

Alvah Bessie

Considered opinion

Doing something about it

That celebrated remark, alleged to have been made by Mark Twain, that "Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it," came to life in northern California for all of eight days in February. It didn't have anything to do with the weather. It revolved around another of those sacrosanct, godlike forces of nature about which people have also become convinced they can do nothing.

The mountain town of Westwood is near Mount Lassen, but the 2,500 people who live there are less concerned with the admitted beauty of their surroundings than they are with the hard time they are having keeping body and soul together. This is a lumbering town and in the winter 80 percent of the workers are unemployed because the six lumber mills in the area are shut down.

So, hard-pressed as the people are, they have not been taking kindly to the soaring cost of living, any more than other Americans all over our disUnited States.

The difference between the inhabitants of Westwood and the rest of us is simply this: They did something about it.

People have always said, "You can't fight City Hall." People complaining about the ever-rising bills they get from Ma Bell are told, in effect, "Start your own telephone company." (As any child can tell you, you can do it, too. All you need are two tin cans and a string.)

The citizens of Westwood got furious when their electric light bills started to double during the last year, and then tripled. They were averaging between \$50 and \$100 a month and some ran as high as \$200.

One retired laundry operator, 82 years old and with a total income of \$300 a

month from the Veterans Administration and Social Security, received a light bill for \$113. An unemployed lumberman with a family of four besides got his unemployment check of \$240 a month—and a utility bill for \$80.

The people of Westwood first drew up a petition to the company, California-Pacific Utilities. They were ignored. They talked to politicians and got nowhere. So three housewives—and let their names go down in history—Paulette Benner, Pauline Asmus and Patty McCormac, wrote a letter to their local mimeographed weekly, *The Pinecones Press*.

"Turn off your power!" they implored the community in the issue that appeared on Feb. 10. They suggested that the blackout run from Lincoln's birthday to Washington's—and the town responded. The lights went off all over Westwood in Lassen County, and astonishing things happened:

- Deprived of their television sets, people started to visit each other, talk to each other, organize pot-luck dinners;

- They bought up all the wood and oil-stoves they could find, as well as candles, camp-stoves and ice-chests;

- One man took the food out of his refrigerator, packed it into a mailbox and buried it in the frozen earth of his yard;

- One plumber ran the pipes for his shower through a wood-stove, then complained with delight that "Everybody seems to be taking their showers at my place. All I ask is that each of them bring a log."

- The residents of Westwood began getting telephone calls from all over the country from people who were not only sympathetic to their plight, but who expressed

their solidarity by saying they were going to turn off their own lights. The organizers of the blackout, *Mesdames* Benner, Asmus and McCormac, were interviewed by newspapers in San Jose, California, St. Louis, Missouri, and even London, England;

- The British radio-commentator who called Asmus congratulated her on "the terribly American way you citizens are handling your problem."

Interviewed in his San Francisco office, the executive vice-president of California-Pacific said he had "tremendous sympathy" for the plight of the people in Westwood. He said his company's rates were not out of line—it buys its power from California's monster PG&E, and sells it at rates approved by the California Public Utilities Commission (natch). He blamed it all on the drought.

The poor man said, "...our company, believe me, is also feeling the squeeze. We are not making anywhere near the profit we are entitled by the PUC to make." (Think of that!)

He even offered this finely-honed piece of thinking: "If there is a failure in Westwood, it is a failure to help needy people meet their needs. A utility shouldn't be doing that. That's the job of the government."

Said Thomas Jefferson, a disreputable revolutionary who was once hounded through the streets of Philadelphia for being "a French agent": "I hold a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical."

Said one lumberman, huddled with friends around a couple of kerosene lamps in Westwood, "Our efforts may be as

revolutionary as the Boston Tea Party. We are people who believe in what we are doing."

The results of this eight-day rebellion in Shasta County, California? The California Public Utility Commission announced "a probe"; California-Pacific started to mail out credits for overcharges, admitting to 1,644 overbillings in the area.

A spokeswoman for the PUC said California-Pacific had programmed its computers incorrectly; had read meters irregularly. It was also discovered that the company had been sending a lot more electricity into the community than was needed. The company said it wasn't so, but if it *had*, it "may have been" in response to complaints from some customers that they had received too little!

As of the last week of February the blackout was over but some Westwood people had decided to see if they can get along without electricity anyhow and it was certain that the rates of the rest will be "adjusted."

Added irony: PG&E, the Ma Bell of the gas and electric monopoly, on Feb. 23 said that with the drought (which had caused the exorbitant bills to Westwood customers—or had it?) being over, it was applying to the PUC to *reduce* its rates by \$98.3 million a year! This would amount to a saving of 73¢ a month to its customers—a practically revolutionary thing to do, on the face of it.

Or is it?

Alvah Bessie is a novelist, critic and screenwriter who was involved in the Spanish Civil War as a soldier of the Republic and was a member of the Hollywood 10.



