

Letters

A Boob-Tube? Damn!

Editor:

As an avid reader and hardworking distributor of *In These Times* I found your *In These Times* Subscription Contest to be a step backwards in promoting socialist consciousness. I am not in disagreement with the contest itself, but the prizes offered (two Sony televisions), your subtle anti-communism, and "American paper for Americans" appeal left me baffled. How can an anti-corporate newspaper make fun of the works of Trotsky and Lenin, and offer, instead, a product that is itself a corporate media device ("the key to mass entertainment")???

What about offering "the complete works of Mark Twain," or a paid vacation to a National Park? (But a Boob-Tube, damn!?) It is possible to be "American" and progressive, ya know.

—Daniel Graham
Syracuse, N.Y.

Editor's note: You may have a point, so I make the following offer. If the winner of the Sony color TV would prefer a complete set of the works of Mark Twain I'll trade my (slightly used) one for the TV.

A party now?

Editor:

ITT is performing a valuable role in beginning a serious discussion within the American left on the necessity of socialist participation in electoral politics. The recognition that the electoral arena must be entered if socialism is to be put on the agenda of American politics denotes a seriousness generally lacking in the American left, which continues to occupy a mystical never-never land.

It is in this light that we were disturbed by your editorial (Dec. 20) that suggests that the "broad diverse array of movements will take party form when it has the prospect of becoming a major party, by transforming or replacing one of the existing major parties." "Transforming" and "replacing" imply different strategies. The first involves working inside the Democratic party and this we strongly maintain would be quite ineffective. Modern history shows that it is difficult enough for the left to operate in social democratic parties. Those difficulties would be magnified considerably in the Democratic party, which is essentially a product of corporate hegemony.

The projected second alternative of postponing the formation of a socialist party until it can replace one of the existing major parties is also troublesome. This might be like Waiting for Godot. Socialism will only become a meaningful force in American politics when it is able to present a serious alternative for state power. This does not happen magically or instantly. The examples of the present French Socialist party or even the American Socialist party in the early decades of this century are instructive. A socialist movement from the early stages on needs a party that can provide a coherent framework for both ongoing struggles and an alternative hegemony/culture. The coherence of a socialist movement depends upon such a reference point.

The creation of a democratic socialist party will probably always seem premature until it is done. We feel there are sufficient prospects to justify working towards its formation now.

—Simon Rosenblum
—Andrea Walsh
Johnson City, N.Y.

A certain brightness of the eye

Editor:

Without a doubt, *In These Times* is one of the better things to have happened in America's Bicentennial year... And too, considering your content—devoid of the limitations of ultra rhetoric and the self-serving and quite manipulative dogmas of the past—your name, *The New Majority Publishing Company*, is in no way presumptuous.

I've even noted a somewhat 'teen-age' spring in the steps of my 60-year-old reader-friends; a certain 'brightness of the eye.' Whatever. I've a solid hunch that 'tigers' of the home-front variety, both paper and otherwise, and of all categories, are about to receive their long overdue 'come-uppance,' in this new year of '77.

—Arthur H. Landis
Hermosa Beach, Calif.

Women still unorganized

Editor:

I would like to correct some impressions that are not my views in the interview with me ("Union Maid," *ITT*, Dec. 6, 1976). In talking about the labor movement today I would characterize it as conservative in the main, not "reactionary" as printed. (Also, I came from Michigan, not Wisconsin.) Since the film was made almost three years ago it is true that there has been some reawakening in the general organizing of the unorganized—as evidenced in the valiant and courageous work of the farm workers, in the white collar field among government workers, in some offices, and in some hospitals. But this is just scratching the surface. The implications of not organizing the mass of unorganized workers, the overwhelming preponderance being women, has profound ramifications for the already organized working force, for the union movement as a whole and for the overall economy. Some of these issues your columnists are beginning to deal with, some right on target. This is informative and most welcome.

But the overwhelming majority of the women workers in this country remain unorganized. And until the organized labor movement addresses itself to this problem (and to organizing the workers in the South), I feel that it will not be the viable, militant force in our country that it could be and once was.

Your paper is informed, analytic, and an exciting addition to other weeklies in the field. Keep it up. In looking over the roster of writers, I am surprised that you do not have more women as regular writers.

