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Building an alternative vision for the future

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The last major public demonstration in the United States in the 20th century, the massive demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, and the new century's first major protest, in Washington, D.C. against the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank this April, illustrate both the possibilities and problems inherent in building a progressive alternative to globalization.

On the positive side, these major demonstrations brought together a spectrum of groups and interests, including many of whom until very recently had little to do with each other. Much has been written about the "new alliance" between representatives of the labor movement and environmentalists, which appeared to come together in Seattle. Both demonstrations have been criticized in many quarters as being overwhelmingly white, and disconnected from the struggles of people of color, especially here in the U.S. Although this criticism is largely justified, as scholar/activist Elizabeth Martinez has observed, in Independent Politics News, black, Latino, Asian and American Indian progressives prominently participated. At

Seattle, for example, there were African American trade unionists from SEIU, ILWU, and the Teamsters; Latino farm workers; the Indigenous Environmental Network, an international coalition of Native Americans; Bay Area formations of color such as the hip-hop Company of Prophets and STORM (Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement); and student activist groups such as MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan).

The key organizers of both mobilizations attempted to make the connections between the actions of the IMF, World Bank and WTO, with the expanding global exploitation of Third World nations' economies and environments. The April 9 demonstration on the Washington Mall was specifically focused on the demand to cancel the debts of Third World countries. Yet this effort, however laudable, did not successfully reach the masses of working class, poor and unemployed African Americans and Latinos who live in the District of Columbia. There were perhaps more African Americans among the police and security forces at the Washington, D.C., demonstration than among the protesters.

Not a few white progressives have explained the relatively small numbers of black, Latino and Asian working class and poor people by the assertion that they are "uninformed" or "unaware" of how the globalized economy impacts their neighborhoods. The

immediate and obvious response from the people of color is that this "argument" is condescending and borderline racist. In Seattle, for example, in the local media blitz leading up to the WTO demonstrations there were "only white faces in the news," according to Roberto Maestas, director of Seattle's Centro de la Raza. "The publicity was a real deterrent to people of color."

Another difficulty that progressives must urgently address is how a shared vision of radical democratic social change can be constructed between the various constituencies and divergent interests who came to Seattle and Washington, D.C. Ironically, this problem was most clearly framed by author David Frum, a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, in a recent New York Times editorial. Frum argued that throughout most of the twentieth century, "the left had something positive to offer: a coherent and compelling vision of an alternative society." Then, with the collapse of Communism and the crisis of self-doubt among socialists, the ideal of socialism as a realistic alternative to corporate capitalism was discredited. "And the death of socialism," Frum gloats enthusiastically, "has simply cut the intellectual guts out of the kind of radicalism espoused by the people who tried to shut the World Bank down." Thus the protesters are motivated only by their "hatred" of "big corporations," "technology," "electoral

politics" and even "Gap khakis." The highly publicized and celebrated "demise of socialism" is, to paraphrase Mark Twain, highly exaggerated. But progressives should take Frum's point seriously. A social vision has to have the capacity to win the hearts and minds of millions of people, for them finally to take collective actions to achieve their objective interests.

Building a successful political alternative to globalized capitalism will take even more than that. It will mean the construction of a new political language and methods of organization to reach constituencies fragmented by gender, class, race, nationality and language. It will demand that well-meaning white liberals and environmentalists will have to learn from and acknowledge central roles of leadership to black people and other people of color. It requires building close cooperation with black churches and other faith-based institutions, women's organizations and low-income groups, as well as with trade unionists and youth of color.

Radicals sometimes think that as conditions worsen, oppressed people will become desperate, and will begin to demand basic change. This viewpoint is completely wrong. History shows that the capacity for resistance is always enhanced by the winning of small victories.

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Working women's agenda

By Bill Lucy
NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

Over the years, I have witnessed the development of many economic and social trends in the United States. One current trend: the range of issues women identify as priorities is driving the campaign agenda of the 2000 elections.

This development is a direct result of women's increased employment outside the home in recent decades: they now comprise roughly half of the American workforce, and that phenomenon is reflected in the new political agenda.

What makes this exciting for unions and other groups that represent working families and what should come as no surprise to anyone who ever listens to women, is that the issues women identify as priorities strongly benefit working families.

It's simple: the women's agenda is a working families' agenda, and that makes it a union agenda.

But it has not always been this way. When unions were emerging as powerful entities earlier this century, our issues stopped at the workplace door. We concentrated on the number of hours worked, wages received and safety conditions.

And through our dedicated focus, we were able to achieve such victories as a 40-hour workweek, the first federal minimum wage and the establishment of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). While still addressing these core workplace issues, unions have realized the concerns of working families do not stop at the factory door. For that, we have our union sisters to thank.

Women have always identified a broad range of issues as vital to themselves and their families — from access to health care and quality education to retirement programs. If unions are to meet the needs of our women members, we must address these issues in a comprehensive framework, rather than as isolated areas of interest.

In talking to working women, it always strikes me that they see issues in a very interconnected manner. I also find that working women generally relate their political positions to real-life experiences, and this in turn strengthens their commitment.

