

# Inside view of work and its discontents

By Mike LaVelle

## WAITING FOR THE EARTHQUAKE

By Lawrence Swain:

Little Brown & Co., Boston & Toronto, 1977, \$8.95

Two different worlds existed during the '60s. One—call it hippiedom, campus unrest, or whatever—moved largely under the umbrella of the anti-war and the civil rights movements and was the subject of much media attention. The other was and is the world of daily bread and daily struggle—the world of labor, of work and its discontents. Lawrence Swain, in his novel *Waiting for the Earthquake*, writes of that other world.

The title is misleading. It seems to play on our fascination with California as the land of fruits, nuts and impending earthquakes. But the scene is the San Francisco Post Office: "He looked up at the dingy, prisonlike building looming over him: above the employees' entrance some forgotten social realist of the WPA days had sculptured a ridiculously muscular manual laborer. What insanity, he wondered, what musty Stalinist fantasies had made the sculptor think that working at the Post Office was noble and heroic."

Eddie Dunaway, the protagonist of the novel, is the vice-president of a local postal workers union at the tail end of the '60s. Eddie's virtue, and his curse, is that he is a labor militant right out of the CIO '30s.

If you do not have the right to strike in 1977, if you work in a system where you are still spied upon and despised by your authoritarian bosses then for you it is still the '30s.

Lawrence Swain's novel is about an im-

minent and illegal strike of postal workers. All strikes by public employees are illegal, but they happen anyway. From 1950 to 1975 the amount of state, local and federal employees has increased from 4,093,000 to 12,023,000. Strikes by state workers have increased from two in 1961 to 490 in 1975 and they are still increasing.

The federal workers struck in 1970, and that strike is the setting of Swain's novel. Swain worked for the SFPO for eight years and his book gives us an inside look into the current militancy of public workers and the government response to that militancy.

"After a few seconds McGonigal found the right key, opened a door, and stepped into a dark black catwalk. He closed the door behind him and began to make his way quickly through the soundless darkness. Every few seconds he would stop and peer through one of the one-way peepholes. He found Eddie without too much trouble: the enclosed catwalks were a world he knew well, and the workroom floors on each of the five stories were worlds he knew even better. He had spent hours of his life, thousands of hours, looking down on them and watching everything that happened."

"He stood almost directly above Eddie Dunaway and watched him case letters. When Eddie got up at Breaktime McGonigal followed him in the catwalk, and when Eddie started talking to Richards he crossed quickly to a catwalk on the other side of the room, where he could see Eddie better and see what he was talking about. McGonigal had gotten very good at reading lips over the years and Eddie's were especially easy to read. Eddie was talking union business, and the conversation ended, as it frequently did these days, with talk of a strike."

Hugh McGonigal is in his 50s and is a postal inspector "solely responsible for security and investigations in postal facilities." It is a job that willingly laps over to a "them" and "us" paranoia. Them: not only Dunaway, but a host of subterranean devils, anarchists, hippies, dope addicts, free lovers, commies, and of course anti-Americans. Such perceptions naturally lead to responses in kind. Warp feeds warp, confusion, confusion, stir, mix, bubble and boil, and out of this strange soup the informer-mania is created. Often to the informer good or evil is irrelevant. Their faith, as it is, is faithlessness, they are ravagers of the heart, nihilists of the soul. To ascribe political motives to the informer might be giving them a virtue that they do not possess.

Jacob Nance is the same age (28) as Eddie Dunaway with a background in Army Intelligence and local law enforcement and at the time of Eddie's troubles, a postal inspector assigned to do his number on Eddie. Become his friend, soothe his loneliness, work next to him, become his buddy, sleep with his sister—and betray him.

Jacob reports on Eddie Dunaway. "He likes to read and write poetry. He thinks of himself as very sensitive, but actually he's just weak, at least too weak to do the kind of things he set out to do. He keeps trying to live up to the family tradition of radicalism, to uphold the family honor in the way they understood honor. But he won't be able to make it. The country isn't set up the way it used to be—I think he'll crack up."

