FROM THE ALTERNATIVES LIBRARY

LeftWords: Another Country

by Lynn Andersen

Just over the northern U.S. border, independent publishers, writers and bookstores are struggling against corporate forces identical to their counterparts in the United States. Chain bookstores and publishing conglomerates in Canada are using the tactics of underselling and homogenization of information that have become all too familiar to those of us living south of the border. We in the U.S. don’t hear much about it, but it’s very real to Canadians, and they are fighting the power. Independent Canadian writers, publishers and bookstores are actively engaged in keeping alive and strong the voices that dare to criticize the corporatization of the media and the disingenuous policies of government leaders who are for sale to the highest bidder. Unfortunately, there is precious little cross-border awareness between the Canadian groups and their counterparts to the south. U.S. citizens probably know less about their northern neighbors than they do about Tierra del Fuego. Because I was lucky enough to have friends that invited me to a very special book fair in Ontario, I had a chance to get a bit of first-hand education about the situation there.

The 3rd Annual LeftWords Festival of Books and Ideas — did anyone in the U.S. know about the 1st and 2nd? — took place on Sunday, November 5, 2001, at the New College, University of Toronto. Gathered together in the main hall were over 30 bookstore representatives, publishers and activists as well as 15 presentations by writers, activist groups and educators. I was the only “American” present unless you count the ones who are trying to become Canadian citizens. I hope this article will convince more progressives from the U.S. and elsewhere to explore Toronto and find out what’s going on there. Meanwhile, here is some information and perhaps incentive to travel.

LeftWords was started by Michael Jackal, York University Bookstore; Peter Steven, Between the Lines Press; Peter Saunders, Garamond Press; Anne Brackenbury, an independent organizer; and Lindsay Sharpe, Fernwood Press. The first gathering was held in St. Lawrence Hall, downtown Toronto, where roughly 700 people passed through the exhibits. The public space was a perfect location for LeftWords but was too small to accommodate the number of people attending the event. The second year saw a 25% drop in attendance due to the relocation. This year, the third, the attendance hit over 500. The 2001 organizing team included everyone listed above except Anne. The original organizers sought collaboration for setting up the conference with the Catalyst Centre, a group that shares its philosophy. Together, the team put together a broader program with fewer academic and more community oriented presentations. Because of the expanded programming, far more young people were attracted to this year’s event than in the two previous years. For progressive-minded booklovers — and I assume most PLG librarians are — this was a great place for gathering new sources of materials, meeting and hearing the activist/authors who did presentations and discussing social and political issues affecting all people, across all borders.

The colloquia were an important part of the forum. The following is just a tiny representation of the presenters. Kicking off the festivities was a quartet of writers who presented the book Resist (Fernwood Books), a collection of experiences from people who chose to protest at the Quebec FTAA (Forum on Tariffs and Trade Agreements) summit. In another discussion, Martin Morris and John Anderson talked of the attempt to extend the capitalist market into all sectors of society. Further study on the issue is available in their book, Commodification of Everything: The Sins of Privatization (Studies in Political Economy and Rebuilding the Left). The Labour-Teacher program of Frontier College had representatives to explain their program of recruitment, training and placement of their graduates as more community oriented presentations. Because of the expanded programming, far more young people were attracted to this year’s event than in the two previous years. For progressive-minded booklovers — and I assume most PLG librarians are — this was a great place for gathering new sources of materials, meeting and hearing the activist/authors who did presentations and discussing social and political issues affecting all people, across all borders.

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about her life as an activist. In another room, the consequences reforms have for women as health care providers and patients was discussed by Pat Armstrong, author of *Exposing Privatization: Women and Health Care Reform in Canada* (Garamond Press). Pat was on hand to discuss the effects of and to spur action in health care policy, information the United States could well put to use as it struggles with its own dysfunctional health care system. The Toronto Dollar and Local Currencies were discussed by Joy Kogawa, Susan Bellan and David Walsh. Over 200 businesses in downtown Toronto and Riverdale use the local currency and 10% of all Toronto Dollars purchased go to the Toronto Dollar “Spirit at Work” fund to support job creation for low-income people. And then there was a 'zine making workshop, and the launching of the Socialist Resister 2002, and John Saul with his book *Millennial Africa: Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (Africa World Press), and Jenny Horsman, *Too Scared to Learn: Women, Violence and Education*, and music by Eve Goldberg and the Spadina Road Taberna­cle Band, and a whole lot of discussion, seriousness and laughter. And, it was FREE!

I had a chance to talk to some of the vendors at the book fair while I was at it. May Lui, one of the co-managers of the Toronto Women’s Bookstore was a representative organizer of LeftWords for the first time this year. The bookstore is struggling with the onslaught of corporate booksellers but is surviving because of a loyal customer base and, I might add, a darn good selection of books. LeftWords offers great exposure for the store, which — as May says — “goes on doing it for the love of doing it.” Lois Pike from Sumach Press, a new publisher, was at LeftWords for the second time and is interested in doing it again. Joel, from the *International Socialist* and *Socialist Worker* journals, was a vendor for the first time. He liked it and will return for the next one. So will I. I even won five books for the Alternatives Library. No one was there to claim the winnings for the last drawing, so Matt Adams of the Catalyst Centre held a voice vote at the end of the fair. The library got the prize. It was a guilt-offering because the library inadvertently got left off the list of cosponsors. LeftWords closed with a protest song, of course. A group of us adjourned to a nearby pub where we continued discussing the issues raised during the conference as well as two big issues on everyone’s mind — the attacks of September 11th and the war in Afghanistan. In speaking our thoughts, apprehensions and frustrations, we shared some unspoken common ground where all borders disappeared, where our common humanity was a palpable experience, one that we silently wished for all people.