Stanley Aronowitz

You can't kill a culture like you can kill a union

The membership of the United Mine-workers Union has now overwhelmingly rejected the tentative contract agreed to after an unprecedented 81 days of strike. In many ways the contract that has now been rejected follows the classic pattern of post-war labor relations. Like other struggles, the issues were only secondarily wages and benefits, although the problem of a health program for miners assumes greater importance than in most other industries because of the almost routine occupational hazard of black lung disease for miners. The key question that provoked the strike was the workers' right to strike a mine over health and safety.

This year the employers, now dominated by a few oil corporations, believed that the time had come to end unauthorized walkouts. They demanded penalties against miners who led and participated in provoking wildcat strikes, including fines and discharges. With the union weakened at the top after Arnold Miller's minority victory over two opponents, and serious output reductions in the unionized part of the industry, the coal employers were taking the calculated risk that they could get away with rolling back traditional miner militancy. Needless to say, the attempt failed because the militancy is not rooted in economic interest alone, but also in a culture of working-class solidarity that is at least one hundred years old. Generations of miners have held to the principle that crossing the picket line is a cardinal sin, analogous to committing sodomy with your union brother's wife.

You can't kill a culture like you can kill a union or an individual. The miners may approve this or another version of the negotiated contract, but it will take more than legalisms to persuade them to go back on their time-honored code of daily behavior.

The pattern of other settlements that is represented in the contract is to exchange high wages and good benefits for workers' control over working conditions. It's the old steelworkers and autoworkers story—hegemonic in all basic and monopoly industries, except coal. The loss of the right to strike over everyday shop floor grievances was among the main signs of the weakening of the post-war trade unions. The traditions begun in the organizing campaigns of the 1930s, job actions and a rank and file steward system, were replaced by binding arbitration on grievances and the dominance of full-time officials over union affairs. When the major coal companies became subsidiaries of the oil corporations in the 1970s, new labor relations rules followed in an attempt to bring coal in line with other industries. But the miners' culture and traditions could not be bought for 80 dollars a day and health benefits.

I talk from personal experience. In 1964-66 I was chair of a Committee for Miners that raised funds chiefly from progressive unions, sent organizers into the coalfields of southeastern Kentucky and provided legal aid to union militants in the area. The committee formed in response to wildcat strikes provoked after the union had threatened to abandon the

Miners Memorial hospitals that were financed by health and pension funds to care for sick and injured miners and their families. The CFM was helpful to the wildcats that spread throughout Kentucky and West Virginia in response to the Tony Boyle administration's brutal withdrawal from the fields. The miners' culture is a singing and dancing culture as well as one of struggle. It is rooted in hearts and minds of the whole community, not only those who go down in the pits. The miners' leaders are sometimes retirees who prematurely leave the fields because they contract "the sickness" at the age of 50 or younger. Sometimes, young miners returning from military service are thrust to the forefront of their struggles. The "union" is both the formal organization and the informal networks of miners that stretches across counties where some "old boy" who is the cousin of someone in this mine can easily be contacted when trouble starts.

The informal networks make possible frequent wildcat strikes of as many as 25,000 miners in four counties and two states. A mine disaster occurs in one place and the protest spreads within days. Roving pickets appear at the pit head at the start of a shift and everybody goes home. Sheriffs' deputies remain out of sight because they know it would be dangerous to appear.

With oil companies taking over the bulk of the large coal mines, smaller operators are no longer able to sell their coal at prices at which they can make money. Coal is beginning to be a mon-

opoly. The biggies undercut the private structure in order to swallow up the small companies, then jack up prices. The big mines can also mechanize faster because they have capital and the small companies are struggling to stay alive using old equipment. Like other industries, the large companies are looking to the union to discipline the work force, and have not discovered that it's not in Miller's power to perform such miracles.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* report on coalfield wars predicted that the strike would be used to speed licenses for nuclear energy projects. The argument will rest heavily on the "national interest," a phrase heard often in labor negotiations in big industry. One of the intended (or unintended) consequences of the struggle may be a new drive to persuade Americans that a "safe" source of energy must be found to replace coal. Since oil and utility companies are important promoters of nuclear and oil exploration projects, it should surprise nobody that this strike may become the prelude to the attempt to destroy the miners' culture by replacing coal as a key energy resource. It's going to take a long time. There are a lot of coal wars ahead, because neither strip-mining nor other fuels are sufficient to replace bituminous pit mining for years to come. As hungry as the miners may be, no-strike provisions will never be accepted, even if they are paid \$100 a day. ■

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PERSPECTIVES

□ FOR A NEW AMERICA □

Neither cop-out nor cuckoo

By Derek Shearer

I framed my piece on economic democracy (*ITT*, Feb. 8) in a provocative way to stir debate about political strategy for the left. I'm happy that Sidney Lens has responded with his views (*ITT*, Feb. 22).

It is difficult to deal with a complex subject like "What Is To Be Done?" in the space available for Perspective pieces. I'm certain that Sidney knows that Tom Hayden and I share his concerns on the arms race and the national security state. Tom has written books and articles on American foreign policy and risked long jail sentences for his opposition to U.S.

policies in Indochina. I co-authored a book called *The Pentagon Watchers*. I've also written on the economics and politics of converting to a peace-time economy. Other CED members share this outlook. Bill Zimmerman, who was Tom's campaign manager in the Senate race, headed Medical Aid to Indochina, and Fred Branfman, the man behind SolarCal, was director of Project Air War for many years. The Hayden campaign document "Make the Future Ours" called for a drastic reduction in the military budget and outlined a new "humanist" foreign policy for the country.

