

Announcements & Shorts

1. Subject: The Virtual Activist Online

From: Audrie Krause

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 23, 1998

NETACTION LAUNCHES THE VIRTUAL ACTIVIST WEB SITE FOR CYBER-ACTIVISTS

"The Virtual Activist," NetAction's comprehensive training course on cyber-activism, is now on the web and available globally to activists who want to use technology effectively for grassroots organizing, outreach, and advocacy.

The complete course can be found at: <http://www.netaction.org/training>.

In contrast to the trend toward high-end graphics and complex technology that has characterized the commercial evolution of the Internet, NetAction's training course promotes a more text-oriented approach.

"The more complex the technology, the more limited the access," said NetAction Executive Director Audrie Krause. "If you want to get information to people, keep it simple."

The unique online training course was developed cooperatively by Krause; Judi Clark, founder of WomensWork; and Michael Stein, Internet Coordinator for Children Now. The training course is based on the curriculum developed for a half-day workshop on cyber-activism, which Stein and Krause co-taught last year in San Francisco, CA.

"We had numerous inquiries about the class from activists outside the Bay Area," said Krause. "Some specifically asked that we put the training course on the web site."

The training course is a rich mix of information about technology tools and examples of how activists have been using the tools. The examples, drawn from a wide range of activist sites, are included as links.

"Internet technology is changing rapidly and activists are constantly experimenting with the technology," said Clark. "We hope to update the site regularly to keep up with these changes."

Activists who visit the site are encouraged to provide feedback to NetAction, added Krause. The training course provides helpful hints for using email and the web, as well as examples of how the Internet can be used by activist organizations to build membership and raise money. There is also a chapter that addresses netiquette and the important technology policy issues that could impact access to the Internet by activists and non-profit organizations. A Virtual Activist Reader is included with links to a wide range of relevant web resources.

NetAction is a project of The Tides Center, a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization. NetAction works to educate the public, policy makers, and the media about technology-based social and political issues,

and to promote the use of technology for grassroots organizing, outreach, and advocacy. NetAction's web site is at: <<http://www.netaction.org>>

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2. Subject: MS Threat to E-Commerce

From: Audrie Krause

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 13, 1998

The Microsoft Threat to Electronic Commerce: DoJ Won the Intuit Battle, But Microsoft Could Win the War

SAN FRANCISCO, CA--An in-depth report by NetAction reveals how important antitrust enforcement is to assuring vigorous competition in the emerging online financial services marketplace. The report, released today, describes how the Justice Department's 1995 opposition to the proposed Microsoft-Intuit merger opened the door to industry competition and ultimately resulted in the emergence of an open standard for electronic banking protocols.

But continued vigilance by the Justice Department is necessary, NetAction's report warns, because Microsoft continues to use its financial and technological power to establish a monopoly in online financial transactions.

"If the company is successful, it could ultimately gain control of the economic lifeblood of Internet commerce," said Project Director Nathan Newman, who wrote the report.

"People who criticize the Justice Department for investigating Microsoft need to understand that the government's 1995 intervention is the reason we have open competition today in online financial transactions," Newman added.

The report, "The Microsoft-Intuit Merger: The Intervention that Worked and the Dangers Today from Microsoft's Monopoly Practices in the Online Financial Marketplace" also examines Microsoft's more recent attempts to monopolize Internet banking. The complete report is available on NetAction's web site, at: <<http://www.netaction.org/msoft/finance/>>.

The NetAction white paper explains how the government's intervention made it possible for new competitors to enter the online financial marketplace, and at least gain a foothold in some of the markets that Microsoft was attempting to monopolize. Although Microsoft had sought to control the standards of online commerce through its merger with Intuit, the Justice Department's opposition killed the proposed merger and forced the company to compromise with competitors in building core open standards into the online financial economy.

Unfortunately, Microsoft's increasing dominance of corporate computing and Internet technology has led to a renewed monopoly threat in the world of online financial transactions.

"Microsoft is inserting its Internet servers into most online financial transactions," said Newman. "With its growing control of the Internet browser market, Microsoft is not only in a position to direct customers to its Internet sites, it can direct consumers to the financial services from which it gets a commission."

The most serious threat is that Microsoft is building a partnership with First Data Corporation in an effort to replace the role of banks in processing online bills that were previously mailed to customers by credit card companies, utilities or other merchants.

"All of this calls for increased government scrutiny of Microsoft," said NetAction Executive Director Audrie Krause.

"The danger is that rapid, unregulated changes in the financial world can have dire economic results," warns Newman. "Just look at the recent crisis in East Asia's banking system, or at the Savings and Loan crisis a few years ago which cost American taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars." NetAction's report argues that government intervention now, oriented toward promoting open competition and economic equity, will negate the need for much broader, more expensive intervention, in the coming years.

