

WHY DISRUPTING THE PACIFICA NATIONAL BOARD MEETING WAS APPROPRIATE

The Athenians in ancient Greece claimed that they cherished individual freedom, but they nevertheless prosecuted Socrates for his teachings, claiming that he corrupted young people and insulted the gods.

And, but for a small oppositional minority of the Pacific National Board, that is what the Pacifica National Board does to those who teach truth.

(What they do)
(They smile in your face)
All the time they want to take your place
The back stabbers (back stabbers)

The O'Jays, *Back Stabbers*

The members of the Pacifica National Board (PNB) assumed authority, or authoritarian control, over the Pacific Foundation pursuant to fundamental flaws in the Foundation's bylaws, which among other things ushered in an election process corrupted by personal financing and a structure of apportioning or transferring votes that dilutes the individual vote and precludes the election of any candidate who is not part of a slate, while at the same time allowing onetime local and national board members to be cycled and recycled. The election process also lacks any meaningful affirmative-action component. In addition, the underlying precept of the governance structure deliberately vitiates the influence of those who make radio happen, and confers upon a hierarchical board decision-making powers that it eagerly embraces, while ignoring even the modest bylaws mandate to perform productive functions such as revenue-raising for the historically cash-strapped network.

What the current PNB has done is manipulate the dilemma of being an organization outside of the mainstream, tilting against the status quo while at the same time seeking to grow its listener base and better fund its activities. Audience growth is certainly hampered by the absence of a mass protest movement to cohere around. The Board has used these inherent problems to frighten people by proclaiming the immanent financial death of the station and then circulating and recirculating this myth to rationalize their takeover of WBAI. Financing Pacifica has always been difficult, but there was a prominent and competent Chief Financial Officer at the helm who was unceremoniously fired (and is now in litigation against the network, alleging racial discrimination among other things), and at WBAI plans were being devised to diversify and increase our revenue stream.

The PNB, their *white hats* bouncing jauntily along with their arrogance, armed with their *white power point* presentations, invaded New York with their proclamations that poor programming and the prominence of the liberatory politics of the African-American General Manager and Program Director had demoralized staff and alienated "listeners." Early in April, they rode into New York to capture the transmitter; this stealth attack proved unsuccessful, but it was followed by slash-and-burn practices, going straight for the jugular – they removed the General Manager

of less than 13 months, Anthony Riddle, and fired the then ailing Program Director, Bernard White.

They fired the Program Director who had successfully rooted the station in the hearts and minds of the tri-state area's African-American communities – communities whose issues and self-representation had previously been given marginal attention by the Foundation, notwithstanding the efforts of the previous (and now deceased) Program Director, Samori Marksman, who was similarly hounded during his tenure. The Board scapegoated Bernard White, who had spent the greater part of his adult life at the station, working at modest pay, without regular wage increases or a pension plan, an employee at will, and absent any grievance process, and blamed him for the station's economic woes.

How sinister and ironic that Bernard White should bear the burden of the static revenues. During his tenure as co-host of WBAI's Wakeup Call program, it became the most popular program on the station – and its most successful fundraiser. Under his tutelage, and with his contacts, relationship to communities, political history, and cultural fluency, Amy Goodman was able to evolve into the prominent co-host of Democracy Now. First as a producer and host and then as Program Director, Bernard White ushered in programs that evidenced tremendous political acumen. While he was Program Director, his encouragement of producers to bring gay rights, immigrants' rights, extended workers' rights programming on May Day and Labor Day, ongoing coverage of the people's survival efforts in the Gulf Coast, and daring coverage of Israel's war against and occupation of Palestine was legend. His lovingly prepared annual tributes to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X proved wildly popular, and regularly grossed more than any other programming event. Whether as producer or as the Program Director who regularly offered premium choices to staff for fund drives, he was responsible for raising more money for the station than any other staff member ever has. This is without taking into account his uncompensated supplemental hours on the air during fund drives, which both demonstrated his devotion to the station's well-being and his ability to reach out and touch the listeners with his humanity and political acumen, along with the premium incentive he chose. His mellifluous tones and the esteem the listeners held him in were also the catalyst for the pledge phones to ring and ring.

