

ON THE LINE

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

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ELECTIONS 94--THE REAL DEAL

NATIONAL:

A Whole Lot of Nothing

The Republicans are in, and the media pundits are still blathering on about the results. "A revolution", they say (we wish). "The voters have called for sweeping changes", but what the changes are and what's behind them is the real issue.

The fact is that most Americans are angry. But most of them expressed thier anger by simply not voting, as they have done for years. The media blames it on apathy, and it is true that many are apathetic, largely due to to the feeling of powerlessness they have over their situations. Many more, however, see the electoral system in the US as a farce, and know that the real decisions are mde not by the elected officials but by those who bankroll them.

Still, some will claim that the Republican victory represents a strong sector of the population who wants less government. Certainly no one likes paying taxes, particularly since the heaviest burden of taxation falls on lower and middle income working people, while the wealthy glide on through the tax system that they and their paid

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NEW YORK:

It's War!

Cuomo's out, Pataki's in. At first it wouldn't seem to mean much. It's true that most of those who voted (only about 40% of those eligible in the State) were pretty much tired of the current administration. But with the victory of Pataki, the "stealth candidate", they may be getting a lot more than they bargained for.

Despite the political maneuverings that caused Mayor Giuliani to endorse Cuomo over Pataki, they are essentially birds of a feather. We have seen the political agenda after the first year of Giuliani's administration--cut services, cut off certain communities from the political mainstream (i.e. poor and minority communities), lock up those who violate the social order without providing real alternatives, and to seek to destroy unions which do not accept the new terms (e.g. the legal aid lawyers). Whatever his high-sounding rhetoric may say, this is George Elmer Pataki's agenda as well.

Added to this already fiendish mix are Pataki's allies--D'Amato, the right wing ideologues of CHANGE-NY, and the real estate speculators.

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Inside this issue:

- bike messengers organize,
- dynamics of capitalist education
- near revolt in the Central Labor Council

National Elections (cont.)

flunkies created. Still, ask most people if they are prepared to give up the specific services that they receive from government and the answer is an overwhelming no.

However, it is clear that politicians and their media apologists are seeking to divert legitimate frustration into a particularly nasty form of scapegoating. They seek to place the blame on the poor ("welfare cheats"), immigrants ("illegals"), people of color, particularly youth ("criminals"), gays and women ("femin-nazis"). They not only want to downsize government but to impose a social agenda like that of the 1950's, in order to remove "negative elements" from the political dialogue.

But fortunately, most of this is unlikely to take place. The Republicans have smelled blood and are already involved in a feeding frenzy that will soon lead them to turn on each other. The Democrats have been slowly but surely capitulating to the Republican agenda for the last few years anyway so major changes in Clinton's policies are not likely to be felt. What is most likely is continued gridlock on the national level and a lot of slinging rhetoric back and forth, but no significant change in either direction.

Still, it would be a mistake to downplay the seriousness of the hard-line Republican ideologues for their "Contract With America". They want to punish the poor and the "undeserving", and to force people to work without first making sure that jobs exist for all of them. The net result of this will be more competition for existing jobs, forcing wages down further, thus benefiting those bosses and investors who depend on low-wage labor and who are the real backbone of the Republican "revolution" (better referred to as a "contract on America").

Those of us who see through this fraud must recognize the legitimate roots of the discontent expressed by many working people who voted this year and give it a real voice. We need to find

New York (cont.)

Surely this is a case of the foxes getting their hands on the chicken coop. Never mind Pataki's claims that he intends to make government more efficient and to eliminate patronage. Once he and his buddies realize exactly how many goodies they can feast on, you can bet that they won't simply walk away from the table.

The new administration bodes particularly ill for not only State workers, but for all human service workers. New contracts for State employees are scheduled to expire this year, and despite recent moves toward greater unity, it is unclear if the unions involved (CSEA, PEF, UUP, Council 82) are ready for a struggle that could well be far more intense than the last contract, which dragged on close to two years after its expiration. Meanwhile, promised cost-of-living raises for workers in State funded human service agencies could not only go by the boards, but with funding cuts, severe layoffs may be at hand.