—Stella Nowicki
Chicago

One good turn deserves another

Editor:

Please enter a gift subscription.... A friend subscribed to the paper for me, and I feel the least I can do is to do the same for someone else. After many years reading (and occasionally writing for) ridiculously sectarian left newspapers, *In These Times* is a breath of fresh air. Please feel free to put my name on your fund-raising lists for the future.

Have you any plans for using the paper as an organizing tool, e.g., setting up readers' groups, etc? If so, I'd be interested in hearing about them.

—James Cronin
Milwaukee, Wisc.

The only real voice?

Editor:

Your editorial of "The minor party vote" (*ITT*, Jan 5) is a contribution to the destruction of solidarity among leftists, and also an oversimplification of the political situation. The dilemma of any leftist party that wants to keep its identity while being responsive to numbers is brushed over in a slick and arrogant way reminiscent of the worst *New York Times* journalism. Your "realism" points to the bankruptcy of our electoral system rather than to the leftist parties involved.

It is a mistake for serious socialists to judge the value of a leftist organization or party primarily by its numbers—this eventually reduces the entire left to irrelevancy. In the face of personality politics, whereby issues either get reduced to one-minute TV slogans or get lost in the mass media's emphasis on appeal, image, and other cliches, these leftist minority parties are the only real voice in a desert. At least they attempt to bring the issues into the open; they—and only they—talk about the real causes of unemployment rather than promising easy solutions; they alone risk losing numbers by opening up ugly themes like the deterioration of the cities rather than constantly hedging on the subject as the majority candidates did in the so-called debates.

The numbers themselves say nothing about the bankruptcy of left parties; rather they speak to the successful and total "socialist taboo" in this country; they reveal the bankruptcy of the public media system. In addition to the difficulty in raising fundamental and therefore inconvenient and disturbing questions for a public accustomed to the political illiteracy of "entertainment news," they do not really get any effective publicity because the public sphere is reserved for the powers of the status quo.

What actually is the alternative implied in your flippant comment? To vote only for the majority parties because they have the power anyway? This in the last analysis means fully to give in to the "token ritual" of elections,

to extinguish the last voices raised against the one-dimensionality of "the lesser of two evils."

—Mechthild Hart
Bloomington, Ind.

Liberal stupidity?

Editor:

The Dec. 13 issue of *ITT* just wound its way thru the postal system, so I hope I'm not too late to comment on Saul Landau's astonishing reply to a previous letter writer:

"The (Jamaican) gun control law is a model for all countries. Guns are simply outlawed and heavy penalties are imposed for illegal possession of firearms."

Indeed! What cleverer way to deal with alleged CIA subversion than to facilitate a military coup by disarming the populace?

This may be Landau's idea of a Jamaican model of socialism, but it looks more to me like a universal model of liberal stupidity.

—Tom Condit
Berkeley, Calif.

Saul Landau replies: Castro also disarmed the population—that is criminals and counter-revolutionary elements. He formed a people's militia of hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries. In Jamaica, Manley's Home Guard will be a similar institution.

We came along from out of nowhere

Editor:

Upon receiving *In These Times* I wrote you that I hadn't ordered it nor was I interested. Now that I've read a couple of issues I find it is excellent and I'm very interested. For all I know, it was a gift. Whatever, I want to keep getting it. I don't recall sending you a check so maybe you'll be sending me a bill, which is ok.

—Frank H. Carson
Prescott, Ariz.

How to break out of the Democratic and Republican trap

Editor:

I take issue with your editorial "The Minor Party Vote" (*ITT*, Jan. 5), which concluded:

"From any point of view other than narrow doctrinal or organizational rivalry, these left presidential campaigns are a painful waste of financial and human resources, a token ritual that pro nothing except the bankruptcy of the parties concerned."

