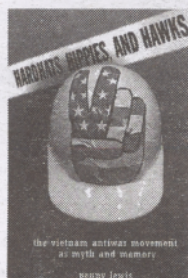


Workers against war

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



**Hardhats, Hippies
and Hawks: The
Vietnam Anti-War
Movement as
Myth and Memory**
by Penny Lewis

With the decline of the labor movement and the turn of the Democratic Party to neoliberalism, working class people by and large have lacked a progressive voice of their own.

In an effort to control the masses from protesting for a just society, generations of manipulation distort the image of civil disobedience.

For more than a generation, whenever there was a protest in the streets, the media could be counted on to make some comparison to the '60s. The general implication was that protesters were a breed apart: unrooted in their communities with their own agendas, while everybody else was busy having a life. After all, weren't the '60s protesters a bunch of long-haired students living off their parents' money, while ordinary working people fought and died for their country in Vietnam?

Not so, says Penny Lewis, a professor at the City University of New York. It turns out that the image of a movement composed of elite protesters alienated from a conservative working class was largely inaccurate. Contrary to accepted memory, the Vietnam War found its strongest support in the upper class and upper middle class; the lower someone's income, the more likely he was to oppose the war and want the U.S. out of Vietnam. It was true that a significant minority of elite students were very vocal against the war. In addition, these students organized the initial protests, led many of the organizations and became the most visible opposition.

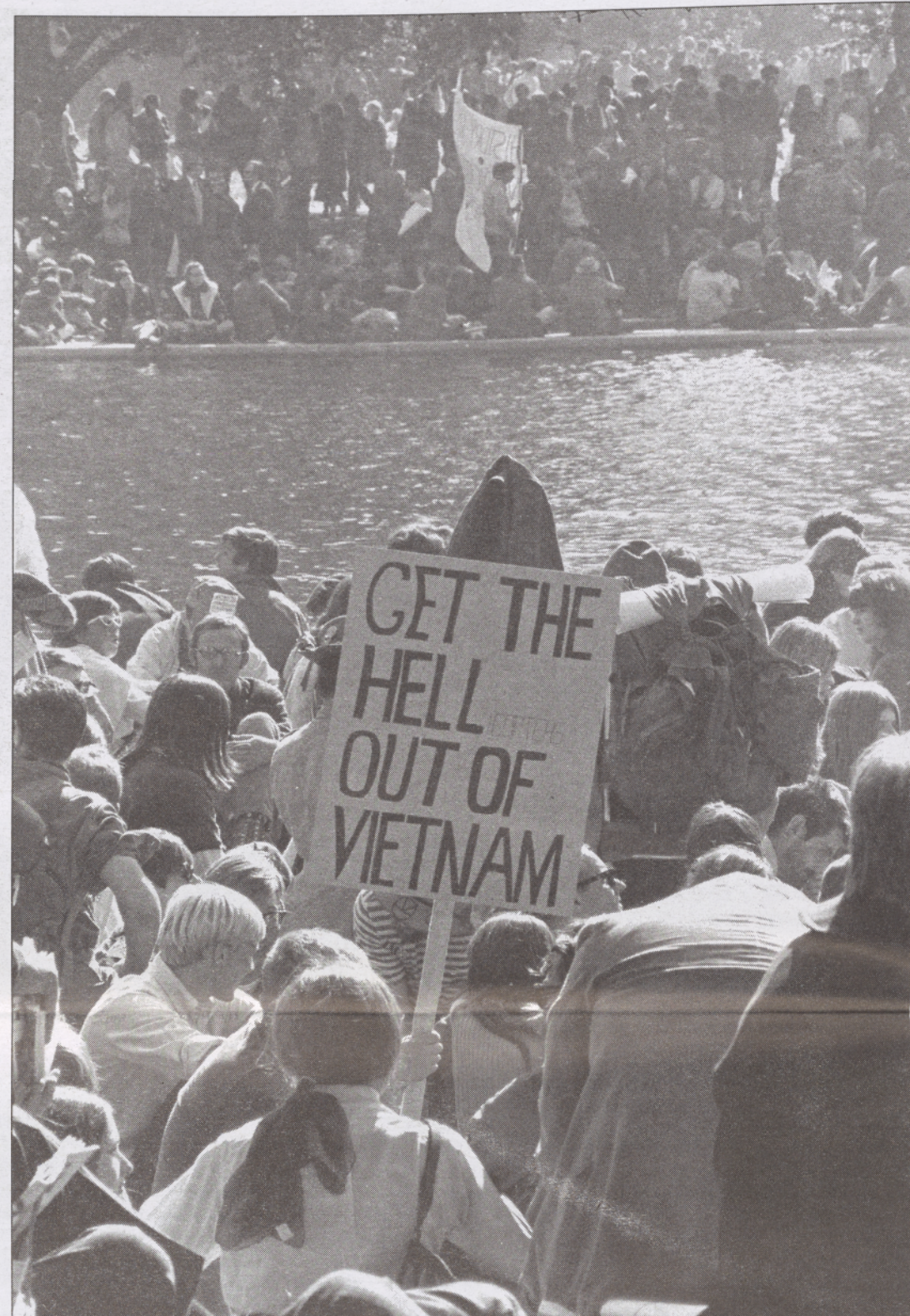
The most effective resistance to the war, Lewis argues, was the covert resistance of troops in Vietnam. Such resistance actually involved as many people, mostly working class men, as the visible protests that were taking place in the United States. In 1970 and 1971, for example, 37 percent of soldiers in an Army survey had engaged in either "dissent" or "disobedience" — the latter including "physically resistant acts of sabotage, refusing orders, and general insubordination."