The key now is forging new links between public sector employees, human service workers in general and the communities they serve. Public sector workers must understand that lobbying and endorsing the same politicians who vote to screw them year after year is of no use. Real political power lies in our unity and self-determination, and in our power to say no and to bring the whole machine of mis-government to a screeching halt if need be. United the workers of this State and the members of the communities who will be most drastically affected by the Pataki program can turn back the attack.

common ground between all those sectors of society who are hard hit by the current economy and emphasize unity and solidarity, not division and hatred. We need to tell people that the real alternative to bureaucratic government is workers' self-organization and direct democracy, so that the goods and resources of society are accessible to all, and that decisions can be made by all those affected by them. Let's answer the current political bankruptcy with a real new vision for the future.

MESSENGERS: Organizing for Health and Safety

--Bob McGlyn

In May 1994, bike messengers in Washington DC organizing into the Teamsters union hit front page news in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. By June New York City messengers contacted and got the support of Teamsters Local 840. Fifty messengers--walkers, bikers, scooters, truckers and a clerical worker--began coming to weekly meetings.

One issue which was ongoing although not a major problem in the effort was wariness of the Teamsters union. While historically the Teamsters have certainly been marred by corruption, violence and lack of democracy (much like some other unions, although much more in the public eye), in the last few years the Teamsters have been going through a cleanup campaign in large part due to a reform slate have been voted in on the national level. Also, as Teamsters locals have autonomy in policy making, their practices can be widely divergent. Many were so bad that they were put under control of the Federal government. Local 840 has never been tainted by such corruption and has a high level of rank-and-file control for a traditional trade union.

The campaign continues to go strong. As of early October 600 messengers have signed up from 20 different companies. Four companies (Early Bird, CMS, Orbit and A To Z) where workers have shown the most interest are being targeted. Local 840 has hired a messenger to do full time organizing with a steering committee of 25 keeping the organizing drive on a solid footing.

The messenger industry in its entirety is one big sweatshop. Its practices are akin to 19th century capitalism with zero rights or benefits (no paid holidays, no job security, etc.) and chronic unfair labor practices. Contrary to what some think, pay is often low, with walkers mak-

-ing usually making minimum wage. Many of the others used to make a lot more when we used to be "independent contractors". Now that the State labor law has forced most companies to treat us as regular employees nowadays, we only bring home an average of \$250. per week, with taxes taking the rest.

Some companies don't even have Workers Compensation or break the law by charging messengers for it. None inform couriers about their rights to Compensation if hurt on the job, while the bikers among us suffer nearly a 100% accident rate if they stick it out for some months. Since most of the bicyclists are piece-rate workers we have to hustle fast to make a living. Many bike messengers would prefer the choice of having a base wage or working piece-rate (this choice already exists at Choice Messenger), and most would choose a decent base wage under a union contract. Working for a wage would slow down our pace, that pace being the excuse that City officials use for cracking down not only on bike couriers but on all cyclists. In this regard the union effort among the bikers is directly relevant to cycling in general, and in particular to cycling advocacy groups like Transportation Alternatives. Transportation Alternatives has worked hand in hand in the past with the Independent Couriers Association (now Bike Messengers United), fighting such things as a failed attempt in 1987 at a Midtown bike ban, or the currently proposed sidewalk-riding bike confiscation bill.

Meanwhile, the bosses are putting out false and misleading anti-union propaganda. One company told messengers that because they were
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were covered by Social Security that they already had a pension plan! Many companies are following a dual track strategy. One is to suddenly promise such things as paid vacations, a higher commission rate or medical plans. The other is to hire union-busting lawyers.

The bosses have resorted to dirty tricks as well. A messenger union leader got suspicious call asking where he lived. This same person along with a Channel 9 camera person were set upon by a group of Early Bird management, one of whom was wielding a baseball bat. Not long after that 10 cops surrounded a Teamster organizer's car parked just outside Early Bird. Why? They said they'd received a call from Early Bird claiming a "white woman [the Teamster] and a Black male [the messenger] with a gun were in the car." After rousting a black kid who happened to be sitting on the car, the cops withdrew after the situation was explained by the Teamster.

