

AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY MILLER, ONE OF THE THREE COORDINATORS OF THE FREE UNIVERSITY BERKELEY.

Miller: Well, you make everybody pay, it's quite clear, yeah.  
 Interviewer: Yeah, well we have a certain amount of scholarships.  
 Miller: Well, we just uh, we just don't give a shit, you know. We have much more students than you, but like our summer registration paid registration was about the same as yours, like 1,100 paid, but like now we've been having around 1,500--more people coming in--just 60% or more are paying, that's o.k. we've got volunteers now, a new situation that we're starting right now to see if we can get involved more in this community by uh by labor as opposed to money. Even though I'm the treasurer, I freak out at this

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whole situation, but you've got to try it anyhow. How's things going with you besides the fact that you've got a deficit?  
 Inter: Pretty good right now, we just got a hold of a defunct coffee house which we're turning into a community center.  
 Miller: Oh, yeah we had ideas for a community center too, but we couldn't afford it, so we moved in here and we're now going out on rent strike.  
 Inter: Oh, so the Free U is on rent strike too huh? See we're covering the BTU -- the Berkely rent strike.  
 Miller: Yeah, so we don't know what's going to happen, we could be out on the streets any time, we never know, we're just proceeding along the lines that everything will work out. We jsut uh - it's very funny that you brought in your catalogue and your tape recorder, we just had alot of shit come down cause we put out our catalogue - we had a thousand of them ripped off by a couple of chicks who took offense at the catalogue because it was sexual exploitative stuff like that. Your catalogue kinda a diametric opposite of what ours is.  
 Inter: That's just the magazine that's not the catalogue.  
 Miller: You guys pay too much for your catalogue.  
 Inter: Well, we do it ourselves so we're paying ourselves.  
 Miller: Yeah, o.k. What your Free U. is, because you're in a fairly isolated place in terms of sophistication, cause here our idea of an alternative society is to de-centralize, we had print mints and Jelly Roll Press before it got burned down, and a lot of independent guys doing the same function, right we already have that, we already have community centers, but we don't have the right ones as far as I'm concerned, and we were going to try that, but we already have one and it's pretty mellow, in terms of development, but the vibes are pretty bad. And so the vibes were pretty bad in our catalogue, it was a really violent, red ass, mother fuckin' catalogue that we had, ya know, and if you look through it, and the reason for that is that's where Berkely was when we put it together, and maybe it will be different. I



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myself am splitting for Montana.  
 Inter: Where do you think the BTU's at?  
 Miller: The BTU uh where do I think they're at? I think most of them are pissed off, failure after failure after failure with things that they've tried in Berkeley which were spontaneous measures. This was the first thing in Berkeley that I can ever remember that traditional political radicals dadada you know, politicians -- they've put in six months of organizing work, this is pretty heavy, I think they're premature, but they had to be premature when they went out on strike. My old lady quit because they were premature, they went out with only 10% on Feb. first, being a cut off point on and individual landlord of how much they would recommend a strike collective have before it went out on strike. I felt like 20% was necessary, and so did she. We felt that enough leadership hadn't been done, but so

far nothing bad's happened, and we'll know in a few months. And we had a vote when we were registering and said "Do you think the Free U ought to go on rent strike?" and it was nine to one vote saying yes. So we're out on rent strike.

Inter: The BTU says it's 500 to 1000 out on strike.

Miller: They can say that, it might be true, it might not be true, there's just no way of telling. They're gonna make it alot higher cause it's in their own interest, I'd do the same thing. If I were a guy going out on rent strike I don't know if I'd believe that figure, cause that's probably not true. As far as I know I'd say 600. The reality is that maybe...

Inter: When it comes right down to it the people who have something at stake -- I don't know if the community's really strong enough to hold together. Like you're going to Montana, right? So your rent doesn't mean shit to you.

Miller: I'm not sure man, that it's gonna mean shit to anybody, like most of the people that are committed to strike are probably uncollectables, right? There haven't been heavy inroads made in the right places, I'm not sure how real the whole thing is.

But uh -- you can't tell how many are on strike, but it's more than 50 or 100, cause we weren't even strike pledge signers and we went out on strike, you know.

And we're a heavy hunk, 300 a month to them guys. Probably 250, and there are riders waiting to see how it's gonna fall. Start March first. The thing about this you never have to make any commitment, you can always jump out at any time. Some people pay rent on the first, some in the middle of the month. The vibes you're picking up are low probably. My direct individual knowledge, seeing an incredible number of people every day and talking all night is probably 250.

Inter: You're the treasurer?

