

POLITICS

Nader looks forward in anger

By Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway

WASHINGTON

Ten years ago Ralph Nader launched the Public Citizen organization amid the darkness of Nixon's Washington. Over the years that followed, Public Citizen became a political force to be reckoned with on Capitol Hill. Today, in the Washington of Ronald Reagan, the darkness is, if anything, even more profound.

In 1971 the momentum of the '60s still favored reform. In 1981, evidence of pell-mell retreat is everywhere to be seen, with once friendly politicians fleeing for the hills and corporate agents stealing all before them.

Last weekend Nader and Public Citizen sponsored a conference in Washington called "Taking Charge: The Next Ten Years," an attempt to sort out priorities and establish a line of march through the (ever)present crisis.

For Nader himself these are not encouraging times. Nor, on the evidence of a recent interview with him, could it be said that he is particularly optimistic.

Over the last decade you built up a good deal of support in Congress, but when Reagan was elected it just dissolved. What happened to these forces of consumerism, the environment, the public interest?

Their opponents in Congress had a structure of private power supporting them with campaign contributions, facilities, everything. The pro-consumer, pro-environmentalists didn't. They either got tired and gave up, defeated by superior campaign money. Or they decided to play a middle-of-the-road game.

Looking at the political map right now, where do you think we're headed?

The civic effort should not concentrate on formal politics. It's just too preliminary, too premature. It's got to deal with organizing power on the outside. It's hard to predict what's going to happen when the Reagan budget hits—not in terms of uproar, but in the quality of the uproar and whether it leads to organization. There may be demonstrations and the grounds-keepers will pick up the paper cups next morning. And that's it. Can you remember a time when provocation for radical citizen mobilization was greater?

But there isn't any radical citizen mobilization.



Not yet. The Reagan budget hits October 1. Two hundred thousand CETA youths are unemployed. Half the plate is gone on the school lunch. The infant nutrition programs are down. Legal Services is curtailed, on its way to abolition.

But aren't we benefiting from lower taxes?

No. Because we're going to have to pay more state taxes. That's what the Reagan budget is going to do. All these things are going to be dumped on the states. If the states pick up some of the items the federal government has dropped, they'll have to raise taxes. If the states don't pick up some of these items, you're going to see a [reaction], more city riots. Look, the Great Society bought off the poverty society. It basically said, calm down. We'll give you some food stamps, fuel supplements. We'll give you jobs and so on. What the Reaganites don't understand is that by taking all that away, it's going to fuel the fires of mainstream

revolution.

There's virtually no tax bracket where people are going to pay less taxes, because inflation is going to jack it up and make up the difference. Social Security will take care of the rest. That's going to be an increasing bite. And higher prices will just pile it on. It's going to fuel inflation and money won't be set aside for investment purposes. Increasing natural gas prices will just speed inflation. Money won't be saved. It's going to be spent. The Reagan supply-side economics is a crackpot theory that through the process of luck and broken-field running became national policy.

Did you expect such a debacle in Congress?

No. I was quite surprised. I was surprised that people like Bob Eckhardt (D-Texas) would be defeated. That [John E.] Moss (D-Calif.) would retire. Moss would now be chairman of the House Commerce Committee. There would be no chance of weakening the Clean Air Act.

In areas with which you have been concerned, what has the Reagan administration done to hurt people?

The most systematic theme of the Reagan administration thus far has been the moves to destroy the gains that have been made in the last 25 years, and there are about five major areas. One is the government's role in defending people against the ravages of an industrial society: pollution, occupational disease, product deficiency. For example, the crash protection standard, which has been in the shaping since 1969, is about to be revoked by the Reagan administration, thereby leaving millions of motorists with the freedom to go through windshields.

In the food area they are going to try to cripple the Delaney Amendment, which prevents any substance causing cancer in animals from being put into the food supply. They're going to weaken the food inspection process. They're going to weaken the ability of the FDA to get data for enforcing the food and drug laws.

