

Temporary Sanity

Mural Dedication Speech by Mike Alewitz



(The following remarks are from the inauguration of the mural at the Roosevelt School in New Brunswick, NJ /1999)

This mural is the result of a grant from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation. But when we went off to look for a site, the city of New Brunswick refused us a wall. Churches refused us a wall. The Labor Education Center at Rutgers refused. Why? Because I wanted to paint about temporary workers...immigrant workers who make up the working poor of this city.

In this mural you will see the vans that come every morning to take workers to the warehouses and factories of this area. There are so many vans in the morning that the city council passed a law against honking before 8am. It is these workers who produce the wealth of the state and the nation. And yet they are invisible. New Brunswick, home of a world-class research university, which prides itself on its cultural institutions, has no place for the poor. On weekend nights the streets are blocked off so theatre-goers don't have to have contact with the locals. If you happen to be poor and African American, and are taking up space for good real estate, they knock your buildings down and ship you out on Route 27, to make room for upscale housing and restaurants. But the poor are not invisible to us. They are our parents, brothers and

sisters, our children, our neighbors. And the work that they do is important. They make our clothes. They build our homes. They grow and prepare our food. In fact, they create everything. Yet we are told that workers have little worth. Even we educators sometimes fall into that thinking. That being a worker makes you a failure. If you don't go to college you have failed. That the sign of success is to be a lawyer or investment banker - people that generally produce nothing.

In 1999, the richest 1% of Americans control 40% of all wealth. Bill Gates is worth more than the combined Gross National Product of Central America: Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize. Workers are earning less, adjusting for inflation, than they did when Richard Nixon was president. Average weekly wages for workers in 1998 were 12% below 1973, adjusting for inflation. Productivity grew nearly 33% in the same period. As families have sunk deeper into debt, household debt as a percentage of personal income rose from 58% in 1973 to an estimated 85% in 1997. Total credit card debt soared from \$243 billion in 1990 to \$560 billion in 1997. The most enormous transfer of wealth in history is taking place. But we are so brainwashed that we think it is the natural order of things. When you watch TV at night and the people on Wall Street are all excited because they are millions of dollars richer...there is nothing natural about that. It is not an act of God. The money didn't come from thin air. They took it from us. Teachers have to struggle with low wages to survive because the money goes to Wall Street.

Temporary workers make a third of what their jobs would be paid, with no benefits, often with the threat of deportation hanging over them. I won't even get into what happens to artists. All this is not because corporations aren't making money. It's because they want to make more. One of the women who works in the cafeteria explained to me that many of the children who go to school here go to sleep hungry... she gets to feed them - that was one of the reasons she liked her job. There is nothing natural about that. The same day she was telling me this, I saw a picture of our state politicians holding a press conference about the five-year-old boy who was kidnapped from Cuba. They are going to be his champion - demand he stay in the US, take him to Disneyland. They are going to show how great the US is compared to Cuba. But in Cuba, with all its problems and poverty, children do not go hungry, or homeless, or

without health care. But what do these politicians have to say about the rights of children right here? Nothing.

In this mural you will see the rubble of the past century, with its broken idols and symbols. Theodore Roosevelt, after whom this school is named, who represented the conquest for US colonies, would surely be turning in his grave to see the children of immigrant workers in this school...workers he tried to keep out of the country in his own time. Labor has always created its own symbols. Earlier immigrants had their own. The black cat, for example, was a symbol of labor militancy of the Industrial Workers of the World. They organized textile workers who were immigrant workers from dozens of countries. And when women textile workers marched in Lawrence MA, they carried banners that said, "We want bread and roses too." The bread to represent economic justice, the roses to represent the desire of working people for a life with art, recreation and leisure. We will create new symbols for the future. But to do that, we must begin to free our minds. To express this I have included the words of Steve Biko, one of the great martyrs of the freedom struggle in South Africa. South Africa has shown us, just like the civil rights movement in the US, that freedom is taken, not given.

As we enter the next century, I believe that the immigrant workers coming to this town and this nation, with their experiences in the labor movements of other countries, will bring us a dose of sanity. And so we dedicate this mural to the parents of the children of this school, the temporary workers. I give you Temporary Sanity.