

## CITIES

# Mysterious fires in Mission District

By Juan Cruz  
and Gwen Roginsky

In a smoke-filled room an elderly man gasps for a breath of fresh air as he claws his way to a fire exit only to find it sealed. In an adjoining room, a terror-stricken woman screams for help and suddenly leaps to her death as her two-story apartment is engulfed in flames.

This scene is a recurring nightmare for poor residents of San Francisco's Mission district, a predominantly Latino community that has suffered a rash of fires over the last two years.

One neighborhood in particular has been hard hit. A recent study revealed that "within the boundaries of Guerrero St., South Van Ness, 17th and 14th Streets, there have been a total of 133 fires during a three-year period," resulting in at least 16 deaths.

Interestingly, the report also noted that "the overwhelming majority of the fires have occurred within the immediate blocks surrounding the 16th/Mission BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station." Of the 133 fires, 14 were attributed to arson and 12 of these occurred within one block of the BART station. (Since then the number of known arson cases in the 16th/Valencia area has risen to 41.)

The 16th/Valencia area is the poorest section of the neighborhood. Some 46 percent of the families there make less than \$6,000 a year and the unemployment rate hovers around 20 percent—about double that of San Francisco as a whole. The area also has the lowest percentage of resident homeowners in the Mission and the highest percentage of absentee landlords.

Families have increasingly fled the neighborhood, to be replaced by a large influx of poor refugees from the demolished homes and hotels around the Yerba Buena Convention Center site. The area has also become home for a disproportionate number of transients and a "dumping ground" for people the city social services can't handle.

Yet, for all that, property is changing hands at a rate similar to levels city-wide. Asked why such an economically depressed area should be the site for so much speculation, one resident replied, "You can stand on any roof in this part

of town and see the highrises following the BART line, and you know in what direction they're headed."

A staff member of the Mission Planning Council recalls, "When the ground was broken for BART, there was an attempt to build highrises or at least to get high height zoning. But because of intense community resistance the height limits were zoned low. But zoning laws aren't forever, and who knows what will happen."

Another activist adds, "If the neighborhood is burned out, who will be there to oppose high rise development in the future?"

Community fears that the fires are linked to redevelopment plans are fanned by the history of other poor neighborhoods in San Francisco. The Western Addition, a black neighborhood close to City Hall and the Opera House, was similarly plagued by fires, many attributed to arson, shortly before being taken over by the redevelopment Agency.

The Agency argued the area was so unsafe and full of fire traps that it had to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch. It now stands as an urban wasteland, torn down but not yet rebuilt.

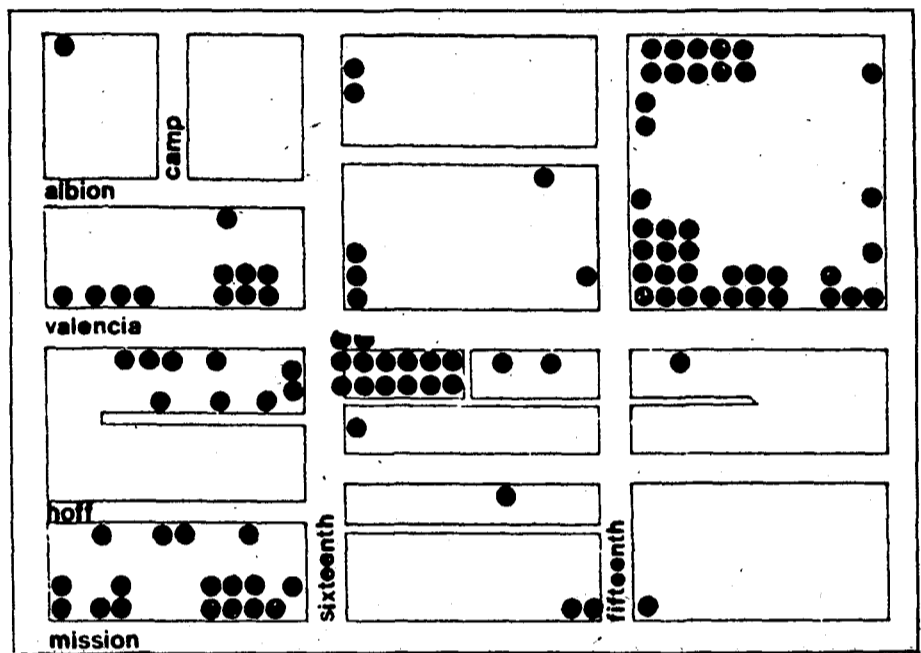
The buildings hit so far in the Mission are usually without adequate fire safety equipment and have numerous building and safety code violations.