We can only expect things to get rougher as the union campaign goes on. Nonetheless messengers continue signing the union petitions throughout the whole ordeal. Nothing is deterring us. We've received and continue to receive positive major media attention and growing support from the rest of the labor movement. It's probably no exaggeration to claim that we're one of the most colorful labor campaigns going on right now in the US.

For more information, contact Local 840 at 212-581-8845.



SMOKE, BUT NO FIRE:

**The uprising that almost was in the NYC
Central Labor Council**

by Neil Farber

Back in November something that hasn't occurred in living memory almost happened--a sitting president of the NYC Central Labor Council (CLC) was in danger of actually being voted out of office. But as we shall see, the mere whiff of unplanned change sent the bureaucrats scurrying and the fire was quenched before it was even kindled.

It all started, at least the way they tell it, back in September when CLC Thomas Van Arsdale and his inner circle decided to call off the annual Labor day parade and instead called for a breakfast! (see the last issue of On The Line for an earlier report on that one). Well they couldn't even get that together so they sent faxes to the various CLC affiliates asking for contributions for a radio ad to be aired on Labor Day "...to wish all workers and their families a pleasant holiday and to make reference to health care reform" (CLC memo-8/25/94).

A little background on 'Brother' Van Arsdale might shed some light on this situation. Tommy comes out of Local 3, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, a union straight out of the old craft union model (which still predominates in the building trades) and which has never been known for encouraging open discussion or challenges to its established order (people of color haven't exactly gotten warm, fuzzy feelings from the leadership there either). Now it just so happened that Tommy's father, the late Harry, was President of that union for many years as well as President of the CLC. So just by coincidence, in 1985 Tommy got to succeed his father both as Local 3 and CLC President.

Now even among some of the union leaders within the CLC this sort of father-son arrangement didn't sit well. In 1986 Victor Gotbaum, then head of the large and powerful municipal

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THE DYNAMICS OF CAPITALIST EDUCATION

--Wade Rawluk

Under capitalism education serves as a means to perpetuate the wage system. In capitalist educational systems grades take the place of wages. Grades and wages share two social functions.

The first of these functions is to establish an authoritarian social structure in either the school or workplace. In the school the power of the teacher to give grades establishes him/her as a person who has coercive power, and as a result of that power has a social status above that of the student. In the workplace the employer, through his/her ability to hire and fire the worker gains the coercive power to give or deny wages. Thus first as a student then as a worker the person growing up in our society learns that the distribution of rewards is based on one person's power over another.

Of course, the teacher is caught in a contradiction. On one hand s/he exists as an education worker, exploited by the wage system. On the other hand s/he takes a role in relation to the students similar but not identical to that of the boss over the worker. The key difference is that the student doesn't produce surplus value, and thus the teacher and the educational system as a whole receives no profit from his/her "work" (study).

But what is the same is that both worker and student labor to receive a reward, be it grades or wages. In this system the very giving of the reward functions as a means of control to insure obedience to authority. Thus, through their experiences in school the student learns to accept the relationship of power that the worker suffers under in the wage system, thus insuring the continuation of the system of exploitation.

Thus the education worker is put into a sad position. The teacher in fact suffers under the same sort of system of power and exploitation

that s/he is teaching the student to accept. However sincere his/her commitment to students and their learning may be, this dynamic in the long run overrides any good intent and turns the teacher into a mechanism for transmitting the authoritarian values of capitalist society.

A second social function common both to the wages and the grades systems is the transformation of the worker and the student into a commodity, whose worth is measured by how high their wages or grades are. While not always an exact measure, in most cases the relative status of the worker is closely related to his/her level of earnings. The student's relative status is as well a function of his/her grade level, and this also will determine future career options, regardless of other skills or talents.

The content of labor power is the expenditure of energy in physical or mental activity, the skill which the person possesses is the form in which this content occurs. Thus the function of the educational system under capitalism is to change the form of this labor power qualitatively from its raw potential to a particular form of trained labor power. When employers hire workers, they choose from a range of skill levels based on what particular type of wage slave they are in the market for. The grades system helps to determine the skill level of the "product" of the educational system (the worker) and is used to tailor the "product" to the demands of employers over time. The "better quality product" (the more skilled worker or professional) is worth a higher price (wage) to the buyer (boss), and vice versa for the "lower quality product" (the unskilled worker or laborer).

