**Get Involved with the Public i**

You don't need a degree in journalism to be a citizen journalist. We are all experts in something, and we have the ability to share our information and knowledge with others. The Public i is always looking for writers and story ideas. We invite you to submit ideas or proposals during our weekly meetings (Thursdays at 5:30pm at the UCIMC), post a story to the web site (http://publici.ucimc.org), or to contact one of the editors.

- Become a citizen journalist; write a news story or opinion piece.
- Make a tax-deductible contribution.
- Help distribute the Public i around the Champaign-Urbana area.
- Help with fund-raisers.
- Join the editorial board.

**Sustaining Contributors**

The Public i wishes to express its deep appreciation to the following sustaining contributors for their financial and material support:

- **SocialiteForum:** An Open Discussion and Action Group, Meets 3rd Saturdays of the month, 3-5 pm, at IMC, 218 W. Main St, U.
- **World Harvest International and Gourmet Foods:** 519 E. University, Champaign.
- **The AFL-CIO of Champaign County:**
- **The Union of Professional Employees (UPE):**
- **Illini Quality Used Auto Sales:** 606 E. University, Champaign; 352-7870
- **That’s Rentertainment:** 308 W. University, Urbana; 367-5044
- **Caffe Paradiso:** 901 S. Lincoln, Urbana; 384-6066
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- **Illini Quality Used Auto Sales:** 606 E. University, Champaign; 352-7870
- **That’s Rentertainment:** 308 W. University, Urbana; 367-5044
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**وكاماشة**

The Public i, a project of the Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, is an independent, collectively-run, community-oriented publication that provides a forum for topics underreported and voices underrepresented in the dominant media. All contributors to the paper are volunteers. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to submit articles or story ideas to the editorial collective. We prefer, but do not necessarily restrict ourselves to, articles on issues of local impact written by authors with local ties.

**October Events**

**IMC Shows**

**WEDNESDAY, OCT 1**
Beth Amsel
Maggie Simpson
Kate Hathaway
Kevin Elliott
Folk/Acoustic, 8pm.

**SATURDAY, OCT 4**
James O Brien with
MJ Walker and TBA
Folk/Acoustic, 8pm.

**SATURDAY, OCT 25**
A New Music Festival
Experimental/Improvisational. Details below.

**MIDDLE ROOM GALLERY**

@ The UC-IMC presents an exhibition of midwest COMIC AND SEQUENTIAL ART.
Opening October 6th, the show will highlight several vital and talented artists working in the "comics" medium, whether in comic books, zines, newspapers or websites. Join us for the Opening reception Saturday, October 11th from 7-9pm.

**Pauline Oliveros Foundation**

**Midwest and IMC Present:**

*Urbana Champaign’s Improvisors Summit*

at the Channing-Murray Foundation
October 25, 2003, 8pm
$5 - $15 suggested donation
All proceeds will benefit PFOM (Midwest and IMC).
For more information contact PFOM@pofinc.org or phone 217-649-1662.

**Visualizing the Global**

*Computer Modeling, Ecology, Politics - A Silicon, Carbon, & Culture Initiative*

Thursday October 16th, 6:00-8:30pm
Beckman Institute Auditorium
Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology, UIUC
405 North Mathews Avenue
Urbana, IL 61801 USA
contact: John Wedge (wedge@uiuc.edu)
John Martirano (martiran@ncsa.uiuc.edu)

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Defending Public Education

In the last issue of the Public I there were two articles critical of public education. One advocated home schooling, the other no schooling. I will argue that no schooling is always bad for a young person, and that home schooling at best can be justified in certain unique circumstances but is a poor choice as a general rule. I am a curious person to write such an article. I went through the public education system in Chicago, first at Stephen K. Hayt Elementary School and then Nicholas Senn High School both on Chicago’s North Side. Through the entire experience, I dreaded going to school every morning. In elementary school, I was nauseated in the morning at the thought of trottting off to school and often arrived having rid myself of my breakfast. The last day of summer vacation was the gloomiest day of my life. My mother often reflected that, given such dread, it was strange that I would go on to a public university (the U of I) to take my B.A., pursue graduate studies, and then assume a teaching career. As a younger, I would certainly have opted for home schooling or no schooling if given the option. I thank my lucky stars that I was not given that option. I would have chosen badly because I would not have known any better.

