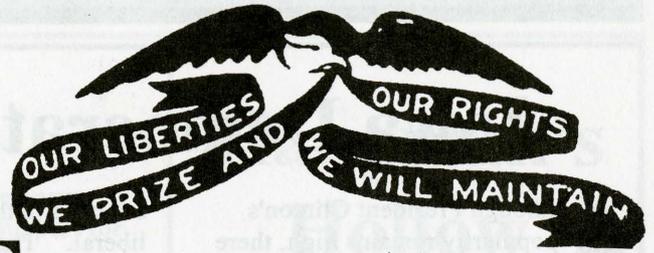


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



® 22

Fall 1998

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

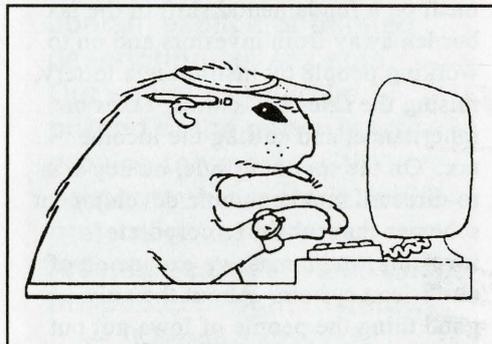
Night of the Living Sales Tax

Twelve years ago Iowa City hired Steve Atkins. The new city manager arrived fresh from Schaumburg, Illinois, home of a giant shopping mall — and a giant sales tax. It took Atkins only a few months to announce that Iowa City faced nearly a million-dollar deficit due to the loss of federal revenue-sharing. Atkins solemnly advised the city council that only a local option sales tax could solve the crisis and save city services.

The services perceived to be in danger at the time were the transit system and the library. Atkins gained notoriety by claiming that too many city residents were “transit-dependent.” The library’s popularity and usage so outstripped its resources that its open-to-the-public hours had been severely cut back.

Atkins went on the road, hawking the joys of the sales tax to every service group, breakfast club, and editorial board in the county. Despite his efforts, and the hopes of some library supporters that a good portion of the tax windfall would come their way, the public wasn’t buying. Opposing the local option proposal were a council-appointed citizens’ committee, the Iowa City Federation of Labor, the Iowa City Chamber of Commerce, city councilors Larry Baker and Darrel Courtney, then-county supervisor Dick Myers, college student Steve Grubbs (now chair of the Iowa Republican Party), and future council candidate opponents Karen Kubby and Mary Jo Streb.

In October of 1987, the voters of Iowa City gave the local option sales tax a mere 15-vote margin; the proposal was soundly defeated county-wide. Atkins’ projected budget deficit never materialized, but Steve didn’t give up his dream. It’s a different city council, and they’re



hustling a different version of the local option sales tax, but the strategies are the same:

- Convince library supporters that the sales tax is the only way to fund the library’s growing needs
- Shift the tax burden as much as possible from upper-income to lower-income residents
- Exploit the perception that students get too good of a deal in Iowa City
- Enlist “liberal” support by concocting schemes to reduce the regressivity of the sales tax.

One new element in the current push for the sales tax proposal is the backing of Mayor Ernie Lehman.

Back in ’87, Lehman—a private citizen—opposed the sales tax increase because he believed it would deter shopping in the community, and because he wanted to promote government efficiency by not making it too easy to raise and to pay taxes. The sales tax is dangerous, Ernie reasoned, for the same reason that many people prefer it: except for low-income taxpayers, it’s less painful and less visible than other forms of taxation. Explaining his preference for a temporary property tax increase over a permanent sales tax increase, Lehman spoke up for accountable government: “If the bucks are hard to find, you become very selective in how you spend it” (*Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 5/22/87).

Ernie had it right the first time. Call him and the other Iowa City councilors and ask them to put library expansion on the ballot as a bond issue, to be paid for by property taxes, the fairest local option allowed by the state. And keep a sharp Prairie Dog eye open for more conversions, back-trackings, rationalizations, divide-and-conquer tactics, and strange bedfellows as *Son of Sales Tax* hits a theater near you. ☪

— Prairie Dog

Each issue of the Prairie Progressive costs \$356 to format, print, and mail.

Iowa Democrats Swing to the Right

Although President Clinton's popularity remains high, there is widespread evidence that voters are losing interest in politics. The best evidence is voter turnout, which is reaching all time lows. During the past 125 years, there have been three periods of growth in voter turnout: the populist offensive against corporate power in 1880s and 1890s; the New Deal of the 1930s; the New Frontier and Great Society of the 1960s. In each period, the Democratic Party identified itself with the aspirations of the majority of Americans who work for wages, and attempted to promote permanent institutional reforms to benefit working people. Each period was followed by a swing to the right that made the Democratic Party more and more difficult to distinguish from the Republicans. As Woodrow Wilson succeeded William Jennings Bryan, Harry Truman succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton succeeded John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, voter turnout slumped.