Accordingly the school and the university has become a knowledge factory that turns out students as commodities along with research for employers to consume. Employers use the grades system to determine the quality of this commodity. This is

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EDUCATION

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why in large part the grades system survives and functions as a support of the wage system.

Some argue that alternative education systems which de-emphasize or eliminate grades entirely can serve to undermine the authoritarian social structure. While not disputing alternative education on its merits, we must keep in mind that it cannot eliminate the stratified wage system which its students will confront once they graduate and join the work force. Further, it cannot eliminate all the other widespread cultural influences of a system in which economic rewards are distributed based on power and privilege.

The abolition of the grades system can only happen in a society that has abolished the wages system as well. The only way to achieve a true cultural change is to establish a stateless and classless society in which economic goods are distributed first and foremost according to need, and such needs are determined by everyone by means of participatory democracy. Only when the wage system is replaced by the free cooperation of labor can students use their education to benefit themselves and their fellow workers rather than an employer.

SMOKE, BUT NO FIRE

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Union District Council 37 decided to challenge Van Arsdale for the leadership, but failed to garner the support of many of the other larger unions, particularly the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and so lost (voting in the CLC is by local union proportionate to their dues paying membership).

But old grudges die hard. What had also changed over 8 years was a continuing shift in membership within the NYC labor movement away from the old building trades and manufacturing unions, whose leaders had formed the base of Van Arsdale's support, toward the public sector unions like DC 37

and UFT. Today, they alone constitute 1/3 of the CLC's 600,000 membership and in alliance with more 'progressive' unions in health care and related fields could easily form a majority.

The Labor Day disaster gave a reason to attempt a challenge. Jack Ryan, President of Local 74 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which mostly represents maintenance workers in schools and the private sector, stepped forward at the CLC October meeting, which took nominations for the annual elections of officers. He quickly received the support of UFT President Sandra Feldman and DC 37 President Stanley Hill. The word went out quickly about this challenge, and the turnout at the November CLC meeting was larger than in recent memory.

However, if anyone showed up expecting a chance to vote Tommy out they were soon disappointed. It was announced from the podium that after an intense meeting earlier that day of the CLC Executive Board that a deal had been worked out for Ryan to withdraw, for Van Arsdale to be re-elected and then to resign in June in favor of Assemblyman Brian McLaughlin, a Local 3 official who was seen as acceptable to Hill, Feldman, and their friends. The sight of the leaders, mostly white, mostly male, few of whom had worked in a factory or office for many years, congratulating themselves on their diplomacy and commitment to 'unity' could only prove nauseating to any sincere union activist who came to exercise their right to elect their own officers.

Elaborate maneuvers such as these go to prove one thing, the established union structure is politically and morally bankrupt. A few leaders may be honest and sincere in their commitment to their members, but the whole order of business has to go if real progress is to be made for workers here or elsewhere. We need real militancy, direct democracy, and an end to bureaucratic shell games. To achieve this, we must begin rebuilding our movement from the bottom up

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE WORKERS SOLIDARITY ALLIANCE

WHAT IS THE WSA?

The WSA is a national network of class-struggle anarchists united around the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism (i.e. anarchist unionism). simply put, we're striving for a future society where there is no divide between rich and poor, no sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism and all the other garbage that goes along with modern capitalist society.

BUT WHAT IS ANARCHISM?

Simply put, anarchism is the belief in a free society without coercion or imposed authority, i.e. the State. Anarchism is not terrorism, anti-social lunacy or any of the other nonsense which those in power and their allies in the media and elsewhere would want you to believe. There is a wide spectrum of theories which call themselves anarchist, from free-market advocates (boring!) to communalists to unionists.

HOW DOES WSA DIFFER FROM OTHER ANARCHIST GROUPS?

Many anarchists have utopian visions of a better world, but fail to offer concrete answers on how people would be housed, fed, clothed, etc. in anarchist society. WSA believes anarcho-syndicalism is a good model, and that unions of workers based on anarchist principles could redistribute such necessities. We know anarchism is not just a pipe dream, and has throughout history shown itself to work. We're also the best looking anarchist group (just kidding).