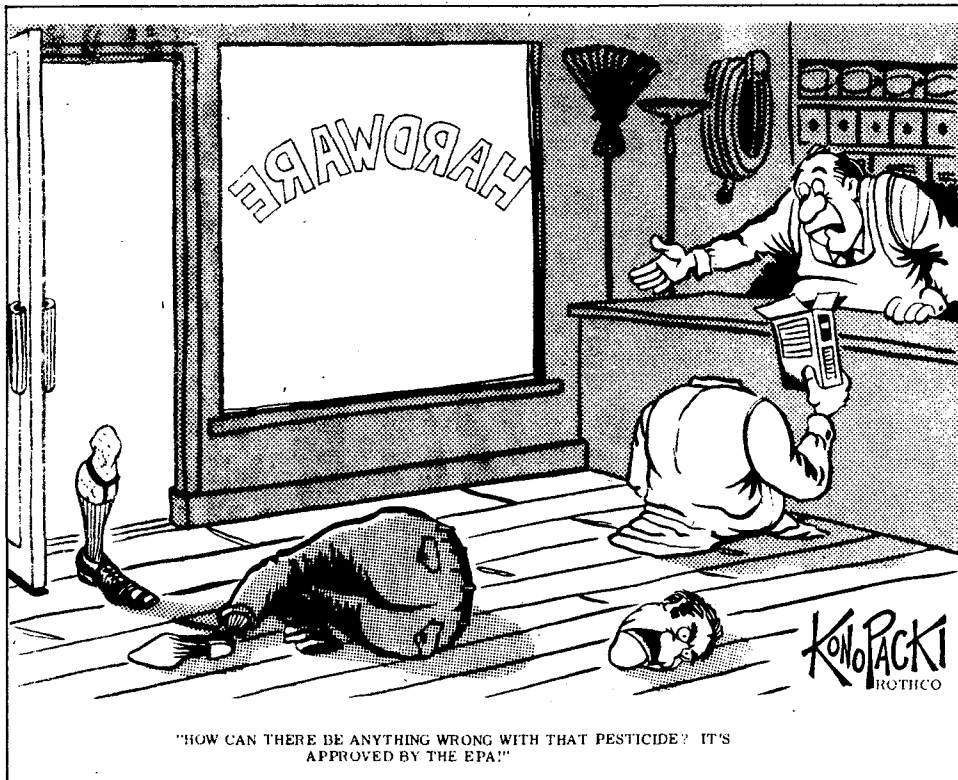
This is a surprising statement, especially in light of the articles in the same issue describing Carter's cabinet as favorable to big business and hostile to working people and minorities.

It appears that Gus Hall was correct in labeling both the Democrats and Republicans as political parties of monopoly. In fact, there are many, including myself, who voted for Carter in the slim hope that he would be significantly different from Ford, but now realize the futility of those hopes and realize that Gus Hall was telling the truth.

In These Times, in denouncing independent political action, is, in effect, endorsing the Democrats and feeding the illusion that there is some way progressive forces can "take over" the Democratic party. Admittedly, the independent vote was in a minority, but if the McCarthy votes are counted, it was much larger than in many years. In fact, the independent vote nearly cost Carter the election.

What is needed today is unity among left forces in this country in support of an independent anti-monopoly ticket. Such a formation offers the best hope for the American electorate to break out of the trap of the two party system.

—Charles Smith
Norman, Okla.



Barbara Ehrenreich

Will National Health Insurance insure anyone's better health?

Not too long ago I congratulated a friend for finishing medical school. "Oh I haven't learned anything that would help anyone," she answered wryly. "We just learn how to name things."

I'd dismissed this as a case of false modesty until the following encounter with our pediatrician, a sensible-enough looking woman in her 50s. My son, she told me, might have Condition X. Diagnostic tests would take several days in the hospital and cost (Blue Cross, not me) upwards of \$750. Condition X, she explained, is incurable. On the other hand, she went on reassuringly, it has the advantage of being almost completely free of symptoms.

It took me a moment to absorb this information and a moment more to explain that, since we owned no stock in drug or hospital supply companies, we would pass up this opportunity to consume a few hundred dollars worth of tests. But the experience fed into my suspicion that medicine is rapidly losing touch with anything we might recognize as scientific rationality, not to mention plain common sense. There are studies that show that 35-45 percent of all drugs prescribed by doctors have no effect on the conditions for which they are prescribed. Hysterectomies are being done to cure migraines and lower back pain. Cancer-causing drugs

(such as estrogen derivatives) are dispensed generously to women of all ages, and, it turns out, certain cancer-curing drugs may cause additional cancers in later life.

