

# LETTERS

## Faith

THANKS FOR JOEL MILLMAN'S "NICARAGUA'S SOCIAL revolution and Christian base communities" (ITT, Feb. 24).

I am a Catholic priest, now in my 70s, who has travelled extensively in Latin America for the past 25 years and has read extensively in fields such as the sociology and religion of Latin America. Millman's article puts into proper perspective what I have been thinking for many years.

Two years ago I travelled to Nicaragua with a Witness to Peace delegation. I thought I was going there to help the poor farmers in a *cooperativo*. What happened was this: they helped me to understand Christianity, to bury hatred, to learn how to love my enemies and to do good to those who may harm me.

The bishop of Jinotega prohibited me from celebrating mass because of his own intransigence and paranoia. The people in the small *comunidad de base* in which I lived for a week accepted me with love. In our prayers together they prayed for their bishop; they prayed for their pesty torturers, the *contras*; they prayed for President Reagan!

I would take Millman's thesis even one step further than he does in his article. I firmly believe that the type of theology and the type of love that inspires the Christianity of the base communities in Latin America will, some day, spread to North America to enliven our Christianity and faith.

Rev. Thomas E. Lacey  
St. Matthias Church  
Redwood City, Calif.

## Tribalism

IT SADDENS ME THAT YOU HAVE BURIED THE PALESTINIAN uprising more deeply than the Israeli soldiers who recently tried and failed. Though you take politically correct stands in your editorials, your hearts are obviously not into any exposure of the Jewish homeland. Otherwise the brutality of the Israeli military in the occupied *bantustans* would somehow intrude into your news coverage and analysis.

I have waited in vain since the "intifadeh" broke out on December 9, 1987, for you to feature, at least once, the story that has been brewing since the occupation began. Clearly tribalism has won out over socialist internationalism, shortsighted self-interest over compassion.

Whose side are you on, I must regretfully ask: that of the victims or that of the executioners? Of the still colonizing West or of the Third World oppressed? Your virtual blackout of the Mideast over the last dozen crucial weeks betrays your fear and prejudice, reiterated by a refusal to support the only credible presidential choice, Jesse Jackson, whom even the Democratic Socialists of America are backing.

Were it not for the dispatches of Diana Johnstone, certainly the finest foreign correspondent writing for the U.S. press today, I should cease subscribing to your tired excuse for an independent socialist alternative.

Shame on you.

Garrett Lambrev  
Oakland, Calif.

## Exemplified

PLEASE CANCEL MY SUBSCRIPTION. I RESENT YOUR anti-Israel position. How can there be the first step to negotiate with a party (PLO) that doesn't even recognize you?

Israel is a tiny country—Jordan is huge, and refused to take the Palestinians in when the state was made.

What about the rock-throwing and fires? The violence from the PLO you don't mention!

I am an old "progressive" who belonged to the American Labor Party in New York. I am ashamed of your paper now.

Name withheld

## Standard liberal reformism

JEFF ALSON (ITT, FEB. 17) THINKS "IT IS APPARENT" that the primary reason why many progressives remain ambivalent toward [Jesse] Jackson's candidacy is the perception that he cannot win. That is definitely not the reason why the Socialist Party USA is not supporting Jackson, and instead is running the only democratic socialist in the campaign—Willa Kenoyer for president and Ron Ehrenreich for vice president.

Maybe Jackson can win. But the point for us is, how do you advance democratic socialism in America? If you think that this can be done without running openly democratic socialist candidates on explicitly socialist platforms, you are deluding yourself. If you think that by running a liberal, even a left-liberal like Jackson, that anything more than liberalism will be advanced, you are kidding yourself. If you think that Jackson is a "social democrat" or that somehow by supporting him that social ownership and workers' control of the economy are going to be popularized rather than standard liberal capitalist reformism, you are fooling yourself. Moreover, you are failing to do anything concretely to advance democratic socialism, but rather are fostering reform capitalism.

Maybe all that you want to do is advance liberalism and reform capitalism. That's fine, but don't go confusing that with the serious and difficult work of building a democratic socialist movement, which, among other things, means running candidates who are going to actually talk about instead of attack socialism. Rev. Jackson and Operation PUSH have never been about socialism, but rather about black capitalism and liberal reformism.

Donald F. Busky  
Philadelphia

## Totality

IN A RESPONSE TO LETTERS (FEB. 17), IN THESE TIMES asserted that the United States is a "democracy" and that "anyone" who thinks otherwise is "living in a dream world—or has a definition of democracy so abstract and absolute as to be meaningless." ITT

also asserted that its "standard of democracy means little or nothing to most Nicaraguans." Readers were thus left to guess whether ITT respects Nicaraguan democracy as Nicaraguans understand it or whether ITT rejects Nicaraguan "democracy" as falling short of the American "standard."

Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile ITT's simultaneous assertions that the United States is a "democracy" but that its citizens are "ruled by a corporate oligarchy." If this were "democracy," the masses would clamor for less democracy and elites for more democracy.

Apparently ITT cannot distinguish a democracy from other political systems. ITT says that "under our constitutional system the population must be persuaded" and that to be re-elected politicians "cannot totally ignore public opinion." But no regime, with or without a constitution, can govern without "persuading" a significant segment of the "population." Not Somoza's, not Ortega's, not Reagan's, not Gorbachov's. Nor can any regime "totally ignore public opinion" if it is to survive. Not Somoza's, not Ortega's, not Reagan's, not Gorbachov's.

The avowed purpose of ITT's defense of the "formally democratic" American regime is to keep the left "in tune" with the "American people" so the left can "contest for power." Fortunately, the democratic left can struggle for power without accepting a definition of "democracy" that includes rule by a "corporate oligarchy." In fact, it is just such an overly inclusive definition of democracy that the left must contest.

Eric Schnauffer  
Ann Arbor, MI

**Editor's note:** There's nothing to guess. It's not our job to sit in judgment of Nicaragua's form of government. Nicaragua's standard of democracy is Nicaragua's business, not the United States'. True, no regime can survive indefinitely without the acquiescence of the majority of the population. In a democracy, however, the people have a recognized right to free speech, a free press and participation in the electoral process on a formally equal basis. We can overthrow our government without resorting to revolution.

## Relevant but unknown

WHO HASN'T PICKED UP A BOOK HE/SHE couldn't understand? Not I. As it happens, Marxist scholars are far less guilty of using an impenetrable jargon than their non-Marxist colleagues. For such a learned Marxist scholar as James Weinstein to think otherwise (review of Russell Jacoby's *The*

*Last Intellectuals*, ITT, Feb. 17) shows how little is known about the great number of high quality, politically relevant and generally well-written Marxist works that are being produced throughout the academy. Don't take my word for it.

Take a look at *The Left Academy: Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses*, vols. I, II and III, edited by Ed Vernoff and myself, which surveys the research of Marxist scholars in 23 different disciplines. The most striking conclusion that emerged from our efforts is just how much good Marxist scholarship there is (yes, in the very sense that Weinstein means it).

The second most striking conclusion was just how little of it is known, even among people who have contributed to it. Forging the weapons of criticism is a necessary and ongoing task in the class struggle, both inside the universities and out. But succeeding at what we still have to do requires that we have a better understanding of what has already been done.

Bertell Ollman  
Dept. of Politics  
New York University

## By the book

YES, WE HAVE A FORM OF DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S. Americans established a bourgeois republic 200 years ago.

But let's ask the real questions. Democracy for whom? Freedom of assembly? Who owns the meeting hall?

Class-divided society is a power vacuum. To abolish capitalist rule, the working class must seize power or lose it. To speak of democracy out of this context is to equate it with the status quo. Socialist democracy is a new type—workers' democracy.

Tim Mills  
Belvidere, IL

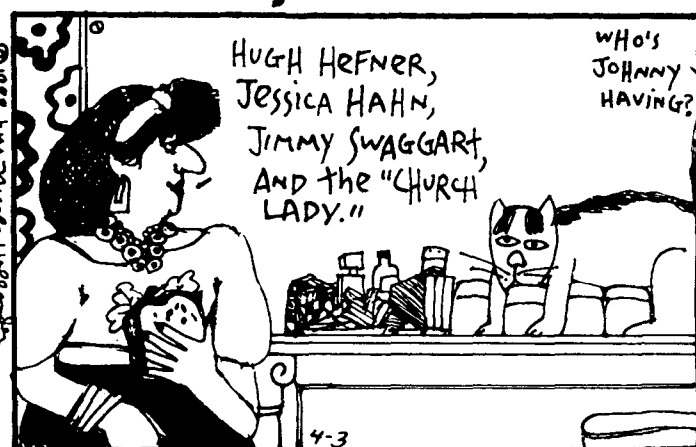
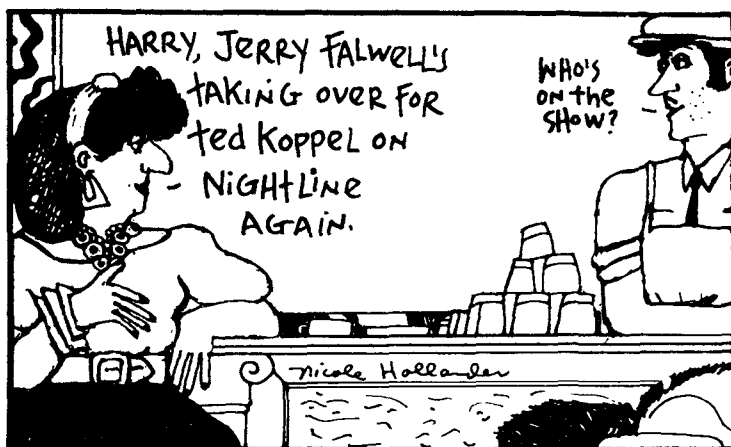
## Unskilled teachers?

