

Thirty Years of Amnesty

by Gord Bennett

"When the first two hundred letters came, they gave me back my clothes. Then the next two hundred came and the warden came to see me. When the next pile of letters arrived the warden got in touch with his superior. The President was informed. The letters kept coming; three thousand of them. Finally, the President called the prison and told them to let me go."

Julio de Pena Valdez
Labour Organizer
Dominican Republic

"It was surreal," recalls Jenna Clark, Chair of York's Amnesty International group. "There were all these people being held for all sorts of bullshit reasons, like practising their religion or because of who their relatives were and stuff like that, and I could help them just by writing a letter. I knew it wouldn't work for all of them, but I knew I could help some."

Clark's belief that something can be done echoes the sentiments of Amnesty International's founder, Peter Benson.

Thirty years ago, in May 1961, a report on how two drinking Portuguese students had been jailed for 'toasting freedom' prompted Benson to write an article entitled "The Forgotten Victims."

In the article, Benson announced an "Appeal for Amnesty." The idea was to launch a letter-writing campaign which would focus attention on human rights abuses. To Benson's own surprise, the appeal attracted international support and within six months a permanent international organization had been founded.



Over the next thirty years, Amnesty International would grow to a million members worldwide. It would use the power of the written word to coerce, embarrass and harass governments about their usually abysmal human rights records. Courteous and respectful one-page letters simply asking for basic human rights — that has been Amnesty's weapon.

"You can't tell these people what you really think," says Clark. "After all, they could take it out on the person you're trying to help. I get a laugh using their official titles, like Emperor so-and-so or His Excellency this or that, but you've got to realize that insulting them won't help the prisoner."

"I don't know if the numbers are good or awful," reports York Amnesty executive Steve Birnie. Of the latest 89 cases highlighted by Amnesty, there have been 36 releases, 42 are still in prison and 11 are 'disappeared.' "All I know is that for those 36

people, Amnesty made a difference."

The 'cases' Amnesty takes on are ones in which Human Rights violations are alleged. "The United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights establishes a benchmark on how people are to be treated," says Birnie. "If there is a violation of those rights, Amnesty gets involved."

There are three primary criteria which determine the scope of Amnesty's work. The first involves deciding if a person is a prisoner of conscience. Prisoners of conscience are persons detained for their beliefs, colour, sex, ethnic origin, language or religion, provided they have not used or advocated violence. A second criterion is whether fair and prompt trials are provided. Finally, Amnesty will become involved in cases of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners.

"Knowing that my personal efforts make a difference for people who are subject to conditions we can conceive

only in our nightmares, that's what motivates me." So spoke an impassioned Carol Wilson about her involvement with Amnesty International. "I wanted to know that my work was really going to amount to something."

And amount to something it did. This fall, Wilson, working within Amnesty and PEN International (an organization dedicated to supporting persecuted writers and journalists) was the central figure in first freeing, then resettling a prisoner of conscience into Canada.

"She had been in prison for nine years solely because her husband had worked for the previous government. It was the greatest feeling, seeing her walking off the plane and knowing that we had made it happen. We put several thousand letters to their head, and they blinked!"

Adds Wilson: "I went to school in the States in the sixties. I saw that people can change things, and students are quite often at the forefront.

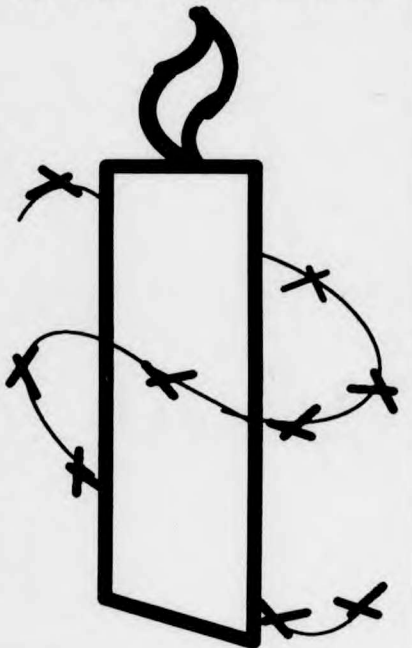
The students here at York can show support for other students in Korea, China, all over the world, and I have seen such support make a difference!"

And so the message might be that just because you can do only a little, you should not choose to do nothing.

The York Amnesty International group meets Thursdays at 5:00 in room 110 of Founders College. For further information, Jenna Clark may be contacted at 739-8754.

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letters

Students need info on strike

Dear Editor,

On October 17 the Toronto Star printed an article entitled "Teaching assistants to strike at York University over safety." The Student Senator Caucus, the student body's representative in the Senate, feels that it is imperative to clarify the current state of negotiations between CUEW (Canadian Union of Education Workers, the union representing TAs and part-time faculty) and the administration of the university, for the understanding of the student body. It is also important to mention that the Student Senator Caucus is in no way a party in the negotiations, and its actions are intended solely to inform students as to their rights during a work disruption.

