

Berkeley's Embattled Schools

Schools Win Praise While Loosing Ground

by Bill Wallace

When the U.S. Civil Rights Commission released its 315-page report on the progress of U.S. integration August 25, it gave special applause to the city of Berkeley. This prompted Laval Wilson, Berkeley's superintendent of schools, to crow, "We're the capital of desegregation in the country."

According to the report the chief reasons for Berkeley's success were vigorous community participation in planning the city's desegregation program, healthy minority representation on the district's faculty and administration, and strong teamwork among the city's disparate racial, cultural and political elements in carrying the program out.

But during the last two years the district has been plagued with difficulties which have radically changed the picture. The Berkeley School Board has been wracked with strife, community views have been ignored and the district's minority staff has been decimated by cutbacks. In short, it appears that the Civil Rights Commission Report applauded qualities which the Berkeley School District and community no longer have, and raised some questions about the future of desegregation in Berkeley schools.

The report pointed out that as a result of Berkeley's efforts, enrollment over the last eight years has remained stable at 45 percent white students, 42 percent black, 7 percent Asian-American, three percent chicano and three percent "other."

But all three factors named by the Commission as reasons for Berkeley's success have been transformed in recent years. The School Board's strong leadership began to dissolve in early 1974 over the selection of a new superintendent of schools to replace outgoing schools chief Richard Foster. The Board's two black members, Reverend Hazaiiah Williams and Mary Jane Johnson, favored Berkeley educational consultant La Verda Allen for the post. Louise Stoll and Marc Monheimer, the board's two white members, sided with their Asian-American colleague Gene Roh in favor of Laval Wilson. Williams was so angered by Wilson's selection that he retired from the board soon after Wilson took office.

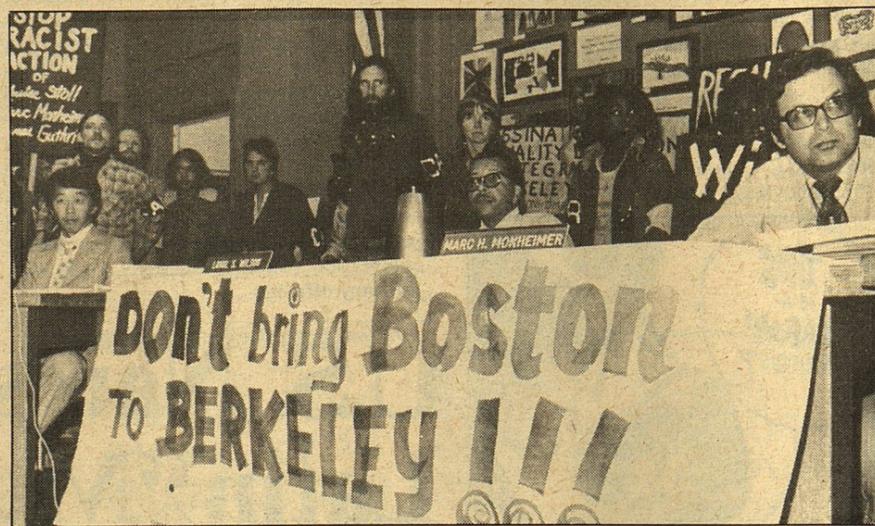
Williams was replaced in 1975 by James Guthrie, a white educator and close political ally of Board President Louise Stoll. Since that time, the three white

members of the board have tended to vote as a bloc, with Johnson and Roh in frequent opposition.

Both board factions deny that the split is racial, but the permanent bickering between minority board members and their white colleagues gives at least the impression of racial conflict and has

ings, the school board repeatedly ignored the coalition's objections and moved ahead, alienating wide segments of the community in the process.

Moreover, many of the minority faculty and staff members who contributed to the success of Berkeley's desegregation program will probably soon fall victim to



Protesters at a recent school board meeting didn't exactly agree with the praise the U.S. Civil Rights Commission later gave to the Berkeley school system's racial policies.

hampered the board's ability to set school policy based on a real consensus among the district's elected leaders.

Another major contributor to Berkeley's desegregation success, the city's highly praised community participation, became little more than a facade in 1974. It was then that parents faced off with administrators and school board members over plans to phase out the city's controversial but popular Experimental Schools Program. Despite overwhelming support for the program from parents, children and teachers, the board blithely went ahead with its planned phase-out, eliminating several popular special schools two years before federal funding for them would have been cut off.

Even the facade of community participation crumbled this spring when a coalition of such diverse elements as parents, neighborhood activists, political leaders and businesspeople, united in an attempt to block the unnecessary demolition of three Berkeley school buildings. Again, despite demonstrably widespread community opposition to the planned raz-

layoffs, which the board has planned in an effort to balance its 1976-1977 budget. Earlier the board had announced plans to cut back 122 positions -- roughly three-quarters of them held by minority teachers. The planned layoffs provoked two months of bitter controversy which climaxed June 8 when an angry crowd of 75 demonstrators chased the white members of the school board out of a public meeting.

Since that time the board has trimmed down the proposed layoffs to 50-75 teachers, but the majority of those will still be minority teachers.