The different city agencies responsible for code enforcement are understaffed, armed with weak laws and encumbered with inflexible time scheduling. "We cannot keep up with the number of cases of code non-compliance that we have to prosecute," says Edward J. Johnson, city attorney in charge of prosecuting landlords who refuse to comply with building and safety codes. "We may close 20 cases a month, but we get 30 a month and there isn't enough staff here to cope with it."

Meanwhile, the fires take their toll on the ability of the neighborhood to survive. "The fires are creating an aura of suspicion, especially with the elderly. They are most victimized by the fires, high rents, and crime. We are poor, almost all of us are without fire insurance, so we lose our shirts if we are victims of a fire," an old-time resident explains.



El Tecolote



The fire cycle doesn't end when the fire is put out. The gutted buildings stand as reminders of neglect and horror. "When you see two or more hulks within a few blocks of each other," sighs a resident, "you can see the rot of the neighborhood—it's like an unburied corpse."

One community organization, Operation Upgrade, has begun to organize around the need for increased code enforcement, rehabilitation of existing housing, and possible alternative housing such as cooperatives.

Betty Anello, co-chair of Operation Upgrade, explains, "I have to question the

values of our economic system where property and real estate rights are the most protected and most sacred, while the basic rights like the right to decent housing are the least protected and most disregarded."

But as the flames continue to engulf the area, Operation Upgrade and other community organizations admit they are in a race against time to save the neighborhood.

Juan Cruz and Gwen Roginsky are writers for the Mission District community newspaper *El Tecolote*.

## LABOR

## Stewardesses moving towards independent unions

By Cindy Hounsell

Guess what your average airline stewardess is up to these days. She's getting ready to decertify the union as her bargaining agent.

Until last November about half of the industry's flight attendants (15-20 percent are men) were affiliated with the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), an arm of the airline pilots' association. The other half were members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which also represents New York's subway workers. (Delta is the only major airline that has not been unionized.)

In recent years working conditions on the unionized lines have deteriorated as too many jumbo jets, the spiraling cost of fuel and recession-related declines in air travel have brought troubles to the airlines. With major lines like Pan Am and TWA on the brink of bankruptcy, costs have been drastically cut and flight attendants have been the major victims.

Wages have been held down. Planes fly fuller with fewer attendants. Working days have been increased and promises of better equipment to compensate for the added load have invariably been

broken. At Pan Am flight attendants on 747s have been reduced from 16-18 when the plane was put in service to 9-12, depending on the passenger count. As *Aviation Weekly* reports, flight attendant productivity has tripled in a decade.

The deterioration in working conditions coincided with the spread of the women's movement among stewardesses, and with the formation of Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR), which had 1,500 members at its peak.

One result of the formation and growth of SFWR was that stewardesses committed to changing conditions and the image of attendants became more active in their unions. Tommie Blake, an American Airlines stewardess and TWU member, for instance, was elected president of her local, which contained 5,500 attendants. Progress was immediate: over 120 members were trained in grievance procedures; a 24-hour toll-free number was made available to attendants with contractual questions. For the first time, the union appeared to care about its flight attendants. But progress may have come too late.

Last November attendants at Continental Airlines broke off negotiations and formed an independent union, the first of several and the only one in which attendants have a chance to improve their situation. Continental attendants are unified behind a strong leadership—and the airline itself has been profitable. The independents are now in the last stages of negotiating a first contract.

But elsewhere, dissatisfied but apathetic flight attendants are voting out old unions in favor of new independent unions without any real chance of improving their lot. The snowball started in March when TWA attendants voted out the TWU. Then on May 3, 58 percent of American Airlines attendants voted to become independent. Within weeks there will be votes at Pan Am and Eastern, with similar results expected.

In the case of Pan Am attendants share a local with mechanics, commissary workers and cleaners. Many are susceptible to the company line that they are professionals and should be independent. Not understanding the role of the union and having been badly treated by it, they also tend

to blame the union for deteriorating working conditions. Many even feel sorry for the company, which has been in financial straits—a sentiment exploited by the company in yearly seminars outlining its financial woes.