Last May, NetAction launched the Consumer Choice Campaign to educate cyberspace consumers about the threat of a Microsoft monopoly of the Internet, and to mobilize Internet users to pressure federal officials for more vigorous enforcement of antitrust laws. Additional information about the campaign is on the NetAction web site at: <http://www.netaction.org>.

Reporters may contact Nathan Newman nathan@netaction.org for an email copy of NetAction's list of Microsoft investments, along with the white paper's Introduction and Table of Contents.

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3. Subject: Labor and Technology

Date: 24 Dec 1997 08:42:03
From: aucad@dclink.com
To: Recipients of conference labr.party@conf.igc.apc.org

Dear list,

I last night finished reading the essay by Jon King on biotechnology that spotlights the legal maneuvers by big business to take ownership of biotechnology. It is a part of the compilation of

technology essays by Marxist and radical scientists, engineers and commentators on technology and the labor movement that was advertized on this list recently.

Jon is leading the Labor Party's (LP) technology commission.

The essay highlights some of the possibilities for vastly increased production of food through biotechnological advances--gene splicing for example, and the ongoing attempts by big money to control those advances through a radical alteration of the patent laws. This is an area of law that we should be paying a lot of attention to because at both the national and the international levels the original intents of the law are being bastardized for the sake of future profit, and, as always, we are going to be the ones upon whom the crime is perpetrated.

King's essay does a good job of outlining the important issue from a working class perspective, without succumbing to the fashionable postmodernist nee-jerk reaction against any and all use of biotechnology for the benefit of humankind. He urges caution where it is warranted, as in public safety issues, without resorting to Frankenstein-like fantasies or the typical religious, anti-human-progress arguments of many in the "postmodernist" left.

Some other essays in the book tend to err in a way that is typical of many Marxists over the last century and a half. They underestimate the ability of Capitalism to remake itself at crucial stages, often just in time to save itself, while overestimating the time it is likely to take for many of Marx's predictions to unfold, a problem Marx himself was prone toward.

While the labor theory of value is fraught with problems, it is certainly the best, most workable value theory we have, at least to my knowledge, yet the confusion between semi-automation and true-automation (a feat that is still most likely many years off), leads many of the authors to make dire predictions for the coming period as far as the world market's ability to put labor to work.

My own predictions for the coming period call for a new long-wave boom (based on the cumulative work of both Marxist and Capitalist economists on what have been called Kondrantieff Long-waves.) This long-wave upswing in world economic growth will not be without its problems and certainly, just as with similar periods, it will not be able magically make the normal seven- to 10-year business cycle disappear, but it will leave the slow-no-and-negative growth of the past three decades behind.

The last time we enter a long-wave upswing in this country, in the mid- to late 1940s, it was well into the 1950s before most Marxist economists realized what was happening, certainly a poor record. I have taken a look at the writing, both scholarly and in the popular Marxist press, and found that the same kind of mistakes were being made then, with economic gloom and doom predictions at the same time when the economy worldwide was on the uphill side of a long-wave boom.

What can be said about the coming period is that it will be characterized by incredible displacement of workers and misuse of workers' talents if we do not create an effective worldwide campaign for a shorter work week with no reduction in pay. That means creating an effective, mass, working-class, electoral political party and ending the disastrous, decades-old labor/liberal/left coalition in favor of a new coalition of the majority that does not include liberal forces. (In fact, attracting the majority, who do not vote at this time and do not participate in politics is contingent on separating ourselves from the liberals who have made it impossible to attract most working class people into active support of the left and labor.)

Technology--particularly information technology in the next decade--will cause the displacement of millions of workers in the world economy. That is inevitable. However, predictions of a massive new class of unemployed, as in Kurt Vonnegut's "Player Piano," is not in the cards as long as the technologies coming online are of the semi-automated variety. They are tools that add to the productivity of workers, such that, for instance, much clerical office work is being eliminated. (My daughter for instance, works as a records clerk for an insurance company. As that company eliminates paper records in favor of computerized records keeping systems, she is being trained for the computerized jobs that will be available in the next year as her paper bound job is eliminated. That process is taking place all over the world today.)

A truly automated system would allow the Capitalists to keep records without an army of computer literate, minimum-wage workers. That will have to wait for the truly automated computer system of the future. Twenty years ago, it was commonly predicted that such systems would be available in ten years! That prediction was way off!

True artificial intelligence computing has been far more evasive than was at first anticipated. The experts in the field, at this point, do not even have a clue as to which of several directions of research will finally yield real artificial intelligence. Many in the field of consciousness research even predict that the human brain is so complex that a machine might never be able to duplicate its computing power (See Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind and Shadows of the Mind*, for example.)