There is no question that these three factors responsible for Berkeley's successful desegregation efforts have changed radically since integration began in 1964. The question is: will this drastic transformation hamper future desegregation efforts?

District officials say it won't. Superintendent Laval Wilson told the Barb, "You'll always have differences of opinion on such issues as labor negotiations, laying off staff members and so on, but I don't think

you have those sorts of differences of opinion surrounding the quality of education and how to put together the best system of education. I don't think the differences we have had on other matters have affected the spirit and commitment on the part of all members of the community to ending racial discrimination."

Similarly, although teachers in the district have viewed the question of layoffs with alarm, they have not yet been provoked into jumping ship on desegregation efforts. Judy Bodenhausen, president of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers, told the Barb, "Teachers aren't going to do anything to sabotage the desegregation effort. There's a lot of disagreement as to how to deal with a lot of different situations in the Berkeley school district, but there is no disagreement on the issue of desegregation."

Nevertheless, some veteran observers of the school desegregation struggle in Berkeley are unconvinced that the community can be united to complete the integration of Berkeley schools in the same way it was united to begin the task. School board member Mary Jane Johnson told the Barb, "It's a different school board in a different time in a different situation dealing with a different problem in Berkeley...The desegregation fight was a mechanical problem that involved logistical information and the temper of the community at the time. To desegregate, you simply put kids in busses and watched them roll."

"What we're fighting now is institutional racism, which is a more complex problem and requires more complex solutions."

Johnson told the Barb she didn't expect to see a resurgence of the same sort of teamwork and cooperation in the community that had helped push through a successful busing program: "I don't know that this community will ever come to grips with any problem with the same energy and intensity and group spirit that it did with desegregation."

--Pesticide Concerns

Continued from page 3

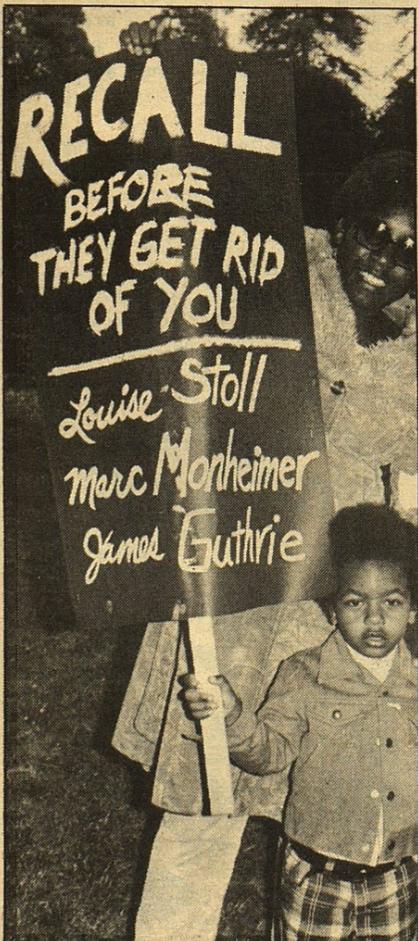
mainly on exposure by eating. The culprits in human exposure have so far been foods treated with sodium nitrate or sodium nitrite, among them cured meats and hot dogs. But it can also enter the body through the skin, and unsuspecting farm hands could already have had exposures predisposing them to liver cancer.

Tomatoes are a big crop in the warmer valleys of the Bay Area, while other vegetables grown in the cool coastal areas -- like broccoli and Brussels sprouts -- are sprayed with Treflan weed-killer also. Treflan's maker, Eli Lilly, recommends it for alfalfa, potatoes, sugar beets and cotton, all major crops in California over a very wide area.

Treflan differs chemically from two other widely-used weed killers which also sterilize the soil and so can only be used for rights-of-way (railroads, pipelines and other utilities), parking lots, or around buildings where all plant life is expendable. One of these is "Trysben," made by Dupont (an identical compound is made under another name by Tenneco). The Ross-Fine tests showed very high levels of nitrosamines, 195,000 milligrams per liter, in Trysben samples.

Technically Trysben is unrestricted as "non-toxic," so the total number of users is unrecorded. The State Department of Agriculture's records show that one public user is the State Department of Water resources, which accounted for 218 pounds in the first half of this year. Only public agencies and commercial pest-control operators must register with the Department, so the number of workers who may have handled Trysben on behalf of industrial users is unknowable for now. Dupont warns them merely to keep its product "out of reach of children" since it can cause "eye and skin irritation" treatable by flooding with water.

Further research is certainly needed, as Fine and Ross emphasized, to trace what happens to those exposed already. It must also be discovered whether nitrosamines have found their way into the chain and, of course, whether future use of these products should be banned for environmental safety. Home gardeners can stop using weed sprays; farm workers have new support in pressing for stricter controls of agricultural chemicals; but what about the uncounted, unknown industrial users already exposed?



One reason for Berkeley's exemplary integration system, according to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, was school district leadership.

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This week's cover photo is from the upcoming And/Or book Sinsemilla. The photo is by Arik Woods.