And of course there was swine flu: The vaccination program seemed to operate on the same principle as using garlic to keep away vampires (you haven't seen any vampires, have you?)—except that nobody ever died of garlic.

I could go on. But this kind of talk barely even gets a rise out of the medical profession anymore. "We're just like the old witch doctors," the local liberal doc (sideburns, wide tie) confided to me with a jovial bedside chuckle. "All our fancy technology is just a modern version of magic."

Well, then, why not go to a witch doctor, or, if you can find one, a plain old unlicensed witch? If "scientific" medicine turns out to be a matter of trickery and ritual, then why shouldn't we shop around for cheaper or more congenial sorts of rituals: herbal cures, shiatsu (acupuncture massage), chiropractic, reflexology, faith healing, homeopathy, etc., etc.?

In the middle of all this confusion we may, if Carter doesn't change his mind, get some kind of national health insurance (NHI). Now I'm for NHI, especially if it's

financed by steeply progressive taxes, is not run by the private insurance companies, provides comprehensive coverage, and a few other provisos of that nature. But so far no NHI proposal, no matter how liberal, seems prepared to deal with the issue that grips the heart of modern medicine like a massive myocardial infarct: namely, is this (modern, scientific) medical care *worth* insuring? An insurance program is a way of making sure that medical care, as a commodity, gets paid for; it cannot, in and of itself, change the nature of that commodity.

Once NHI is passed—again, Carter willing—I predict a headlong rush for the gravy train. Every tarot card reader, psychic healer and licensed masseuse will insist that their services be reimbursed too. Civil libertarians will argue that the right to choose among competing types of healers (doctors, herbalists, etc.) is implicit in the Constitution. And who will gain-say them? The surgeons who remove tonsils to finance ski trips? The obstetricians who gave millions of pregnant women ineffective, but harmful, doses of DES? The pediatrician who dispenses antibiotics like candy? My friend the disillusioned medical graduate?

It may be that we are getting to the

point where health care (beyond certain basics like prenatal care and immunizations) will be viewed as a matter of personal taste. I can see the ads already: "Nine out of ten executives prefer the decisive feel of surgery." "Shiatsu—the *sensuous* solution to constipation." "Cleans you where a douche can't reach—Mercy Hospital's expert hysterectomies!" And so forth. At that point I think we should give up on NHI and apply our money to some less dubious measures like banning tobacco and distributing free food on the streets.

But if there is still any possibility of a rational, honest (dare I say "scientific"?) approach to taking care of sick people, then let's get on with it. I would like to see gatherings, all over the country, of community health activists, elderly people, nurses, mothers, victims of lower back pain and other experienced people of all descriptions—for the purpose of figuring out what health care ought to be and how we get there. The Feds would, I'm sure, be willing to fund these get-togethers out of NHI start-up funds. And who knows? Maybe even the doctors, cynical as they are, would have something to contribute.

Barbara Ehrenreich is co-author (with Deirdre English) of *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*.



Ira Shor

The Westway in New York will help the auto industry, not mass transit

Lame-duck Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman Jr. flew into New York City recently with a final perverse gift from the outgoing Ford administration. He brought with him over a billion dollars to start construction of the controversial Westway, a 4.2 mile interstate highway to run from the tip of Manhattan to the midtown hub of West 42nd street. This last gesture is Ford's final way to tell New York to drop dead. He can get away with it because Westway divides the Big Apple Democrats. On one side are Mayor Beame, Governor Carcy, the regular Democrats, the construction industry and unions, and David Rockefeller, supporting the new highway. In opposition is a coalition of community, environmental and mass transit groups, supported by reform or progressive Democrats.

Coleman delivered his booty after supposedly receiving assurances from private enterprise that another \$7 billion would be invested in New York, if Westway got started. This care package for the city has made many eyes glitter green. The Rockefeller banks see the new infusion of money as one way that their prior loans to the city will be made more secure. The construction companies have a nose for fat profits in building contracts. In a town where unemployment in the building trades runs from 20 to 80 percent, the unions are desperately looking for jobs. They agreed to a no-strike pledge for the duration of Westway work, and earlier had accepted a 25 percent wage cut to get a federally funded housing renewal program. Pro-Westway forces pose the new highway as crucial to New York's economic recovery.

