

# Thirty years: WIP editors look forward and back

Compiled by Matt Crichton and Lori Lively

WIP recently invited former WIP writers, editors and agitators to share reflections from their time with the paper for its 30th anniversary edition. We received, and continue to receive, thoughtful responses that shed light on the marriage of activism and journalism that is key to WIP's longevity. They remark below on just a few of WIP's many memorable campaigns, some local successes, and why they mattered.

## Mark Bean: WIP and labor are early allies

"My introduction to *Works In Progress*, or WIP, began in the summer of 1990 as part of my local carpenter union's desire to move into community participation. I was a newly-minted organizer for the Carpenter Union District Council and had been on the prowl for alternative outlets to communicate our messages. But it turned out that Sylvia Smith approached me first at a state workers union function. She certainly had her ear to the ground. She had heard about our organizing efforts around the state construction of new buildings in Olympia. I was grateful for being asked to write about a subject close to home to our local union."

Early in WIP's history, sanitation workers who were also union members shared garbage remnants from a state construction site with WIP, including private internal messages, computer data, receipts, and personnel information from the general contractor. "This information was analyzed by our carpenter organizing group, which turned into tactical advantages for our carpenter organizing effort. We saw that having home field advantage was of extreme benefit against a non-union contractor. It also produced fact-based information for my WIP articles. The contractors could not figure out how we learned of their inner workings."

*"Without local activism there's a break in movement building. It ties to resistance globally."*

## Pat Tassoni: Early days

"We all had multiple roles as WIP was starting. A lot of us were, not necessarily anarchists, but definitely left-leaning. We did not want any sort of hierarchical structure. It was mostly done by consensus—who wants to do what. 'These are the opportunities, if you want to learn this your can, writing, typing, etc.'"

"We were all volunteers, so no one got paid. If we fell short we would just all pitch in and pay for it—\$20 here, \$20 there." WIP ran free promotions for several supportive businesses but "we hated capitalism so much we didn't bill them." An Evergreen student suggested WIP treat businesses as advertisers and bill them for ads. "We found that, wow! WIP was a sustainable endeavor! Our ad rates were actually cheaper than others." (Editor's note: they still are!)

## Digging for the stories

When a local movement pushed for the development of affordable housing, it was quickly opposed by a sudden flood of letters to The Olympian. "I thought to myself 'who are these people?' so I found them in the phone book and called them. I learned they all worked in just two businesses downtown." In a widely-read piece, WIP revealed that the opposition was actually a handful of people who had written letters on behalf of their friends.

"That article reversed the decision. The city and county both received state and federal funding for this affordable housing project specifically. The state finance person said this was the first time in the history of the state that it was awarded money. They quietly took the money and developed the project but still refused funding that would have allowed access for an elevator for a basement that could have been developed into additional housing units. The city still found a way to, you know, be a dick about it."

"It took about 10 yrs to get solidified and recognized in the community. A lot of us were students of the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration. We liked the double meaning of 'we're all works in progress, our community is a work in progress.'"

"Other publications have risen and fallen because, honestly, they think they can make money off it. It's hard to make money off WIP as long as it aligns with the mission statement."

## Advice to future WIPsters

Try to be a check and balance to *The Olympian*, the corporate newspaper that's always favoring the wealthy. There's more to the story. Budding journalists think they have to have fairness in their articles but I say no—the mainstream media is essentially a monopoly of information. The fairness is up to the reader to decide who's more credible, how to interpret the situation. I also don't encourage people to just rant on their blogs or twitter accounts and call themselves journalists. I trust the readers."

*"I want to believe that as long as people are working for justice the paper will continue."*

## Patti Imani: Personal and professional discovery

"My first submission was in the early 90s, a very awkward bit on income inequality, but the writing brought me from being isolated in my struggles with poverty to speaking out and organizing with others."

