

Woo brings socialism to campaign stump

Twice-fired lesbian educator urges voters to make links

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Merle Woo wants everyone to hear the S-word.

Socialism, that is.

For Woo—Chinese American, academic, lesbian, feminist, revolutionary, victor in two anti-discrimination suits against the University of California at Berkeley—socialism offers the answer to the urgent problems of late 20th century America.

Her current bid for governor of California is aimed less at winning stewardship of the state than at educating voters about what socialism means and how it could affect their lives.

"We need to be building enormous mass movements, a broad based anti-capitalist movement," Woo told an audience at Portland State University last month. "Liberation has got to cover everybody or else nobody is free."

In the face of environmental damage, economic depression and threats to civil liberties posed by neo-Nazi groups, anti-abortion protesters and others, Woo said, only a widespread movement can unite people across differences of class, race, age and sexual orientation.

The Peace and Freedom Party platform on which Woo is running attempts to bridge those distinctions with a broad based agenda that calls for full employment at union wages, decent housing, free health care and child care and a clean, healthy environment.

The party opposes capital punishment, police brutality, violations of privacy rights and union busting.

Individuals will be inspired to action when they realize how such issues translate their daily lives, Woo said.

And she should know. In the late 1960's, Woo was living the life of a quiet, conservative academic. Then student strikes churned across campuses from Berkeley to Boston. Woo watched as students held sit-ins and marches, demanding ethnic studies programs, affirmative action, participation in university decision making. She watched as police clubbed some of those students, hauled others to jail.

"I became a revolutionary in about three-months, in the fall of 1968 through the spring of 1969," she says now. "All of a sudden I realized what had been done to me."

About ten years later, Woo was hired by UC Berkeley to teach Asian-American studies. "I thought I was finally going home," Woo recalls with a rueful laugh. Instead, she found an administration slowly eroding the gains students had won in the late '60s. She found Asian faculty members who chose silence over the risks of speaking out. She saw that "education is very, very political. What we have been taught is a perspective that is white, straight, male, capitalist and elitist."

Woo did not choose silence. Instead, she came out on campus as a lesbian and a socialist. In 1982, she was fired. She filed suit, and the university settled out of court,

reinstating her in 1984. Two years later, she was fired again.

An arbitrator decided on February 1989 that the university acted "unreasonably" when it fired Woo the second time, and that she should be reinstated with back pay, benefits and seniority. To date, the university has not offered her a position in her field of ethnic studies; Woo is currently teaching women's studies at San Francisco State University.

Today, Woo still looks the part of an academic, with her dark rimmed glasses, neat collared shirt and navy sweater vest. But her speech is fired with anger, irony and the urgency of someone who has seen oppression dwell in her own backyard.

Woo said she is concerned about the erosion of 1960s ideals, both on campuses and in other arenas of American life. She sees women who once marched for liberation slipping into business suits and aping the male dominated power structure. She sees racist Skinhead activity threatening the safety of Asians, Blacks, Jews, gay men and lesbians.

Yet she remains optimistic that despite these problems, many in America are eager to embrace political change. In her visits to college campuses and other places, discussing socialism and her bid for governor, she noted, "No audience has said, 'Oh, that's impossible.' They're just saying, 'How?' There's an optimism and spiritedness and sense of humor."

Woo traces her own revolutionary leanings to her family, where a sturdy class consciousness and ethnic pride flourished amid a struggle to survive economically in San Francisco's Chinese community.

"A lot of our parents worked two or three jobs in order to have us be educated. They gave us the opportunity to stand on their shoulders and to see things better," she said.

"Within the home, there was always anger about racism, always a sense that there was an enemy, that there was injustice going on. And there were strong women who bucked the whole tradition," including an aunt whose assertiveness impressed Woo.

She has tried to raise her own children, a daughter, 26, and a son who will soon graduate from UC San Diego, with the same ideals of ethnic pride, feminism and political awareness.

On the societal scale, Woo stresses that people must be joined, not separated, by their differing experiences of oppression, that successful politics today must make room for many issues and facets of human need.

She also tries to bring that ideal home. As an educator, an activist, a poet and now, on the campaign stump, Woo sees her work as being linked.

"I didn't begin to put my stuff out (as a writer) until I had come out as a lesbian in the late 1970s. I didn't come out as a lesbian until I came out as a revolutionary feminist. Then I realized I had the same right to speak out as everybody else," she said. "It's all connected—the movement and the writing. You can't have one without the other." ▼

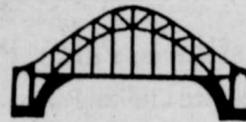


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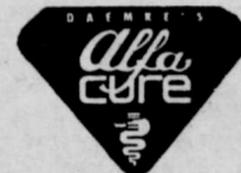
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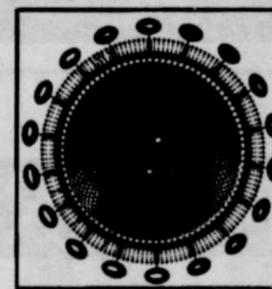
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