Public education is an important mechanism for upward mobility in a class-divided society such as our own. Many parents are simply not equipped to educate their children. Most low-income and single parents have to work so long, often more than one job, that they do not have the time to educate their children. At the very top of the economic and social hierarchy, super-wealthy patrician families like the Bushes send their kids to private prep schools to prepare them for the Ivy League or other elite private universities like Stanford or Duke. What are the non-affluent to do if we were to abolish public education? The general argument against public education has some very severe class and racial implications. There would be drastic unintended consequences if public education were to be abolished. Neither of my parents had a B.A. For all my angst about school, I am sure that I would have never have enjoyed the fulfilling experience of being a professor at a major university if I had not been given the experience (albeit against my will even though it was my right) of public education.

Public education gives the child her first experience in moving outside of the particularistic confines of the family. The family is a unit that is above all devoted to the self-interest of its members. It develops tight bonds of partiality between parents and children. When the child enters a school, she learns that there are people outside of her particular family who have interests, needs, and ideas that are different from those of her family. The parochial school by definition is less expansive of the child’s horizons than the secular public school, but it still offers a wider horizon than no schooling or no schooling outside of the home. In the school, the child is confronted with difference and hopefully learns to be respectful of those differences. The child learns how to communicate with others outside of the family. Respect for difference and the ability to communicate with others who are different and not family members are absolutely crucial attributes for a democratic society and polity. They are also consistent with teaching the child to be a critical and questioning citizen. A related function of the school is to foster a communicative process between peers on the one hand and teachers and students on the other. This involves two conceptions, equality and respect. In public education, students see that their class peers are entitled to the same consideration that they are. In the family, they see this with their siblings, if they have them. In school, they learn to become less narcissistic because they see that others to whom they are not related merit the same treatment that they do. On the other hand, they learn that they are not equal in an important sense to their teachers. They come to understand that there is an intellectual world out there that the teacher has a better hold of than they do and that under certain circumstances it is appropriate and in their own interest to take advantage of that. There is thus a double educational process going on in the classroom, egalitarian learning among student peers and authoritative learning from the teacher. Some would argue that the latter is just a manifestation of raw power. I respond that the good teacher genuinely cares for his pupils and earns their respect through demonstrating that care while stimulating the child’s intellectual curiosity and learning. Of course power is involved, but when not abused it is not a dominating, damag- ing power. In the case of a good teacher, it is a symbolic power in which the power of the teacher is used to empower the pupils.

Additionally, public education entails accountability in a way that home schooling does not. Since the learning progress of the pupil is assessed by people outside of the particularistic family, those responsible for the education of the child are in a position to less partially assess her progress. Despite the overemphasis on testing in the Bush Administrations’s mandated guidelines, testing is but one of several ways of assessing a pupil’s progress. There are more holistic ways that most teachers employ as well. But in many states, there is virtually no accountability outside of the family that home schools. If the family is satisfied with the learning of the daughter or son, that’s fine. And under conditions of no schooling as it was described by Gina Cassidy in last month’s Public, the child is accountable to herself. In both instances, home or no schooling, none of the above advantages of public education would apply. This assumes that only the family, and not the society as a whole, has an interest in the education of children.

I do not deny that in practice there are serious problems in public education in the United States today. Some have to do with unequal or inadequate funding, some with racial and class segregation because of housing patterns, some with the difficulty of attracting superior teachers because of the shamelessly low pay accorded to teachers, some with the lack of involvement of parents and community members with their children and in the schools. These issues need to be addressed at all levels of government and in local communities. In Urbana, some teachers and community members created a movement called the Project for Educational Democracy (PED) that addressed the issue of parental and community involvement in school decision-making.* Whether it be the Urbana’s PED or the Small School Movement in Chicago, there are movements that recognize the imperfections of public education and attempt to address them.

In certain exceptional cases, such as threat of serious physical or psychological harm, I can understand why parents might remove their children from schools. But I do not believe that the interest of the child or the society is served by turning this into a general principle. On the other hand, I think that it is a general principle in a democratic society that all of us have an obligation to be attentive to our public schools and to become involved in supporting and improving them whether we have children in them or not.

Challenging “Unschooling”

by Margaret Kosal

The September issue of the Public i included an article by Gina Cassidy entitled “Children’s Liberation” which argued against compulsory public education, advocating instead a system of “unschooling” in which children are free to pursue their own educational interests (perhaps with the guidance and support of their parents). Before Gina’s article went to press, however, it was posted to the Public i listserve for peer review. One member of our editorial collective, Margaret Kosal, took issue with the article, arguing that it contained factual inaccuracies and was propagandistic. This sparked a brief debate among the collective, and in the end we decided to print the article with only minor edits, provided that Margaret was free to include a counterpoint to the “Children’s Liberation” article, a collaboration of Margaret’s points are printed below.