They want to double the amount of pollutants that come from automobiles. They want to get rid of the concept of the "best available" technology as the standard that government agencies have to force the companies to meet. They want to develop average fleet emission standards so that it will be impossible to recall automobiles that don't meet specific pollution standards. I don't see them for-

cing the auto companies to recall any autos the companies don't want to recall. They will issue no new standards.

You're couching all this in terms of "they will" or "they're going to." What in fact has Reagan done?

They've got to go to Congress or through certain administrative proceedings before they revoke a standard. What they've done is to stop the work of the health and safety agencies, which was leading to issuance of stronger standards, updated standards or new standards. They have suspended the public-affairs programs of EPA. They have embargoed, destroyed, curtailed the distribution of pamphlets, reports and materials designed to alert people to pollution hazards, their rights under the law and so forth. They have not enforced the law.

Do you think things will revert to 1964, when you started out, or even worse?

They're not going to take out the seat belts or put back the ram-rodding steering columns, but they're going to come pretty close. Relatively speaking, the rate of death and injuries is going to start climbing because there's a higher percentage of small cars on the road, whereas 15 years ago there weren't that many. So they'll slip, unless they can put things like passive restraints, air bags and so on in small cars. It's really the Reagan devolution. It's a systematic attempt to get rid of the last 25 years of protective measures.

Where do you see things going in 1984?

Well, Reagan probably will usher in a moderate Democratic administration, because it will look good by comparison with Reagan. Reagan's got himself in a bind. As the tax revenue goes down, he's got to continue to cut social programs because he won't cut the Pentagon. And there will be more disruption, more welfare claims, more pressure by the states. The states and the localities are going to have a major role in the 1984 election. Not only are they going to be under pressure because they've had all the stuff dumped in their lap, but they are also going to be at the point of exposure. What Reagan is trying to do is to turn to the American public and say, "Get it from your mayor and your governor."

You see the Democrats as coming back as moderate Republicans?

That's right—as the liberal wing of the Republican party. It will be Percified. The Democratic Party will be like Senator Percy.

Do you think anything will happen to the left of the Democratic Party?

There is no left. All they'll be asking for is relief. Not change.

What's the future for the public interest movement, or does it have a future?

It has a very defensive one right now. I'd hate to see what would be happening if there was no one around. It's been slowing Reagan down, especially in the environmental area, where the administration has had to cut back on some of the leasing.

Is the public interest really worth the bother? Is it more than a bunch of well-to-do middle-class kids, pushing their own interests and having a good time? Or is it an institution that stands its ground and fights?

I think they are standing their ground and fighting. They may lose, of course. One important thing is that the public will know what is being done. It won't be sugared over with a lot of Reagan rhetoric.

Where is the political hope?

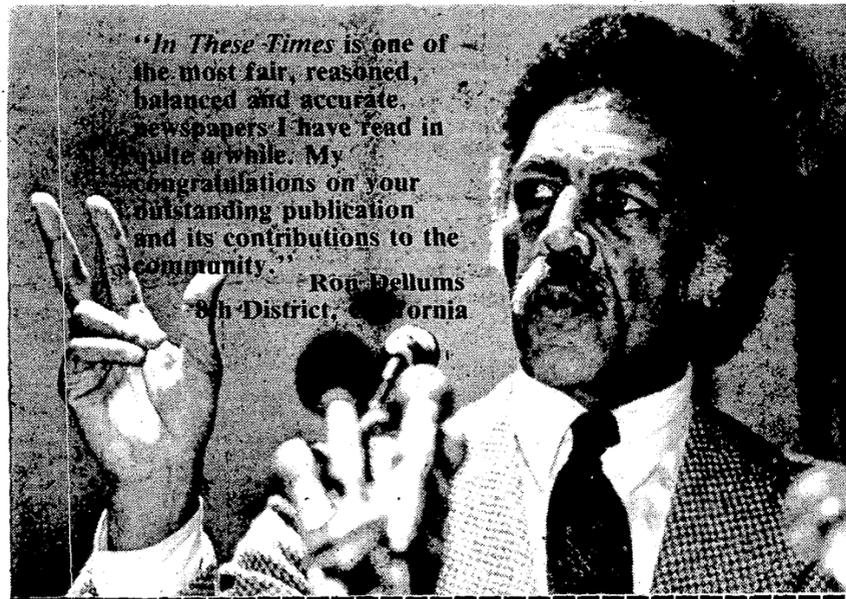
Hope lies in developing the mode of organization. That's the biggest need of today. It means alternative economy through the co-op. It means greater use of initiative, referendum and recall.

