Liberal Think Tank Fights a Union

By T.R. Reid
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In the 13 years since it was born here as the first "respectable" offspring of the New Left, the Institute for Policy Studies has survived withering political assaults, conspiracy indictments, and FBI surveillance of everything from its telephone calls to its typewriter ribbons.

But now the institute, which has grown to a staff of 71 and an annual budget exceeding $1 million despite the attacks from its adversaries, faces a new threat from one of its presumative allies: organized labor.

Twelve scholars at the institute, a think tank and social action center, have formed a local unit of the American Federation of Teachers. They are demanding collective bargaining over wages, job security, and organizational management.

Marcus Raskin and Richard Barnet, the institute's founders and co-directors, say that development could mean financial disaster. Accordingly, they have refused to bargain with the union — except for a single "negotiating proposal" which called for firing (they call it "a separation") of the employees who formed the local.

The dispute at IPS is insttructive, because it illustrates how new financial realities and changing fashions of liberal thought have affected the scores of left istcenters and institutes that sprang up in the impassioned years of the '60s.

The labor trouble at IPS could be a harbinger of a wider effort at union organization throughout Washington's "public interest" community, where low salaries and minimal job security are the rule.

"It may be that this is a whole new frontier for the Wagner Act," says Charles Both, a labor lawyer who represents the local at IPS.

Both cited the union contract signed last year at the Antioch Law School, another liberal, social-action-oriented organization, as evidence that "management at these places may have to recognize that their employees are going to organize to protect their jobs."

Ann Zill, who deals with numerous public interest groups in her role as chief Washington grant-giver for New York philanthropist Stewart Mott, agreed that the IPS affair could be "a good case study of what could happen to some of these groups."

"A lot of these people who talk about changing the world from a leftist perspective have never worked out the realities of labor-management relations," Zill said.

"Of course, if they really were liberal and democratic, they should believe in worker control of management. But these left-advocacy groups hate to admit that they have any management or any workers," she said.

Members of the union local at the Institute for Policy Studies said that Zill's analysis hits home.

"They want us all to be one big family," said one. "Nobody's supposed to worry about labor issues."

"That was okay in the '60s. We were all in it for the esprit de corps of the thing. But now you've got a wife, or more likely a divorce, and two kids, and it's no game anymore. You need that job and that check."

There was maximum esprit de corps at work in 1963 when Raskin and Barnet, both young lawyers disaffected with their work in the federal government, gathered almost $200,000 in foundation grants and three other new left thinkers into the Institute for Policy Studies.

The organization was to be, they said, "a place for thought . . . based on the premise that social theory must be informed by, as well as inform, social action."

Put more simply by one of the founding scholars, the institute was designed to "spend half the time planning utopia and the other half running a local food co-op."

Raskin and Barnet quickly earned nationwide reputations for their enormous outpouring of publications and their seminars and consultations with members of Congress and senior policy officials in the executive branch.

Perhaps the best-known of the institute's other members in Arthur Waskow, a bearded firebrand whose voluminous writings were punctuated with such exhortations as "Liberation Now!" and "Stop Pharaoh Nixon."

With the heightening of the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam war, and the emergence of new issues such as ecology and local control, the late 1960s were fertile years for liberal thinkers and activists.

Supported by grants from leftist foundations in New York and California, IPS grew rapidly. By its 10th anniversary in 1973, there were 30 scholars on board, supported by a staff of 23.

As the institute grew in prominence, it came into turmoil. Raskin was indicted in 1968 along with Dr. Benjamin Spock and three others on charges of conpsiring against the Selective Service System. Although all five were acquitted, the FBI was not convinced that Raskin and his institute could be trusted.

According to the House intelligence committee, the FBI conducted a five-year investigation of IPS, employing telephone taps, informers, break-ins, and reconstruction of institute documents from typewriter ribbons snatched from its garbage.

But none of that seriously impaired the institute's work. What did hurt were shifts in the liberal philanthropy set that financed IPS and other public interest operations.

The stock market crunch of the early '70s dried up some funding sources. Others began to lose interest in the liberal causes of the previous decade.

"It got to a point," said Saul Landau, a filmmaker at IPS who has opposed formation of the union, "where the things some of our people were doing were no longer marketable commodities in funding circles."

"Feminism, local organization, civil rights, relgious experience—you can't get foundation money for that stuff anymore," Landau said.

"We're just like bricklayers who need a union to deal with their bosses. The only difference is that a bricklayer's product is a wall, and our product is social change."

In their increasingly frequent fund-raising forays to New York, Raskin and Barnet found their patrons to be mainly interested in intenational—or "transnational," the preferred term among leftists—issues: world economics, foreign policy, national security.

The institute's federal tax return for 1975 shows that many of its major supporters during the '60s—the Stern Family Fund, the Daniel J. Bernstein Foundation, the Janss Foundation—had reduced their contributions to $50,000 or less. The largest single grant—$450,000, nearly half the IPS operating budget—came from the Samuel Rubin Foundation in New York. Raskin and Barnet say that money was resricted to international studies.

The institute responded. The single word "Transnational" was lettered in over the door at IPS headquarters, at 19th and Q Streets NW, and Chilean refugee Orlando Leteller was hired to run a new Transnational Institute. (Leterlier was killed last September when a bomb exploded in his car.)

But a group of institute scholars refused to acknowledge that a shift in interests among wealthy New Yorkers should affect their work. While Raskin and Barnet worked on "transnationalism," the others continued to produce such articles as "Lesbians in Revolt" and "The Seven Days of Creation From a Buberian-Feminist Perspective."

Everyone agreed that something must be done, but no one agreed what it should be. "We kept having these meetings where we agreed to a salary cut," Landau said. "But nobody ever implemented it."

Last fall, Raskin and Barnet bit the bullet. They proposed that salaries—ranging from $18,000 to $30,000 annually for tentured scholars—be cut deeply, with individual scholars becoming responsible for raising funds for projects that Raskin's and Barnet's contacts would not support. They also called for "greater focus" in the scholars' work, which some saw as a threat of central control of all research.

Waskow and 11 other scholars—mainly those involved in domestic issues—responded by forming the union local.

"It's a classic case of workers struggling with unresponsive management," Waskow said. "We're just like bricklayers who need a union to deal with their bosses. The only difference is that a bricklayer's product is a wall, and our product is social change."

The union organizers last month approached Raskin and Barnet to demand collective bargaining. After a month of debate, the co-directors replied with a one-page "negotiating proposal" that calls for "a separation from IPS" of nine of the union members. The nine would receive severance payments up to $40,000, with the restriction that if they use the money to start a new think tank, they cannot call it anything that sounds like "Institute for Policy Studies."

In a lengthy memorandum, Raskin and Barnet called their proposal "just." Charles Both, the lawyer for the new union, called it "refusal to bargain" and "retaliatory intimidation." Last week he filed an unfair labor practice complaint against the institute with the National Labor Relations Board.

Over the weekend the institute's trustees, including Raskin and Barnet, Waskow, and several of the organization's financial backers, will try to resolve the dispute. While both sides said they hope for an "amicable" resolution, each maintains that it cannot afford to give in to the other.

"After all the years this place has worked in the struggle for democracy, we just can't betray our commitment to the workers' struggle," Waskow said.

But Raskin and Barnet replied that recognition of the union would mean "greater damage to one another, to the institute, and in a real sense to the country."