Beyond the conclusions... most of it is unsubstantiated propaganda. The most egregious errors are the claims with regard to the historical “free-thinkers” (the article cites George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford as having “little or no formal schooling”). They were (1) privileged upper class landed gentry who were schooled formally by tutors often employed in their homes or (2) only those schooled in formal school settings of exactly the kind the author criticizes, e.g., Einstein, who valued formal education enough to go all the way through to a PhD from the University of Zurich (which he got at age 26, same as I did – so I can compare myself to Einstein - NOT!), and stayed within the formal university system his entire life. That’s the easiest one to pull apart off the top of my head!

[The author] spuriously neglects/selectively neglects to mention the vast number of historical and current free thinkers who have been or are educated in the formal school system. Just because something is counter to the status quo, the US government, or the Catholic Church does NOT make it true or worthwhile!

One can critique the current US educational system on a number of levels.

Does “unschooling” work for some? YES! Does everyone have a difficult time in the school system? (fail to figure out how to play the game or use resources to one’s own advantage as some do?) NO. Should “unschooling” be made available more? I’m not sure – those who seek it out and seek out the resources are most likely those who may function adequately in a formal environment.

Compulsory education made available free by the state for all boys and girls is one characteristic which people around the planet do admire about the US. Prior to US compulsory education, only rich, white Judeo-Christian boys were educated. Where did the rest of the under-16 population spend their work day? Reckoning public education is not going to produce some utopian (or economically privileged) un-school society but rather a source of cheap, exploitable labor. See Amnesty International reports of “torturous” (labor and long) hours to which children around the world are subjected! The article posted has an unstated undercurrent of economic and social privilege.

Such ideas may be worth considering, possibly with some deep and thoughtful analysis. Perhaps then [they] may be worth advocating. (Is anyone familiar with the Montessori “Unschooling Handbook”, which similarly advocates unschooling or self-schooling?) Is worthwhile because she owns the material as her own and her experience. She is living the unschooling program. (Gina Cassidy’s) article is littered with inaccuracies and portents to reveal the wisdom that is crushed in her conspiracy theory of public education!

How many of us “survived” the public education system? How many of the founders and active members of the UC-M and the LMC movement came out of the public school system? Are we ALL statistical anomalies? How large a group can be considered a statistical anomaly? Blaming the public education system for a host of negative effects is not a solution. Edited by Darrin Drda and Lisa Chason

Leave No Public School Standing

By Gene Vanderport

Gene Vanderport a long-time local political activist working in the education labor movement. He is currently a staff representative based in Urbana for the Illinois Education Association (IEA).

This article reflects his own thoughts and are not necessarily those of IEA.

You have to hand it to the Bush administration. They have a remarkable ability to seize the agenda from Democrats and progressives and force the rest of us to dance to their tune, at least in the short run. I’m talking specifically about the “No Child Left Behind” reauthorization of the School and Secondary Education Act. The public education “reform” embodied in “No Child” is truly powerful and is wreaking havoc across the nation.

There is a remarkable consistency in Bush policy-making and I’m struck with parallels to the administration’s Iraq gambit. Take a look. Start with a catchy title you can’t argue against. The Bush administration is wielding a massive budget to finance its “choice” agenda, which is wreaking havoc across the nation.

The need and opportunity are before us. The need for reform is evident, and the opportunity for serious reform, while not without its risks, is certainly present. The challenge is to seize the moment and make the reforms we need.

The key to making this happen is to create a public education system that is responsive to the needs of its students and communities. This means investing in our schools and providing resources to support teacher education and development.

We must also work to ensure that our schools are safe and welcoming places for all students. This means providing adequate funding for security measures and creating a culture of respect and inclusion.

Finally, we must work to create a system that values and respects all students, regardless of their background or ability. This means providing opportunities for all students to succeed and ensuring that every child has the chance to reach their full potential.

The public education system is a critical part of our democracy and our society. We must work together to ensure that it is a system that serves all students and meets the needs of our communities.

Community Forum

Edited by Darrin Drda and Lisa Chason

Strickland (D-Ohio) has proposed this bill that would do the following:

- End reliance on a single test
- Give schools credit for improving student achievement in reasonable time frames
- Create workable ways to measure skills and progress of students with disabilities and limited English
- Public school choice and supplemental services would be targeted specifically for those students in subgroups that have failed to improve as expected

This bill, plus efforts to fully and adequately fund the law, would give a long way to fixing a very flawed policy. The need and opportunity are before us. It’s time to rein in the chaos, build the political coalition, and truly give public education the resources it needs to succeed for every child.

