

All of Us or None

Social Justice Posters of the San Francisco Bay Area

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“When I came out here [Berkeley in 1970], the people doing the best communicating were the anti-war activists....All you needed was a guy with a mimeograph machine at 8 a.m., and you could get 5,000 people to People’s Park by the afternoon.”—Moishe Rosen

After the frenzy—and success—of Berkeley’s Free Speech Movement, the social protest sphere expanded dramatically. Many activists were returning to the Bay Area after participating in civil rights movement actions in the South, just in time to engage in two top priorities: ending the war in Vietnam and supporting the struggles of people of color in the United States. Often the two issues became entwined.

By 1964, the war had escalated to the point where a military draft had been instituted, dramatically impacting young men. The draft fell disproportionately upon working-class youths and people of color. By 1969, middle-class white men, the primary beneficiaries of student deferments, lost that shield when the draft began to be determined by lottery. In addition to personal risk, there were many other legitimate reasons to oppose the war. Some felt that all war was immoral, some felt that just this war was immoral, and some believed that this war was an unjustified extension of an imperial foreign policy. All produced subtly different poster art.

The earliest antiwar posters appeared for Vietnam Day, a teach-in on May 21 and 22, 1965. This thirty-hour marathon event hosted speakers including United States Senator from Alaska Ernest Gruening, noted journalist I. F. Stone, satirist Paul Krassner, pediatrician Benjamin Spock, poet Kenneth Rexroth, singer Barbara Dane, “and many others.” The phone number to call to help out was the residence of later-to-be Yippie (Youth International Party) leader Jerry Rubin. Other Vietnam-related events

included a benefit produced by the San Francisco Mime Troupe and another by the musicians of Spontaneous Sound, who performed a concert that included “gongs, tympani, cymbals, bells, chimes, flutes, and Tibetan temple horns.”

After the first teach-in, the Vietnam Day Committee continued to be a focus for antiwar work; a benefit concert the next year featured local musician, Navy veteran, and antiwar activist Country Joe McDonald.

In 1966 the controversial draft resistance poster “Girls Say Yes to Boys Who Say No,” featuring the charming trio of Joan Baez and her sisters, Mimi Farina and Pauline Marden, was published to raise funds, and in August a series of vigils was started at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine, a weapons station in the East Bay. That was also the year that Yippie activist Jerry Rubin ran for mayor of Berkeley.

The following year, 1967, saw an explosion of antiwar actions and general media outreach. The Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam organized four simultaneous national demonstrations for April 15, one of them in San Francisco. One of the Port Chicago vigils featured a concert by local cultural hero Pete Seeger. A major effort to shut down the Oakland Induction Center was held October 16 to 21 by the Stop the Draft Week Committee, a broad-based coalition of peace, antiwar, civil rights, and labor groups, and the first poster by Frank Cieciorca for the event sported the slogan “Hell no, we won’t go.” His next poster changed the slogan to the more inclusive “Hell no, nobody goes,” and a subsequent poster for a rally featured a dramatic blocky figure with a raised fist. The October 17 event was a tumultuous near-riot. Cieciorca’s third poster proved to be a movement milestone. He isolated the fist from the previous poster figure and used it as a totemic symbol of resistance, one of many in a historic chain of clenched fists—including his own from the civil rights movement.

This one, so simple and strong, was picked up and used by many New Left groups in the United States and around the world. It showed up almost immediately within pieces produced by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which used it in a flyer for the 1968 Chicago National Democratic Convention protest. A virtually identical fist was used in the 1969 Harvard student antiwar strike, and traces its origin to School of Design student Harvey Hacker.

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Across the Bay, UC Berkeley’s plans to develop a nearby empty plot called People’s Park conflicted with community interest in preserving it as an area for free speech. Poor handling of the local resistance by UC and state officials echoed the chain of events of the Free Speech Movement only five years earlier. Governor Reagan was incensed at this affront, and his Chief of Staff Edwin Meese—who as Alameda County District Attorney had shown his muscle against the Stop the Draft Week demonstrators—made sure that order would be maintained. Alameda County Sheriff Frank Madigan’s officers were dubbed the “Blue Meanies” in reference to the cartoon villains in the Beatles film *Yellow Submarine* released the year before. Escalating aggressive law enforcement tactics culminated in the use of National Guard troops to control protesters, and the ensuing riots resulted in the death of an innocent bystander. The struggle was an epic one, pitting flower-planting hippies against baton-wielding troops, and it reflected the deepening social divide gripping the nation.

Back across the bay, students at San Francisco State College (now University) had been involved in what is still the longest student strike in U.S. history. Between November 6, 1968, and March 20, 1969, faculty and staff joined many student organizations, led by the Black Students Union and the Third World Liberation Front, to mobilize around such issues as opposition to the Vietnam

War, limited opportunities for students and faculty of color, and demands for more relevant curricula. When College President Dr. Robert Smith resigned in the heat of the strike, English professor Dr. S. I. Hayakawa was named Acting President. Hayakawa’s bitter opposition to the strike contributed to the dramatic escalation of events that involved riot police and mass arrests.

For many artists, this was a turning point in using their skills for social change. Rupert Garcia describes the moment:

We had a big meeting of art students and faculty about how to address the campus strike. And one faculty—I guess a faculty from England who had just come back from visiting France and Paris—mentioned to us what he saw some students doing there, which was to make posters. And so we—some faculty and students—organized a poster brigade. And we used Dennis Beall’s print studios and his instruction on how to do silkscreen, and so we learned this technique, like on-the-job training. There was no course, no class. And I was a liaison between the art department and the other members of the Third World Liberation Front organizations. I would go talk to them and come back, and this kind of thing. And so we began to make posters dealing with the issues—issues from racism to better education to police brutality, antiwar, and much more. I mean, all the issues that were being addressed at that time made for a heady experience. Many of those issues were being dealt with in our poster brigade. And the posters were used in the demonstrations on campus, and some were used outside of campus, and some were sold to raise money to get people out on bail, people who had been arrested. And it was going very well. We had really wonderful teamwork.

For book information, see p. 9.