Miller: I'm one of the coordinators, there are three big wheels, three paid people. Fifty dollars a week. It's really gonna be a battle for the first time, a battle of wits, and imagination of more cerebral imagination combined with physical imagination that a lot of battles in Berkeley have been. Because there are alot of legal ways you can hang them up and hold them by their own system, and it's been more organized than anything else has been in Berkeley -- it still may fail like everything else has in Berkeley.

But you've got to stand behind them, which is one of the reasons the Free U went out on strike even though our existence is sort of this fat existence, we've existed for five years, we're the oldest Free U in the country, and we're really fat, we have security, we have a reputation, we have people come here all the time, we have money, and so maybe we have to go back on the streets, but we have to do it. We have to do it, not only because the people voted, because if the people didn't vote we'd probably have to do it anyway, we were born in Sproul Hall, you have to have an expression of community solidarity -- especially on something fundamental. Personally, I feel there are four fundamental things, you've got to relate to them. One of them is food, anything that involves whether a guy eats or he doesn't eat, you gotta relate to it. Another is shelter, another is love, another thing is warmth.

Inter: Your vote to go out on strike was nine to one? How did you vote?

Miller: I voted yes. When the big vote came of strike pledge signers, about whether or not to have strike, I voted no.

Inter: Nine to one was the percentage, how many voted?

Miller: 700 -- that was the first day of registration -- they vote while they registered.

Inter: How many people come to your meetings, do you have meetings?

Miller: Yeah -- steering committee, about 25, most people come who have gripes, who have alot of gripes, so we have representatives come from alot of different places.

Inter: So what do the organizers have to do besides pay the bills and put the catalogue together?

Miller: They have to organize the courses, organize the volunteers staff, organize our apprentice program which we're starting out. We're starting out with veterenarians clinic, a low cost community vet clinic, keep up the rhetoric and the actual communication about radical education and what that's all about. Coordinate with CPE, work on the political angles which are very relevant in our community, like the tenant's union, like People's Park, contribute to things like the Food Conspiracy which is low cost food co-ops, and the Labor Gift Plan which is what we're helping to organize on a block by block basis to trade mortar skills amongst our own community, to break down barriers like people live in houses and they don't even know who the hell they are that live next to them, so we work on that. Uh -- those are the kinds of things we do, alot of time there's nothing to do, other times there's a frantic amount of things and we're just going crazy, you know. And that's all there is -- it's just a normal mellow job, it's just like life, you know.

Inter: What are your heaviest classes?

Miller: Oh, things like Joel Fort's "Turn on Social Systems", Basic Hatha Yoga, Gardening.

Inter: Do you do much psychodrama?

Miller: Yeah, we have the Moving Company, it's been a really fantastic success. They've become statewide famous, they are a Free U group, they just went off, they are giving about seven different courses on different stuff and they work on ecological stuff, Psychodrama in the sense of encounter just takes place in the encounter groups that there are. But you can't live in Psychodrama in encounter experiences any more, because encounter experiences are being taken out into the street, all the time. Normally, on a busy day, like this office can be an encounter experience, like I consider the Free U office to be the longest ongoing continuous Free U class that there is. It's a change for me, to have something like that and be paid for it, you know, it's a really unique position. All of us are leaving, because you can only do it so long and then it's somebody else's turn, and besides you have to move on and do other stuff too. So the Free U changes, somebody else comes in every once in a while and gives new blood and new ideas. What do your coordinators do?

Inter: We have one guy who is coordinator, and we have an office staff.

Miller: We don't even elect them, we're really not very democratic.

Inter: We have like every Thursday night a town meeting, anyone who is a member has one vote.

Miller: We don't even do things like that, we do anyone who shows up at a meeting, regardless of who he is has a vote. The people who come to meetings have gripes, the people who are interested hate meetings, have much better things to do including myself. We have much better things to do than go to these meetings, we'd rather go to the classes even. We don't follow any political policy, we just discuss an issue when it pops up. Like what kinds of issues do you consider?

Inter: Like the Community Center, council of communes, Grassroots.

Miller: Like that kind of stuff I wouldn't consider

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to be a political stand. That's something that you definitely have to consider but I don't consider that a political orientation. Like the questions how do you relate to uh Third World strike or an action on campus, or an action anywhere, or a Black Panther thing, or when David Hilliard is busted for saying "I'm going to kill the president", like how do you relate? Do you put your equipment at their, uh, open to them? Do you give them money? Do you allow them to use your building as a place to meet? You know, those are pertinent policy questions which are political in nature in that we would never do that stuff on our own, it's just our own community UMPH that says we've got to relate to this. And if nobody feels like relating to it, then it just passes us by, but it's not like a community center, that's more like an internal thing, we would be running that, just like our low cost vet clinic, like we would be running that, or like the Family Store, that's kinda internal stuff. There isn't too much stuff that, uh, anybody really likes to do in Steering Committee, there are just so many meetings in Berkeley, and if you're gonna meet your friends you'd rather it not be in a meeting. I mean, you'd be meeting the same people anyway, and all of a sudden there are things to do, and it becomes like theatre or ritual, you know. It's that same old thing. How many people do you get? You get a lot of people coming to your meetings?