In each period of conservative reaction, Democrats received high praise for abandoning "ideology" and "moving to the center" in order to make themselves electable, even as they faced electoral disaster. In the wake of the Wilson, Truman, and Clinton administrations, Republicans seized control not only of both houses of congress but of a substantial majority of state governments. The rightward swing of the Democratic Party has produced the same results in Iowa, leaving us with a Republican governor, a Republican legislature, one right-wing Democratic congressman, and one former populist Democratic senator.

The swing to the right by the Iowa Democratic Party has been particularly notable because of our progressive and populist traditions. During each presidential caucus, Iowa has been

attacked in the national press as "too liberal." The admirable progressive traditions of grass roots democracy built up in the Democratic Party during the era of Senator Dick Clark have been almost entirely abandoned by the State Democratic Central Committee. Under the leadership of state chairs Bonnie Campbell and Arthur Davis in the 1980s, the state party was turned into a machine to raise "soft money."

At the same time, following Terry Branstad's election as governor in 1982, legislative Democrats entered into a coalition government with Republicans on key legislative issues. The most important issues in government are how you raise the money and how you spend it. Branstad and Democratic legislators were in agreement on a fundamental shift in the tax burden away from investors and on to working people by instituting a lottery, raising the sales tax, cutting taxes on inheritance, and cutting the income tax. On the spending side, money was re-directed into economic development schemes that subsidize corporate investors, and a massive expansion of our prison system. About the only good thing the people of Iowa got out of the deal was a maintenance of spending levels for public education at all levels. That was fine with Governor Branstad, who had a strong personal commitment to education.

The neglect of grass roots democracy by the state party, and the anti-working class tax and spending policies of Democratic legislators, has been matched by a dizzying swing to the right by Senator Tom Harkin. He ran against Bill Clinton in the 1992 primaries as a "real Democrat" upholding New Deal principles against a right-wing Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council. But ever since he ordered his delegates to support Clinton at the 1992 conventions, Harkin has been aggressively support-

ing policies that carry out the unfinished business of the Reagan revolution.

In a country with shameful levels of child poverty, Harkin voted for tens of billions of dollars in cuts in child nutrition programs. He supported the dismantling of the 1935 Social Security Act, which provided an entitlement to a minimum level of income support for every poor child. Harkin toured the state to campaign for an expansion of INS officials to deal with illegal immigrants, and strongly supported the repressive 1996 Immigration Act. The result, according to the American Friends Service Committee, is a reign of terror in immigrant communities in Iowa, where mothers are afraid to allow their children to play outside after school, and children who watch the evening news see their friends and relatives marched into airplanes in chains for deportation.

Harkin aggressively supported the 1994 Crime Bill, which was the largest single public commitment of funds to the expansion of prisons in American history. It extended the death penalty to dozens of new crimes, bailed out the states that were facing fiscal crises over prison construction, instituted new and unjust mandatory minimum criminal sentences, and set out to provide incentives for local governments to shift their spending priorities away from health and education and into law enforcement. The effects of this bill have now come home to Iowa City, which received temporary funding for several new police officers. The money has expired, and now must be replaced by the city, making it impossible (according to the city manager) to staff a new public library without a regressive sales tax increase.

The list could go on: support for a NAFTA treaty that was designed to drive down the wages of working

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Yin and Yang in the Board Room

On July 31, 1998, with reluctant ambivalence I neared the Board Room at the Iowa Memorial Union for the vote count on the Service Employees International Union organizing effort of nurses and other health care workers at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. I had scheduled a car repair to avoid this, but my presence was fated when the Dodge dealer had no transmission seals — due, I imagine, to the UAW-GM strike.

I so passionately wanted a win that I was unable to assess the outcome, a failing of the naive I had mostly outgrown. Anger at past defeats, frustration with decades of apathy toward social injustice drove my awareness: I am too afraid to be here. I had forgotten how hard desire could be, especially the desire to establish a connection, the wanting for collective action to work.

I knew that public sector union efforts were more successful than in the private sector, but also that larger units were more difficult to organize, that union elections, unlike electoral politics, were generally decided by a very small margin of votes, that a union buster on the scene like Management Science Associates could seriously tip the balance, and that even a well-conceived and executed union drive generally was not successful the first time.

