

Introduction

Home is where the heart is, and for me, the heart is where the organizing is. I am a grassroots organizer; it's in my blood. I stay close to low-income communities—Black and Latino communities where I have lived, worked, and organized most of my life. I stay close to auto, electronics, restaurant, and hospital workers, among whom I have spent much of my life as bus boy and waiter, nurses aide and operating room orderly, electronic assembler and auto worker. I have come to hate big business from my “labor relations” education at Cornell, my exposure to radical books, films, and organizers, and from first hand experience. I have worked for some of the biggest U.S. transnationals—IBM, Ford and General Motors—twelve years as an assembly line worker, getting a good view of corporate capitalism from the bottom up. As I came to understand the U.S. as an empire, my greatest hope in the fight against imperialism has always been the organization of oppressed peoples.

I don't travel regularly to international conferences. There is always something so compelling in the day-to-day struggle against the system that makes it seem like the struggle of the century. Sometimes it is, often it is not, but my sense that every tactic, no matter how small, is essential to the ultimate victory or defeat of a particular campaign has been a hallmark of my work, and a key to many victories I have helped to win against far more powerful adversaries. That attention to daily detail makes it hard for me to remember that my trips to participate in political gatherings in Mexico, Italy, Canada, Germany and China have always been so influential in my development. After 35 years of organizing I should listen to my own words— I often tell others who worry about taking time away to attend an international meeting “Don't worry, I promise you that the racism and imperialism will still be here when you get back, and if we solve it while you're gone we'll be sure to give you a call.”

So last July, I get a phone call from Rinku Sen, formerly of the Center for Third World Organizing and now on the staff of its sister project, the Applied Research Center (ARC), “We have one more opening on our delegation, you have to decide today, do you want to go to South Africa for the World Conference Against Racism?” Did I? What a question. I called my wife Lian, and said “I have to decide in an hour. Should I go—is it okay on the home front?” “Of course it's okay, Eric. It's great. Go for it,” she tells me. We have always encouraged each other to take advantage of every political opportunity; still, it's great to go with support from your best friend. It was also very generous of Rinku and Gary Delgado from ARC. We talk of solidarity in the movement, but it's hard to get. As a white,

Jewish organizer, I was particularly honored to have been invited, and I am so grateful for what turned out to be a transformative experience.

I decided from the beginning to go as a journalist as well as an organizer. I love to write, and used to make a living at it, covering the prison movement and the world for the *Boston Realpaper* and *Boston After Dark* in the early 1980s. It would be fun to be a left reporter again, well, not a reporter, a commentator, for no one is neutral. I decided to write “dispatches” from Durban and put out my views through the magic of the Internet and email listserves.

The Strategy Center, my political home, is also the scene of my best friends and comrades. Lian had been planning to have two weeks for herself while I was in South Africa, only to come to realize, when I asked for her help, that “my” dispatches from Durban would become “our” project. She is a great editor, all of our work over decades has been influenced by each other, and there was no way I could write stuff right on the spot in a country I had never been in about a conference I had never attended without at least one thoughtful comrade on the other end of the world, to provide ballast and counterweight to any ideas from the frontlines. She agreed to help with all the rewrites that would be needed as the stuff came hot off the internet. Her editorial and political hand is obvious throughout, but, in particular, on the COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) march article where her rewrites helped to shape my approach toward the work to follow, which has now become this book. Having served as editor of her work as well, I know the rare excitement of a personal political partnership.

Then Geoff Ray, the Center's administrator, agreed to give up his Labor Day vacation to produce the dispatches, get them up on listserves. I sent out my first dispatch before I left for South Africa ("On to Durban: Putting the Heat on the U.S.," Dispatch Number One), and the email responses I got back were beyond what I could have imagined, a multiracial but predominantly Black readership pushing me on, encouraging me to report back to them, more than 50 thoughtful emails just from the first dispatch, thus my sign off line on many of the dispatches, "I will keep you posted."

The key to the success of the writing project was the internet-based *Black Radical Congress News*, edited by Art McGee, which published all of my dispatches, and reached an amazing audience. This was supplemented by our own Strategy Center News list, as Geoff had created his own listserve of 400 or so key contacts, and ZNET, where Mike Albert helped us get out the word. It was strange being in South Africa, introducing myself to someone, and have them tell me, "Oh, Eric Mann, I just read your article last night." So here I am in the midst of 10,000 NGO delegates, I send a draft back to Lian, she edits it, Geoff puts it up on our website and sends it out on the listserves, and through the magic of the BRC, ZNET, and the Strategy Center, something I had written in Durban reappears back in Durban within a few hours and is read by a delegate who doesn't know me from Adam—or at least not until then. Those dispatches are read by a producer for Amy Goodman's path-breaking radio program *Democracy Now!*, who was in Durban with a broadcast crew, and the next day I am on Amy's show, radio-in-exile at the time, along with Mahlengi Bengu, Chief Education Officer

of COSATU. So the multiplier effect continues. (The transcript of her interview is included after Dispatch 2—the “COSATU General Strike and the Treachery of the International Marketplace.”)

