Crisis at WBAI radio in New York: an attempt to silence alternative views

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WBAI-FM, the New York City listener-supported radio station, is embroiled in a bitter dispute involving its staff and the national Pacifica Foundation, the station's parent.

In late November 2000, Pacifica executive director Bessie Wash met with Valerie Van Isler, WBAI's general manager. When Van Isler refused to accept a job in the Pacifica national office in Washington, she was dismissed from her post at WBAI, which she had held for the past 10 years. The firing of Van Isler was followed by the dismissal of Bernard White, the station's program director. Van Isler was replaced by Utrice Leid, who was named interim general manager.

When Van Isler was locked out of her office on December 22, demonstrations followed, along with petitions demanding that Pacifica reverse its decision and respect the autonomy of the local station. More than 1,000 listeners and supporters attended a rally in late December, which has been followed by other meetings and protests.

Pacifica, which also owns licenses for listener-supported stations in Los Angeles and Berkeley, California, Washington DC and Houston, was organized in 1946 by a group of pacifists who had been conscientious objectors during the Second World War. WBAI joined this network in 1960.

Over the past 50 years, Pacifica stations have provided a source, rare in broadcast radio, for radical and dissenting views. Pacifica outlets have been the target of investigations by the House Un-American Activities Committee.

WBAI's public affairs programming has featured extensive international news coverage, and its programs have been sympathetic to antiwar causes and critical of US foreign policy. WBAI reporters were the first to cover the Vietnam War from North Vietnam.

The station has also involved itself in civil rights and civil liberties issues. It has covered the campaign on behalf of imprisoned death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal. WBAI is well-known for "Democracy Now!," a public-affairs program it produces that is also heard on some non-Pacifica stations around the country, and reaches an audience estimated at 700,000.

WBAI's programming, reflecting the outlook of left-liberals and the milieu of radical protest politics, leans heavily towards black nationalism and gay and lesbian identity politics, and its news commentary is generally uncritical of bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Third World.

The conflict at WBAI has its source in differences over the format and political direction of the Pacifica stations. It is similar to one that erupted in 1999 at WBAI's sister station in Berkeley California, KPFA. More precisely, it is a continuation and deepening of the dispute that surfaced at that time.

Pacifica claims that it is attempting to reach a "more diverse and larger audience." Kenneth A. Ford, vice-chairman of the Pacifica board, was recently quoted as saying that, while no one was advocating "a milquetoast appearance" for Pacifica, it "had a mission at one time and had a credible voice, but now it has gone from being insignificant to irrelevant.... Do we serve people who are locked in time in the '60s, or do we try to stay current and expand and grow to bring in new people under the Pacifica umbrella?"

Opponents of the Pacifica board charge that the foundation has moved sharply to the right in recent years, and, in the name of "relevance," is seeking to remove politically controversial and challenging material from its stations. They point to Houston as an indication of what the Pacifica board is seeking everywhere. There, Pacifica station KPFT, which had a history of politically oriented programming and was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s, has adopted a music format and news programming similar to the bland offerings on National Public Radio stations.

In its efforts to change the character of its stations, Pacifica provoked an uproar in Berkeley in 1999. The Berkeley station was closed for about 20 days, after Pacifica carried out a purge of station management and followed with a gag order forbidding station personnel from discussing the conflict on the air. After mass protests, including a march of more than 10,000 and a benefit concert featuring folk singer Joan Baez, the Foundation backed down, at least temporarily.

The dispute in California has become a protracted legal and political war. Supporters of the local station are backing three separate lawsuits against the foundation. Pacifica continues to control the finances of the local station, and individuals fired in 1999 have not returned as part of paid staff, although some have produced shows in a voluntary capacity.

There can be little doubt about Pacifica's political motives. It recently attacked "Democracy Now!," the national program produced by Amy Goodman. After Goodman brought Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader onto the floor of the Republican National Convention for an interview, Pacifica pulled her press pass to cover the Democratic Convention. According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, Pacifica's acting program director

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made this decision because he considered Goodman's interview with Nader “a stunt and not in keeping with Pacifica's standards of journalism.”

Management has also imposed a new set of “work rules” on Goodman, including the requirement that she clear all speaking engagements with management and provide Pacifica with “a list of possible shows the following week and a short status report on each.” She was told she could be fired if she did not tell management the topics of at least three of her five shows one week ahead of airing.

