

Battle over censorship and control at California radio station

By Kim Saito
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After a bitter 17-day lockout, the forty staff members and hundreds of volunteers at Berkeley radio station KPFA returned to work on Monday, August 3, responding to an unexpected offer by Pacifica Foundation, its parent organization.

Pacifica Chairwoman Mary Frances Berry said in a statement that the CWA union and KPFA staff will be allowed to run program operations. The national offices will be relocated to Washington, DC, where Berry, a former federal civil rights official and long-time Democratic Party activist, is based.

The Pacifica board will remove itself from management of the station for 6 to 12 months, during which time they will monitor audience share in the KPFA signal area. However, the board warned, "Pacifica's goal is to increase listenership during this time period and reach a more diversified audience." The station at 94.1 FM now reaches about 200,000 people in northern California.

KPFA supporters are worried that this could put pressure on the radio station to increase listeners or face a possible sale, leaving in doubt the fate of the nation's oldest listener-sponsored station.

Since July 14 when the lockout began, massive support was mobilized. On Saturday, July 31, an estimated 10-15,000 supporters marched through Berkeley and called for the return of local control. This was the biggest demonstration in the city since the 1960s antiwar protests. Two weeks ago, a benefit concert featuring folk singer Joan Baez attracted 3,500 and raised \$70,000.

KPFA was established 50 years ago by World War II conscientious objectors to aid the antiwar movement. It is well known for its radical and counterculture programs. Over the decades it campaigned against the anticommunist McCarthy witchhunts and against US

military interventions in Vietnam, Central America, Iraq and Yugoslavia. It promoted the Free Speech movement, gay rights, women's liberation and the Black Panthers.

It claims to be the first to have played The Grateful Dead, and broadcast Allen Ginsberg reciting his famous poem "Howl," which prompted an obscenity trial in the late 1950s. Recently, it has campaigned for the freedom of Mumia Abu-Jamal. Many of its programs focus on gay/lesbian and identity politics.

Pacifica Foundation is the nonprofit parent of Pacifica Radio Network, comprised of five stations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, New York and Washington, DC, reaching 700,000 listeners nationwide. Its assets are estimated at \$200 million, but non-profit radio faces significant financial pressures in an era of cutbacks in government support for public and independent broadcasting.

At the heart of the dispute is Pacifica's decision to reach a "more diverse and larger audience" by changing its programming. Last February, the national board gave itself sole power to elect new members, which has meant the exclusion of local stations' advisory boards from the decision-making process.

In 1992, Pacifica had attempted to accept foundation money from Pew, Ford and MacArthur Foundations. This was followed in 1993 by protests over then KPFA management's attempt to purge public affairs programming.

During the dispute and lock-out Pacifica censored some of its own programming, including WBAI's "Democracy Now," which was blacked out on several occasions from every Pacifica station but WBAI, when it attempted to raise the KPFA issue.

In an era of increasing media monopolies, KPFA confronts what all small radio stations are facing.

“People are very worried about the void that would be created,” says KPFA co-news director Aileen Alfandary, who has worked at the station for 20 years. “There's lots of right-wing media in this country. Don't we need something on the progressive end? If Pacifica self-destructs, there's nothing to take its place.”

In light of this attempt to "mainstream" KPFA, Pacifica has no doubt faced the political disapproval from its potential corporate sponsors. In 1998 Berry supported a new Pacifica policy barring programmers from encouraging listeners to attend rallies opposing the US blockade and war on Iraq.

In April, the national Pacifica management fired the Bay Area station's manager Nicole Sawaya, who had broadened ethnic representation on its local advisory board and revived the station's use of live, remote broadcasts into the Bay Area's multicultural neighborhoods. She had also criticized Pacifica's National Board for excluding representation from its local stations. Other personnel were subsequently disciplined, and veteran programmers were fired for discussing Sawaya's dismissal and Pacifica's power grab on the air.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes the purge by Pacifica Foundation as part of our defense of democratic rights, including the right to free speech. Although we might disagree with many of the political viewpoints expressed on KPFA and Pacifica, it is one of the very few public avenues where such alternatives have been aired. As in every industry, what counts in broadcasting are profits for the corporate owners.

The attack on KPFA takes place in an atmosphere of growing assaults on democratic rights in which the bourgeois state seeks absolute control of the media as its direct agency, and therefore, sees “alternative” forms of media as a threat. In Belgrade, the United States bombed the Yugoslav TV center to prevent the American public from knowing about civilian casualties caused by the bombing. In Berkeley and other cities, unionbusting measures, which include lock-outs and strong-arm tactics toward the same end, are used to prevent workers, students and the middle class from having access to points of view that criticize the corporate consensus.

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