I do not hold with Penrose's pessimism and somewhat dualistic, almost supernatural theory of consciousness that is based on the idea of quantum-level organization of the consciousness; however, despite the enormous stride forward in brain research and understanding of how intelligence works, scientists have yet to come up with a convincing theory of consciousness. The most popular theory of brain function, meanwhile, suffers from the problem that it really does not adequately explain the level of complexity of the brain. The "Connectionist" theory is based on the idea that each brain cell is roughly equivalent to a transistor in a computer, functioning as a switch that can represent data by its chemo-electric state (See Paul Churchland, *Neurophilosophy*, 1992). The problem is that when one counts up all the neurons in the average brain, they fall magnitudes short of the number that would be necessary to provide the kind of computing power we know the brain actually has.

So to create a machine that can do what the \$5.20 per hour worker can do for the capitalist is not just a ways off, it is in fact not known for certain if can be done at all. My materialist and dialectical philosophy leads me to believe that it can be done, but I have no proof to point to.

Until we either learn the way nature evolved intelligence or figure out a new form of intelligence, we are not going to be building any machines that are intelligent. And until we create machines that are intelligent, we are not going to see a moribund form of Capitalism that creates a new, permanent "structurally unemployed class."

Unemployment will rise and fall and there will be no permanent unemployed. That is not in the cards. In fact, people who should have the chance to be "permanently unemployed" for the purpose of raising children are being kicked out into the streets by the liberal/conservative welfare reform. They will work for minimum wage, or less, and without the advent of a strong, mass, electoral labor party, they will have little recourse.

In fact, the same conditions exist today in regard to the fundamental drive toward a permanent army of the unemployed as existed in Marx's day. That is not new, it is as old as capitalism.

The idea, promoted by Nelson Peery, that this "new structurally unemployed class" is the basis for a new revolutionary movement is pure nonsense! At this juncture, we must shoot for a grander, loftier

vision of the working class, a vision of the 70 percent or so of people in the United States who work for a living--for one or another individual or corporate capitalist--but are not a part of capitalist management as constituting the modern working class.

The Marxist idea of class has never excluded the so-called unproductive workforce, those in service, and other non-manufacturing, or not value-creating positions. The working class has always been what it is in reality, all non-management humans who work for someone other than themselves. In fact, that can even include many types of so-called self-employed when those people are actually locked into subservient contracts or franchise deals that make them defacto workers (sans benefits). The idea that we should be abandoning the vast working class (70 percent of the population) for the pipedream of organizing an illusionary class that has no precedent in Marxist thought or in reality is counterproductive to our real needs.

Not only is this idea based on the faulty idea that automation is already pervasive, when in fact it does not yet exist, but it is also based on the idea that the working class is no longer worth trying to organize!

But to the contrary, our class (even among those in the "aristocracy of labor") is in a better position and predisposition to be organized right now than at any other time since the 1940s! I contend that we, the working class left and labor force, are at least partly to blame for missing the opportunities other working classes in other countries were able to make gains from in the period from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, mainly because we failed to see that that was a time of long-wave boom and because we allowed the hopes of a cross-class coalition with the liberals to cloud our judgement. Valuable opportunities were missed on both counts.

The idea that today we face some kind of Capitalist economic meltdown based on the inability of capitalism to put people to work because of automation is premature, by at least decades! It also makes us sound like nuts because the working class is smart enough to see what is really going on and to see that this theory does not offer them any positive way to organize in their interests. A massive, worldwide labor campaign to shorten the workweek with no reduction in pay, combined with a campaign for real full employment, social security, free higher education and a drastic rise in the global wage scale is the answer.

In solidarity,
Chris Driscoll

4. Subject: Re: Team Concept

Date: 09 Jul 1998 08:58:22
From: aucad@dclink.com
To: Recipients of conference: labr.party@conf.igc.apc.org

Dear list,
Team concept is essentially an issue between unions and bosses/owners.

It is an issue that should be superceded by political changes, if the LP ever reaches the other 15/16ths of the union movement that is not yet with us.

When we overturn the bad parts of Taft-Hartley and other anti-union legislation and enact legislation protecting the right to strike, and the right to organize, issues like team concept will be much easier to educate around.

If the LP took an official stand on team concept now, it would only be used to keep unions out of the party. That doesn't make much sense. It is not a question of principle, since our responsibilities are to take positions on political issues, not on contract issues. We may abhor the underlying political ideas involved in team concept (I certainly do!), but that does not mean we should take a position on the issue as a party. This is just one more area where John, Richard, Earl, Sean O'T. and others are confusing the mission of a union with that of a political party.

We do not have the luxury of letting our hearts rule our minds on this one. We must stay principled, and keep to our own side of the line that separates the issues that unions must debate and decide for themselves, and those that the unions must work on together through a union-based, union-led political party.