I knew that SEIU had planned and executed a well-financed, well-run, and emotionally compelling effort. Dan Iverson, President of SEIU Local 150, a visionary union leader, modest in demeanor, grand in dreams, had thought of this day for a decade. Debbie Timko, Mayee Crispin, and Jesse Case were a luminous, intelligent, and fun organizing team, empowering potential voters with

innumerable tasks. Any visit to the organizing office on First Avenue showed some health care professional, here after a paid shift, calling, writing, talking for hours, for days, for weeks, for months, growing more fearless and

“The SEIU achievement is so much greater and more honorable than the Coral Ridge mall.”

determined, more knowledgeable and convincing. Hundreds more unionists and community coalition folks had done their part. This campaign to unionize professionals had been substantially financed through the dues money of janitors and maids. Every day the solidarity had felt economically, socially, and emotionally visible.

I am glad I opened the door to the Board Room. I needed to see, again, the demographics of our American lives. On the left, seven or so white males, beyond being enlivened by even a double dose of Viagra, old with luck, and two younger gofers, all control, all rigidity, a group of good old boys, the patriarchy, the THEY, the THEM made concrete: the UIHC deconstructed into gendered maleness. The combination of arrogance, stupidity, and special treatment which had for decades characterized the management style of UIHC came down to less than a dozen white males faking it, faking authority, and faking being in control.

The other side of the table, mostly women, but not all, messier, smiles and frowns, emotions diffusing throughout the room, faces of different colors and ages, palpable vagina power expanding the possibilities, overturning the game board, forcing a redefinition of human struggle: simply the wanting, needing, must having of the female heart.

The Viagra-deprived and the Vagina-seeking: the demographics were shouting, if not today, then tomorrow, then someday, for Susan B. got it right, failure is impossible. Whatever the outcome this day, hope, believe in democracy, love again, and believe, foolishly, stupidly, and irrationally in the inevitability of love to transform the community in which you live.

SEIU delivered a stunning blow and decisive electoral victory that afternoon, a major step toward building a union. The screaming, crying, laughing, and hugging side of the Yin and Yang at the table in the Board Room made the AP photos, the local newspapers, the TV, and our collective memory. The SEIU achievement is so much greater and more honorable than the Coral Ridge mall.

After the count, media swarmed in the IMU lobby. Women who had never spoken in public, or had not spoken in public since the anti-war days, faced cameras and notebooks with aplomb. Daughter-aged voices riding the legato of experienced-yearred women bemused at their own public passion. Working against history forming her-story, leading brothers on the first step to building a partnership. ☪

— Clara Oleson,
President,
AFT Local 716

Hardacre Festival a Heartacher

This year the old Hardacre theater on the square had a new public address system and air conditioning installed just the night before. "We survived the odds. We're back." With those words Troy Peters opened the second annual Hardacre Film Festival in Tipton, Iowa.

There was also a handsome little program sporting the festival's new logo. And we would get two days of movies this year, with four directors showing up to talk about their works. Everything about this year's festival was better and bigger but the audience. Where were all the deprived movie lovers from Iowa City?

Apart from the offerings at the university's Bijou ("Oasis" would be a more fitting name), Iowa City is a one-reel movie town under the total domination of Central States Theaters Corp. It recently opened a 10-screen cinaplex at the new Coral Ridge Mall (after closing its 4-plex in Coralville), which meant only that area moviegoers could now see the sophomoric *There's Something About Mary* at two different locations.

Hardacre was a welcome relief in this summer of our no content. For two days Tipton de-centralized Central States. Where else could you see in 48 hours nine short films, seven documentaries, two student films and a feature film? And all for what you would pay for one movie, popcorn and a soft drink at any of your local theaters.

In keeping with the spirit of the well-chosen program quotes in support of smaller, nonviolent movies and democratizing film technology, the festival was long on shorts and documentaries.

The selected short films ran the full comedy-to-tragedy gamut. At one end was a farce about a woman racing her own biological clock while in mad pursuit of a husband, and another about a wife whose too amorous husband won't let her fall asleep. At

the other end was *South Bureau Homicide*, about the shooting death of a young Black man while he sat at his school desk. In between was the sad tale of a Vietnamese mother and young son trying to survive in New York City after the father's death.

The best of the bunch was a seven-minute masterpiece called *Phil Touches Flo*, about a sociopath with a stun gun who uses it on anybody who touches his dog Flo. This little ode to the power and joy of filmmaking had everything: faces, drama, humor, style, and, of course, a dog.

Film festivals are about the only way you'll get to see a documentary anymore. This year's festival documentaries easily matched the depth and intensity of human experience present

"...you couldn't help feeling that he could make anybody's life (even mine?) funny and interesting."

in their fantasy counterparts. In *When I Was Fourteen: A Survivor Remembers*, the camera follows Gloria Hollander Lyon, a Czechoslovakian Jew now living in San Francisco, back to the concentration camps of her past and the school classrooms of her present, where she counteracts the insidious work of the Holocaust revisionists by telling her story to a generation that doesn't believe anything it hasn't seen on television.

