

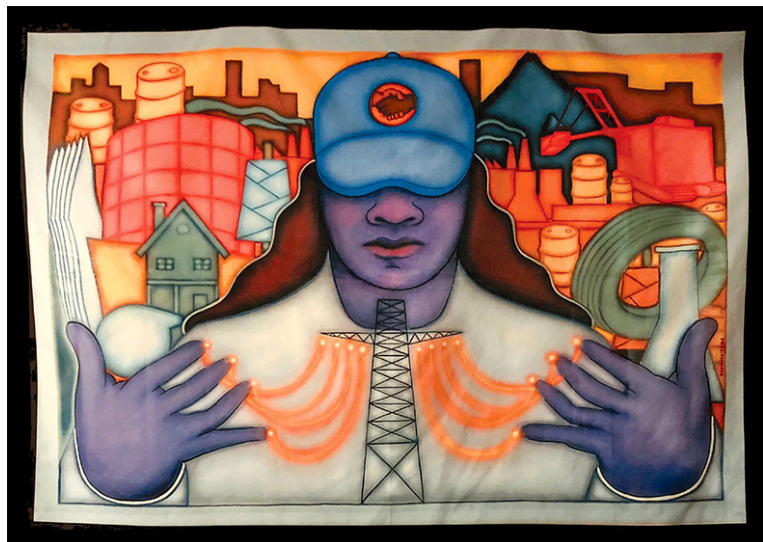
The Worker in the New World Order Unite & Organize

By Paul Buhle

Excerpt from INSURGENT IMAGES, THE AGITPROP MURALS OF MIKE ALWITZ, 2002

Five, 7' x 10' Portable Murals by Mike Alewitz. 1995

Mike's first truly international labor work was commissioned in 1995 for the merger of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Union (IFCE) and the Miners International Federation (MIF). Global affiliations of the OCAW and connected with it, the new IFCE and MIF called for five seven-by-ten-foot murals—Competition, Bureaucracy, Production, Unity, and International Solidarity—comprising together The Worker in the New



Production, 1995

World Order. Competition, as might be expected, showed a dog-eat-dog, worker against worker (the potential murderer even wearing a peace sign on his/her chest) image, while tanks, missiles and skeleton generals looming in the background as piggy capitalists with their piles of money watched gleefully. Bureaucracy depicted an androgynous worker bound like Gulliver by the Lilliputians. This hero(ine) was tied up in reams of paper, spit out perhaps by the printer-headed robots who stood on each side of a White House. With his/her golden scissors s/he could cut her way out, but will s/he? Production would be familiar indeed if the worker was the burly male of old-time radical iconographic. Instead we again have the purple wo/man, her fingers streaming beams of light towards a telecommunications tower. S/he is clearly the worker of present and future. Behind him/her stands the occasional house, factory, and earth-moving crane, but now joined to a beaker evidently used of chemical reformulation, and other modern scientific devices. On the worker's cap this time we find a light brown and darker hand clasped. Unity depicts three workers: the computer operator on the left, the traditional miner in the center, and the agricultural worker (hoe at the ready) on the right. Each represents a continent or place; but the faithful sabot-tabby also hovers, its back up, promising unrest. The final panel, International Solidarity, is the near literal logo for the merged union, radicalized through Alewitz's imagination. Angels hover above the union banner. The image includes two Amazonian bare-breasted women, five variegated workers around an organizing globe that reads (in Spanish) Solidarity of Workers, No Frontiers, and beneath all of this, on repugnant display, are the capitalists, financial wolves, robots and generals. These are the players in the Big Game. But the new leadership of the AFL-CIO was not entirely sure that it wanted to play. Intended to be displayed at the AFL-CIO headquarters building after the chemical unions' international merger talks, the panels were dedicated to imprisoned oil workers in Nigeria as a focus of international solidarity. Alewitz's work was shortly removed. Officials explained that the panels had proved offensive to some viewers (two banners contained a penis, albeit so subtly as to escape casual

notice). Alewitz commented, in an open letter to Rich Trumka, that the labor movement should not practice censorship in any case, but "In the first image the "penises" are cannons in the pants of generals forcing workers to wage war against each other. In the final panel, the same general, now vanquished to hell, is in a flaccid state as workers dance around the globe. Is this not clearly an anti-war cartoon? Have these censors not been to see any movies or art shows in the last decade or two?" Of course, it was very likely to be the ridicule of the generals rather than symbolic penises, which offended the old hands at the AFL-CIO headquarters. War and the constant threat of war had been awfully good to labor's top leaders, and the changeover at the leadership level had not budged the permanent Cold Warriors and seasoned intelligence operatives from influential unions like the American Federation of Teachers.