Letters: Continued from page 3

NCEA members go beyond bake sales and "making nice" with administrators. We're involved in coalitions to increase school budgets, we work for anti-racist/multi-cultural curriculums, and we fight against practices that discriminate against poor and working-class students and students of color.

Most of our members' efforts go into local struggles. However, as we expand the common ground between parents and teachers and as we become clear about what we mean by school reform, NCEA is becoming a grassroots voice in the national debate over schools.

We encourage parents and teachers who want to explore these possibilities to join us at our annual conference "Breaking Barriers: School and Social Justice in Our Communities," July 30-August 2 in Milwaukee.

For details: NCEA, P.O. Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472 (914)658-8115. (Some assistance is available, with priority to parents and people of color.)

Sincerely,

Debi Duke
Executive Director, NCEA

Why Bother?: Continued from page 15

nize national electoral campaigns based on the two parties that currently monopolize political power, and doubt that third party efforts at this particular time are likely to have any success, most can readily point to the kind of organization they would like to see. As Mark Toney puts it "I'd rather link up with a regional or national community-based organization that, on occasion, did [get involved in] electoral politics, than with an electoral organization that claimed it did organizing."

A key component of any involvement in electoral politics, according to these activists, would be the ability to enforce some kind of reciprocity between elected officials and the community organizations. Leah Wise of Southerners for Economic Justice sums up the problem by saying "once people get elected, they ignore the people who put them there. We have never developed a mechanism that keeps local people involved and politicians accountable."

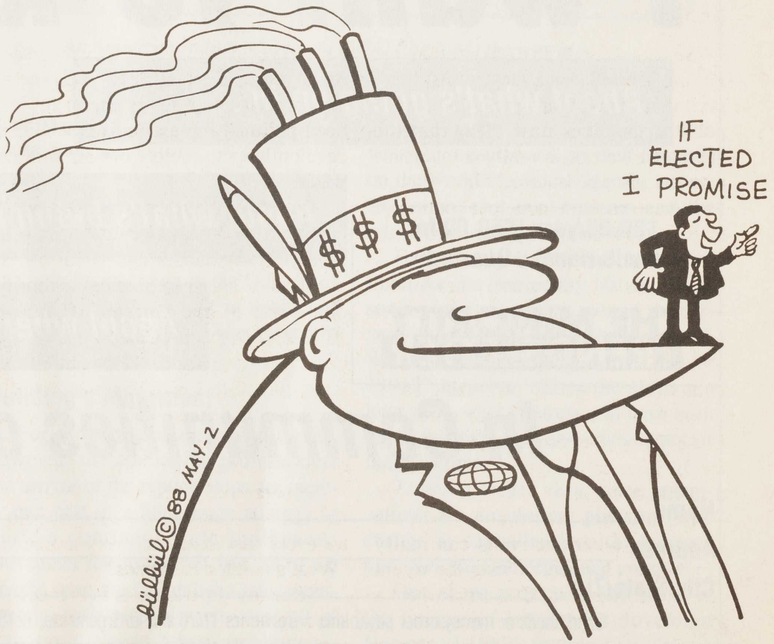
Nonetheless, many of the people interviewed for this article believe that it is really only on the local level that people have any hope of holding politicians accountable. Activists who are absorbed in electoral politics, for the most part, are tied in on the local level.

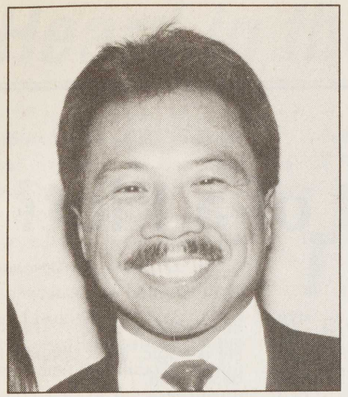
The Localists

Juan Montes, who works with the Rural Alliance for Military Accountability in New Mexico, says that the only reason he's registered to vote is so that he can participate in local politics. He reasons, "it's not that we don't think that we're affected by national politics. The question is where you are going to start. Our interest is in building an organization rooted in the experience here. The political structure is very much a part of that experience. So, we're involved in local politics. Simple. But that doesn't mean that we think that activity in the political arena is any more important than any of the other work that we do."