The TWU must also bear the blame. Run by men who denigrate "the girls," the union hierarchy threatened to expel union members who participated in SFWR, comparing it to the Communist party of the 1950s.

But in a situation like that at Pan Am, independence can only lead to further deterioration of conditions. The union contract expires in the fall. With virtually no money, organization or experience, any strike called by the new union would quickly fail. Indeed, no strike in the airline industry has ever been won without the support of an international union.

Some of us are trying to point out dangers in becoming independent, and the TWU hierarchy is making belated attempts to right past wrongs, but it is probably too late.

Cindy Hounsell is a flight attendant for Pan Am airlines.

## LABOR



## California and S.D. fight over Dennis Banks

SAN FRANCISCO—A full-scale political and legal confrontation between two states is brewing over the extradition case of American Indian Movement leader Dennis Banks.

South Dakota wants Banks returned for sentencing for a 1975 conviction on riot and assault charges. Banks, who recently resigned as a national director of AIM, claims he will be killed if he is sent back to South Dakota from California, where he has been a college instructor since last year. California Gov. Jerry Brown has indicated he is seriously investigating Banks' fears, but maintains he needs more time before making a decision.

On April 25, however, a California state appeals court—acting on a petition from South Dakota—ordered Brown to extradite Banks, an historic ruling without precedent in American law. Only once before, in 1861, did a state seek judicial intervention in an extradition case, but the court ruled against it. California plans to appeal.

South Dakota Attorney General William Janklow has assumed an extraordinary personal role in the extradition battle. Political observers in South Dakota believe Janklow is gearing up for the governor's race next year.

Janklow dismissed Banks' fears for his life as "nonsense." He has offered to personally pay the expenses for two official investigators from the West Coast to visit South Dakota's federal penitentiary in Sioux Falls to determine whether Banks would be in danger there.

As evidence of the danger to Banks' safety in South Dakota, his attorney Dennis Roberts cites a threat from Janklow: "There is only one way to stop the Indian problem here, and that's to put a gun at the AIM leader's head and put a bullet in it."

Janklow admits making the statement, but says he meant that only if AIM leaders "came around with their guns and threatened people...that I would see to it that they were shot."

Janklow's former assistant attorney general, Max Gors, is also quoted in court documents submitted in the case as saying, "We don't have an Indian problem in South Dakota. The only problem we have is Dennis Banks and Russell Means, and if we get rid of them, we get rid of the Indian problem... I'm calling for the extermination of the two of them."

As for Banks' safety, Janklow says, "I can't say yes or no categorically that he will be safe here. But he can't point to one actual time he was ever in danger here. It's all heresay and rumor."

Banks' supporters point out that there were 50 murders on Pine Ridge Reservation (pop. 13,000) in the three years following the Wounded Knee takeover.

Furthermore, Banks' lawyers have cited the case of Anna Mae Aquash, an AIM activist who was one of Banks' closest personal friends. While facing extradition in the fall of 1975, Aquash warned West Coast reporters she would be killed if returned to South Dakota. After her extradition she disappeared while awaiting trial and was found dead three months later in a remote section of Pine Ridge Reservation. She had been executed by a small calibre handgun held against her head. To date, no one has been arrested in the case.

While awaiting the outcome of his extradition battle, Banks is teaching college courses in Indian law and Native American religion and philosophy. He has also been prominent in attempts to revive Indian religious traditions and recently helped launch an Indian Survival School for children in Oakland.

—David Weir

Pacific News Service

David Weir covered the American Indian Movement as a staff writer for Rolling Stone magazine.

## At the heart of Arizona labor

By Sam Kushner

PHOENIX—Several thousand Arizona trade unionists have been anxiously waiting for I.W. Abel to respond to his mail.

Abel, president of the Steelworkers Union, is scheduled to retire this summer and has announced that he intends to move to the posh Sun City development just outside of Phoenix. For more than seven months, however, construction workers, members of Local 383 of the Laborers union, have been on strike against the developers who are constructing Sun City.

Over three months ago Bill Soltero, business manager and secretary/treasurer of Local 383, called on the president of the largest industrial union in the AFL-CIO to correct the harm he had done to the striking workers and to publicly give up his future residence in Sun City.

So far there has been no response from Abel, and the Laborers union, one of the largest and most powerful in Arizona, is urging unions throughout the country to communicate with Abel and urge him to give up his scab-produced retirement home.