Goodman has denounced this as political harassment, pointing to previous criticism she had received from Pacifica, including for her story on the 1997 police brutalization of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in New York. A Pacifica official was reported to have said that he didn't want to hear about the details of this case “before breakfast.”

There was another incident, on election day 2000, which many believe may have at least affected the timing of the latest moves against WBAI. Pacifica officials, many with close ties to the Clinton administration, were undoubtedly incensed by an interview Goodman conducted with Clinton when he called the station on election day as part of a “get-out-the-vote” drive. Clinton was calling many stations for this purpose, but Goodman grilled him for about half an hour. After about 20 minutes he said, “You have asked questions in a hostile, combative and even disrespectful tone,” but he remained on the line, as Goodman asked about such topics as sanctions against Iraq and the effort to obtain a pardon for Indian activist Leonard Peltier (a pardon that Clinton eventually refused to grant).

The current battle at WBAI reflects the growing crisis and the widening of divisions within the American radical and left-liberal milieu that had its origins in the anti-war, identity politics and counterculture trends of the 1960s. This political milieu, heterogeneous to begin with, has undergone further social and political differentiation in recent years. Many of those who experimented with protest in their youth have become wealthy and have moved to the right.

This is the layer whose outlook finds political expression on the board of the Pacifica Foundation. It includes quite a few figures prominent in political and corporate circles. Mary Frances Berry, who recently retired as chairman of the board, held that post at the same time as she presided as chairman of the US Civil Rights Commission. Berry, a longtime ally of Bill Clinton, was one of the main figures in Pacifica's moves against KPFA in Berkeley.

Among the other Pacifica executives, according to a report in the New York-based newspaper *Haiti-Progres*, Treasurer Michael Palmer “has boasted of developing ‘maquiladoras' in northern Mexico,” Vice-Chair Kenneth Ford works for the National Association of Home Builders, and John Murdock is a partner in Epstein, Becker and Green, a New York-based law firm with expertise representing employers against unions.

WBAI staff member Mimi Rosenberg, speaking about these and other board members, made the rather apt comment that while Pacifica founder Lew Hill “went to the airwaves at the height of the Cold War and said that the FBI was a scurrilous and contemptible organization.... One would be hard pressed to believe that Pacifica's current national board would ever make such a statement.”

Not surprisingly, the upper-middle-class elements who deal socially and on a business level with the ruling circles of the US would like to remove any hint of radicalism from the Pacifica stations today.

The opponents of Pacifica on the WBAI staff are incapable of advancing a perspective to fight the attack on the station, however. The foundation executives have been able to make use of the confusion and disorientation among the middle-class radicals to advance their own agenda.

After years of race-based and “identity politics” programming, backed by people on both sides of the current dispute, WBAI has understandably attracted some dubious political elements. One example is the newly-appointed interim general manager, Utrice Leid. Ms. Leid has ties to the black nationalist demagogue Alton Maddox, and appeared at a meeting of Maddox's United Afrikan Movement last April.

Taking their cue from forces like Maddox, Pacifica defenders have tried to use the race issue, pointing to both Pacifica Executive Director Bessie Wash and newly installed WBAI Interim General Manager Leid to claim that their opponents at WBAI are hostile to black women. They have made this charge even though fired WBAI General Manager Van Isler is also black.

The Pacifica board has definite economic motives, as well as political ones, in its current campaign to transform its local stations. Radio stations have become increasingly lucrative properties in recent years, and there is talk that the sale of WBAI could bring a windfall of as much as $200 million to its current owners.

Beyond the immediate economic and political motives, as important as they are, the developments at WBAI reflect the growing pressures of political conformity and commercialization in the media. Pacifica's actions are bound up with the rightward shift in the ruling establishment and the media as a whole. Public and listener-supported radio is not immune from these pressures. The competition for audience share is used to justify the elimination of controversy or challenging programming. Public radio has long since forfeited its claim to be noncommercial. Its sponsors are called “underwriters,” but their role is increasingly the same as that of commercial sponsors.

It is not necessary to agree with the political outlook that dominates WBAI to recognize that Pacifica's actions are a threat to free speech. Whatever the limitations of WBAI's format and programming—and they are considerable—Pacifica's attack is aimed at squelching dissent and censoring oppositional and left-wing views, and must be opposed by all defenders of democratic rights and opponents of the increasingly centralized and pervasive corporate control of the media.

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