

# Defend KPFA!

On July 31, 1999, fifteen thousand people took to the streets, marching in support of the progressive public radio station KPFA. The huge, spirited march that wound its way through the streets of Berkeley was a vibrant, broad united front encompassing the full spectrum of the progressive community throughout Northern California. The march, and the street demonstrations and rallies which preceded it and continued afterwards, succeeded in repelling the attempt of KPFA's governing body, the Pacifica Foundation, to shut down the station.

Why has there been such a mass outpouring of support for KPFA since it has come under siege? KPFA is not tied to a single issue or organization. It has been a central component of all aspects of the progressive movement in Northern California for 50 years. KPFA stood up to McCarthyism and gave voice to opponents of the war in Korea. It was in the thick of the Movement in the sixties, when many of us listened to its live coverage of the struggle in the streets for civil rights, against racism and against the Vietnam war. The prophetic voices of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X have been broadcast for decades, with frequent replay of their historic speeches on 94.1 FM.

But KPFA did not become frozen in the past. It continued its front-line work in the ensuing decades, documenting and supporting the mass actions of the anti-nuclear movement (remember the Livermore Action Group?), the struggles

for gay and lesbian rights, the environmental movement, the Central America movement and the anti-apartheid movement. When the rest of the media fell into line and parroted the White House and Pentagon during the Gulf War, KPFA continued its historic anti-war role, and helped to get Vietnam-era-size demonstrations into the streets. Mumia Abu-Jamal's voice, censored on National Public Radio (NPR), can be heard regularly on KPFA. Likewise, one of the leading progressive intellectuals, Noam Chomsky, who is shut out of NPR in spite of his international reputation as a leading American dissident, frequently airs his penetrating analysis on KPFA.

Other forms of organizing not always in the public spotlight, specifically international and labor struggles, also get a serious hearing on this station. You heard about East Timor there first with Amy Goodman and Allan Nairn's heroic reporting; the anti-apartheid movement had its most consistent on-air support at KPFA; the voices of Arab-Americans, of the Palestinian people, and of the Jewish and Israeli peace movements, which could be heard nowhere else, were always given extensive KPFA airtime. On-the-scene coverage from places such as Iraq, Chiapas, and Guatemala, continues to keep international solidarity in the forefront of the public's consciousness. The incipient rebirth of the labor movement, including the United Farm Workers union, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, the struggles of

the mostly immigrant Janitors for Justice—all these are usually invisible in the mainstream media, but all get their time on KPFA.

### **A PIONEER RADIO STATION**

But KPFA's importance does not lie solely in its relationship to the Left and the people's movements. Throughout its history, it has been a cultural center where new talent is discovered and where established, but non-commercial, talent is honored. The music of the entire world, old and new, can be heard on the station. Poets and writers not recognized by the mostly-white, mostly-male mainstream culture are featured regularly on KPFA.

All manner of artists talk about their work on KPFA. Zen philosopher Alan Watts had a 20-year run on the station. June Jordan, Allen Ginsberg, Audre Lorde, Diane di Prima, Lenny Bruce, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Pauline Kael, Bobby McFerrin, Whoopi Goldberg, Alice Walker, Ishmael Reed...there are too many names to cite, but no one can deny the crucial role the station has played and continues to play on the national cultural landscape.

This combination of political and cultural significance is enough to explain the huge and passionate outpouring of support for the station, including the support that Vanguard has rendered.

But of equal significance, KPFA is also a trailblazing institution in the world of non-commercial radio. It is the world's first listener-sponsored station. It is a pioneer community-

based station airing a combination of professional and volunteer programmers. And for a number of years, it has contributed to Pacifica's live coverage of important hearings in Washington, starting with the Iran-Contra affair. The host of much of this coverage has been Larry Bensky, one of the great broadcast journalists of our time, a veteran KPFA staffer and one-time station manager. The depth and quality of his work have earned him professional awards, as well as tremendous listener loyalty.

### **PACIFICA ATTACKS KPFA**

For many listeners, the first sign that something was amiss was Larry Bensky's firing, one day into his stint as the host of the Clinton impeachment hearings last fall. No reason was given for his dismissal, but many listeners suspect that Bensky's unequivocal opposition to Clinton's murderous bombing raids against Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan was difficult for Dr. Mary Frances Berry, Pacifica Foundation Board Chair, to accept, given her close relationship with the Clinton White House.

Because of massive listener support, Bensky was rehired—for a while.

In February, the Pacifica Board announced a change in its bylaws that removed any semblance of local input into the composition and policies of the national Board. Perhaps because of her opposition to these changes, Nicole Sawaya, the station manager at KPFA, was summarily fired. Sawaya was popular among staff and volunteers at the station, and

also among the listeners. She enjoyed such strong support because not only was she a talented manager, she was a true leader. She was able to listen to all the relevant constituencies, and she was unhesitatingly principled in providing a direction for the station. To the staff and volunteers, this meant a new, healthy, participatory management style. To the listeners, it meant that the sound of the station started improving dramatically. To all, it meant the most successful fundraising in the station's history which meant that continued improvement became possible. Moreover, many believe that Sawaya played a key role in starting to move the station in a more inclusive direction, with an emphasis on hiring and promoting people of color. She also had no patience for amateurism in the name of progressive politics, and strove to bring the highest level of media professionalism to KPFA.