As you will see from this book, I got very caught up in the debates about South African politics and the South African Left. It was quite an experience to listen to so many people disagree with each other (and disagreement I’m afraid is the order of the day in South Africa right now) at such a high level of theory. I have tried to convey the debates as best I can, giving each participant the fullest and fairest representation of their point of view. These are some very developed people, what a pleasure to be exposed to such a sophisticated level of political debate.

Walking on the beaches of Durban and the streets of Johannesburg, I had not understood before I arrived how beautiful South Africa is. The pain of thinking of how the European settlers stole it for centuries is even more intense when you see the country first hand. And the theft is far from over, even under Black majority rule. It was infuriating to watch so many South African whites, having so much money to spend, while the Blacks in South Africa, as a group, are still so poor. I remembered Amiri Baraka, the revolutionary poet, having said, “Why would the white folks ever give up capitalism voluntarily, for them, imperialism is heaven on earth.” The question remains how the wretched of the earth can continue to rise up and make a new world.

Dispatches from Durban will pretty much speak for itself. By now you have read the jacket blurbs and read Robin Kelley’s generous and insightful introduction. Some of you know who I

am and know about my work. So just a few summaries of key arguments in the book and its objectives.

Dispatches situates itself within a world wide tendency that is trying to find some relationship, some synthesis, between Black revolutionary nationalism, anti-imperialism, and socialism.

Dispatches argues for the strategic centrality of the Black Liberation struggle inside the U.S. and the importance of a unified set of alliances among people of color. It also argues for the strategic importance of antiracist, and anti-imperialist whites, and within that grouping, the historical role of progressive and Left Jews in support of the Black movement, the Palestinian people, and the movements of Third World peoples inside and outside the U.S.

Dispatches places the U.S. government and U.S. imperialism squarely at the center of the world's problems and focuses on the building of an anti-imperialist united front as the key strategy for the world Left. At all times, antiracist politics is treated as effectively, or potentially, anti-imperialist. The World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg are vibrant sites of contestation over these politics.

Dispatches views the South African Left as an advanced workshop for the world Left. I use the interviews with key South African intellectuals, organizers, and electoral leaders, not as a judgement as to what I think they should do, but as a way for those of us in the U.S. in particular to learn from and be challenged by a more advanced theory and practice.

Throughout *Dispatches*, I have had tried to address a fundamental contradiction between proposals for strategy and tactics and a movement that does not really exist, at least does not co-

here, at this time in history. The book is fundamentally about strategy and tactics, and yet, strategy is very difficult to fathom, and impossible to implement without an organization. I consider myself very fortunate. I am part of two interrelated organizations—the Labor/Community Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union—and from that base a series of major projects, the National School for Strategic Organizing, the Program Demand Group, *AhoraNow* publications, and now, *Frontlines Press*. I am also well aware of the limits of the Strategy Center, we exist to be part of a larger movement. And yet, at the national and international level, there is no organized form, no organized tendency, no caucus or network or political party that reflects my views or the proposals I am making in this book for a broader Left. Thus, throughout the book, the editors, Lian Hurst Mann and Layla Welborn, and I have been having trouble finding appropriate organizational references: “the multiracial Left in the U.S.” (that does not yet exist), “the nascent world Left” (which often does not have any organized form, and whose component and constituent parts often are clear they do *not* want to work with each other) “the Black Liberation Movement” (which at this point in history would be difficult to bring under one roof, let alone one organization).

There is no question that one objective of this book is to help bring these forces together, to show the tremendous opportunities we had in Durban, in some ways (lets be honest) opportunities lost, in other ways, opportunities imagined and acted upon. I convey the movement victories in Durban, even if fleeting and transitory, to show the historical possibilities, and to challenge the white chauvinism and narrow nationalism, the in-

dividual and organizational competitiveness, and the fatal disease of sectarianism that has killed many a beautiful project in its infancy. *Dispatches* tries to combine the delineation of sharp political difference with a sense of generosity toward, and assumed good intentions of, many different forces on the Left. I want the book to be a tactic in a broader project of multiracial Left unity. We'll see how it goes.

In the section "Bringing It All Back Home," I write about the work of the Labor/Community Strategy Center as a hopeful, but hopefully not boastful, contribution to imagining what Left work can look like. It is hard for me to listen to people write articles or give speeches that say, "The Left should do this" or "We (whoever that is) must do that." I come out of a tradition of organizing: tell me what you are doing, why you are doing it, what you are building, the ups and downs of the work, and I can listen for hours. In that I do not speak for any broader Left than my own opinions and in some indirect ways my own organization, I wanted to give some examples of one organization whose director came back from Durban all fired up, and was able to convey that enthusiasm to a wonderful group of leaders who shared that view, and have acted upon it and collectivized the vision

The main audience for *Dispatches from Durban*, for the publications of the new Frontlines Press, is "the opinion leaders of the oppressed," the frontline organizers and activists in social movements, the welfare rights leaders and shop stewards, the activist professors and NGO militants, the people who others see as leaders, the people who get up in the morning to change the world, not just read about it and weep. I think we

are talking about a lot of people now, and a whole lot more people in the future.