Eddie Dunaway has much of the childlike innocence of Herman Melville's Billy Budd. Even Billy Budd's response to Claggart. Dunaway is a socialist who despises the student radicals of the '60s, at

least those event-radicals who intrude into the occasional labor conflicts with instant analysis and instructions and then leave in disgust upon failing to direct a local strike into a siege of the nearest Winter Palace. Dunaway explains that he is "amazed at the incredible arrogance of the students, expecting to come into the middle of a wildcat strike such as this and influence people they had never worked with, had no regular communication with, to whom they were in fact complete strangers."

I have heard that feeling expressed by striking workers before; I have expressed it myself. One incident sticks in my mind. In 1969 I had to dissuade a student radical from showing up at a local plant strike with her red flag contingent to "assist" us. It was difficult to convince her that the issue was money and not revolution. Even if the issue were something other than money the arrogance would still be offensive.

Perhaps it takes a certain amount of humility to listen rather than talk, to learn rather than teach, but in the final analysis all of us concerned with change ought to offer to those on the bottom of the economic heap, and even to those attempting a more democratic trade unionism, something more than our presence as "complete strangers." Lawrence Swain, from his inside perspective, gives us a chance to listen, and listening is at least part of what it is all about.

The American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead commented that "We think in generalities, but we live in detail." The "details" are what we need to know and why we need more Lawrence Swains.

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## Where DSOC stands: A contribution to the discussion

By Ronald Radosh

Roberta Lynch's column, "Is DSOC on the right foot?" (*ITT*, April 6) makes certain substantive criticisms of DSOC that deserve a fuller discussion. Although Lynch acknowledges that old alignments are dissolving in the European socialist left, she seems to reject DSOC because it "comes out of a tradition of socialist anti-communism" that supposedly it can never discard; because it is affiliated with the Socialist International; because it sees its "main function as a loyal opposition within the Democratic party;" because it espouses only top-down organizing, and, finally, because it confuses socialism with reformist welfare statism.

DSOC has moved away from the tradition out of which it emerged. (Indeed, its very formation was a major break with that tradition.) Ironically, this change has been duly noted in a recent column by Carl Gershman, Executive Director of Social Democrats U.S.A., which appeared almost the same time as Lynch's piece, in the April issue of *New America*.

Gershman blasts Michael Harrington for taking a "lurch to the Left," for seeking a "working alliance with the New Left," for holding a joint meeting in New York with NAM whose "democratic credentials are highly suspect," for giving up his anti-Communism, for making "another important concession to the new left" when he told *IN THESE TIMES* that he supported the left-wing of the Socialist International; for "asserting the greater weight of ideology over

that of class interest" by which Gershman means that Harrington now favors "the sectarianism of leftist ideologues as against the [George Meany] class-based politics of the labor movement;" for taking the "extremist" view that the U.S. cannot have both guns and butter. Putting all this together, Gershman concludes that Harrington now stands "far to the left of where he once stood."

Unlike Lynch, Gershman—who does speak for the real voice of the old anti-Communist social-democrats—understands that Michael Harrington and DSOC are committed to socialism, and not to anti-Communist social democracy. Yet Lynch continues to condemn DSOC for the tradition from which it emerged. That is akin to someone from DSOC attacking NAM because some members of that group came from a tradition that identified socialism with the Soviet bloc countries.

Now of course there are some classic social-democrats in DSOC. But at least there are no self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninists who advocate a "vanguard" party that must prepare to move toward armed struggle. And while there indeed may be some members who favor Soares in Portugal, there are probably few who reveal the infantile variety of Third-Worldism that has been a major problem with the politics of much of the New Left since the mid-1960s.

