at the CAT Leicester, England plant report that the corporation is offering union members \$750 each on the condition that they quit their unions and join a "staff council" without negotiating rights. In essence, the company is trying to set up a company union and on the cheap at that. Surely they'd like to do the same here, but so far the workers show no sign of giving in. Once again, we see that corporations don't worry about borders, so neither should workers fighting for jus