

PEOPLE'S ART TEARS THROUGH L.A. TINSEL

By Eric Gordon - Special to the Guardian May 1990 LOS ANGELES



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South Central Los Angeles lies far from the towering decorator suites of television's "LA. Law." This part of town has a large Third World population, high unemployment, a big drug problem and a police department famous for riding roughshod over the rights of anyone who happens to be of the wrong color. In the midst of this neighborhood, the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research was founded in 1963. Its doors are open to readers and researchers interested in books, posters, films, recordings and all manner of archival material relating to the labor movement, the struggles for peace and social justice, the women's movement and other progressive causes. For years, plagued by unsightly graffiti, staffers at the library had appealed for a mural to grace its walls. Such outdoor murals are a recognizable feature of the Los Angeles cityscape, thanks in large part to the Social and Public Art Resource Center.

Never having heard of the library. New Jersey painter Mike Alewitz, known in New York for the off-desecrated Pathfinder Mural, and for his labor union projects with the United Auto Workers, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America,

the United Mineworkers and other unions, applied to SPARC to paint a mural on the dual themes of international solidarity with undocumented workers and organizing to protect the interests of all workers. Choosing Alewitz out of a hundred artists submitting proposals for this community, SPARC put his idea together with the library's request, and offered him the commission. Alewitz worked on the 23-foot by 48-foot gessoed surface in April and May 1990, assisted by four students from nearby Manual Arts High School.

The formal dedication of the library's north wall, at which numerous labor, cultural and community leaders spoke, took place May 15th. The mural on the outside gives appropriate clues as to what is inside, for as William Doyle, president of the library, pointed out both the mural and the library exist to give the working class the knowledge it needs to gain power. "In Los Angeles," Alewitz says, "we see a microcosm of world events. Millions are uprooted and driven from their homelands by economic and political repression. They seek a better life here, which for a great majority will remain unrealized. Instead, they will become victims anew, through other forms of economic exploitation, racism and the ghastly Hollywood culture which demeans and stereotypes their culture."

The mural depicts a mass of working people streaming toward the electrified, barbed-wire Mexican border from the distant, smog-shrouded city of Los Angeles. They wield a magnificent tool of their own creation, designed to cut through the frontier. On the right, the captains of local industry (grapes, wine, garment, pharmaceutical, machine tools, aeronautics, shipbuilding) look on in horror as their profits are threatened. Their mascot, the bloodsucking monster of imperialism, guards the pile of gold that has been created by labor. On the other side stand the legions of paper-shuffling bureaucrats, all of them plugged in to the middle-class conformity emanating from the TV monitor. Overhead, the sun that shines on all breathes out a banner held up by worker-angels, while a projector from the top of the tower spells out the title of the mural, "Labor Solidarity has no Borders," in English, Spanish, Korean and Farsi. Clearly, Alewitz has drawn on the traditions of agitational propaganda (agitprop) popularized by countless workers' movements of the past. The influence of the Mexican muralists is self-evident. His work is a frank admission that art— all art—takes sides.

But he has also introduced many subtle references across space and time. He clothes his workers in modern garb: A woman in camouflage recalls the informal "uniform" of the Pittston miners during their militant 1989-90 strike, and the various headgear point up the multiethnic character of the working class. Many of his figures reflect older sources. A female figure holding a jug comes from ancient Egypt: It is one of the earliest representations of labor in art. A male figure with a basket is Gustave Courbet's painting "Stone Breaker." A Sandinista woman spreading seed recalls Jean Francis Millet's painting "The Sowers." while a man at the wheel restates a classic image by the Soviet photographer Rodchenko. If the viewer seems to recognize Marx, Lenin, Malcolm X and Rosa Luxemburg in positions of prominent leadership, this is not unintended. The hovering cartoon angels are new versions of baroque cherubs; one, wearing glasses, and unmistakably Leon Trotsky, sends down an energetic blessing. The tower from which the workers flow is modeled after Tatlin's visionary project for a huge monument to the Third International in the early days of the Russian Revolution. In a gesture of self-quotation, Alewitz has recreated his monster of imperialism from the "P-9 Mural" he painted in Austin, Minnesota in 1985 for Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers, during the prolonged strike against Hormel. That mural, celebrated in song by folksinger Charlie King, was destroyed after only a few months when P-9 was taken into receivership by its international union.

Alewitz's mural is one of 15 commissioned through SPARC in its 1989-90 program of "Neighborhood Pride: Great Walls Unlimited." Funds for the project came from the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the Arco Foundation and the Hitachi Foundation. So far it has been well received in the South Central Los Angeles community, whose residents well understand its message. Though the U.S.-Mexican border is the immediate reference, it is impossible to ignore the wider implications North and South, East and West. Labor solidarity must extend around the world. Indeed, as Alewitz has observed, "The future of the labor movement ultimately depends on how it relates to all the world's unorganized and undocumented workers. Will it champion the most oppressed sectors of society?"