As the war dragged on, Lewis points out, the student anti-war movement spread to community colleges and state universities where low tuitions had brought in a large number of students from working class families. In addition, African-Americans and Chicanos, mostly working class, opposed the war in large numbers, though mainly as members of those ethnic groups rather than as members of a particular class.

Some of the myth of the working class support for the war happened because the media talks about working people, it usually means white working people. In the 1960s and 1970s, the images of a conservative white working class were reinforced by TV shows like "All in the Family" and movies like "Joe," starring Peter Boyle.

Even the white working class, however, was divided about the war. There were a number of unions, including ones that were majority white, which came out against the Vietnam War as the casualty rate mounted and it became clear that paying for the war was cutting into social programs.

There was a conservative backlash against the anti-war movement, climaxing in the iconic incident when white construction



workers in New York City beat up protesters at a demonstration. But interviews with the construction workers showed that they were not so much pro-war as anti-protester, reacting against a counterculture that rejected the work ethic in a way that seemed to demean the lives of working people.

Most narratives about the '60s in school textbooks focus on the organizations that led the anti-war movement, especially Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which fell apart in 1969. But by then SDS was pulling back from anti-war organizing. The anti-war movement continued to grow until after the invasion of Cambodia in 1971 and became so large that most of the people in the movement didn't belong to any organization. A majority of Americans turned against the war, leading to what conservative commentators would call the "Vietnam syndrome:" the unwillingness of U.S. voters to support intervention and invasions abroad, at least until the 1990s.

Lewis says one of the problems the organized anti-war movement has faced from Vietnam is that it largely accepted the myth of working class conservatism. As a movement mainly organized by professional people and students, it was easiest to expand among the people they knew.

Attempts to "reach out" to working people have often been tinged with condescension or cluelessness. With the decline of the labor movement and the turn of the Democratic Party to neoliberalism, working class people by and large have lacked a progressive voice of their own. "People vote on social issues when other meaningful things that people care about — such as policies that address economic opportunity, insecurity, and inequality — are effectively off the table. ... The width, depth, and importance of working-class social conservatism therefore rests on shifting sands."

While the language is sometimes overly academic, Lewis' book is a useful corrective to the legacy of the '60s that has tended to target movement organizing toward middle class and upper middle class liberals. Lewis sees the recent Occupy protests and the way that they formed ties with unions and ordinary people as a good sign: "Movements of today appear poised to ... shake off the legacy of the real and imagined polarization that has characterized our politics since Vietnam." One can only hope she's right.

Reprinted from Street Roots sister paper, Real Change News in Seattle, Wash.

PHOTO COURTESY OF
WIKICOMMONS
*Vietnam War
protesters amass in
Washington D.C.,
1967.*