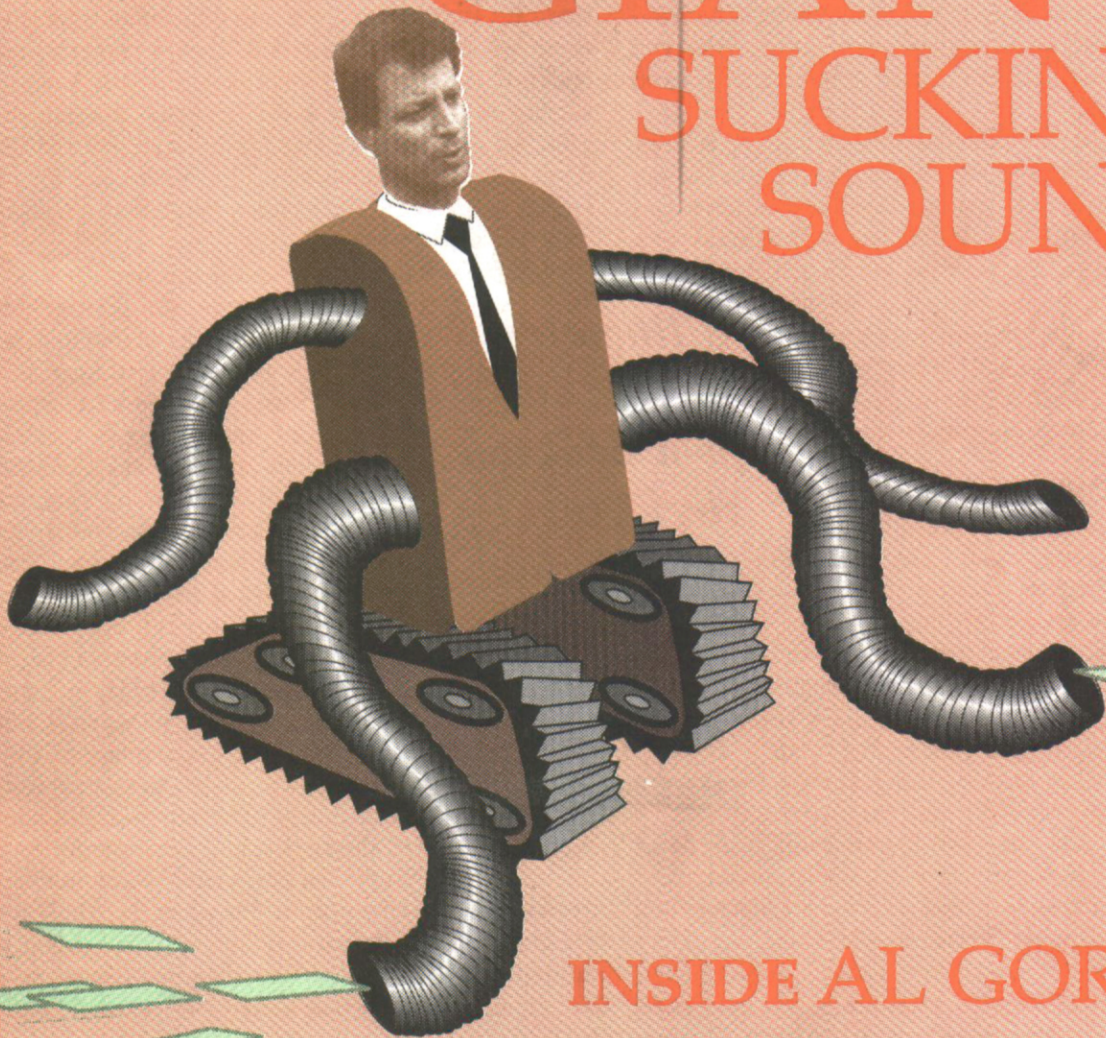


WHO WILL RUN THE CIA?