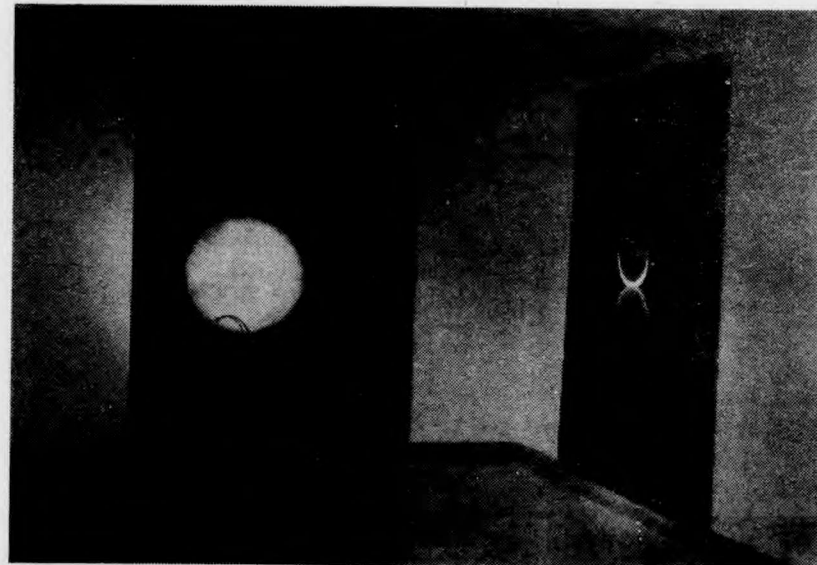
The negotiation process is currently at the level of conciliation, and a strike is not even possible until at least 17 days after the breakdown of conciliation.

In the event of a work disruption, there is a formal Senate Policy on the "Academic Implications of Disruptions or Cessations of University

We will publish, space permitting, any letters up to 400 words. They must be typed, double spaced, and accompanied by the writer's name and telephone number. Material deemed libelous or discriminatory by the staff of Excalibur will be rejected. Letters may be mailed or delivered to Excalibur • 426 Student Center • York University • 4700 Keele Street • North York • Ontario M3J 1P3

Business due to Labour Disputes or Other Causes." The Student Senator Caucus requested through its chair, Justin Linden, at the September meeting of the Executive Committee of the Senate, that a special sub-committee be formed to address the concerns of the Caucus with regards to the interpretation of that policy. The result was that the Caucus has been assured that in the event of a strike, the guiding principle in the implementation of the policy will be "fairness to students," and the protection and respect of a "student's freedom of choice."

The Student Senator Caucus strongly urges all students to inform themselves as to the positions of CUEW and the administration, and to



Alok Sharma

make their voices heard to the appropriate parties. We call upon both parties, CUEW and the administration, to immediately advise the student body as to their positions through all possible means, and to keep the students informed as to the state of negotiations on a continuing basis. To that end we ask that the lines of communication be opened between the negotiating parties and the student body, so that the voice of the students can be clearly heard.

We encourage all students to discuss the negotiations, and the possible academic implications with their TAs and professors. For direct communication with either party, please call Margaret Watson, chief negotiator for CUEW Local 3 at 736-5154 or Paula O'Riley, chief negotiator for York University at 736-5400.

For further information regarding

the senate policy, please contact the student senator caucus at 736-2100 ext. 20900, or drop by 438 Student Centre.

Justin Linden
Chair, Student Senate Caucus

Cool visual in Excalibur

Dear Excalibur,

I would like to compliment you on your article reviewing the Patient Players exhibit at the York University Student Centre Art Gallery. Also, if not noticed before, you have created an amazing photograph.

Visually the phenomena can be seen by holding the picture a few

inches away from your right eye and to the right. Now stare at the full circle and you will see the images in the picture adjacent (right) disappear. This also works vice versa but not upside down. The artistic illusion is exemplified in the full circle (left) having two arcs near the bottom, illustrating perhaps out of sight but not existence.

This phenomena actually describes a very plausible explanation of human behaviour. Infants at 1-2 days old begin to see—and acuity improves in the first 3 months of life. The infant tracks objects, and being much slower must constantly have people and items go out of vision in the blind spots of their eyes. This would allow the infant to also learn items out of sight do not mean they do not exist. Visual memory of objects would be learnt via this time sequence of visual absence. Although the eyes are closed pre-birth, imagery may still exist however this visual learning may be the beginning of visual memory for objects, people, etc. If this is the case child infants have much earlier capacities for memory at an earlier age than documented by Piaget and Havell. More research is needed—but I believe this is how children gain this visual memory, and it is a very simple biological explanation.

Again, the art is captured well and creates a second masterpiece. I hope you have it placed in text books, and art galleries.

Sincerely,
Cheryl Briston, B.A. Hons.

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