You used to talk enthusiastically about the formation of other political parties.

All these things are possible. But it depends on the energy level of the reformers.

Which, right now, is pretty low?

Yes. It's pretty low. Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway are columnists at the Village Voice, where a longer version of this interview first appeared.



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IN THE WORLD

THE VATICAN

Is John Paul II a socialist?

By Paul G. Schervish

BOSTON

POPE JOHN PAUL II'S RECENT encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (*On Human Work*), may be the most dramatic recasting of papal social doctrine since Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (*On Things New*), published 90 years ago. It introduces into papal discourse a framework of concepts and logic strikingly akin to Marxism. And it sets forth moral principles that criticize existing capitalist and communist systems while implying an alternative of democratic socialism.

It is still too early to gauge the international reaction to the encyclical; but reports in the U.S. media have been matter-of-fact, either missing or avoiding what some experts on Catholic social teachings suggest are substantive advances in Catholic social thought.

George Higgins, a long-time labor advocate and former director of the Office of Social Action of the United States Catholic Conference, explains, "The document does not have the ring of earlier social encyclicals. Rather than taking a deductive, natural-law approach based on the scholastic thinking of Thomas Aquinas, it argues inductively from a personalistic and humanistic starting point to the nature of human beings as subjects engaged in the work of shaping their world."

The encyclical is "new and remarkable in the history of Catholic social thought," explains David Hollenbach, an authority on Catholic social teachings. "It contains a persistent and detailed emphasis on the primacy and dignity of labor as the foundation for all economic and human rights." In fact, suggests Hollenbach, "it really looks like the Pope's criticism of capitalism and collectivism from the standpoint of labor argues for a form of democratic socialism."

An examination of the text of the encyclical reveals a strikingly informed treatment of the contemporary subordination of labor to those who control the means of production in both capitalist and communist economies.

John Paul's fundamental premise is that "human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question" (all emphases are the Pope's). Work is defined broadly to include any "transitive" human activity "whether manual or intellectual"—that is, activity "beginning in the human subject and directed towards an external object."

The objective aspect of work, says the Pope, entails a particular combination of human effort and technology that he defines as "the whole set of instruments" created by labor and used in the labor process. But the more crucial aspect is that the worker is a "being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization." This seemingly unobtrusive principle grounds the ethical conclusion that stands at the center of all that follows: "work is 'for man' and not man 'for work!'" Every society, every economic structure, every work arrangement is to be "judged above all by the measure of the dignity of the subject of work."

From the dawn of the 19th century the principle of "materialistic economism" has subordinated the laborer to the process of production. The worker came to be treated as mere "merchandise" sold to the employer. Today, this degradation of labor exists in both capitalist and so-called collectivist societies. In fact,

Hollenbach points out, the Pope reasons that existing collectivist economies—whether formally considered socialist or communist—are in reality forms of state capitalism. As the Pope says, every system that separates labor from control and makes the subject of work its object "should rightly be called 'capitalism.'"

Who owns the "great workbench?"

The conflict between labor and capital originated in the fact that "the workers put their powers at the disposal of the entrepreneurs, and these, following the principle of maximum profit, tried to establish the lowest possible wages for the work done by the employees." This "real conflict between labor and capital was transformed into a systematic class struggle, conducted not only by ideological means but also and chiefly by political means."

This formulation is significant, says Arthur McGovern, the author of *Marx-*

means of production, of the role of unions and of the appropriate direction for social transformation.

Though not often recognized, explains Hollenbach, the Church has always maintained only a qualified defense of the right to private ownership of productive property. What distinguishes John Paul's position from his predecessors', says Hollenbach, is not his view that "the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use," but his stance that common use means to "serve labor."