We can, however, use the Labor Party to teach the ideas behind class solidarity. One of the ideas behind class solidarity is that you side with your own class when it is under attack. We are under attack today, and team concept is being used as a blunt instrument against some of us. While we can't tell the unions what to do with their contract negotiations, or take stands on issues like team concept, we can point out through our educational efforts that such concepts as team concept undermine class solidarity.

We can point out that the bosses and their government have been aiming their class warfare against us for decades without stopping, and that in warfare a common tactic is to make a temporary peace with one side of an alliance while stepping up the fire against another side. That is really a part of the bosses' aim with team concept.

Rather than to allow them to keep us from building a labor party by taking a meaningless and stupid position against team concept or any other minor irritants that the bosses throw at us, we need to start attacking issues on a much higher level.

For instance, we need to change the laws that stop workers (even government workers) from striking in solidarity with others. Right now, we need to be doing what our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico are doing!

In solidarity,
Chris Driscoll

Earl Silbar comments(***): ***Those who understand/believe this should openly make our case against the 'team' practice and concept, beginning now. Waiting until the LP is bigger will only mean that more official unions will be there to defend their collaboration and attack our views and us. Why wait till the opponents are stronger to begin the open contest? Why would the people who want to push the Team Concept be stronger after the Labor Party is more organized? If you are trying to discourage endorsement by unions that already engage in "co-participation," then that's just counter-intuitive from a perspective of attempting to organize mass union support. From my understanding of the situation that has led to the Team Concept, it is the weakness of the unions that helps to bring about this sort of collaboration. This is a rather complicated issue as far as its effect on workers "self conception" and so forth, but the Labor Party as such would seem to help workers to identify with each other and with being members of the "working class" in opposition to the Demoblicans and their bourgeois politics. What's more, if our program to lessen the risk of organizing is actually carried

through, undoubtedly more workers will organize. A revived "safety net" will replace the floor that Rooseveltian programs presumably put under workers such that "scabbing" will not be as attractive as it is at this time because of sheer desperation. As far as "participation" goes, and this is not an area that the Labor Party will be involved in other than supporting strikers' and picketers' political rights, etc, American workers can only demand that management step aside if they are in a position like (my favorite because it's the only real instance that I'm familiar with) Eastern Airlines where the workforce was ungovernable and management had to hand over prerogatives in order for the company to survive. The workers as managers improved the operations in real efficiency and saved Eastern money overall. There was worker solidarity and pride in the plant and they had union leadership that believed in worker control. But, the Labor Party would not be demanding such arrangements, we can only work for a program which might make arrangements like that more likely. Admittedly, the Labor Party walks a fine line between being reformist and being anti-Capitalist per se. Unfortunately, I must say that we are not now anti-Capitalist as such. When we gain strength, I think that this will become more of an issue.***

Dennis Dixon comments: But that would ignore the testimony of workers from these [Staley, CAT, etc - JDD] struggles that such cooperation severely undermined their own self concept, gave management the information needed to defeat and replace them, etc. We certainly should, as union activists, warn people of the dangers of management "picking our brains." This has been the classic means by which to deskill the workforce, consolidating manpower, hiring scabs, and developing machines to replace workers. It would be difficult for the Labor Party to pass laws saying that the employer can't ask you how you do your job. It's the unions' job to warn against these co-optation techniques. I have told many people to no avail that unions should have orientation sessions for members in which issues like this, along with a basic Labor History lecture, and basic Labor economics should be taught. This could be done over a weekend or in several sessions. I know I was barely even aware I was in the various unions for which I paid dues. The Labor Party could participate in educationals like this, I suppose, as could the various unions, Jobs with Justice, and others. I think that it should be part of a Labor Education program so that more than one union might be able to send their new members. I doubt there are many unions that get enough new members at any one time to fill such a class. As it stands now, you already openly oppose these collaborationist concepts through WPAEN (Workers Progressive Action and Educational Network), and that's legitimate. You can invite people to come to your meetings and many of us will come. But, the Labor Party is not going to put this specifically in the platform. You are welcome to try, but I don't think it will stand up on merit--even though I agree with your assessment of the Team Concept otherwise.
Dennis Dixon (Chicago)

5. Subject: 1998 NETWORKS FOR PEOPLE

Date: Tue, 20 Oct 1998 11:28:56 -0400
From: Kevin Taglang <kevint@BENTON.ORG>

SOCIETY & INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE, THE NEXT GENERATION
NTIA's forum to discuss the connections of people, information technology, and services across a broad spectrum of American life will be held December 8 - 9. Save the date to participate in this important conference.

http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/tiiap/conference/Title_Page.html

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