SINCE WHEN IS IT A BAD THING TO PAY PROFESSORS less than skilled workers? If Polish academics are so unhappy with this state of affairs, (ITT, Jan. 20) why don't they leave the universities and find work in the shipyards?

Ken Lawrence  
Jackson, Miss.

**Editor's note:** Please try to keep letters under 250 words in length. Otherwise we may have to make drastic cuts, which may change what you want to say. Also, if possible, please type and double-space letters—or at least write clearly and with wide margins.

## SYLVIA





By Bud Kenworthy

**T**HE DEFEAT OF THE PRESIDENT'S CONTRA aid bill in the House on the heels of the successful Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) negotiations between the superpowers provides a moment of satisfaction for those who labored hard and long in these vineyards. While savoring this moment, left organizers might step back from the fray and think about the underlying issues that shape progressive work in the United States. One such issue is unity. With the exception of transitory—and even then tense—collaboration during national demonstrations, the “peace” and “solidarity” movements pretty much have gone their separate ways. There seems little point in closer collaboration for the sake of abstract “unity.” Are there other reasons?

In a recent issue of *Nuclear Times*, Robert Schaeffer interviewed peace activists about the Central American campaign. Most saw the two issues as “distinct” or “tangential” and more than a few expressed concern that Central America might rob their cause of scarce resources. Organizations open to working on both fronts usually do so as a hedge. Schaeffer quotes an American Friends Service Committee activist, for instance, as saying “you don’t put all your organizational eggs in one basket.” Schaeffer’s own metaphor, summarized in his call for a diversified “movement portfolio,” echoes this theme.

This is not to say that those working on one front do not wish those working on another well, or that we are short on theoreticians capable of tracing connections between the two. To the Institute for Policy Studies’ Michael Klare, for one, “deadly connections” link Central America to the danger of nuclear war between the superpowers. Viewing Central America as a test case for Washington’s post-Vietnam interventions, Klare argues that if the Reagan administration “succeeds” there, this or future administrations would be tempted to repeat that “success” elsewhere, including the very region that brought the world to a nuclear alert during the Nixon administration. (Unbeknown to most Americans, during the 1973 Mideast crisis Soviet airborne troops were sent aloft while U.S.’s Strategic Air Command went on full alert.) World War I is, of course, the classic example of peripheral countries triggering a deadly confrontation among major powers.

**Commonality:** Are there, however, connections that don’t require the two movements agreeing on a theoretical map of the world situation? For if experience tells us anything, it is that theorizing divides left coalitions more often than it unites them. Are there commonalities that emerge from the experience of those who grapple with the realities of American power? I think so, and I think that this is an opportune moment for taking a close look at one of them: anti-communism.

Anyone who follows administration rhetoric, congressional debates, and public opinion polls realizes that anti-communism is the lodestone of both elite and public attitudes toward all foreign affairs. I would argue that anti-communism is the sea in which all progressive movements swim—against the current. It hobbles the left’s work and confines our victories to tactical, rear-guard operations that must be re-



## The anti-communist scourge

peated over and over again to keep the demons at bay. Whether the demons be imperialism or nuclearism matters little when anti-communism keeps all demons healthy.

By anti-communism I mean the scarcely articulate, deeply visceral predilection that turns up in public opinion polls. During a 1987 Gallup poll, a representative sample of American adults was asked to respond to 16 political identities, using a scale on which 1 stood for no identification while 10 meant complete identification. To “anti-communist” 70 percent responded at the 8 or higher level. At that level all other identifications received less than 50 percent response. That is, there is no majority that feels as intensely about any other identity. (A majority of those polled believe that “communist countries” are responsible for unrest in the U.S. as well as in the world at large.) Broadening identity to the 6 to 10 level—now including some identification as well as strong identification—we discover a public in which 78 percent are anti-communist while 65 percent support peace. In short, they are the same people, which is not surprising, given that from time immemorial Americans have been told that anti-communism serves peace.

In this country more than products are sold by advertising. We may have grown inured to the “selling” of candidates—now a \$100 million business employing 50,000 professionals—but little attention is paid to the selling of policies, including foreign policies, by those candidates once in office. Anti-communism continues to be a hot seller; it is reinforced daily. Elite manipulation of public fears, when combined with the public’s addiction to panaceas, holds all progressive movements in thrall. Anti-communism is the controlled climate in which all activists work, adjusting their goals downward as a result. It is the palpable issue we have in common.