All property, including productive property accumulated in the form of capital, "is acquired first of all through work in order that it may serve work." For that reason, the means of production "cannot be possessed against labor, they cannot even be possessed for possession's sake, because the only legitimate title to their possession—whether in the form of private ownership or in

forms of oppression have evolved that are even "more extensive" than those "working 'intelligentsia'" suffer from "what is in effect 'proletarianization.'" Thus even today there is continued need "for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers." To such a movement the Church is "firmly committed" so that she may give proof of her fidelity to Christ as the "Church of the poor."

The state as "indirect employer."

Recognition of the "proper position of labor and the worker in the production process demands various adaptations in the sphere of the right to ownership of the means of production." These may include "proposals for joint ownership of the means of work, sharing by the workers in the management and/or profits of businesses, so-called shareholding by labor" and so on. In constructing a properly socialized economy, unions are granted a special but not exclusive place. Besides "associating labor with the ownership of capital," the socialization of property also entails "producing a wide range of intermediate bodies with economic, social and cultural purposes; they would be bodies enjoying real autonomy with regard to public powers, pursuing their specific aims in honest collaboration



Any form of ownership—either private or collective—is condemned if it violates the fundamental principle of the encyclical: to serve labor.

ism: An American Christian Perspective. It reflects the Pope's subtle distinction between the objective conflict between labor and capital and its expression in class struggle. Once the objective conflict becomes translated into narrow class struggle, revolutionary victories too often establish collectivist economic structures that merely recast the subordination of labor in the form of a workers' state. It is no real victory for labor when the means of production come "under the administration and direct control of another group of people, namely those who, though not owning them, from the fact of exercising power in society manage them."

What is needed, in contrast to existing forms of capitalism and collectivism, is a true socialization of property. This occurs only when "on the basis of his work each person is fully entitled to consider himself part-owner of the great workbench at which he is working with every one else.... The principle of the priority of labor over capital is a postulate of the order of social morality." From this John Paul derives his understanding of the limited right to private ownership of the

the form of public or collective ownership—is that they should serve labor."

In view of what may be termed the Pope's labor theory of social morality, it is but a small step for him to envision trade unions as the guarantors of the social good. Labor unions, he recommends, represent an "important and eloquent" reaction "against the system of injustice and harm that cried to heaven for vengeance and that weighed heavily upon workers" in the early stages of industrialization. Such a movement was justified, he argues, "from the point of view of social morality" because the liberal socio-political system "strengthened and safeguarded economic initiative by the possessors of capital alone, but did not pay sufficient attention to the rights of the workers."

John Paul recognizes that many rights of workers have gained some protection over the years under what he terms "neocapitalism or collectivism." Still "various ideological or power systems, and new relationships that have arisen at various levels of society, have allowed flagrant injustices to persist or have created new ones." In the developing nations,

with each other and in the subordination to the demands of the common good."

But such changes are not limited to the economic sphere and must take form as well in what John Paul calls the sphere of the "indirect employer." This conceptual innovation roughly corresponds to what is often called the superstructure but stresses labor as the key. The indirect employer is the total social environment that "substantially determines one or other facet of the labor relationship, thus conditioning the conduct of the direct employer when the latter determines in concrete terms the actual work contract and labor relations." The concept applies, he adds, "in the first place to the state. For it is the state that must conduct a just labor policy."

The impact of the encyclical on shaping religious thought as a resource for criticizing existing capitalist and socialist systems and for constructing alternatives under the rubric of democratic socialism will depend on the extent to which its radical formulations will be missed or dismissed. The challenge to the left will be to look past the Pope's insensitivity in thought and language to the struggles of feminism in order to appreciate a religious formulation of humanistic principles defending the dignity of all workers. The right, in contrast, will strain to dismiss the encyclical as either uninformed about the blessings of democratic capitalism or naive about the ability of self-interested labor to guarantee the social good. ■ Paul G. Schervish teaches sociology at Boston College.