

COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS ATTEND CONFERENCE
ORGANIZED BY NEW FEDERATION

TELLURIDE, COLORADO (LNS)--A new national organization of community-sponsored radio stations, the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB), held its first national conference June 17 through 20 in southwest Colorado.

Over 150 participants at the National Alternative Radio Conference (NARC) came from more than 30 non-commercial community-supported radio stations and about 24 alternative media organizations and groups interested in building such stations in their areas. The number of organizations represented -- compared with the first meeting of community broadcasters in 1973, when only half a dozen such stations were on the air-- reflects the growing importance of community radio.

What 'Community Radio' Means

"The one thing that ties all community stations together," said Fred Paneuf of WYSO in Yellow Springs, Ohio, "is that they're run by people who are disenfranchised. They were turned down by the established channels of access to the air. They had something to say that wasn't being said, and the only way they could do it was to start a station."

Programming that distinguishes community radio includes, for example, a course in economics taught by a radical economist, as offered by WBAI in New York, a weekend composed entirely of local programming, as offered recently by KAXE in northern Minnesota, or an entire day devoted to examining the environment, as programmed this spring on KPFA in Berkeley.

Dennis Batson of WEVL in Memphis, Tennessee expressed the importance of community radio in his home town: "When you live in an area like mine," he said, "it's important that this kind of radio station exist--more important than in San Francisco or New York. Where we are, the stations are the only possible free thing that can exist, because they are above local laws."

"There are all different viewpoints here as to what 'community' means, what relationship to the established media should be," observed conference participant Alan Snitow, news director at KPFA. "I would like to see NFCB be the beginning of an alternative network of news and public affairs which would compete with and undercut the propaganda that comes out of the established media."

Merrill Goozner of WAIF in Cincinnati supported this idea of community radio as an agent of social change, in contrast to other conceptions of community radio as a vehicle of "free speech, public access--to anyone and everyone"--(including, for instance, even right wing sects) and in contrast to the idea of community held by those who "don't want it to be a mass phenomenon--who want it to be esoteric. They want the weirdballs to listen to the FM station on the bottom of the dial."

Involvement of Women and Third World People

Previously unarticulated differences within NFCB as to what "community radio"--its responsibilities, potentials and goals--is all about

emerged at the conference in the context of lengthy discussions about the involvement of women and third world people in community radio and in the federation.

Community radio stations devote considerable airtime to serving third world communities and to women-oriented programming; and women and third world people represent approximately 33 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively of the stations' staffs, although the percentages drop considerably--particularly for third world people--when it comes to full time staff membership.

Women at the conference made plans for an ongoing task force and newsletter to monitor and promote women's participation in community radio, and to exchange information and ideas.

A Third World Media Alliance was formed and NFCB members passed a rule requiring that two of its eight-member steering committee be representatives of the Third World Media Alliance.

The NFCB, Community Radio, and the FCC

The NFCB was formed by participants at the first National Alternative Radio Conference, last year in Madison, Wisconsin, where individual stations recognized their common inability to noticeably affect national policy concerning non-commercial broadcasting.

"Of all the regulatory agencies," NFCB Executive Director Tom Thomas says, "the FCC is possibly the most dominated by the industry it regulates." According to conference participant Sam Buffone, a Washington D.C. attorney who has represented community stations legally, "the FCC is completely captured and under the control of commercial broadcasters."

Participants at the Madison conference called for the formation of a national organization which, among other things, would represent the interests of community radio in long-term policy decisions affecting it.

The NFCB is now preparing to actively lobby at upcoming FCC rule-making proceedings that will have a crucial impact on the future of non-commercial radio, long plagued by FCC regulations such as those that act to severely limit the number of community stations that can exist.

CPB And NPR Confronted

Late in the conference a conflict between NARC participants and representatives of government-funded radio surfaced. Representatives from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the funding, policy and planning arm of federally-funded broadcasting, and from National Public Radio (NPR), the production and distribution arm, met with NARC participants to answer question on the role of non-commercial stations in the public broadcasting system.

CPB funding criteria are very stiff, and most community stations do not meet the requirements of having a \$75,000 annual budget and five full time paid staff members. Many community broadcasters criticize the content of NPR programs and believe that a recent reorganization within NPR's news and public affairs divisions are likely to undercut its progressive aspects even further.

