

Why the labor show isn't being broadcast on KPFA

by David Bacon

To listeners of the labor show on KPFA,

Today is the fifth Wednesday that you haven't heard the labor show at its normal time, 7:30 AM on Wednesday. I'm writing to explain why, and to ask you to take action to support the work we've done and would like to continue.

This show broadcast for the first time the week NAFTA went into effect, in January, 1994. It was then called Labor and the Global Economy, and the name still sums up what the show is about. Our first segment was a live interview of Bay Area unionists who'd gone to Tijuana to observe a union election in which workers were trying to organize an independent union in a maquiladora.

Over the years we've brought listeners news from unions, workers' centers, and working class social movements. We've tried to present the world as it looks from the bottom -- from the point of view of workers themselves. We've covered local strikes and organizing drives, and ones in other parts of the country and the world. We've looked at the migration of people and the rights of migrant workers. We've heard from day laborers, auto workers, janitors, teachers and people without any job. Hundreds of people have told their stories.

The show has been taken off the air twice. Each time we've returned to the microphone. In the mid-90s we were removed by station manager Pat Scott when she reorganized the station's programming. We returned to the air as part of the Morning Show, which gave us the chance to reach the large number of working people who listen to the radio at 7:30AM on Wednesday. That is our audience. Then, a decade ago, we were among those staff who violated the gag rule prohibiting us from talking about KPFA's own labor problems over the air. Like everyone else at the station, we were locked out, and only got our show back because the community rallied to the station's support.

Five weeks ago, Pacifica executive director Arlene Englehardt took the Morning Show off the air, and laid off its two paid hosts, Brian Edwards-Tiekert and Aimee Allison. One producer, Esther Manilla, took a voluntary layoff to help the station make it through its present financial crisis. The show's other producer, Laura Prives, is still working at the station. Englehardt substituted a show broadcast by KPFK in Los Angeles for KPFA's own locally-produced program.

The following two Wednesdays, in agreement with our Morning Show staff, I went to the studio ready to do the labor show, once accompanied by two organizers from the ILWU as guests. Each time I was told that the labor show had been preempted along with the rest of the KPFA Morning Show, and that the KPFK show was being broadcast in its place. The two Wednesdays after that I was traveling for my work.

Meanwhile, the staff union at KPFA, a unit of CWA Local 9415, filed a grievance over the termination of Edwards-Tiekert and Allison. Englehardt says she had to lay them off because the station was in an economic crisis. The union says that any economic layoffs must be done by seniority, and that the two were not the least senior people and therefore shouldn't have been laid off. The union has proposed an alternative budget, and says the two are being targeted because they opposed Englehardt's budget-cutting proposals in the past.

The union has asked me not to come in to do the labor show while this dispute is going on. I have agreed, because I believe that the union contract and the labor rights of those two people have been violated. Their request is like a picketline protesting the violation, and in solidarity I won't cross it.

There are many complex issues at KPFA that are causing the current crisis, and must be resolved for the station to survive. They include the dire economic situation of the station, the need to balance the rights and responsibilities of paid and unpaid staff, and

our own ability to resolve our problems in a united way without engaging in fratricidal strife.

But one other key issue is workers' rights. I strongly believe that the staff of the station have the same labor rights as other working people. In order to protect those rights, we organized our first union at KPFA in 1965. We've gone on strike at least twice, and been members of at least four different unions over those years.

The union contract at KPFA, therefore, has a long history. People have sacrificed a lot for it, and have used it to guarantee a work environment where fundamental rights are protected. One of those rights is fair treatment and protection from unfair termination. That is why we've had a seniority rule from the very beginning. Our first strike in 1965 was over an unfair firing -- Elsa Knight Thompson. We got her job back.

I was the union rep for the station in the early 1990s, when staff belonged to the UE. I helped negotiate the contract. During that time we fought for the jobs of Flashpoint staff, after Pat Scott said they would be excluded from seniority, and lose their jobs after a year. We won that fight -- Flashpoints is still around today. I say this to emphasize that the union and contract can and should protect everyone, regardless of what side people might be on in our internal debates.

Today the jobs of Edwards-Tiekert and Allison need that same protection. But beyond those particular jobs, it is important to defend the contract and the principles of fair treatment and seniority, along with affirmative action and the diversity of the station staff.

In addition to protecting labor rights, we also need to think seriously about the programming we want during the Morning Show timeslot of 7-9 AM. Rebroadcasting a show from Los Angeles was a big step backwards, away from community radio. Recently, Englehardt has begun broadcasting Democracy Now! in the timeslot in which

we normally do the labor show. Over the past decade we opposed this idea also, for the same reason.

The 7-9AM timeslot, in which the Morning Show is broadcast, is the time when the vast majority of working people can and do listen to the radio. We should use those hours for programming that originates in our own community, and that covers our issues. As progressive as Democracy Now! is, it can't and doesn't cover much of what's happening in northern California, or in the labor and grassroots movements. Now apparently Al Jazeera English will also be broadcast during this timeslot. Al Jazeera deserves an audience in northern California, and has some good programming. But neither it nor Democracy Now! should be used either to displace a show that gives us the community and labor coverage we all say we want.

It is disturbing to me to see it valued so little by so many people in the debates around our current situation. Our labor coverage needs to be expanded, with more resources and time. The show needs a webpage, like the other shows on the station, which would help to build its audience.

I hope the current dispute can be resolved in a fair way. I believe it's possible, and that we'll return to the air when it happens, but a labor show has to take a stand. You can help resolve this situation by communicating your distress to Englehardt and the Pacifica Foundation board, and insisting that they sit down with the union and agree to a solution in accord with the contract [WRITE THEM HERE AND WE'LL FORWARD THE MESSAGE: <http://kpfaworker.wordpress.com/contact-form>]. If you value the labor coverage, please continue supporting the station during these hard times. Urge the station to provide all of its important community programming, including the labor show, with the resources we need to move forward and grow.

Thank you.

David Bacon