A few years ago, Christopher Lasch noted effectively that Michael Harrington held the fallacious view that "the union movement in its present form already amounts to a secret social democracy." It is this view that Harrington has shed, (and that the Social-Democrats U.S.A. still maintain). Harrington also used to argue, Lasch noted, that the labor movement could become socialist without adopting a socialist politics. His DSOC convention presentation made it clear he no longer argues this specious point.

DSOC, he told its convention, now sees itself as a "socialist wing of a mass democratic Left;" a Left that has to support "structural changes that go beyond liberalism." He noted the demise of the liberal ideology that tacitly accepts the

corporate domination of the economic infrastructure. It opposes the cold warriors, and seeks to present an agenda that could begin to move America "in a socialist direction," and that seeks to move the entire democratic Left "to a full socialist position."

Harrington's and DSOC's posture, indeed, is similar to that advanced by both John Judis and Alan Wolfe in their important article "American Politics at the Crossroads" (*Socialist Revolution*, no. 32) Judis and Wolfe note how the disintegration of cold war liberalism has provided new openings on both the Right and the Left. They conclude that if a socialist movement in the U.S. is ever to be built, "it will have to come about through the further political organizational development" of socialist tendencies within the existing mass anti-corporate movement, "as it takes root within the Democratic party, the labor unions, women's and minority organizations, and neighborhood and community organizations."

DSOC has precisely that understanding, set of goals and strategy—it advocates the type of tie to the mass movement that gave the 1940s Communist party its strength, while rejecting the CP's lack of advocacy of a conscious socialist position within the mass movement. While some of us started out with the early hope that NAM could become the catalyst for creation of a new socialist movement, reality has forced us to shed the illusion that such a task could be accomplished by merely calling for its creation. The movement away from social-democracy by DSOC members has created the grounds for a convergence that will allow us to work together effectively to bring socialism into the mainstream. I fear that Lynch's sectarian attack will hinder a new and necessary unity.

Roberta Lynch responds:

I find none of Radosh's arguments compelling in dealing with the substantive issues that I raised, but these questions will ultimately be answered only in the course of DSOC's further development.