Given these shared concerns, where

do we differ with Lens?

The answer is not over long range goals, but over political strategy.

Lens says that our economic democracy strategy has "two obvious and glaring defects: first, it addresses itself to lesser problems rather than the central ones; second, it delays and avoids confrontation with the national power structures that are responsible for today's problems."

We believe that the only way to alter American foreign policy and cut the military budget is by winning political power and transforming the institutional arrangements (which are, in large part, economic) that require a militaristic and im-

perialist foreign policy. *Democratizing the economy is central to this task.*

Corporatism is the issue.

As Ralph Nader recently said, "The issue is corporatism." Only by diminishing corporate power and ultimately democratizing it, can we hope to change the U.S. relations with the world.

The point about supporting alternative economic institutions, which I thought I'd made clear in my article, is not that they are the answer—but that they are both models for a democratic economy and training grounds for us. How can we talk seriously about governing if we don't have people with political and technical experience—and where will these people come from if we don't develop them ourselves?

Furthermore, it has been our experience that a majority movement for change cannot be built solely around foreign policy issues and nuclear disarmament. Years of trying by numerous well-meaning peace groups attest to this. Lens is wrong in thinking that it is possible to build "a political constituency by attacking the national security state."

The economic issues have to be dealt with in a positive manner before working people are going to risk their livelihoods supporting such a political movement. Perhaps Lens agrees that a full employment program is a key part of any program for dismantling the military-industrial complex.

Finally, Lens claims that our strategy "delays and avoids confrontations with the national power structures." Of course it does, which is only sensible given the strength of the left at this time. The confrontation politics of the 1960s did help end the war (with a lot of effort on the part of the Vietnamese), but they did not result in cutting the military budget or in seriously changing American foreign policy.

We're trying to formulate and test a more enduring strategy. We may be wrong—but the only way to find out is political practice.

Lens says the "Hayden-Shearer panacea is a cop out." I find this unkind and uncharitable. But more troubling is Lens' failure to offer an alternative strategy. Is he for a leftwing third party? Does he support Michael Harrington and DSOC? Does he agree with Bill Domhoff's proposals for running socialists in the 1980 primaries?

I hope that others who think we Californians are a bit cuckoo will suggest concrete things to do when we get up in the morning.

—Derek Shearer
Santa Monica, Calif.

Another WSP view of SALT

By Edith Villastrigo

Today more than ever we face a spiraling and costly arms race that, unless stopped, may end in nuclear war, as predicted by many eminent scientists.

How do we stop this suicidal trend toward nuclear holocaust? How do we counteract the concerted, well-organized and well-financed campaign of the military/industrial lobby to continue the arms race and bring back the confrontation tactics of the Cold War?

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) can help create both military and political conditions for the avoidance of nuclear war. The SALT process is a major part of a broad effort to decrease international tensions, defuse U.S.-Soviet hostility by building a web of relationships in a wide range of fields—trade, science, medicine, industrial technology, sports and culture—in short, detente.

It is essential that the Senate ratify the SALT II Treaty after it is signed by the U.S. and the Soviet Union for the follow-

ing reasons:

- For the first time since the beginning of the SALT talks in November 1969, there will be a treaty limiting strategic offensive arms. The so-called SALT I agreement was only a five-year executive agreement. This treaty indicates that both the U.S. and the Soviet Union are serious about halting the strategic arms race. Thus the very existence of the SALT II Treaty on offensive arms is a major step in international law, paralleling the ABM Treaty of 1972, which was on strategic defensive arms.

- Also for the first time since SALT began, there is an agreement to limit all strategic offensive weapons. The Interim Agreement of 1972 limited only ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) and SLBMs (Sea-launched Ballistic Missiles). The proposed SALT II Treaty will limit those two strategic weapons plus heavy bombers, MIRVs, and strategic cruise missiles.

- A major provision of the SALT II Treaty is the three-year PROTOCOL,

which limits strategic cruise missiles and heavy missiles and bans the deployment of new strategic weapons systems.

- Failure to ratify the SALT II Treaty could and probably would lead to a major unlimited strategic arms race, the development and production of new "first strike counterforce" weapons (MX mobile missile, Mark-12 warhead, etc.), and add as many as 7,000 new nuclear weapons to US-USSR arsenals by 1985. (From the Center for Defense Information Monitor, July 1977.) This would result in a greater risk of outbreak of nuclear war, intensify pressures for the spread of nuclear weapons and at a minimum cause the expenditures of many tens of billions of dollars more on unnecessary strategic arms.

- Finally, and most important, SALT II will set the stage for SALT III, in which both sides will be committed, again for the first time, to negotiate substantial mutual reductions in strategic arms. ■

Edith Villastrigo is National Legislative Coordinator of Women Strike for Peace.

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