"There was ongoing writing during the Sustainable Community Homeless Empowerment Movement (SCHEME) days in the mid-90s. The city was trying to stop a transitional housing project. I want to believe exposing the classism of the city officials and business owners in the pages of WIP at least put them under public scrutiny. Those writings also encouraged housed people to check their own thinking. There was some friction between advocates and houseless activists (as there is today) but the writing in WIP helped form alliances that wouldn't have existed otherwise."

## Meaningful campaigns

Important stories during Imani's tenure included organizing and reporting on a benefit to cover legal costs for the late priest Bill Bichsel; a 30 days fast at the capitol to support clemency for Leonard Peltier (a letter to that effect was eventually signed by Governor Mike Lowry); opposition to a regulation that would have required more than 25 people gathering on capitol grounds to get a permit; a Mother's Day panel focusing on women in prison; and the 2005 Global Women's Strike.

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## The importance of direct action

"I want to point out direct action isn't focused on policy change but in creating the change you want (policy or no policy). For example, the community spent years asking the port to stop contracting to move fracking materials to the Bakken oil fields, with no result. Direct action happened when people blocked the trains to stop the movement of those materials. Eventually, those port contracts ended. I don't believe that change would have happened absent direct action. Activists didn't wait for a change to do what was needed."

## Advice for aspiring journalists:

*"Stop doing journalism and start being an activist. Also, stop asking for advice."*

Imani's final submissions to WIP, she says, were written anonymously or collectively. "I started to understand the individual doesn't matter, it's the relationship between us, and what we do with it, that matters... Without local activism there's a break in movement building. It ties to resistance globally."

*"We pissed off some people and made a lot of other people laugh."*

## 1990

### Early days

The first WIPsters share duties, learn as they go, and make decisions by consensus. Their first office is in the Labor Temple on Capitol Blvd. (Oct. 1990)



### Police accountability

Lack of accountability and brutality by Olympia Police top the list of most visited topic on WIP pages (Sept. 1995).



### Nuclear power

Activists challenge proposals for new plants and calls for cleanup of existing facilities (Sept. 1990)



### Gulf War

Opposition to the First Gulf War with original cover art (Feb. 1991)



### Globalism

WIP covers "The Battle of Seattle" and unravels the WTO ministerial conference for readers (Nov. 1999)



### Racism

Cover story in first issue is interview with South African pastor on how racism is perpetuated (June 1990)



### Labor + Unions

Workers rights are front and center in WIP pages from the beginning and local unions lend early financial support to WIP (Jan. 1993).



### Port of Olympia

WIP's exposure of Port of Olympia bids to renew military shipment contracts, combined with one-the-ground actions by protesters, led authorities to abandon the practice.

## 2000

### The carbon bombs that threaten our children's future



### Climate

Stories about climate science, US policy and local actions to influence change appear early and often (2017)



ACDC fuels many all-night layout sessions. (1989-2004)

### Palestine

WIP writers introduces the culture and politics of Palestine to WIP readers (2007)



### Iraq war

The invasion of Iraq ignites a firestorm of opposition in editorials, letters, protests and actions (Feb. 2003)



### Homelessness

Coverage from the 90s to the present chronicles how civic leaders have failed to address the crisis of homelessness (March 2007)



### Facism

Consistent coverage by WIP underscores zero tolerance for facism (May 1998)



## 2010

### Capitalism

Shining a light on corporate greed and how taxes are disproportionately assessed against working people are consistent WIP themes..



### Occupy Oly

WIP provides the only significant insight into local occupiers participating in the national movement. (Jan. 2012)



### Immigrant rights

WIP continues to spotlight immigrant rights and illegal detention, supporting Olympia as a Sanctuary City (2019)



### Affordable housing

WIP contributors remind readers Olympia's housing crisis cannot be solved by market capitalism (Nov. 2017)



### Solidarity

Expanding participatory democracy across class, race and gender, and contributing to the cause of justice are part of WIP's core mission.



### Your face here?

WIP's fourth decade will be written by those who show up to tell the stories of those working for justice in its many forms. See you next month.



## 2020