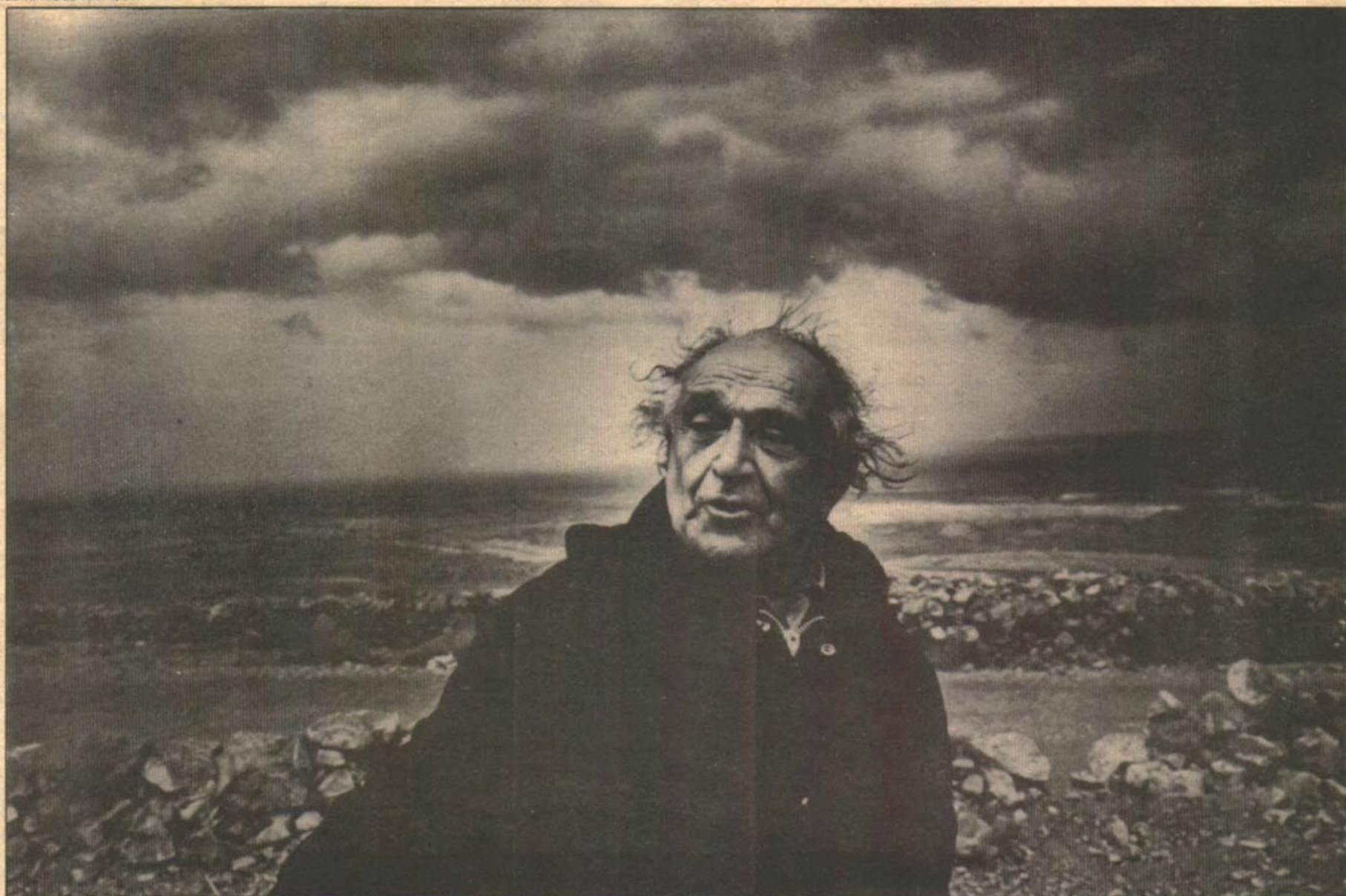
What disturbs me about the response of Radosh and other critics of the column is their common accusation of "sectarianism." Frankly, this surprises me. I wrote the column to raise questions that I thought were not being seriously addressed in some quarters. My purpose was twofold: to acknowledge that changes have taken place within the DSOC and to urge that those who consider themselves to its left be more open to joint work, political dialogue, etc.; and to point up the political ambiguities that surround DSOC that we (those who are part of a political tendency with which NAM identifies) should be clear about in pursuing such dialogue.

I did not attempt to write DSOC out of the left, to engage in rhetorical name-calling, to distort DSOC's positions, or to urge others to isolate it. What then constitutes "sectarianism?" Is it simply criticizing or raising political questions? This seems to me mistaken. If the right to make such criticisms is to be sacrificed in the name of non-sectarianism, we will quickly be left with a unity that is based not on honest political interaction, but on opportunism.