Alas, Sawaya's promising stint at KPFA was to end abruptly after only 15 months. Her dismissal by Pacifica precipitated the most serious crisis in KPFA history. Almost all programmers protested her firing on the air, including Larry Bensky and volunteer music programmer Robbie Osman. Pacifica then fired both Osman and Bensky. At that time, Bensky correctly predicted that thousands of listeners would rise up in struggle and that he would be back on the air.

### **HOW DARE THEY?**

The ensuing battle is well-known: Pacifica hired private cops to enforce their reign, as well as a high-priced corporate PR firm, best known for its union-busting efforts against the UFW's strawberry workers' campaign in the Salinas Valley. The Pacifica Board of Directors ultimately crossed the line—they shut down the station, locked everyone out, and called in the police to arrest over 100 KPFA supporters. The result was the mass struggle described above, which has led to the current stalemate: the station is back on the air, but it is crippled by budget cuts as well as the firings. The worst news of all is that KPFA still faces the biggest threat imaginable: the Pacifica Board has been seriously considering selling the station!

This truly shocking development only underscores the political and moral bankruptcy of those on the Pacifica Board who would even consider the possibility of selling a public institution to a private corporate entity. After the Republican attack on Pacifica in the mid-nineties was stopped in its tracks, the flagship station of the Pacifica radio network is now under attack from its own Board, under liberal Democratic leadership! As the worldwide privatization wave launched by Ronald Reagan expands ever wider, it is now threatening to reach one of the few progressive public media institutions. A non-profit institution such

as Pacifica does not belong to the Board, and the radio stations are not theirs to sell. They are the common property of the people—the Board is merely charged with directing them on our behalf. The Pacifica Board has restructured its bylaws so that it is not accountable to the listener constituencies of the stations, and it is conducting itself as if it were a private corporate entity.

There is much to learn from this struggle about the importance of democracy in progressive institutions. The dictatorial authoritarianism of the Pacifica Board is a travesty of leadership. Effective, responsible leadership must be based on full, open debate. We hope that this lesson is being taken to heart by all the organizations and individuals who have supported KPFA in this crisis.

### **WHAT NEXT?**

KPFA is not now, has never been, and will never be perfect, however one may define such a state. As long as the station has existed, you could always hear someone complaining about its shortcomings, the limitations of this or that programmer, the cancellation of this or that show, and so on. This is a sign of healthy democratic debate about a community institution. At this time of crisis, people in and around the station (including Vanguard) have correctly closed ranks in defense of this precious community institution. The claim advanced by some that the fault for the current crisis is shared equally by both sides of the dispute does not hold water.

However, we cannot be complacent: past successes do not guarantee future victories. I would like to raise three points:

- ▶ KPFA is not provincial. Throughout its history, it has engaged with the heart of the progressive movement and with the artistic community. It has played a role much greater than the size of its listenership would indicate. Nevertheless, there is no reason to consider a small listenership something to be proud of. This kind of small-and-marginal-equals-pure-and-virtuous mentality is not in the best interest of either the station, or the Left. Expanding the listener base requires a combination of the highest standards of professionalism and attention to the needs and concerns of the broader community. It is particularly important to reach out to young people, and to communities of color.
- ▶ KPFA is not anyone's private property. It is not privately owned by the Pacifica Board, nor is it the private domain of the longtime members of its staff, as dedicated as they

are. In the current crisis, many people have resigned from the station, almost all of them people of color. This is a sobering development, which highlights the problem of institutional racism in progressive institutions, a problem which unfortunately is not limited to KPFA. In this area, the station needs to be genuinely transformed, with a serious effort to recruit and promote people of color, who must become integral not only to the station's programming but to its formal and informal power structure.

- ▶ KPFA is one of the country's leading progressive media institutions, with the ability to raise over a million dollars a year. It has a major responsibility to support the production and dissemination of *national* Pacifica programming so that the voice of the Left is heard throughout the country. One of the most prominent and powerful examples of the national programming of Pacifica is the renowned *Democracy NOW!* show, anchored by Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez.

While I feel strongly about these three points, I do not mean to belittle, nor can we forget, the initial demands of the KPFA struggle:

- ▶ Nicole Sawaya and Larry Bensky must be rehired now! Their presence remains as important as ever to the forward motion of the station and the Pacifica network.
- ▶ The democratization of the Pacifica Board and the attendant accountability to the listener constituencies are absolutely essential.
- ▶ Any attempt to sell the station must be repudiated once and for all. The Pacifica Board should sign an ironclad statement to this effect and release it to the public immediately.

KPFA has been an invaluable part of the political and cultural life of the greater Bay Area for decades. We have the highest hope that 94.1 FM will continue to be a voice serving the people's struggles for decades to come.

*Vanguard's statement in support of KPFA was written by Henri Picciotto. Henri is a math teacher and textbook author. He lives in Berkeley, has been an activist in the Bay Area since the Vietnam era, and is a member of Vanguard's Executive Advisory Board.*