Challenges in the Schools

By Gene Vanderport

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ICMFest Raises Over $1,500 for the UC-IMC
by Meghan Krausch

ICMFest, last month’s all day benefit at the Canopy Club (fortified by the IMC’s booking group) was a resounding success. With the help of twelve bands, two feature films, one filmmaker, a ‘zine slam, lots of volunteers, and an enthusiastically supportive community, we were able to raise $3,687 for the IMC! One thousand dollars of this money will go toward the IMC’s Capital Campaign; of the rest, a portion will go to the IMC’s Video Group for its contributions to the event, and the remainder will be reserved to support IMC Projects.

The Capital Campaign, as many people may know, has become increasingly urgent since the closure of the IMC’s shows space, which was a major source of revenue. In order for the IMC to be the community resource it has the potential to become, we need a place we can put on all-ages non-smoking concerts, have enough room to display all the books and magazines in our library, and have adequate space to open our own small media.

The Capital Campaign’s goal is to reach $100,000 by the end of the year in order to purchase a permanent home for the Independent Media Center. We are well on our way with over $42,000 in the bank, but we are looking toward the community (including Public i readers) to help us reach our goal. In order to make your tax deductible contribution to the Capital Campaign, go to http://capital.ucimc.org, or send your check to Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, ATTN: Treasurer/Capital Campaign, 218 W. Main St., Suite 110, Urbana, IL 61801-2725, made out to UCIMC with Capital Campaign in the memo line.

In part due to the overwhelming success of ICMFest, the IMC Booking Group plans to use its share of the ICMFest money to produce a similar all day affair, this time at the Channing-Murray Foundation and open to folks of all ages. This concert is scheduled for November 15, and will be coordinated by several of our undergate volunteers.

And looking even further into the future, the Booking Group has plans to make ICMFest a semiannual event, with the possibility of another event in the Spring and one next summer. The funds from last month’s ICMFest will help make all of this possible, and will allow us to rent space to put on smaller shows as often as we possibly can. Thanks to everyone who attended the festival, everyone who stayed all day to help (some people volunteered for more than twelve hours!), everyone who paid a $50 entrance fee (we saw you), and all the businesses in town that generously offered their services to help us make our crazy idea a success.

The Legacy of GirlZone
by Rebecca Crist

After four years as a volunteer with GirlZone, Rebecca Crist can change the oil in her car, create a zine in under two hours, defend herself, light a grill with a fluid lighter, and can often adjust the controls on her borrowed skateboard. A half hour later, though, she was swooshing down the ramps, seated, on her borrowed board. By the end of the workshop, she was asking her mother to buy her a board for her birthday.

As a GirlZone volunteer, I saw that sort of transformation happen over and over. Girls came to these workshops disinclined to step onto a skateboard, to breakdance, to speak on the radio—do anything that might make them look foolish, or awkward, or just not good at something. No matter how much they wanted to try it. And universally they left feeling confident, capable, and involved.

That was no accident, and that was not simply a result of “let’s meet at the skate park/dance studio/radio station.” GirlZone workshops were very thoughtfully planned to best engage girls in active participation—something a lot of girls don’t encounter in their schools, or even their homes.

Research has shown that girls drop out of their own lives around adolescence, and the fact is that we let them do it. We teach them to play soccer in P.E., but we don’t force them to actually make an effort to contact the ball. We give them bikes, but don’t give them a bike repair toolkit. We give them computers, and load them down with word games and Cosmo makeover software. Girls are disinhibited and unhappy, and instead of putting them on the spot and forcing their participation, we let them disappear.

If I sound hysterical, picture the basketball courts at Hessel Park, or Phillips Rec Center, or any neighborhood schoolyard. No locks, no entrance fees, no limitations to access—and almost uniformly no girls. Imagine being that trio of beginning girls who want to play basketball; imagine asking the group of guys who play every day if you can use the court for an hour. The issue for girls in this town—and any town—isn’t just the right to use; it’s the culture that says Sure, you can be here, as long as you stay out of the way.

GirlZone was specifically designed to combat this culture that lets girls be passive participants in their own lives. I developed eight years ago as part of Aimee Rickman’s graduate work in educational psychology, GirlZone ran monthly workshops for girls ages 7 to 16, covering everything from auto repair to knitting. But far more important than just providing access to oil pans and knitting needles, GirlZone was meticulously and thoughtfully designed to encourage and enable—and even enforce—girls’ engagement. In everything from the language we used to the spaces in which we held our workshops, GirlZone was a planned environment built to affirm girls’ pre-installed capabilities.

