

WITHOUT ACTION, THERE IS NO KNOWLEDGE

By Mike Alewitz

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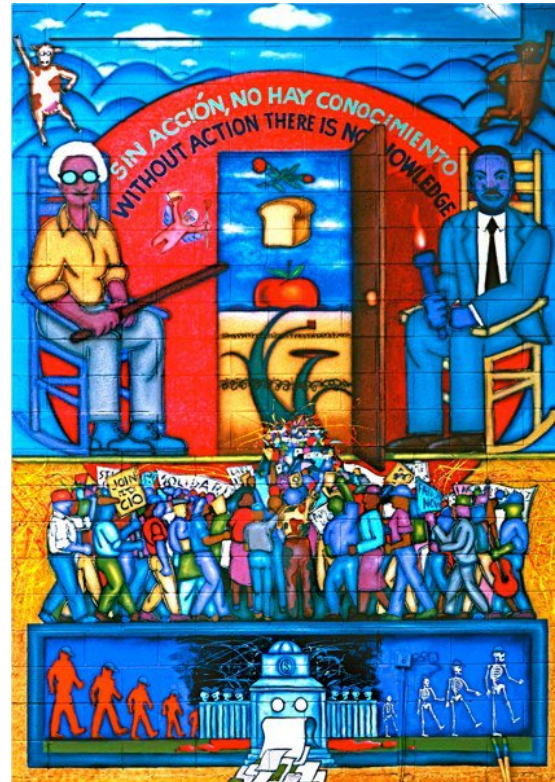
The following are edited remarks by Mike Alewitz at the August 27, 1998, dedication of a new mural at the Highlander Center for Education and Research.

We are living through a really weird but interesting political time. There is an ongoing political and social crisis. There is a cultural crisis as well. What the new world order has meant for working people is regional wars, ethnic cleansing of different varieties, environmental disasters, unemployment, rampant disease, and all the other things that come with a profit-driven system. That is the world that working people live in.

Bill and Monica, along with all of the employers they serve, live in a very different world. They are ok. In some ways, they are doing very well. Companies are making record profits. They have neutralized large sections of the working-class movement. They have forced people to sign unfavorable accommodations throughout the world. They do have a problem though. They have no solutions to the very fundamental problems that face working people. When we look at the television every night and see that the sexual lives of two very unimportant people have become the center of American politics, it only reveals the bankruptcy of the system we are living under. This stuff is important to them only because it is the disguised way that they resolve problems among themselves.

Art and Education Under Capitalism

Unfortunately for most of us who are artists, cultural workers or educators, our job is to sell their ideology. That is what we do as artists and educators. We try to convince



people to believe in the system. As Meridel Le Seur once said, they want us to "perfume the sewers." They want us to make it palatable to live under capitalism. We artists and educators sell their drugs and their wars. A few get very rich doing it. Steven Spielberg just made about a billion dollars selling war. If you are willing to do that there are substantial rewards. They call it 'tenure,' or a 'one-person show.' Or you get a special professorship or endowed chair. You become a celebrity. This is what you get if you jump through the hoops. This is your reward.

Action as a Basis for Knowledge

There is a very different and important tradition of education here at Highlander. Highlander comes out of the struggles of working people, and primarily out of two of the most important struggles of this century. The first was the creation of industrial unions in the U. S., as symbolized in this mural by Lucille Thornburg, a leader in the struggle to organize textile workers in the South. Industrial unionism, even in its terribly weakened and bureaucratized state, remains the basic organization in defense of the rights of working people. The club that she holds in her hands reminds us of the proletarian methods of struggle, which we need to relearn.

The second struggle, symbolized by Martin Luther King, was the Civil Rights Movement. This movement was not only important because it divided and conquered the ruling class of this country, but for the tremendous inspiration it provided for the most oppressed of people throughout the world. The future merging of these two historic struggles, along with other social movements, which have arisen since that time, is the future we see as we look through the door to the future envisioned in this mural.

A Democratic Education

By basing itself on these great struggles, Highlander has created a different kind of education, a deeply democratic education. You'd think that in a "democratic" country like the U.S., that there would be lots of democratic institutions, but in reality, there are very few. Unions are not democratic. They are run from the top down, even the best of them. Churches are certainly not democratic institutions. Schools aren't either. Certainly the family, our most fundamental institution, is not democratic. Political parties are not democratic. There are very few institutions that actually have the confidence in working people to say: we will listen to what you have to say; you have the power to resolve your

problems; and we will learn from you. There are very few institutions like that; in fact, I can't think of any right now. But Highlander is a place, which strives for that. The popular education here relies on working people seeking solutions from within their own group. I don't want to sound anti-intellectual in saying all this.

Workers cannot solve all problems by themselves. There is a desperate need in the labor movement for artists, educators, economists, and philosophers...in all kinds of highly educated and trained individuals who can give us the tools we need to transform society. But it has to be based on confidence that working people have the ability to make change themselves...not the staffs, the organizers, the trainers, and all of the rest of the apparatus that we have invented.

Popular Education is Dangerous

During the eight, or ten or twelve hours that we as artists and educators have to sell our labor power, we are stuck just like other workers. But like everyone else, after that time, we are free to teach, create and do as we really feel. That is one of the advantages of wage slavery over chattel slavery. That is where we artists and educators can make a real contribution. That is where Highlander, and all of you, makes a contribution. The tradition that exists here is an inspiring one. Popular education has always been considered dangerous by the authorities. That is why Highlander has often been a target. That is why popular educators have always been singled out for attack by contras and fascists. I have chosen to dedicate this mural to those educators and activists who have taken literacy and popular education throughout the world, and who have died in that effort. Whether it is the jungles of Nicaragua, the towns of Chile, or the mountains of Appalachia, they are all part of one movement. Their example points to the future.

The Eye of the Hurricane

Today the world that Highlander envisions, with the empowerment of workers, and the world of the Bill Clintons and Bill Gates, is heading into a direct clash. We are in the eye of the hurricane, and it partially explains the bizarre behavior of Washington. When a hurricane hits, as hurricane Georges is now, it arrives as a tremendous force, with winds that flatten everything. That was kind of what the earlier social movements were like. But then in the middle is the eye of the hurricane. It's very calm. For those who are

uninformed, everything seems just fine. That is what the employing class has felt like for a long time. Things are fine. What's the problem? The water is calm. We can go for a dip. But today, they sense that something ugly is approaching. The winds are picking up. They see that in the growing international financial crisis. They see it in their inability to re-establish what they would like to see in Eastern Europe and in Iraq. They cannot articulate a solution to it, but they know it is happening. It is causing them a lot of uneasiness. They see the storm clouds gathering, and they are afraid. We on the other hand, await the rest of the hurricane with great anticipation. We are waiting for that great surge that comes with the second part of the storm. Today we build and educate around traditions that exist in institutions like Highlander. But we look forward to the coming storm. That's the energy of working people; it's a hurricane.