Inter: About forty.

Miller: I had organized the Berkeley People's conference, we had a lot of different people too. We don't even try to get it together, and the reason we don't even try is because it's so much bigger. Like, uh, I've never really been to Palo Alto, I've only passed through it. I don't know how many heads there are, what's going on down there, what the troubles are. But like getting in... getting in the same room with a Black Panther, with a guy from Progressive Labor Party, in the same room with an acid head, in the same room with a gardener, in the same room with a Free U. encounter group leader who doesn't dig sex or dope, and try to come together about something, especially when the divisions in Berkeley are so deep, cause there's blood, literally blood, and there are bruises and the betrayal, the constant sense of betrayal, the divisions are so hard that it's in roads here, like the polarities are so incredible, like everywhere in America.

Inter: Yeah, but isn't it that situation that's keeping us from becoming a real movement?

Miller: Yeah, you know that, and I know that, and they know. And the traditional problem of the left has always been splitting and internal back stabbing, that's always the way it's been.

Inter: Palo Alto has its divisions and polarities, and it has its bruises too. There's a lot of shit goin' on in the town, but it seems its got a realm of possibilities and there's a lot of things happening.

Miller: What are you trying to do? Got any specific things?

Inter: Well, like Stanford University and the City Council are running the town one way with the Industrial Park -- the defense firms around Stanford, and it's up to the radicals, and the high school students, and the hip people and the freaks to get it together and say, "We don't want it to go that way, we want it to go this way".

Miller: O.K. You're going to have a terrible time and the reason you're gonna have a terrible time is

not because you have a bad idea, but because you have no idea. People cannot coalesce around the idea of getting together, I've tried, it's been tried a million times. You can only coalesce around a symbol, a concept, a principle, a pledge, an action, something concrete. And unless, at these meetings you can throw out something tangible, tangible in either symbolic terms or in real terms like a peice of land, some aim you want to achieve -- you're gonna fall flat on your ass.

Inter: We've got those tangibles, the problem is each group has their own tangibles.

Miller: You've got to find one that's transcendent, right? You've got to find a transcendent thing. Like People's Park was almost achieved that transcendent function, like it was a synthesis, Rent Strike is another kind of transcendent problem, but the issue is fundamental, like 60% of Berkeley is tenants, there's no way around it, whether you're Black, White, Chicano, political, non-political, you still pay your rent.

Inter: It seems to me that the area it's coming up in is not like a futuristic vision, but it's all kinds of personal problems, like rent, where it's beginning to come down now. Three things are coming up in the future, like Palo Alto is going to build an expressway through part of downtown Palo Alto, and they're going to build a financial square, and a super-hospital.

Miller: That would be good. That's a good place to start, but it doesn't take too much radical action to do stuff like that. I mean like, the city of San Francisco, which isn't so fucking radical, stopped the freeway, it's the only city in the United States that ever did though.

Inter: But to stop an industrial park is another thing.

Miller: To stop an industrial park, you're going to have to have divergent opinions, right from the very beginning. Some people are going to say you can't stop an industrial park unless you wipe out the industrial technological complex of capitalist America which is providing the capital for them to provide the power both to expand there and to buy the courts, so you know you can't win it. So what you gotta do is to have some terrific multi-level attack on something like that, or your energy is going to become scattered. That's always happened to us. Always, and it's really tragic, but nobody knows...

Inter: Your point about Berkeley, the Free U. here is not a centralized organization, it's just one little tiny piece in the whole situation where as in Palo Alto, that kind of thing isn't happening.

Miller: Right, that's why I don't even compare the two institutions, I don't think it's valid, I don't think it's fair to you and I don't think it's fair to us. (He picks up a Free You magazine) This looks pretty interesting by the way, these magazines; I'm going to take one home and read it tonight. I don't even have your catalogue, I wish you had some with you. Take home a couple of ours, they're going to become collector's items cause they are certainly, umm, they're unreadable. Nobody can read a thing, man, and they are amazing... If this is for your magazine and you're gonna quote me on something, you should send me a copy. Just found out from my old lady, she made LIFE magazine today.

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