AREN'T MOST UNIONS JUST AS CORRUPT AND BUREAUCRATIC AS THE GOVERN- MENT?

When we talk about building unions, we don't mean ones like those current mainstream ones (such as the AFL-CIO) which are run by bu-

reaucrats only out for themselves and who could care less about the average worker. Even in the rare cases where the leaders are sincere, their top-down structure leaves the members out of key decision-making and at best defends the lousy deal we already have. In most cases these unions are sell-outs who are really about controlling workers and throwing them crumbs rather than seizing the workplace and chucking out the bosses altogether.

The unions WSA is talking about (anarchist unions) have no leaders, no paid officials and all decisions are made cooperatively. Their purpose is not only to get as much out of the bosses for workers as they can, but to fight for an end to capitalism and to realize our dreams of a free society, where living "happily ever after" isn't just the end of a children's fairy tale.

DO I HAVE TO BE A "WORKER" TO JOIN WSA? DO I HAVE TO BELONG TO A UN- ION?

Not if you're a rich person with lots of money to give away. Seriously, our group includes quite a few students, homemakers, unemployed and retired people as members. What job we have is not what unites us, but rather that we all identify as part of a class and work together to change society.

Nor do you need to belong to a union. All that's required is a belief in and dedication to anarchist unionism. As anarcho-syndicalist unions don't currently exist here in North America, we are trying to build a network that could create such unions when the time is right, while fighting for the rights of working people today.

WHAT ABOUT WSA AND STUDENTS?

As mentioned above, WSA includes many students. We believe that anarchist unionism applies as well to schools as it does to the workplace (aren't schools a "workplace" for students?) Students organized into fighting, democratic unions can push forth their demands on the administration and win important

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT WSA

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gains (more academic freedom, changes in the curriculum, better lunch room food, etc.) until the day when the students along with the teachers and the community seize the school and run it collectively.

WHAT ABOUT THE WSA AND SOCIAL ISSUES?

WSA is about much more than organizing around workplace issues. While we see class struggle as the basis of any lasting change in society, many of our members are active in the social struggles for abortion rights, against racism and fascism, for gay and lesbian liberation and more. In order for society to be truly free and equal the rights of all people must be respected. As anarchists, we believe in a 'social' revolution as well as a class one. We organize anywhere working class people are, and around issues important to the society we want to create.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD?

The WSA is part of the International Workers Association (IWA), an anarcho-syndicalist organization founded in 1922 with chapters in over 15 countries spread across Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa. Some sections are large (like the CNT in Spain, with 10,000 members and several active unions), some are small (like WSA, at least for the time being). The IWA and its sections realize that the working class is international, and in order for us to change the world we must overcome national boundaries. After all, bosses and politicians are full of crap wherever you go!

HOW IS WSA ORGANIZED?

WSA is organized into 4 regions (Northeast, South, Midwest and West). Each region has a delegate responsible for helping out new members, coordinating activities and communicating the views of the region to the organization as a

whole. We also have a National Secretary (who publishes our Discussion Bulletin and tallies votes on major decisions), an International Secretary (who keeps in contact with other IWA and sympathetic groups around the world), and a National Treasurer (who keeps track of finances and signs up new members). We elect people yearly to serve in these positions.

Together, these people form a National Committee which makes decisions on an interim basis. We hold an annual Convention open to all members and hold referendum votes as needed. Anyone who is elected can be recalled at any time if they fail to follow the members' mandates.

WSA is also organized into local groups, Working Groups around specific issues (e.g. NAFTA, anti-fascism), and Industrial Networks (for those who work in a common industry or type of work). Members may join any of these groups by getting in touch with them, and getting involved.

I LIKE WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO SAY! NOW HOW DO I JOIN?

Just fill out the little coupon below, and we'll send you everything you need to know to join. Dues are payable quarterly, and entitle you to a membership card (sorry, no secret decoder rings!), our monthly Discussion Bulletin, voting rights and copies of any WSA pamphlets and publications that we put out. Regional Delegates will also help put you in touch with other WSA members in your area.

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