We required workshop facilitators to go through training, covering everything from ways to break up cliques to how to speak to girls to show you appreciate their input. We discussed the best ways to address the sliding fee scale so that no girl had to feel guilty or embarrassed, and so that no girl ever was turned away for lack of funds. We stressed the importance of trying new things ourselves, of keeping in mind how it feels to be vulnerable and clumsy when you want to be cool and competent. We talked about why it’s important that parents not be allowed to watch the workshops, why we avoid saying “you girls,” and why we never allow anyone to say “girls rule, boys drool.”

To me, those seemed like great ideas; maybe that’s because I saw them at work. I know some of our policies were difficult for others to swallow. We made no effort to hide the fact that we were a feminist organization, which was sometimes misconstrued in ways that had nothing to do with equality. We were unapologetically girl-based, non-sectarian, and open to folks of all types.

GirlZone prided itself on being based in this community. We held meetings and workshops in local businesses, we talked local talent to teach workshops, we worked with local girls. Eventually, we hoped, the community would take some of that back and provide girls opportunities without GirlZone steering things along.

GirlZone was also entirely volunteer-run. Even at its busiest moments, GirlZone was run by Aimee and a small phalanx of unpaid women and men volunteering their free time, after work, and around classes. And more than that, GirlZone was basically unfunded. The only major local funding organization, the United Way, turned us down. The small grants we did get were designated for programs only, rather than for staff or space.

And that, partly, is why GirlZone had to close. After eight years, GirlZone was still an unpaid full-time job for Aimee Rickman. After eight years, GirlZone was an organization that everyone was glad to have around, but that not many were willing to support with money, or space, or equipment. Our attempts to collaborate with various local city and nonprofit youth organizations had consistently fallen through or been rebuffed. We were forever finding ourselves in a fait accompli that says Sure, you can be here, as long as you stay out of the way.

Most heartbreakingly, though, because of GirlZone open, we were showing girls that their interests weren’t worth a paid staff, unlike, say, greyhounds or lizards. And we were showing this town that it didn’t have to pick up the slack, that we’d be happy to beg and borrow and pay out of pocket with our time and our money to serve their girls.

Two years ago, the Champaign Park District opened a dazzling new skate park. It’s bright and smooth and free. And it’s very much dominated by boys, to the point that a boy, maybe ten years old, asked Aimee and me—both in our late twenties—to take our skateboards and get out of the way so he could have the area. And we did it. We resent it, we dissected it, we thought up what we should have said, and we’re still not sure why we gave up the space, but we did it, because that’s the way things are. The skate park is a beautiful gift to the young people of C-U, but just because the gate is open doesn’t make it, in any practical sense, accessible to everyone. But we paid for that park, just like we pay for the basketball courts and the ball diamonds and the swimming pools, and it’s our duty to say we want the parks and the youth groups to make sure that everybody really does get a chance to play.

If it’s true that you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone, maybe GirlZone’s shuttering will inspire more people to look at the playgrounds, the skate parks, the open mic nights, the battles of the bands, and say “where are the girls?” I hope so. Wow, do I hope so. But even more. I hope that next time you look at the skate park, you’ll see Chloe out there with the board that she eventually got for her birthday, showing her friends how well she can ollie. Go to it, people. GirlZone’s gone; now go make this whole dang town the zone for girls.
A Visit to Baghdad

Interview by Lisa Chason

Mohammad al-Heeti, owner and manager of the popular World Harvest international food store at 519 E. University Avenue in Champaign, was born in Hie, Iraq, a small and very old city on the Euphrates River, west of Baghdad. This past June he went to Iraq with his 20-year-old daughter Roaa to visit family. They stayed mostly in Hie but also visited Baghdad twice, and went to Ramadi and Falluja, where his wife is from. This interview took place on September 18.

We understand that the US forces have wanted to control everything, out of their fear for the Saddam and Baathist loyalists. They dissolved the Iraqi army, fired all the police and many government workers and sent them all home with nothing to do. Now unemployment is at 60 percent.

Yes, and arms are everywhere. You can buy them anywhere. The bases were left unattended. Now people are selling hand grenades, automatic weapons. In this way they can make some extra money. Children also are selling them. In the vegetable market, meat market, there are also weapons. It takes no effort to find them. This is new to Iraqi society. There was never such a situation before.