After all, if you're not getting fair pay, how can you afford the quality childcare that allows you peace of mind at work?

And what about women who are caught in the so-called "sandwich generation" — caring for an aging parent while they still have a school-aged child at home? You better believe they have strong views on Social Security/Medicare, education and flexible time at work to accommodate family demands.

It is this broad spectrum of issues that will decide this year's presidential election. There are clear differences in the candidates' positions and records. Here are two:

- Education — Vice President Al Gore, a Democrat, supports investing \$115 billion to decrease class size, hire new teachers and make preschool available to all. Republican George W. Bush has ridiculed plans to hire new teachers while under his tenure as governor, Texas ranks 47th in reading skills.

- Health care — Gore fought for a "Patient's Bill of Rights" with an OB/GYN primary-physician option and the right to sue HMOs. Bush merely supported a weak Patient's Bill of Rights without an OB/GYN primary physician option and without the right to sue HMOs.

The changing profile of women in the workforce is also illuminating new frontiers for activism. In 1997, for example, 12.8 million families were headed by women, up from 5.6 million in 1970. Clearly, we must work to expand the Family and Medical Leave Act to include paid leave.

Women currently comprise 55 percent of workers paid by temporary agencies and 77 percent of part-time workers. We therefore need to extend health benefits to part-time and contingent workers.

Even as women point the way to where we need to go, it is the activism of working women, particularly union women, that will help get us there. So I can declare wholeheartedly: if it's a working women's issue, it's a winning political issue too.

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Racial profiling bill the cops could love

EARL OFARI
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It was a bizarre scene recently in front of the California's State Capitol building in Sacramento. Hundreds of student, black and Latino community activists, and police reform advocates were holding a spirited rally to support a bill by Kevin Murray, a Black Democrat state senator from Los Angeles, to compel the state to compile figures on the race, age and gender of motorists stopped by the California Highway Patrol.

The CHP makes more traffic stops than any other police agency in the nation.

The bill also would've required the CHP to tell why motorists were stopped, and whether a search and arrest was made as a result of the stop.

But midway through the rally, the mood of the crowd changed from exuberance to shock and then anger. Their fury was not directed at Gov. Gray Davis, who vetoed an identical bill Murray introduced last fall, but at Murray himself. The crowd turned on him when they got word that he had gutted the bill of the data collection provision to get Davis's signature. The amended bill required

only that police hand a business card to drivers and undergo more diversity training.

The toothless bill was immediately hailed by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's office and LAPD Chief Bernard Parks. They have waged a personal crusade to torpedo legislation requiring their departments to keep racial stats on traffic stops.

But if Murray's original bill requiring data collection had become law it would've been a big step toward proving or disproving whether police departments use racial profiles to harass and intimidate blacks and Latinos on the highways. Since laws passed in California are closely watched and frequently emulated by officials in other states, Murray's bill might have spurred reluctant and timid officials in those states to pass a similar law.

This would have been a crucial breakthrough for another reason. Many blacks and Latinos have long screamed that police target them for shakedowns on the highways and streets. According to a Justice Department study, blacks comprise about 14 percent of the population, yet account for more than 70 percent of all routine traffic stops.

Murray himself took up the fight against racial profiling because of a scrape he had with police. On election night in June 1998, he and his wife were

returning home from his campaign headquarters when they were pulled over by a police officer in Beverly Hills. Murray was not speeding, or driving unsafely.

He immediately identified himself to the officer as a state official and explained where he was coming from and going. This meant nothing to the officer who ran a complete check on him.

Murray's title, position, and prestige as an incumbent state senator counted for nothing. He publicly protested that he was a victim of "driving while black and brown," filed a lawsuit against the police, and introduced his bill.

Beverly Hills police officials responded to Murray's complaint the same way most police agencies do to thousands of others who say they are victims of racial profiling. They say that it's illegal and they don't do it. But that's easy for them to say since other than anecdotal horror tales by black and Latino motorists of police mistreatment on the highways, there is no real smoking-gun proof that the practice exists. To get that kind of proof requires state law enforcement agencies to keep hard numbers on the race of all motorists they stop on the roads.

A few police departments and at last count two states, North Carolina and Connecticut, have passed legislation requiring police agencies to keep racial

stats on traffic stops. A dozen or so other states have proposed similar bills but they have either died in committee or been voted down.

A bill by U.S. Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), called the Traffic Stops Statistics Study Act, requires law enforcement agencies to compile figures by race on highway traffic stops. The bill has languished in Congress for the past several years. Police unions, police benevolent associations, and correctional groups adamantly oppose these bills. They don't want to be told they must identify by race those they stop and why they stopped them. They have the money and the political muscle to get their way. Davis is a good case in point.

The Peace Officers Research Association of California, which represents more than 600 police unions statewide, openly condemned Murray's original bill. The group dumped nearly a quarter-million dollars into Davis's campaign in 1998. Their money was well spent. The backroom deal making between Murray and Davis handed police officials everywhere a near-fool-proof public relations tool to duck and dodge the volatile issue of racial profiling.

EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON is author of "The Disappearance of Black Leadership."