►The opposition.

The opposition argues that the new road will only bring in more heavy traffic and buses to an already densely traveled west side of Manhattan. The noise and air pollution expected both during and after construction will make a bad situation intolerable, they claim. Further, they point out that New York needs the full \$1 billion for mass transit, not highways. Coleman's billion-dollar baby includes a previously budgeted \$78 million sop for mass transit. As further concessions to the resilient opposition, Coleman and the other planners had to include park areas near the road and affirmative action in hiring. Minority hiring rights in construction have not yet materialized, and it's easier to imagine how pleasant a park near a roaring expressway will be.

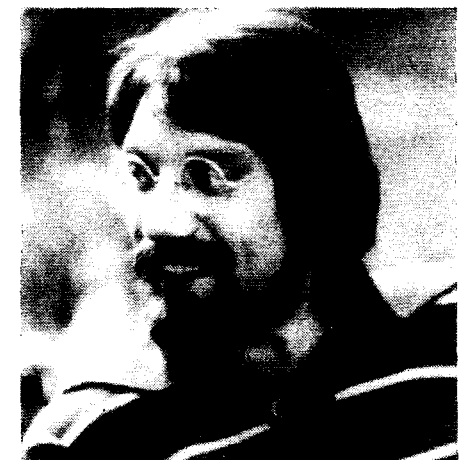
Unsatisfied with promises, the community coalition says that mass transit uses less energy in the building phase and provides more jobs in the post-construction period. They argue that more roads encourage more traffic. New York's experience with the Throg's Neck Bridge and with the Long Island Expressway demonstrates that traffic quickly expands beyond the capacity of each new roadway.

Now that Coleman has linked arms with Beame, Carey and Rockefeller, the anti-Westway forces plan to fight on in the courts and in November at the polls, when the Mayor is up for re-election. Six Democratic members of New York's Congressional delegation support their efforts. However, the people of New York have been softened up to accept the new road, by both the economic crisis and by

editorials in the *Daily News*. The *News* has announced that "Westway is the best-way" for a city needing jobs. In a town badly needing public money as well as jobs, no popular force is strong enough to mandate the social uses of capital. The official propaganda campaign linking Westway to jobs and recovery will make the highway acceptable, despite the claims of the ecology coalition. Sensing this, cocky Coleman pushed the money across the table to an eager Beame and Carey. Coleman declared that any future Transportation Secretary who promised to reduce the use of the automobile was a "liar." To him, gasoline is the blood of America pumping through an internal combustion heart.

►For now, sad but true.

For the immediate future, he is unfortunately right. Since World War II, suburbanization has gone hand-in-hand with automobiles. The rise of the highway lobby and the withdrawal of capital from railroads have left to trucks the delivery of more and more goods. Further, the retreat of jobs and housing from central cities has made the car indispensable to working people. Workers who have to commute from job to home in a society with poor mass transit, have no choice but to rely on cars. Also, low consumer prices in a period of runaway inflation can most often be found in far-flung shopping plazas, accessible mostly by car. In addition, now that four million working people attend community colleges, the campus has become one more destination in their daily commuting.



Besides convenience and necessity, the car is also a symbol of status, freedom, and mobility. After workers take care of life's necessities—job, home, family, shopping—they use the car for fast getaways. Cars enable people to move quickly to the leisure-time places that compensate for a life of hard work. Going to recreation by car is easier, safer, faster, more fun, and offers a wider geographic choice of activities. Lastly, for young people who can't afford their own apartments and have to live with their parents, the cheap jalopy is a private place to have sex, one of the few spaces they can control.

This complex of needs for cars and trucks, joined together by the promise of jobs and economic recovery, will make such projects like Westway hard to stop. The production and use of so many vehicles is not only choking urban streets and air, but also distorting the economy, in using up so many resources and so much labor. A policy of mass transit development coupled with full employment is needed. The anti-Westway forces engage these issues. They have lost a battle, but are still fighting the war, and may have more allies in the hundreds of transit workers who stormed public hearings on subway cutbacks, less than a day after Coleman tip-toed out of town.

Ira Shor teaches English at Staten Island Community College. His column appears regularly.