Dean Ishida, creator, and creative editor, of *My Lazy White Friends*, was a friendly presence during the entire festival. While watching the film of

his roommates at my alma mater Boston University you couldn't help feeling that he could make anybody's life (even mine?) funny and interesting.

Dirt featured industrious people of all colors creating gardens in New York's East Village. This homage to soil and the life-giving powers of excrement set out to prove "There is a planet under the concrete."

The first day ended with the 1996 Sundance winning documentary *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, which likened the battle to save a 125-year-old Iowa family farm to the fight between good and evil in an old western movie. The farm in southwest Iowa is ambushed by a gang of farm rustlers from Norwest and their hired accountants. The *Des Moines Register* has predicted that robbing of banks will hit a record high in the state this year. This film documents the robbing by banks that wiped out so many family farms. Rent it—with farms entering a new crisis period thanks to the Republican Freedom to Lose Your Farm Act, *Troublesome Creek* is as timely as ever.

Speaking of people doing the labor of America while at the mercy of bottom-line feeders, the 1976 Oscar winning documentary *Harlan County, U.S.A.* was a fitting climax to the festival. But what a mood breaker it was to leave the Hardacre theater after this classic film about the heroic struggle of working class families with the worst jobs and bosses on earth only to hear the director of the surreal, "Best Experimental Film" *Flying with the Angels* tell somebody that his goal is to do work that "makes no sense at all." Just like nine out of ten movies now playing out at the mall. ☺

—Jae Retz



Oct. 12

Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat reads at Prairie Lights Books, 8 PM, Iowa City

Oct. 20

Osterberg for US Senate reception, 7 PM, 600 Manor Drive, Iowa City, 319-338-3446

Oct. 25, 1983

US Marines invaded Grenada

Oct. 30

Fiesta Mexicana and Day of the Dead Celebration 6 PM, Old Brick, Iowa City

Nov. 3

Election Day

Nov. 17

AFT 716 monthly meeting, 7 PM, Iowa City Public Library

Nov. 26, 1968

UN passed resolution against capital punishment

*Rightward Swing,
Continued from Page 2*

people; opposition to single-payer national health insurance; support for an anti-terrorism bill that allows people to be tried without seeing, or even being informed about, the evidence used against them. Senator Harkin no doubt has very good reasons for his positions on all of these issues, but it is important for liberal Democrats to face up to the well-documented record. Grass roots Democrats in Iowa have remained progressive and liberal. But without progressive leadership in the state party, the state legislature, or the U. S. House or Senate, it is difficult to see how there can be a progressive revival in the Iowa Democratic Party. ☪

— Jeff Cox

“Public media should not contain explicit or implied descriptions of sex acts. Our society should be purged of the perverts who provide the media with pornographic material while pretending it has some redeeming social value under the public’s ‘right to know.’”

— Kenneth Starr, 1987, *Sixty Minutes* interview with Diane Sawyer

Hangman’s Hollow Revisited

Iowans Against the Death Penalty 1998 Annual Meeting, “Hollow Executions: Hangman’s Hollow Revisited,” will take place on October 23-24, 1998, at the historic Hotel Manning in Keosauqua, Iowa, the site of Iowa’s first execution.

Please join us as we elect officers and appoint advisory board members to serve in the ongoing resistance against any attempt to reinstate the death penalty in Iowa. We have chosen Keosauqua in Van Buren County as the setting for this meeting because of its historical significance in the history of state executions.

In addition to the IADP annual meeting, which will be held in the oldest courtroom in Iowa where Iowa’s first death sentence was handed down, we will retrace the steps to Hangman’s Hollow with a candlelight vigil and announce our pro-active agenda for 1999.

Friday, October 23

7 p.m. “Hangman’s Hollow Revisited: A Presentation on the Social and Legal History of the Death Penalty in Iowa.”

Saturday, October 24

9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. Annual Meeting.
12:00 noon - 3:00 p.m. Strategy Planning Session.

Rooms at the Historic Manning Hotel are limited. For more info call 515-277-8096.

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Global Economics 101

The current world financial crisis...starkly reminds us that many of the concepts that have guided our sense of how the world and its affairs are best ordered have suddenly been shown to be wanting...

The precepts of the economic theorists who could so confidently prescribe to, now appear to have drawn much of their apparent intellectual validation from having been unchallenged by the day-to-day operations of a system that operated in the interests of the powerful and not the poorest of the poor.

—Nelson Mandela at Harvard University, September 18, 1998

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