

Anti-corporate insurgency making itself seen, felt

The demonstrations in Seattle last December against the World Trade Organization, and in Washington, D.C., last month against the International Monetary Fund are only the visible tip of a new social ferment that is spreading across the United States, in workplaces, campuses, and on the streets.

Agitation is growing over rising inequality, neighborhood decline, and continuing environmental degradation. And while the specific issues often differ, the common rallying cry is that democratic rights should take precedence over growing corporate power.

Why now, when the economy is on a roar and unemployment is at a historic low? The fact is that the dizzying increases in wealth and profits celebrated in the gilded ghettos of Beverly Hills and Scarsdale aren't making life better for many Americans, who find themselves working harder for wages that lag behind historic trends. Meanwhile, the millions of working poor and the destitute are simply not part of the celebration.

The big, spectacular demonstrations make the press, but the evidence of insurgency is much more widespread.

Labor is on the move, with strikes among janitors, truck drivers, and airline pilots reflecting unions' growing assertiveness. John Sweeney's election as AFL-CIO president four years ago brought a new cohort of activists to the leadership of many of the national and local unions. They are working to revive social movement unionism, reaching out to form alliances with community and campus groups, and reviving the old union emphasis on organizing the unorganized, which means focusing on low-wage service and manufacturing workers who are mainly immigrants, women, and people of color.

Last year, for example, the Service Employees International Union in Los Angeles won a union election for 75,000 home-care workers, the largest single union victory since the 1930s.

Community groups are also in motion. Living-wage campaigns in more than 100 cities have brought together community organizations, unions, and local church leaders, and in 34 cities they have already won laws that require companies contracting with city or county governments to pay better wages.

In New York, demonstrations against police brutality have become commonplace. In Atlanta, Coca-Cola is the target of demonstrators demanding minority hiring. ACORN, a network of community organizations, has launched a national campaign challenging banks and insurance companies for their red-lining and predatory lending practices.

Community organizations affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation are waging campaigns for better affordable

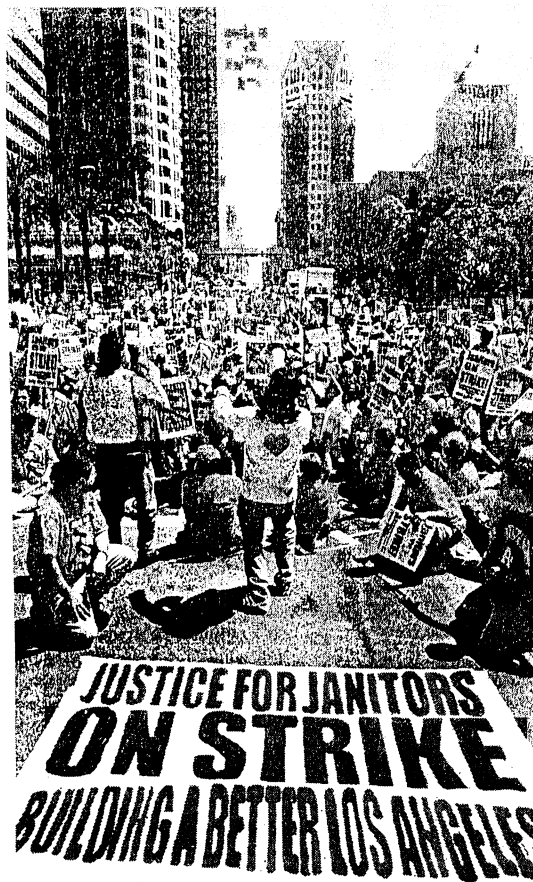
housing, job training, and local schools in dozens of cities. And organizations of poor women and advocates are beginning to wage state and local campaigns to modify the draconian new national welfare laws so that, for example, poor mothers are not yanked out of school for a workfare assignment.

The Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles, using lawsuits and protests, has forced the regional transportation agency to add more buses and reduce fares. A national coalition of environmentalists, small farmers and consumer groups is challenging the "gene giants" — global companies like Monsanto and Novartis — for their promotion of the "corporatization" of agriculture and their production of genetically-engineered food. Successful "clean money" campaigns in Maine, Arizona, Vermont, and Massachusetts have resulted in tough state public campaign finance laws.

And campuses have come alive. College students, and sometimes high school students, are protesting sweatshop conditions, in the developing world and in American cities. On more than 200 campuses, student activists have succeeded in getting administrators to adopt codes to guarantee that clothing with college insignias is not made under sweatshop conditions.

In the past few months, students at Johns Hopkins, Tulane, Yale, Purdue, Macalaster, Wesleyan, State University of New York at Albany, and the Universities of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Toronto, Kentucky, Oregon, Arizona, and Iowa have staged hunger strikes or acts of civil disobedience to demand living wages, both for the workers who produce their clothing, and for the college employees who clean their dorms and serve their food.

Some commentators will inevitably judge the protests unnecessary. But they are wrong. As in earlier gilded ages — the 1890s, the 1920s — corporate greed and



AP PHOTO

The Service Employees International Union mobilized janitors in Los Angeles to strike last month when their contracts expired.

corporate political influence have grown together. Business money floods our elections and K Street lobbyists write our legislation.

In the past, mass protest has sometimes worked to make political leaders accountable to their democratic base, and brought us the changes that have tempered the excesses of unbridled markets. In the progressive era, radicals and reformers led the way for legislation that today is the framework of corporate antitrust and health and safety regulation. In the 1930s, movements of workers, farmers, the aged, and the unemployed dramatized the effects of pervasive economic insecurity and poverty and forced the creation of our basic social welfare legislation.

Protest movements can force American politicians to listen to ordinary people who are usually ignored. They make democracy come alive.

Peter Dreier is professor of politics and director of the public policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Frances Fox Piven is professor of political science and sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center.