

Let's Get Back to Basics

What if they held an election and nobody voted? It hasn't come to that yet, but it's getting close. In the first 16 states to hold primary elections this year, only 17 percent of those old enough to vote bothered to do so. Ten states had record low turnouts. In Texas, only 7.6 percent of the electorate cast ballots. In Nevada, where voters could select "none," many voters did just that. Seventeen of the 33 Nevada candidates for statewide office in the September 8 primary lost to "none." In the Democratic primary for lieutenant governor, "none" came in second with 24 percent of the vote in a four-way race.

All of this happened before Kenneth Starr released his report. A week later, on September 15, eight other states and the District of Columbia held primary elections. The Monica Lewinsky scandal played no discernible role in the outcomes, but the number of voters continued to decline. Politicians and pundits attribute this latest drop in political interest to the White House sex scandal. They are correct in this sense: Clinton's incessant use of the English language to obscure rather than reveal the truth resonates with voters disgusted at politicians who talk about serving the people's interests during election season—and then legislate in the corporations' interest once elected.

As the electorate has narrowed, so, too, have the differences between Democratic and Republican officeholders. As a result, an increasing majority of those eligible to vote find that no one represents them. This, in turn, has created a crisis, a public estrangement from civic life, that seriously threatens our democracy. Yet few of our present political leaders voice concern about this situation. Preoccupied with their own re-elections, they are slaves to the polls and focus groups that are used to snare that ever-shrinking core of eligible voters who now comprise the electorate.

All of this is both a cause and a result of the decline of the left in the United States. With the central importance of television and the media in the election process, money has become all-important to individuals running for office. And, as political parties give way to media sound bites, it becomes increasingly difficult to win elections through sustained popular mobilization. The result, of course, is that monied interests dominate our political life as never before, while fewer and fewer people have any meaningful incentive to vote.

The left's own disorientation also has contributed to this process. Its failure to challenge the ideology of corporate America, its abandonment of class as the under-

lying substance of our public life and its retreat into a cultural politics that isolates it from natural allies, have all contributed to a disorientation that threatens to marginalize us permanently.

So where do we go from here? Nobody, including us, knows. But we do know that it's time to think about these issues seriously. Otherwise we should just give up on politics and the hope of fulfilling our nation's promise of genuine democracy.

That's why we decided to organize a conference on the future of the American left. It's called "Back to Basics" and it will be held in Chicago from October 9 to 11. The purpose of the conference is to explore how we can increase our presence in the mainstream of American political and intellectual life. We hope to start by examining the underlying principles of the left and to stimulate thought about how these

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principles can be translated into legislative goals and programs that resonate with the concerns and desires of most Americans.

To do so, we first must develop a distinct public identity. And we must learn how to participate in politics in a way that the vast majority of the American people understand.

For far too long the face of American politics has been dominated by questions of individual character and issues of private behavior, while its substance has been the protection and enhancement of corporate power. In a democracy, however, the appropriate role of government is not to regulate private behavior, but to provide for the common welfare and to allow the majority to determine public policy for the common good.

For more than 200 years, Americans have struggled for a system in which it is possible for all to participate. Of course, our current national leaders have no interest in seeing such potential realized. Indeed, they are the instruments of the degradation of the democratic ideal.

The left, if it is to have any historical significance, must provide nothing less than the means for rescuing our democracy. "Back to Basics" is one small step toward that goal.—J.W.

Tackling Unocal's Corporate Crimes

By James B. Goodno

A coalition of activists and lawyers has asked California Attorney General Dan Lungren to initiate proceedings to revoke the charter of the Union Oil Company of California (Unocal), one of the world's largest energy resource firms. The coalition charged the company with a plethora of environmental, labor and human rights violations.

Kathy Spillar, national coordinator of the Feminist Majority Foundation, says California firms have a responsibility to follow the standards set by the state wherever they do business. "If you are going to enjoy the benefits of being a California corporation, of being a U.S. corporation, you have to abide by a set of rules that the American people have established."

Unocal, the coalition claims, has frequently violated environmental and occupational safety and health laws, released toxins at 82 Superfund sites and contributed to human rights violations in Burma. In addition, complainants have questioned the legality of some of Unocal's dealings with the Taliban, the extremist militia that controls most of Afghanistan.

