

While We Were Sleeping...

## Pygmies Standing On The Shoulders Of Giants

By Kurt Staudter

*"History which keeps alive the memory of people's resistance suggests new definitions of power. By traditional definitions, whoever possesses military strength, wealth, command of official ideology, cultural control, has power. Measured by these standards, popular rebellion never looks strong enough to survive. However, the unexpected victories - even temporary ones - of insurgents show the vulnerability of the supposedly powerful."*

- Howard Zinn

*"Look, part of the whole technique of disempowering people is to make sure that the real agents of change fall out of history, and are never recognized in the culture for what they are."* - Noam Chomsky

Cambridge, MA

As I sit here at the end of week five of the Harvard Trade Union Program there is a growing sense of both helplessness and empowerment. Executive Director Elaine Bernard has created this wonderful parade of educators, critical thinkers, labor leaders, and just people who are making a difference, to address the class and lend to our discourse more depth and meaning. Sometimes the message is one that paints such a gloomy picture of the current conditions that you might expect that the struggle for economic justice is doomed. Other presenters make such a compelling case that the next big social movement is just one successful fight away. Now, I'm so overwhelmed by this flood of compelling information that it's too early to tell which camp I fall into, but I will say that one can't help but be inspired by the people we've met.

Long before I became involved in the labor movement, and as my personal politics were being developed, two writers loomed large in the shaping of my young and impressionable mind - Howard Zinn and

Noam Chomsky. While both of these gentlemen are not necessarily household names, one is a retired history professor and the other a linguist, there is no doubt of the contribution they have made to those of us fighting for social and economic justice. The quotes above are from two books that are well worth your time and have helped make me who I am: Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, and Noam Chomsky's *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*. Both of these writers have given the progressive community a firm foundation from which we will build a sustainable and just society.

Now I'm not one to give in to hero worship, or to become star struck, but I will tell you that it was such a thrill to meet these guys. If for nothing else, it was wonderful just to get the chance to thank them for their contribution in helping us understand the world. For so long these two voices have spoken truth to power, and for those of us who have been raised in their shadows, through their example we've been taught how to carry on this tradition of critical examination of those in power and how to forcefully raise the alarm when those in control abuse our trust. For as long as I can remember, Zinn and Chomsky have been the vanguard for positive change and vigorous dissent, and yet they now seem almost grateful to step aside and let the next generation take up the "good fight."

Chomsky started off his lecture with some comments about current events in the news. He has from the beginning been very critical of the Bush administration and the Iraq War. He came to national attention as one of the leading voices against the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and his comparison of that war with today was illustrative of how much we've given up, or lost, control of our government. His point is that unless we hold our leaders accountable they will

operate with impunity. Noam also spent some time talking about healthcare reform and the forces aligned to protect the status quo. He said the current rhetoric from the White House about an entitlement crisis was "pure crud," but went on to say that we do have a "major medical care crisis." His solution: Extend Medicare to everyone and create a National Health Plan.

Howard Zinn talked about some of the events in our history that led to the consolidation of power in the hands of the rich. "The history of the United States is a history of class struggle, but that's not the way it's presented, American culture denies that," he began. Zinn told us of Shays' Rebellion in western Massachusetts and how our founding fathers used that event to make a government that crushed dissent: "There is a quota for revolutions; You only want one." Perhaps the thing he said that I will always remember is this: "You never know how much power you have until you exert it, and you don't know how powerful your opposition is until you confront it... You don't make the people in power understand things by educating them, you need to show them your power and that tells them something they understand."

Looking around the room at my fellow students I saw an understanding that the struggle was now in our hands, and that the sage wisdom of these teachers becomes our inspiration for a fight that will outlive us all. I also saw in Zinn's eyes an acknowledgment that we were worthy to carry on this age old fight.