Why did you leave them? For protection.

Yes – security is zero. You need something at home to protect yourself. And also out of curiosity. They are very cheap. Items worth hundreds of dollars – you can buy for a few dollars. It’s a horrible atmosphere.

The Americans chose to dismiss everyone. Couldn’t they just have removed the people at the top?

But you see they had no plan for after the war. Winning the war – this is their achievement. No other power can claim that – especially from the air. What comes after that? They don’t know the people, the culture. They had been given the wrong impression – that when you would topple the regime in Iraq, the Iraqi people would dance in the streets – come with flowers and open arms. That was bad advice. Unfortunately they didn’t give it enough thought – that was the major mistake they committed. That’s one of the reasons they face all these problems. They could have much better systems for how to deal with the Iraqis. People might have been less surprised. They said it was to free the people from Saddam, but if that was their real intention then they would have thought about how to deal with the people afterwards. Most of their thinking was about oil. So when you go to Iraq you see the few buildings concerned with the oil industry – these are undamaged. It is very clear to everyone there they didn’t calculate cleverly how to manage Iraq.

Not everyone in the police or military or working for the government was loyal to Saddam. Only a very small percentage was willing to fight next to him. Unfortunately they didn’t think about this properly.

The costs for continuing the occupation are so enormous now. Do you think the revenue the US administration expects to get back from the oil makes it worthwhile to stay this course?

It is not only dollars and cents. It is that whoever will control the region will control the whole world, now at Europe, especially France and Germany, versus the US. If they control the oil of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and small nations such as Qatar – anyone who will have their hands on all of that oil, they will manipulate the whole world.

They say that the last barrel of oil that will come from Iraq, that has the second largest reserves after Saudi Arabia. When the US went there they thought it would be easy. Bring in our troops, then install new people who will help us because we freed them. Their calculation was absolutely wrong. They thought people were so weak after 12 years of sanctions. Then they thought it would be easy. Bring in our troops, then install new people who will help us because we freed them.

A defaced Saddam monument and anti-American graffiti reflect the prevailing attitude in Baghdad.

Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, top Shiite cleric who held a seat on the US-created Iraqi Governing Council, was killed in a bomb attack in Baghdad. Some   Muslims – to them an occupation is an occupation. So when the people in Iraq saw the US will dump the UN and go and do whatever they want to do. Do they look at the US the same way they look at the UN? In the last twelve years the US used the UN to impose the sanctions – they worked together to kill that million and a half. And many agents who worked with the UN – they admitted they were spies for the US. Like Scott Ritter – he was a UN weapons inspector – in his lectures and publications he admitted he was working for the US. So when the people in Iraq look at the US and the UN they see two sides of the same coin. To the Iraqis an occupation is an occupation – no matter if they are Russian, American, Turkish, Arab, Muslims – to them an occupation is an occupation. So whoever participates in that, they are helping the US in their occupation. They will not differentiate between Americans and British and Polish – to them it’s occupation.

We are hearing reports about ethnic tensions among the Sunnis, Shia and Kurds. Some say if the US would leave now civil war would break out. Have their historically been divisions among these groups and do you believe civil war would occur?

This same slogan was used by Saddam Hussein himself: if I leave you, there will be a civil war. Now Saddam is gone. There is no civil war. At a time when there is no police force, no secret service – it is actually the opposite. Everybody sees on Arab satellite TV the unity. There has not been one incident of religious killing. The killing which is taking place is either for theft or retaliation or family feuds or it is among Baath party members. Even after the tragedy which took al-Hakim [Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, top Shiite cleric who held a seat on the US-created Iraqi Governing Council, killed in a bomb attack in Baghdad] in Najaf, when everybody thought that then civil war would start – it didn’t happen. Again the opposite has been proven. The people got together – and there are a lot of very, very smart people among the Sunnis, the Shia, the Kurds. They get together very frequently, almost every week, just to keep the country together as before. And they are very successful. So the issue of ethnic fighting or civil war after the US would leave – this is the same slogan used by Saddam Hussein, now being used by the US. And another point. There has never been a civil war in Iraq. There has been war between the government and ethnic groups – but not among the people themselves. It was the government against the Kurdish people – not the people themselves. The people are very close to each other. They are neighbors, they marry each other.