Drawing attention to what Robert Benson, professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and principal author of the complaint, describes as the "failure of the regulatory state," the coalition invoked a little-used course of action: California, like other states, retains the right to revoke corporate charters it has issued when it believes a company has violated the law.

"Rather than fight a losing battle against harms one by one," he says,

"the California attorney general has legal authority to ask a court to dissolve a company by revoking its corporate charter."

Unocal spokesman Barry Lane describes the action as "ludicrous." "This is about [Burma], the rest is window dressing," he says.

"They failed to get us out through the

ness and the difficulties activists face in challenging corporate power through conventional political and legal means. Members of the coalition, however, remain committed to a variety of tactics, including shareholder resolutions, boycotts, lobbying and litigation, and they bring a broad range of priorities to the table, notably concerns about the environment, democracy and women's rights.

The Feminist Majority Foundation, for example, signed the complaint because of Unocal's contacts with the Taliban in Afghanistan, through which a Unocal-led consortium hopes to build a pipeline. The Taliban has effectively imprisoned women and girls in their

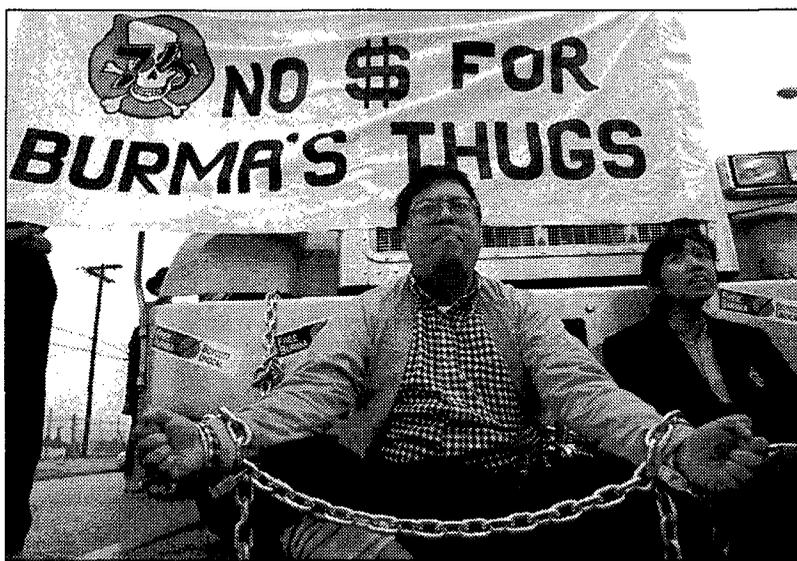
homes, preventing a them from working outside the house or attending school, and allowing husbands and fathers to determine when they may come and go.

Many complainants and other Unocal critics view the company's behavior in the United States and other countries as linked. "Unocal thinks it is immune to morality and public opinion," says Joe Drexler, of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW). OCAW, which is not a party to the complaint, once

represented roughly 1,500 Unocal employees. That number declined to 200 as Unocal sold its refinery and marketing operations. In the process, almost 900 Unocal employees lost their jobs. "This is a company that basically sold its U.S. operations to finance activities in places like Burma," Drexler says.

Proponents of the complaint hope activists elsewhere in the country will follow suit. The National Lawyers Guild plans to conduct workshops in various cities to encourage similar actions. "We hope lots of people will steal this idea and run with it," Benson says. ■

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AFP PHOTO/ERIC SLOWANSON

Unocal has few friends among Burma's refugees.

democratic process," he adds, citing shareholder resolutions, consumer boycotts, punitive sanctions and lawsuits, "now they're asking the attorney general to overturn these decisions by fiat."

To an extent, Lane is right: Activists are broadly opposed to Unocal's Burma operations. In conjunction with Thai and French firms, Unocal is developing an offshore natural gas field and an overland pipeline in Burma. Critics charge the company with complicity with the Burmese dictatorship in the use of forced labor, the suppression of independent trade unions and the destruction of the rainforest.

It is also true that the action against Unocal reflects a broader concern about the way many large corporations do busi-