New management recently took over at Sun City, Soltero explains, and it decided to operate on a non-union basis. Under the old union agreement construction workers were earning \$7.13 an hour. Now scabs reportedly are paid about \$4.

"But the strike has been a costly one for those who took over the operation," Soltero says. "They are eight and one half months behind in home deliveries. We used to put up eight houses a day, now they get about three and one half each day. And the houses they do finish need repairs immediately."

## One battle among many.

For Local 383, this battle is but one of many. In the past five years only one contract with an employer has been renewed without a strike—all at a time when there is a "depression in construction," with 3,300 of the local's 9,000 members laid off.

The local's jurisdiction is immense, four-fifths of the state of Arizona. About 70 percent of the members are in the construction trades with the rest in miscellaneous industries, including hospital workers, golf course employees and maids at a number of locations. The philosophy of the local, according to its top official, is "anybody who wants to be organized should be organized."

About one-fifth of the membership is

**Arizona Laborers Local 383, covering fourth-fifths of the state, remains a center of progress in a tough area.**

Anglo. The rest are native Americans, blacks and Chicanos, who make up the majority of membership. Local 383 officials point out that there are more native Americans in their union than in all the rest of the Arizona labor movement. One of the local's business agents is black and another is Navajo.

For many years Local 383 refused to affiliate with the AFL-CIO Building Trades Council in Arizona. "We disagreed with their lily-white policy," Soltero explains. But all of that is turning around these days. Local 383 has just affiliated with the Building Trades Council and according to Soltero, "for the first time we have a truly American union, one that includes workers of all colors and races."

## An open office.

The Laborers union building—a full square block at Fifth and Adams—is the hub of the labor movement here. In it are the offices of the United Auto Workers, the Rubber Workers, the Upholsters Union and the United Farm Workers. Many of them are there rent free and the Local 383 office staff services their phones. There is the main organizing office of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers union, which is in the process of organizing hotel workers in this city. There is also an office for the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest.

In opening its offices and facilities to unions and public interest organizations, Local 383 is out "to help those who help people who are being abused." Sometimes helping others creates some conflict for Soltero and his fellow officials. While Local 383 favored an initiative for the construction of a nuclear site on traditional building trades grounds that it would create more jobs, the Center for Law in the Public Interest opposed it.

Much of the guiding spirit for Local 383 comes from far off California, from Cesar Chavez and the UFW. When the UFW was faced with a savage attack from the Teamsters union in the Coachella Valley in 1973 Soltero and virtually his entire staff moved to that valley to help the embattled campesinos. Dominating Soltero's office is a huge black eagle flag with the names of hundreds of farm workers in-

scribed on it. "I disagree with anyone who doesn't believe that Cesar Chavez is the leader of the farmworkers," Soltero says grimly. He will make no alliance, he emphasizes, with anyone, in or out of the labor movement, who takes part in weakening the UFW.

He says he even changed some of his opinions about AFL-CIO president George Meany after \$1.6 million was voted by the AFL-CIO Executive Council for the farmworkers in 1973. That action, Soltero says, "made me feel that the old son of a gun couldn't be all bad." Nowadays his feelings about Meany are "mixed."

## Better days ahead.

Looking back at the last eight years with Republican domination of the White House and the last 12 years with the G.O.P. controlling the state house Soltero muses: "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and wonder how we have been able to exist in the state of Arizona."

National Labor Relations Board decisions have been consistently bad, he recalls. Since the first of the year, perhaps because of the election of Jimmy Carter, he says there seem to have been some changes for the better in the NLRB.

Democratic Gov. Raul Castro comes to the Local 383 union building to address the membership. Soltero is on close terms with the new governor. Castro's staffing of the unemployment compensation and workmen's compensation offices with people who are not anti-labor has scored major points with Soltero and others in the labor movement. While there are other Chicanos, including some of Soltero's fellow officers in Local 383, who are highly critical of the new Democratic governor, considering him at best a conservative Democrat, Soltero stands firm in his support of him. "It's not because he is a Mexican," he insists.

However Soltero is very proud of the fact that there is a Mexican governor, and that there are many city and county officials of Mexican extraction now in office. He recalls earlier days when the Chicano was virtually shut out from all political life in the state.

Through it all one gets the impression that this union remains a multi-national militant organization that is apparently looking forward to some better days. In Arizona it is a center of progress.

Sam Kushner is author of *Long Road to Delano* and a reporter in the Southwest.