The new, self-appointed Foundation management stormed into town from 3,000 miles away with a smile on their face, belying their authoritarian and self-involved edicts for programming changes and the cruel and repressive behavior that was to follow. The new Board authority (or authoritarian), Grace Aaron, who is now also the interim Executive Director, and the interim Chief Financial Officer LaVarn Williams, who was also installed and is doubling as interim General Manager of WBAI, are supported by the wealthy junk-mail king and WBAI LSB member Steve Brown, whose virulent racist utterances and writings, directed against African-American staff at WBAI for years, have brought national condemnation – although never the formal repudiation of the Foundation. Along with a small but persistent coterie, including LSB Chair Mitchel Cohen, they forced the resignation of the long-term conscientious troubleshooter of the network, Dan Siegel; fired the tested and committed Chief Financial Officer, Lonnie Hicks; removed others from their positions and sanctioned, censored, and displaced WBAI staff, even going so far as to threaten criminal trespass charges against dismissed personnel should they dare to enter their former worksite. Amidst their aggressive complaints about their intended

victims, they have been immersed in their own opportunism and corporate sensitivities, which among other transgressions of Pacifica's very essence have included bringing underwriting, actually folded into advertisements, within the programming of the Houston station – while an application for employment with the Foundation by the courageous freedom fighter and six-term former Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney was rejected without even the consideration of an interview.

The Foundation management undertook its bloody purpose with gusto, excising African-American and Latino workers from the network and purging those who have been critical of their corporatist mentality and behavior. The board has placed the dollar in command, unilaterally advocating for personality rather than content-driven programming. They shaved an hour off of WBAI's Wakeup Call program, in complete disregard of its invaluable and irreplaceable delivery of news, issues, and activist projects of the tri-state region, as well as its role as an organizing conduit for those affected by the events it covers and those who are organizing resistance. The final hour of Wakeup Call was replaced by the popular and professional sound of Democracy Now, with its national and international focus, which formerly ran only at 9 a.m. – but the key program and programming time for building movements rooted in our communities was eviscerated. Putting genuinely progressive politics in command is not the guiding principle of the PNB; they are willing to sacrifice that principle to the golden calf, namely, what is believed to be the most expedient programming that they imagine will cough up dollars.

While the PNB and its executive staff have loudly, albeit generically, lambasted WBAI's programming, they dance to the tune of and constantly reference the star broadcasters of liberal media. WBAI would lose its identity – along with its niche in the radio market, and certainly its relevance in politics – if it were to compete with the oft-mentioned liberal media such as Air America or National Public Radio/PRI, to which stimulating activism is anathema. If our programming were overarchingly driven by personalities, it would be in contradiction to keeping the community in community-based radio, and it would certainly be a repudiation of our mission. If anything, our strength lies in deepening ways to reflect the needs of communities and to involve them in radio broadcasting. If WBAI sought producers because they were recognized personalities, professionals, or careerists like Rachel Maddow, Keith Olbermann, Roseanne Barr, or whatever prominent figures could be drawn into our ambit, as our iED and iGM have wished, would that not essentially negate the station's ability to draw people to it because they see it as a political entity? Don't we want to draw activists to the station, and don't we want to be media activists as well? Shouldn't we draw those who feel an allegiance to the station, to work individually and together to maintain and develop its resources so it can play a more significant role in challenging the message of the corporate media conglomerates and the nonpartisan premise of liberal media, which certainly are not a stimulant for social activism? Shouldn't the station be about much more than individual endeavors to communicate the private and personal interests of individual personalities disconnected from the community?

Shouldn't the station and the network be a political venue from which to launch challenges to reactionary-right media outlets, and to initiate legal challenges to backward and confining media regulation and legislation? Shouldn't WBAI bring people into its fold who are more than careerists with their bread quite literally buttered by their ascendancy to prominence and profit?

If WBAI were to follow the model of liberal media in substance, we would be an empty vessel, a mere repository of information, with hosts who might perhaps grow in personal stature but not in fulfillment of purpose – or the Pacifica mission.

While the executive staff of the Board is star-struck, this affliction has diverted their attention. They are apparently unaware of racist attacks on African-American and Latino staff. The PNB and its staff have for years permitted the most foul and dangerous expressions of heated racial enmity to be unleashed on African-Americans and Latinos who express nationalist and/or liberatory politics. Notwithstanding that there are African-American or Latino people in middle-management positions within the Foundation, just as there are individual members of the PNB who are people of color, the prevailing and controlling position is dominated by white leadership whose cultural leanings exclude and/or are hostile to a pronounced expression of Black and Brown identity and political aspirations. The Foundation has launched an assault on those who have a strong sense of and express their glorious history, their culture, and their collective identity, which challenges the supremacy of the dominant Eurocentric culture values and power structure.

This Board believes – as did the coup perpetrators of a decade earlier – that there is an audience of millions, flush with ready money and with their pockets full of credit cards, merely waiting to join WBAI – and that they know how to recruit them. All we have to do is bring our American idol(s) to the microphone, and be a little more liberal. All we have to do is quell the nationalist and self-determining sentiment of African-Americans and use even more medicinal self-help cure-alls as premiums, and the membership base and dollars will flow in. And, oh yes, maybe underwriting for WBAI is on this board's agenda – after all, there are those who have reportedly ruminated about selling WBAI's license, so why not? IED Grace Aaron has categorically rejected weaning ourselves from the necessity of and dependency on on-air fundraising by diversifying how we raise funds. These are dominant perspectives of the PNB, when its individual members and their LSB allies are not themselves seduced by the siren song of their own voices amplified over the microphone as they seek to take control of programming.