**Debilitating discourse:** Consider for a moment how this pervasive anti-communism makes it difficult to achieve peace in Central America, in U.S.-Soviet relations—anywhere. Where you start is immaterial, for all paths lead to the same conclusion: the need to replace the manipulative, emotional public discourse that links “Marxist” and “revolutionary” to “Soviet” and all three to “threat” with a discourse in which all such links must be proven, not

assumed. Let’s begin with Central America, where one of Reagan’s principal charges against the Sandinistas continues to be their role in facilitating a “communist” takeover of all Central America, threatening “our own southern border.”

Quoting from the president: “a faraway totalitarian power has committed enormous resources to change the strategic balance of the world by turning Central America into a string of anti-American, Soviet-styled dictatorships.” “Nicaragua is literally already a satellite of the communist bloc.” We are all familiar with this rhetoric by now. What is notable is how it survives the Reagan-Gorbachov summit in which the Soviet leader told the U.S. president what U.S. intelligence has known for some time: that the Soviet commitment to the Sandinistas is both limited and declining.

**Ideological cover:** The president repeatedly plays upon the U.S. public’s naive association of revolutionary Marxism in the Third World with Soviet “expansionism.” As the administration carried out a disinformation campaign to link Islamic terrorism to the Soviet Union, so it mounted an equally deliberate attempt to replace “leftist guerrilla” in the public lexicon for Central America with “terrorist.” Soviet, Libyan, Iranian and Nicaraguan: in Reagan rhetoric all these identities fuse into a single, global threat. From the Reagan primetime television speech preceding Congress’ caving in on the contra issue in 1986: “The Soviets have made their decision—to support the [Nicaraguan] communists. Fidel Castro has made his decision—to support the communists. Khadafy, Arafat and the Ayatollah Khomeini have made their decision—to support the communists. Now, we must make our decision. Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya, right on the doorstep of the United States?”

Tarring the Sandinistas with the Soviet brush is, of course, a repeat of what the Nixon administration did to Salvador Allende in Chile—or should I say did to the American public. It worked then and it works now. Almost no Democrats in Congress, including such pro-peace liberals as Rep. David Obey (D-WI) and Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), seem willing to challenge the framing assumption that, in “our” hemisphere, Marxism simply has no place.

How have most activists dealt with this?

In opposing contra aid, activists largely have conceded the Marxism issue. In the early years many even tried to conceal the Sandinistas’ Marxism. Today they rally public opposition to contra aid by mining the other deep vein in the American political subconscious: isolationism. Nationwide organizations such as Countdown ’87, Neighbor to Neighbor and Citizens Action portray Central America as “another Vietnam,” a “quagmire” in which U.S. lives and dollars will be lost with nothing to show for it. Better the money be spent at home. To defeat contra aid, such campaigns stoke the public’s “strong aversion to the region that goes from misinformation to racism.” That’s the conclusion of liberal pollster Stanley Greenberg as interviewed by *In These Times* (Sept. 2).

The messages to activists on Central America, then, is clear: either confront the anti-communism issue—which is the Soviet threat issue, which is a peace movement issue—or run the risk implicit in relying on isolationism. Isolationism is about costs, not about goals. It provides no inoculation against Grenada-type operations carried out by U.S. forces or against situation where U.S. surrogates prove more effective than the contras have been (for example, the Guatemalan army). It provides no footing from which to mount an attack on Washington’s economic embargo of Nicaragua. Revolutionary Marxism in the Third World has to be detached in the public’s understanding from Soviet satellite or else the Allendes and the Sandinistas will be saved from one kind of U.S. intervention only to face another.

To those focused on U.S.-Soviet relations and the threat of nuclear war, I would point out that “Central America” (in quotes to signify the administration’s advertisement, not the reality) is what keeps the public’s sense of being threatened by the Soviets alive at a time when Gorbachov’s initiatives and Reagan’s desire for an arms treaty might otherwise undermine that sense of threat. While Reagan says it’s all right to trust the Kremlin on INF, notice how he continues to feed the spectre of an “evil empire” by not changing his rhetoric on Soviet “imperialism” in the Third World. Thus the deep well of the public’s anti-communism is kept full—ready for the day when this or another president wants to fan anti-Soviet animosity to jack up the arms race.

It is not just the perception that the Soviets have dangerous weapons aimed at us but the perception that “they” are everywhere, including in “our own backyard,” that keeps the public voting for representatives who in turn vote for escalations of the arms race. Our common goal—a peace that permits social and economic justice—requires a common effort to defuse the visceral, indiscriminate anti-communism rampant in the American public. Helping the public see the distinctions that exist in the real world won’t be easy inasmuch as Americans have no memory of Marxism playing a constructive role in their own history. But playing isolationism off anti-communism is a risky substitute. Victories on immediate issues will prove ephemeral unless and until we make a dent in this meta-issue.

**Bud Kenworthy** frequently writes on U.S. policy toward Latin America.