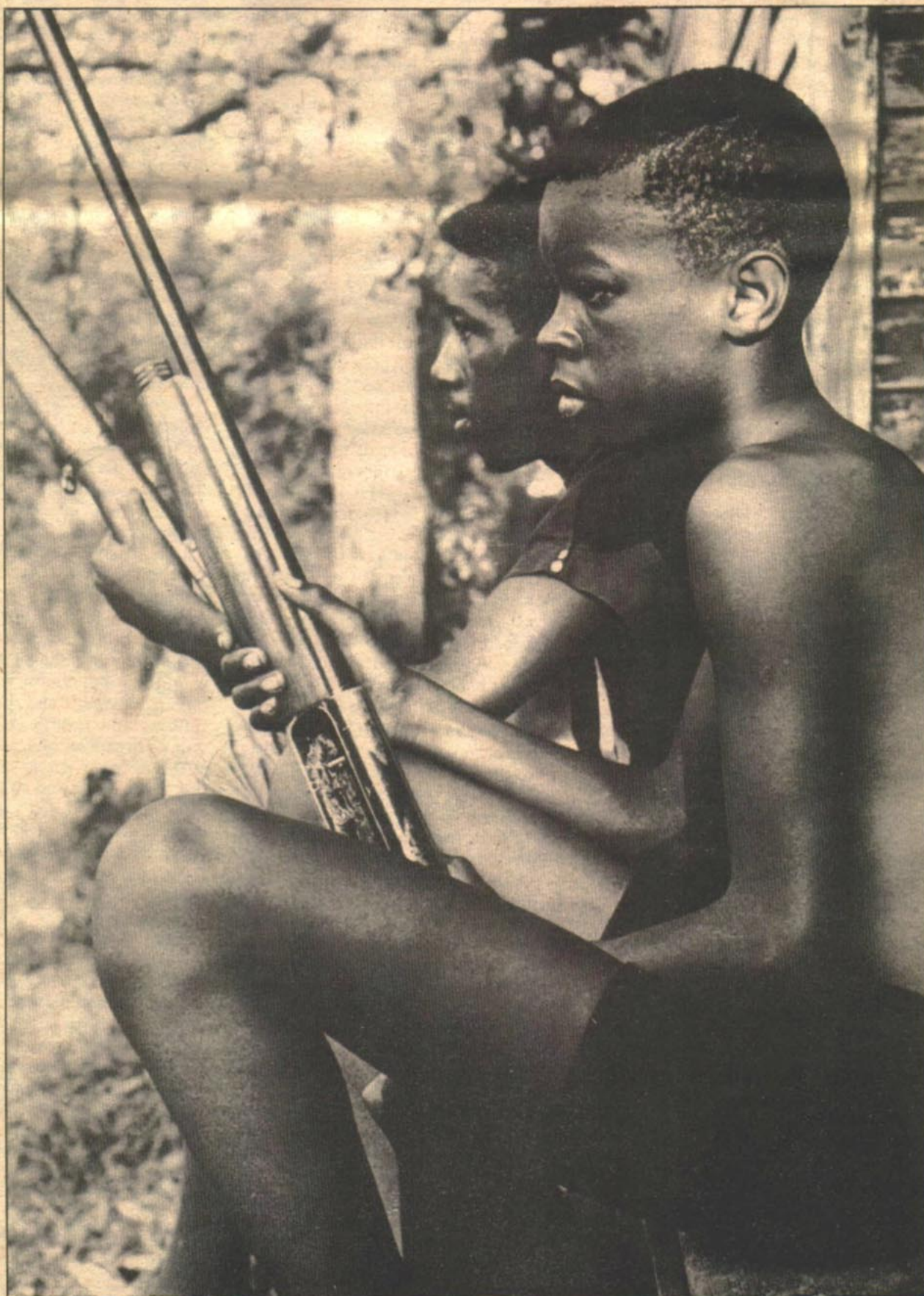
In addition, Radosh's jabs at "Third-Worldism" or Al Hart's complaints about NAM's "irrelevance" are indicative of a strange double standard: It's fine to sharply criticize those on our left, but when it comes to groups on our right an uneasy silence should prevail. I disagree with this approach. Sectarianism, in my view, has little to do with frank and comradely criticism of those with whom we disagree. It has to do much more with an unwillingness to work in an open manner and on a common basis with those with whom we disagree. I tried to make clear in writing the column that I was not advocating such a course, but rather saw interaction with the DSOC as positive.

Sectarianism, dogmatism, and the isolation from mass trends that they produce are among the more significant problems that the left faces today. But finding solutions to them is not aided by facile use of the terms to describe the open discussion of political differences.





"Yahudi Almog." Archie Lieberman, c. 1965.



"Monrow, North Carolina." Norris McManara, 1963.