The corporatists of the Board, with their signature dollar sign looming large, have demonstrated an imperviousness to input. They are devoid of creativity and resistant to any serious endeavor to explore technological trends and ways to exploit the potential of technological advances to expand communication processes. They are resistant to a panoply of fundraising and outreach scenarios. It is they who are bankrupt, not the station. Where is the responsibility of the PNB – can it really be that these would-be media moguls actually produce nothing? Why don't they have the obligation to fundraise as a Board? Why have they never planned or devised methods to supplement on-air fundraising with such self-evident schemes as estate planning, enlisting listeners with professional skills and contacts to do some grant writing to their constituents, direct-mail campaigns, black-tie dinners, and special events, among other ideas?

The hijackers first tried to usurp our transmitter, but this was merely their opening salvo; when it failed miserably, they were not to be deterred. This was WBAI's introduction to those who would rob us of our "community control." Then began the full court press, as they excised individuals and negated structures. Workers were removed arbitrarily, for fabricated reasons or for no reason, and some were threatened with "banning" from the premises in perpetuity. The

new regime ignored all requests of the legally constituted unpaid staff union (the Unpaid Staff Organizing Committee, USOC) for a meeting, refused to process grievances, and even went so far in its union-busting efforts as to set up a parallel structure – a company union. The hijackers rearranged programs without any consideration of the obligatory structure calling for the involvement of the Program Council, which was set up to provide for democratic input and prevent arbitrary removal, as well as to offer advice and consent – an elected and inclusive editorial board of sorts.

Since we've analyzed what has happened at Pacifica, let's analyze the protest that ensued at the Board meeting. There are some vociferous critics and antagonists to the protests. And perhaps there are those who will view skeptically the various still photos and videos taken there that project sharp, even shrill behavior that did challenge the deliberations of the Board. Of course, through editing and the manipulation of film, and absent context, many of the images are calculated to appear more strident than the reality. But the real question is whether the Board should be permitted to operate with only the thinnest veneer of participation, and just do its "white power point presentation" while it dismembered the station. Take Back WBAI, a diverse group of listeners and staff, decided that it should not – and they were compelled to and did successfully prevent the PNB from perpetrating a fraud during its meeting in New York City.

In preparation for the PNB meeting, members of Take Back WBAI grappled with the nature and extent of our expression of ideas and beliefs. We deliberated on how the proceedings would affect the struggle to take back WBAI. We placed the measure of expression and of protest within the context of the Board's offenses, including its efforts to usurp the transmitter; the forced removal of the General Manager and the removal of the Program Director after weeks of keeping him dangling by a thread and years of unmitigated racial invective directed against him; the removals of programmers and preclusion of their physically ever entering the station again; and the efforts to bust the unpaid staff union. It was the majority faction of the PNB and its newly self-appointed national staff and recently installed ancillary local personnel who were responsible for initiating policies that contradict the Pacifica mission and practices that mimic the crudest and cruelest of any corporate juggernaut. The charade by the PNB had to be and must continue to be revealed and confronted, and the network hijackers removed. So, do you choose to permit a repressive body to conduct its business in abrogation of individuals' rights and collective processes? Or, when you are locked out of the process, do you press against the walls of Jericho till they come tumbling down?

The common element of protest is the commitment to higher ideals. No protester enjoys being locked out of the process, ridiculed, and threatened with "security." When there is no real input, when there is no advice and consent – most particularly in an organization that boasts a mission statement and history of consideration of protest – we cannot ignore that. The PNB hasn't been willing to engage in meaningful dialogue. Thus far, it has indicated that it will not be swayed, and that it prefers a form of violence against the staff and listeners who oppose it, who now feel that they have been sold down the river by corporatists – and many of whom are saying that we're not going to lie down meekly. If you continue to ignore the will of the people, then you must expect that we will rise up. We will resist with logic and argument and emotional pleas. And we will resist through creative disruptions: you will not conduct business such that you will

dismantle the network we built. We will rise up, we will speak up, and we will exercise freedom of expression against authoritarian rule.

Our protest was a victory, and the direct action taken by the protestors must be hailed as such. It is the PNB, which removes personnel without process and consideration – much like the most offensive henchmen of corporate cutbacks – that has triggered the outcry. It is the PNB's own actions that are the catalyst for protest. To allow it to carry through its nefarious agenda without protest is to be complicit in the violence and destruction that are inseparable from that agenda.