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Before the recent invasion, Ethiopia's commander in Eritrea was quoted as saying "if you want to kill the fish, you have to dry up the sea."

This brutality, however, is a measure of the failure of Ethiopia's efforts to regain control of Eritrea. Between 60 and 70 per cent of the Ethiopian Army is stationed in Eritrean cities. But of these, nearly 11,000 troops were put out of action last year alone, as a result of casualties and desertions.

"They don't know how to fight," commented one Eritrean student leader. "They dropped a very big store of arms from America and some of our soldiers put on Ethiopian uniforms and got the whole thing: if you are a revolutionary, you can get all kinds of weapons."

EPLF Consolidates Gains

Despite Ethiopian repression over many years, the liberation movement continues to develop. "We always heard about political struggles from our parents who fought the Italians and the British," an Eritrean student told LNS. "All the people from the very beginning were on the side of the movement. This is my experience . . . when I was 7, 8, I always hoped the movement would win. I didn't understand politics, but I hoped they would win."

This feeling seems to have been widely shared, so that consequently the EPLF has organized a large people's army, including women's units of more than 1000 soldiers. Children under 15 also contribute by helping supply the front.

To build up the liberated zone, the EPLF recently rebuilt a 500 kilometer road left from the Italian occupation. It also opened two 300-bed hospitals to provide medical services in the rural areas. A Trade and Retail Section has also been established in the past few months, to provide common consumption items; ration cards prevent hoarding and speculation by wealthier people.

"Most people were illiterate," an Eritrean student explained, "but under the EPLF leadership people are getting education--as much as can be provided... Our farmers were very primitive. Now the EPLF teaches them what crops to grow and helps them analyze their situation."

A Protracted Struggle Ahead

The junta's recent invasion represents only the latest in a series of efforts by Ethiopia's military rulers to defeat the liberation movement. A neo-colonial solution, based on assemblage of tribal leaders, failed completely when the elders declared that "the struggle belongs to our children. We are not representatives any more."

The junta has also sent delegations to various Arab and African states in an attempt to undercut support for the EPLF. Most recently, coinciding with the invasion the junta offered autonomy to Eritrea if the liberation forces would surrender.

But the offer comes many years too late, after the EPLF has won control over most of the country. Furthermore, representatives of the EPLF and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) met earlier this year and agreed to support each other's struggles. This unity between the progressive forces in the two countries increases the pressure within

Ethiopia to recognize Eritrean independence. Add in the rest of Africa, the Eritrean struggle is increasingly viewed not as the breakup of an African state, but rather as a legitimate struggle for independence.

The Ethiopian junta, however, has not given up its hope of reestablishing control over Eritrea. The Eritreans interviewed by LNS expected the war to continue for some time. Yet they were confident of the ultimate outcome: "You will find not a single village that is not behind the struggle. They will never surrender."

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"Now it is less important what happens to a man named Grillo or Nemick," the paper continued. "From now on whenever another Banks or another Bufkin or any other criminal recruiter tries to rent or buy crooks to send to Africa, they will always hear the same warning: REMEMBER ANGOLA."

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(Important Note to Editors: As we go to press, the verdict in the mercenary trials is expected shortly.)

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"A typical NPR program," commented Fred Paneuf, "is a panel discussion with someone from the Brookings Institute and someone from George Washington School of Education--sort of elite, liberal."

Consequently NARC participants' attitude towards NPR and CPB representatives was challenging. "I think the CPB and NPR people felt they had some very sharp questions pointed at them," Paneuf said. "But I also feel they didn't feel any commitment to do anything for small non-commercial stations."

Future of NFCB and Community Broadcasting

The NFCB's own plans for a news and public affairs network, elaborated at the conference, involve expansion of its Tape Exchange. The service, which allows members to exchange special programming through a central office at low cost, will include weekly news tapes compiled from stories supplied by community stations in different parts of the country.

During the conference the NFCB received word that it had been awarded a \$9,000 grant, part of which is already committed to the Tape Exchange.

As participants in the very beginnings of an organization, many people at the radio conference in Telluride shared a "wait and see" attitude about the potential relationship between community broadcasting--the most progressive element within broadcasting today--and the newly formed NFCB.

"The organization right now could go either way," said John Mondello from Double Helix, a St. Louis media access group. "It could become a fairly established lobbying boy in Washington, or serve as a continuing forum for discussion of concerns that go beyond mere questions of funding and self-sufficiency."

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