Saddam’s regime was not Sunni or Islamic – he was against anybody who would dare to be against him. Saddam killed his sons-in-law, his nephews, his relatives. He was born into a Sunni family but he was secular; he didn’t differentiate among any ethnic groups. He killed more people, especially the thinkers, the scholars – he killed more from the so-called “Sunni triangle” than from the rest of the country. The Baath party was Arab nationalist. Before British colonization, the military was more made up of Sunni. He opened the military to the Shia more than before. Saddam said no difference anymore – we are Arab, anyone can get into the military. Many of his assistants were Shia or Kurds or Christian. Only thing that mattered was how loyal you were to him and to his party – the only criteria.

So you don’t believe that if the US pulls out the situation will deteriorate?

I don’t think so. If the US would really trust the Iraqis, would give them the power to run their own affairs, their own country – there are enough people in Iraq who could do this well. But the longer the US stays in Iraq, the more enemies it will create inside Iraq. Now even mainstream media here is showing it. So if they leave, trust the
Iraqis, develop a good relationship with the people of Iraq – the Iraqis would love to have a better relationship with the West, with the US.

What is the extent of the resistance? It is everywhere – north, south, center, east, west. Nowadays they don’t allow the reporters to cover any of it. That’s part of blocking the information coming to this country. This is very serious.

Are foreigners involved? Well, the borders are all completely open. All you have to do is show your passport and you can go through the checkpoint. Iraq has long borders with Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia – and anybody can enter. This was a big mistake when they dissolved the government forces – now the borders are open to anyone. It happened to me – I didn’t have to get out of my car, I wasn’t asked anything, they didn’t even stamp my passport. Very strange. And now it is too late if they want to seal the borders.

Of the $87 billion Bush has requested 15 to 20 billion is considered money for reconstruction, and from other countries very little is coming in. So there continues to be plenty of money for reconstruction... It’s funny – the second largest oil reserves in the world. Why do they need money for reconstruction? Iraqi people themselves have said so many times we are rich enough to control our own economy, we have enough money to rebuild. The US destroyed it twice – in ’91, in the name of the liberation of Kuwait, and in 2003, in the name of the liberation of the Iraqi people – they literally destroyed the economy. And then they occupied the country. And now they are talking about raising money to rebuild that country. The country has enough money. That’s what Iraqis are saying – there are tens of billions of dollars in Iraqi frozen assets all over the world. And if the oil were allowed to be sold – they wouldn’t have to collect one dollar from anywhere else on this earth. But they have a hidden agenda – they consider the oil as their oil – and the moment they start talking about the “privatization of oil” they feel something wrong is going on. And who is going to own it? The Iraqis, or the American companies? That’s the point that is really bothering every Iraqi. The oil of Iraq is going to be privatized – and who’s going to own it? So we need to ask them: Why are you collecting money, and for what? For your troops, you need money. To rebuild Iraq, Iraq would have enough money from the oil revenue if you let it go to the Iraqis. So it’s very obvious.

What do you think of the recent French proposal that a provisional government should be established in Iraq in a month, a draft constitution by the end of the year and elections by next spring? Definitely the Iraqis need some help from outside. But they need sincere help, that puts the interest of the Iraqis first. It doesn’t matter who it comes from. Then get out of there and in one year the Iraqis can fix everything. But unfortunately even France is looking out for their own interests. They are negotiating what is the benefit of participating in this process. The Russians too are looking how to get their piece of the cake. Any time you see a country that opposes the US, then you see them shifting little by little because you don’t see what is going on behind the scenes. All of a sudden the smooth talk starts coming from the US – how can you trust any of them? All the reasons that have been used to wage this war have been proven false. So you don’t feel more solidarity coming from Europe?

If the US controls the Middle East’s oil fields, they will control the whole world. Europe just doesn’t want the US to control it all.

All the money that’s been spent on US military operations – for that money they could have been making business deals. They could have bought control, why did they have to intervene militarily...

That’s true. But what can you do about people who can only think in a military way? Look at Cheney and Rumsfeld – they would never think of a peaceful way. They only know how to wage war. And of course there is Israel. Sharon has said that Iraq and now Iran and Syria – that these regimes have to be changed. I don’t think that Hosni Mubarak of Egypt is any less corrupt – the regime of Jordan, of Iran, of Saudi Arabia – they are all corrupt. Even their position against Israel – it is only propaganda. Unless we really solve the issue of the Palestinian people, by giving them their homeland, this situation will go on.

Your feelings about the immediate situation? I think they will do the following: The US is under huge pressure inside Iraq. Their military people are suffering a lot. Their military形象 has been changed. I don’t think that Hosni Mubarak of Egypt is any less corrupt – the regime of Jordan, of Iran, of Saudi Arabia – they are all corrupt. Even their position against Israel – it is only propaganda. Unless we really solve the issue of the Palestinian people, by giving them their homeland, this situation will go on.