For Donna Chavis of the Carolina Indian Cultural Center, local politics offer her a way to forge coalitions. "One of the key issues here," she says, "is representation. Gaining local political representation is one of the things that has brought Indian and Black people together to work collaboratively."

After almost twenty years as a community organizer, Anthony Thigpen recently spent six months running a Los Angeles candidate's campaign for a local political office. When asked why, Thigpen laughed: "Although his opponent was Black and good on international issues — like apartheid and U.S. intervention in Nicaragua — he was terrible on basic domestic issues like rent control and the neighborhood versus downtown development. In terms of the Jobs with Peace agenda — to build a citywide coalition around [the issue of] development, the election was very important. We needed an inside voice to move our agenda. It was quid pro quo."





Bill Tamayo

No Faith

Sandra Davis, lead organizer for People United for a Better Oakland, says that "I used to ignore [electoral] politics, but it is now clear that the mayor we've got is really a lot worse than the guy who opposed him. Though I still have no faith in national politics, I think we can have an effect on who gets elected here, and what they do."

Though this essentially pragmatic local perspective on electoral politics is not surprising coming from Davis and Thigpen, both of whom come out of a traditional community organizing background, it is interesting to note that Eddie Wong, the former field director of the Jackson campaign in 1989, shares the same opinion.

He now believes that it is on the local level where activists can really make things happen. Citing the recent case in Bell Gardens, California where a local Latino organization managed to take over the city council, Wong remarks, "local activists are really moving, especially in California. We've got fights over reapportionment and single member districts, struggles to take over municipalities, and even attempts to take over administrative positions in some of the large urban centers."

Gail Small, director of the Montana-based Native Action, gets involved in local politics to the extent necessary to move her agenda. As an elected representative to her tribal government, Small sees a need to "develop a generation of leadership that is educated. We need political representatives who can develop laws to protect our air and our water.

> ***As activists and organizers, we have to look at what is best for our community.***
>
> ***In some cases we'll work with Republicans, in others with the Democrats, and in still others we'll go independent. We can't be wedded to any party. I don't think a third party will work nationally, but if we can effectively deal with our own interests locally, something real might develop.***

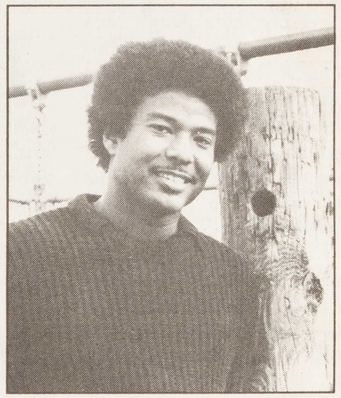
Outside of the reservation we have to deal with the attempts to split our vote through gerrymandering. A lot of the attempts to usurp local tribal authority come out of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. But much of the wheeling and dealing concerning development efforts is on the state level. So we have to develop a voice there."

Veronica Barrela, who is active in Colorado Democratic Party politics and is the organizer of the state's People of Color Coalition, has the same question for every candidate and every initiative. "What's in it for Hispanics?

Since my experience is in business," she comments, "I want to know the bottom line. With local people, if they can't keep their word, we know how to get to them. On the national scene, we have no leverage."

Ron Daniels, on the other hand, holds what might seem to be a contradictory position. On the one hand, Daniels argues that local grassroots political organizations are vitally important. On the other, he is currently an independent candidate for president. Commenting on this contradiction, Daniels points out that "we need two things. We need a national movement for social and economic justice, and we need strong local organizations that are able to operate both inside and outside of the electoral arena.

"The two are not mutually exclusive, and I hope to use my candidacy to articulate issues and positions as well as build organizations."



Mark Toney

When asked which of the efforts was more important, Ron grins and says "local organization, every time."

Summing up the attitude of most of the activists interviewed for this article, Leroy Johnson of the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center in Lexington, Mississippi says "as activists and organizers, we have to look at what is best for our community.

"In some cases we'll work with Republicans, in others with the Democrats, and in still others we'll go independent. We can't be wedded to any party. I don't think a third party will work nationally, but if we can effectively deal with our own interests locally, something real might develop."