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New infighting continues KPFA's long march toward meltdown

By A.C. Thompson

A small pack of protesters – perhaps 20 folks in total – clumped on the sidewalk in front of the headquarters of KPFA-FM, Berkeley's nonprofit lefty radio station, on the afternoon of June 15. A cop approached, and one protester told him, "We're a very law-abiding group, officer."

Uh, yeah. No need to call out the riot squad for this crew of gray-haired, picket sign-equipped baby boomers. Their beef? They say KPFA's parent network, Pacifica, is keeping its financial records secret, failing even to let the network's directors see the books.

"It's very suspicious," protester John Sheridan said. "It looks bad. It smells bad." Sheridan and company fear that fat sums of money raised during KPFA's near-constant on-air fund drives are being covertly funneled to other Pacifica stations.

In other words, in a world brimming with inequity and evil, a cadre of KPFA gadflies is once again fixated on "fixing" the station. In standard activist fashion, they're organizing demonstrations, photocopying reams of propaganda, and threatening lawsuits.

Meanwhile, the personal dynamics inside the station – which have been twisted for years now – have grown completely toxic. Staffers are threatening to sue to get rid of general manager Roy Campanella II, whom they portray as an utter jerk, while one ex-employee, Noelle Hanrahan, has already sued, claiming a colleague emotionally abused her.

Conspiratorial minds – and there are a frightening number in the KPFA orbit – tend to see all this turmoil as the product of some sort of nefarious plot. One programmer was quick to point out the connections between a KPFA insider and the local ABC radio affiliate, implying that the person might be trying to



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wreck the station to enrich ABC. Another suggested, seriously, that the US government might be trying to sabotage KPFA through a covert COINTELPRO-type government program.

Other folks have their own theories. As listener and local board member Annie Hallatt put it, "A lot of people really enjoy fighting and don't feel alive unless they're engaged in combat."

Hallatt was being metaphoric, but apparently there has been some actual lefty-on-lefty violence at the station, and what some say is remarkably bad behavior. In her lawsuit, Hanrahan claims that *Flashpoints* personality Dennis Bernstein forced her out of her job after telling her, "I'm going to torture you until you quit or I force you to leave."

Several local papers have reported on the suit, but most have overlooked one intriguing aspect: In her complaint, Hanrahan says Bernstein got into a "fist fight" in 2001 with fellow KPFA staffer Aaron Glantz. (In a 10-round bout, we'd bet on Bernstein even though he's significantly older – the guy's developed quite a scrappy rep over the years.)

Glantz told the *Bay Guardian* that some sort of physical altercation did indeed occur. "I confirm that Dennis tackled me at KPFA in 2001," he said via e-mail. "I am not interested in commenting further." Contacted by phone, Bernstein told us, "I really don't have any comment."

When Hanrahan, who's best known for producing commentaries by death row resident Mumia Abu-Jamal, left the station in 2002, she blasted out a fairly nutty e-mail implying that Bernstein might have poisoned her by dosing a glass of water. Notably, that particular allegation doesn't appear in her lawsuit.

More recently, in May, lawyers for KPFA workers sent a letter to the network's management saying that "a substantial number of women working at KPFA radio have reported sexual harassment, emotional abuse and discriminatory treatment" from Campanella. The letter also cited an incident in which Campanella allegedly threatened to beat down *Hard Knock Radio* host Weyland Southon. (In this one, our money would definitely be on Southon by knockout in the first round.)

"The issue at the station is really a labor issue," said KPFA producer Sasha Lilley. "It's an issue of workplace safety. That's gotten lost."

On June 17, Southon sent out an e-alert to fans of his hip-hop talk show, which is one of the few programs not aimed at aging hippies. "*Hard Knock Radio* is under attack," Southon said in the e-mail, which asked supporters to lobby Pacifica's national board on behalf of the show and detailed his grievances with management.

Insiders say the station has already hired a lawyer to investigate the allegations about Campanella. Reached by phone, Campanella told us he couldn't comment directly on the charges, but said, "I'm focusing on the positive. This is a great station, and we have some very talented people here." (And let's be honest: By anybody's standards, managing KPFA under the best of circumstances is a rough gig, and these are not the best of circumstances.)

In addition to the unhappiness with the boss man, some staffers are bent about how much money the network is pouring into the democratic governance structure it erected in the wake of a massive labor dispute in 1999. Internal Pacifica documents obtained by the *Bay Guardian* indicate the network is expecting to blow through about \$463,000 this year on board meetings and teleconferences.

This kind of spending is a worry to some at the station. "We, as a Network, cannot survive this kind of expense," chief financial officer Lonnie Hicks wrote in a 2004 report to board members.

KPFA financial reports show that the station is planning to spend at least \$60,000 of its \$2.2 million annual budget on its elected, 24-member Local Station Board, which oversees the station, a fact that doesn't sit well with some employees, who would rather see the money go to programming.

Local board members, on the other hand, are pretty blunt in their criticism of the KPFA workforce, portraying certain "entrenched staff members" as ideological enemies of democracy. "Any time you have a democratic process, it costs money," said Richard Phelps, who sits on the local board. "The fundamental problem with people here is they don't want management. They haven't had real management in a long time."

The timing of all this acrimony, it should be noted, is pretty shitty. In case anyone has forgotten, the country is currently run by a theocratic kook whose signal accomplishments

include prosecuting an utterly stupid war and making torture standard operating procedure for the US government. For decades KPFA has been one of the Bay Area's most important alt-media institutions. It's too bad that the station, which could be pouring its personnel and resources into covering these new Middle Ages, seems bent on self-destruction.

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