April 28-May 11, 1997

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# E D I T O R I A L

## CHALLENGING CORPORATE POWER

**W**hat do the Arizona doctors who in 1995 sold their shares in an HMO to a California corporation for \$3.2 million each have in common with clerks at a Borders Books and Music store in Chicago who make \$6.50 an hour?

They have both recently voted to join unions. The doctors, who work at the Thomas-Davis Medical Centers in Tucson, voted 93-32 in January to join the Federation of Physicians and Dentists, an AFSCME affiliate (see "White coats with blue collars," by Annette Fuentes, March 3). Specialists at Tucson's oldest and most prestigious medical clinic, they are the first group of physicians at a for-profit HMO to unionize. They have not banded together to get higher wages—they're all millionaires—but because they want to be good doctors.

They complain that their HMO's new, profit-driven corporate owner, Foundation Health Plans, has imposed rules that lower standards of treatment and require a suffocating increase in paperwork. One doctor says that the company told him to increase his patient load from 1,800 to 2,200, which means that patients must wait longer for appointments or must be sent to the clinic's urgent-care center in an emergency. Time is wasted filling out the paperwork required for everything from referrals to prescribing medication. Complicated procedures now require corporate approval, which wastes more time.

These specialists are not unique. Everywhere, doctors find their authority to make decisions shrinking. As Barry Liebowitz, president of the Doctors Council in New York, told the *New York Times*: "Doctors are having gag orders and drive-through mastectomies imposed on them. They are finding themselves in an economic morass, where professional control translates into economic control." As a result, Liebowitz says, interest in unionization has "increased exponentially in the last six months."

At Borders, of course, the clerks are not millionaires. They barely get by on \$6.50 an hour, and their union election, which they won by a vote of 28-17, was in large part over wages. But Borders is to bookselling as corporate HMOs are

to medical care. The Chicago workers are the first to organize a union in a national bookstore chain (though since their October victory, workers at two Borders stores in other states have also voted for unionization).

Clerks in small, independent bookstores don't earn high wages, but the job is attractive in other respects. Workers are often immersed in the literature they are selling. They use this knowledge to participate in decisions about what books the store should carry and to recommend to customers what books to read. Such stores carry books of special quality or authority, even if they sell slowly.

In the new superstores that are driving independent bookstores out of business, things are different. Clerks have little or no voice and less discretion when it comes to ordering books. Knowledge and love of literature may be as much a liability as an asset. The lowest common denominator prevails. All that matters is the bottom line. For the clerks at Borders, having a union means having a voice for the first time. It means becoming a citizen rather than a cipher in the corporate world.

*Millionaire  
doctors and  
poor bookstore  
clerks see  
unionization  
as the best  
way to defend  
their interests.*

Though far apart on the social scale—in their levels of education, income and prestige—doctors and bookstore clerks share the experience of recently becoming victims of the inexorable invasion of corporate capital into every nook and cranny of modern life. And, as has been true since industrialization began, those whose lives are most disrupted are also the most likely to attempt to protect themselves by forming unions.

We now live in a society where virtually everything is corrupted by the values imposed by corporate bottom lines. Half a century ago, in the heyday of unionism, corporate treatment of workers was partially humanized in the face of the organized power of working people. Then, too, during the early years of the Cold

War, the perceived threat of a global alternative to corporate capitalism also pushed our rulers toward more humane treatment of working people. But when the AFL-CIO leadership became a partisan in the Cold War, joining wholeheartedly in the defense of international capital, it helped undermine working people's interests worldwide. And when Soviet Communism collapsed as a result of its own internal corruption, so too did the idea of a viable alternative to corporate power.

Now the union movement appears to understand the need to challenge corporate power at home and abroad. It is beginning to revitalize, both on the organizing and political fronts. Politically, however, we still see no vision of a good society, and no true alternative to free-market ideology. To develop and propagate such a vision is the task of the left. ◀