This prioritized audience is often overlaid with class and race and gender dynamics. That is, most working class women, most women of color who are involved in the movement or involved in a specific cause want to read books about how to fight, and how to win, and what should we do? This book is written for those who are angry and want to fight, and mainly those who are already fighting and those who, if I influence them, can influence others, for they are the opinion leaders of the oppressed.

I want to write for the largest audience possible, but the key audience that will actually move history. As such, I target Black readers, Latino readers, Asian/Pacific Islander readers, Indigenous peoples readers, Third World readers, women readers, and antiracist white readers. I am aware that the “movement” is not very big right now, but it is a lot bigger, if unfortunately dispersed, than people think.

I began my activism, my commitment to revolution, in 1964, when I went to work for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a militant civil rights group at the time. By that time I had already joined the Civil Rights Movement, but many CORE veterans told me about their civil rights marches in the 1940s that were downright tiny, and the freedom rides in 1961, which had helped radicalize me when I was an audience, not an activist, let alone an organizer. They explained how step by step, year by year, they had gone from tiny to small and from small to mid-size and now in 1964 they had more members and more chapters than they knew how to handle. In 1965, George Wiley, my good friend and, at the time, deputy director of CORE sent me to

represent the organization at a sit-in against Apartheid in South Africa staged at the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York's Wall Street district. And here I am still engaging the challenges of racism and South Africa today.

Perhaps I was hallucinating, but I swear I marched with millions of people during the 1960s who talked openly about racism and capitalism, women's liberation and socialism. But perhaps they all died and I didn't know it, or perhaps they have been invaded by the body snatchers, and they all have had a davidhorowitzectomy and repudiated everything they ever stood for or thought? I think not. I think the audience for this book is the hundreds of thousands (I want to say millions but that is, I'm afraid, wishful thinking) of veterans of the sixties and seventies who are not as radical as they once were, but still want to fight, to make a difference, and are open to being riled up and reorganized. At least I can try to reach them. But even more, I want to reach the tens of thousands of long-distance runners, who have kept their politics intact and are working in high schools teaching inner-city youth, or abortion clinics protecting women's right to choose, or serving as nurses at hospitals in urban medical centers fighting to keep people alive, or as trade union organizers or foundation officers or public interest or pro bono attorneys fighting the rich and fighting for the poor.

And what of the youth? Am I hallucinating again, because I see them, the Blacks and Latinos, the Asian/Pacific Islanders and antiracist whites, fighting against sweatshops and globalization, organizing in communities of color against police violence, mobilizing immigrants and welfare mothers, planning union organizing drives and demanding a living wage, challenging

the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization, writing great stuff on the endless listserves on which geniuses, madmen and madwomen coexist. Even at a point of Left disorientation with no national or international socialist or communist project, there are tens of thousands of these people, no hundreds of thousands of them at least, who know something is very rotten in this country, who see through George Bush and the Democrats with the greatest of ease, who will vote for Nader and the Greens or not vote at all, will march against the World Bank and risk their lives as the post-September 11 police state talks about “shoot to kill.”

They will pass up a corporate job for a community one. Thousands of young public school teachers experience first hand how the U.S. lets its public schools rot in hell and subjects the students and teachers to a robot-like standardized testing, while diverting public education funds, in the form of school vouchers, to Christian fundamentalist schools. No, I am revising my estimate, it's over a million people I bet who consider themselves active, activists, organizers, left liberals, progressives, radicals, socialists, revolutionaries, antiracists, anti-globalization activists, anti-imperialist organizers. They like Fidel Castro and don't like George Bush, they care about the Global South and are truly ashamed of U.S. society with its avarice, racism, and arrogance. And they want to fight back, they're looking for a strategy. They want to make a difference. If only “the movement” could come back, they would march and picket and sit-in and even risk their lives, if there was an organization, if only there was a clear plan.

Dispatches from Durban is not a revolutionary manifesto, although I am working on one, *Revolutionary Organizing in the*

Age of Reaction. But *Dispatches* is a strategic document that contains the seeds of a broader Left strategy, the antiracist, anti-imperialist united front, a positive vision of a society, organizing to stop the abuses of the existing system. *Dispatches from Durban* lays out a framework for a broader strategic vision, and provides plenty of suggestions for immediate tactical interventions. One of the last dispatches, “Bulletin from Bali,” ends with the central question facing all of us, “What are *You* Going to Do About the United States?”

For those who are already asking that question, all over the world, you are my audience.

Eric Mann
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