The ruins of a governental building (left) and an Iraqi home

Near a bombing site, An Iraqi man sifts through trash for recyclable metals.
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Strike yields travel advisories at downtown Chicago hotel

By Ricky Baldwin

If you're planning a trip to Chicago any time soon, you may run across warnings about too-good-to-be-true rates at one hotel on Michigan Avenue looking Grant Park. Accommodations at the 580-room hotel are renting at winter prices — $99 a night, compared to twice that in a comparable downtown hotel — or rather, the rooms are not renting, for the most part. All because the hotel tried to squeeze sixty cents out of the folks that clean the rooms and cook the food.

Hundreds of customers have turned away after they arrived and discovered a picket line in front of the hotel. Many more have walked out within the first hour after seeing the state of the hotel from the inside. Unknown and unknowable numbers have simply booked elsewhere when they heard the news.

Big weddings and reunions, some worth as much as $35,000, have simply been dropped by hotels around the block. More have walked out within the first hour violations to health and safety hazards. In this case, says Busch, "especially cleanliness issues." Witness the customer complaints.

"A room service tray sat outside our door for nearly two days with leftover food rotting. "Not well maintained. Escalators and elevators didn't work. It looks like a hotel in pouring rain, in winds that seemed on longer than the boss. "

These are all from customers who booked online this summer, unaware that the workers at the Congress Plaza Hotel have been on strike since June 15. There has not been a strike at a downtown Chicago hotel in decades.

OUT IN THE STREET

The 130 workers belong to Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 1, a member-run union that last year stood up to and beat a hotel management association representing 27 downtown Chicago hotels. Local 1 threatened to strike then, but the hotels blinked first and agreed to raise wages to $10.00 an hour. But when the union contract at the Congress expired, its out-of-town owner — a wealthy clothing importer named Albert Nasser, whose Gelmart Industries supplies Wal-Mart among others — refused to keep pace with these increases. In May management cut pay by seven percent to $9.21. The housekeepers, telephone operators, restaurant employees and others then voted by a 90 percent margin, to strike until Nasser agreed to pay — even if it meant forcing him to sell or shut down the hotel.

"It's like when Moses went against Pharaoh," says Sharon Williams, a phone operator for eight years at the Congress. "Pharaoh did everything he possibly could to them, and still they won. And just like Moses, the workers at the Congress hotel will be out one day longer than the boss."

Other strikers seem to feel the same. Pickets have been up almost without a break straight through heat-stroke season, in pouring rain, in winds that seemed on the verge of tearing up trees by the roots. The one exception was when the union briefly called off the midnight shift, but the strikers soon insisted that the picket line must be active round the clock.

ONE DAY LONGER

Large rallies in support of the strikers have also punctuated the struggle all summer. On July 12, hundreds of religious leaders and other supporters re-enacted the biblical tale of the fall of Jericho, marching with strikers around the entire hotel grounds seven times and finally blowing a trumpet. The walls did not come tumbling down.

On August 9, the mostly-immigrant strikers joined with about 1,000 supporters in an "Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride" at a nearby theater. After that event, supporters marched back to the hotel and around the block again.

Workers from the other 27 union hotels, the ones that got their deal last year, have been out in force to walk the line with the Congress strikers, as have supporters from other unions — Service Employees Industrials Union Local 1, UNITE and others. Earlier in the summer there was a fair amount of media attention. Presidential candidates Carol Moseley-Braun, Dennis Kucinich and Howard Dean have been out to speak with strikers. But by August the media had moved on to other topics.

Then on Labor Day, unions and other community groups joined Local 1 in a civil disobedience in front of the Congress. Hundreds turned out in a driving rain. Twenty linked arms and sat down in the middle of Michigan Avenue traffic and were arrested. Local TV, radio and newspaper coverage suddenly increased as again. The strikers are hoping that the word will continue to spread and that the hotel's dropping clientele will sink even further.

"It really boosted the strike" says HERE spokesperson Lars Negstad.

Still, no one expects the strike to be over anytime soon. And being out of a job is hard on the workers, but the union has been helping them find part-time work at other hotels to supplement their strike pay.

"I'm not worried about it," says Williams. "I know this is right, and I put my trust in Go The workers walking the line are a strong force."

For more customer complaints or to help out, see www.congresshotelstrike.info.