

Bombing as rock the boat in Seattle

By Mark Brothers

The rulers have set the time for the (Bicentennial) party. Let us bring the fireworks.

—Weather Underground, Summer, 1975

"At first I thought it was just a firecracker. Then the whole sky went red."

—Seattle resident
January 1, 1976

Seattle's counter-bicentennial festivities got off to a fast start when an explosion ripped through a City Light power substation just after midnight on New Year's Day. At a press conference the next day a police spokesman whined, "These people [numerous guerrilla organizations] have told me they are going to blow out the candles on our birthday cake." The Seattle blast was the first guerrilla attack this year and it was accompanied by a communique signed "Love and struggle, happy new year, the George Jackson Brigade."

The George Jackson Brigade (GJB) has been one of the most active of an array of clandestine groups operating along the West Coast. Since assuming the name of the slain revolutionary prison organizer/theorist a year ago, the GJB has claimed responsibility for six bombings, a prison escape and an abortive bank robbery. Brigade members were recently arrested and Seattle has become the site of federal grand juries and defendant trials.

A Year of Action

The GJB made its debut May 31, 1975, when it blew a hole in a wall at the Washington State Department of Corrections in Olympia. The explosion was in solidarity with Walla Walla State Penitentiary prisoners' demands "to limit the state's power to transfer prisoners" to behavior modification facilities. In the communique which followed, the Brigade wrote that "crime is the natural response for those caught between poverty and the American culture of greed, racism, sexism, and racism."

In August the GJB bombed the Tacoma FBI office and a bag of dynamite packed with explosives set off a blast which injured seven people. It was retaliation for the capture of the South Dakota, and the death of Ralph "Po" Ford, who was killed while planting a bomb at the same store three days earlier. Ford had been carrying out an independent action. He had no links to the GJB.

The Seattle Left community strongly criticized the

responsible, precautionary measures in the Safeway bombing. The Left Bank Collective, which operates a book store where Ford had worked, expressed the sentiments of most of the community when they disavowed the action for "its gross disregard for the safety of the people." They wrote that the GJB's indiscriminate violence "was in total contradiction of everything 'Po' stood for."

The next GJB attack was on New Year's Eve. At 11:37 P.M. and 11:53 P.M. separate blasts went off at a Seattle Safeway distribution center. Simultaneously, in the wealthy Laurelhurst neighborhood, a bomb was planted at a City Light substation. When it exploded at 12:10 A.M., the station was virtually destroyed with damage estimated up to \$250,000. There were no injuries and the substation was tied to a 2½ month strike by City Light workers. The "New Years Communique" lauded the "long and courageous strike... we have chosen to bring in the New Year with respect and solidarity for the brave example the City Light workers have set, by sabotaging the power source for Laurelhurst."

The document described Safeway as "the world's largest food chain, powerful agribusiness and imperialist... the target of bombings and armed actions up and down the West Coast."

It criticized the September Safeway action as "wrong because we brought violence and terror to a poor neighborhood; a neighborhood already tacked with the violence of hunger and the terror of the police." But, they added, "we have no qualms about bringing discriminate violence to the rich."

On January 23, while the Brigade was attempting to expropriate \$43,554.25 from the suburban Tukwila branch of the Pacific National Bank, police arrived in response to an alarm switched on by the manager. To avoid injuries to anyone, Bruce Seidel, Brigade member, stepped outside the bank to announce their surrender. Police opened fire without warning. Seidel was seriously wounded and John Sherman, another member, was shot in the face. During a lull in the police fire, Seidel again attempted to surrender, "I'm telling 'don't shoot, we give up," he moved to the glass doors. Suddenly police began firing again and Seidel was killed.

Jailbreak

Sherman and Ed Mead, the other Brigade members in the bank, were arrested. Later, they declared their membership in the GJB so they could speak out about the murder of Seidel and present their own political defense in court.

As Sherman was being taken to jail from the Harborview Medical Center on March 19, he was rescued when the cop guarding him was wounded by GJB gunfire.

"Our comrade is free," a

March 27 "Women's Day Communique" heralded, and "all other participating units (in the bank robbery) escaped." The Brigade pointed to several tactical errors they had made during the hold-up: they were "unprepared" for the level of violence the police were willing to bring down; they waited too long to "open fire on the pigs"; instead of staying to clean out the safe, they should have split immediately after a phone rang to authenticate the silent alarm;

role as a prison organizer.

On April 8 Mead was convicted on two counts of assault with intent to kill police. He was sentenced to two... consecutive... life terms. Mead, who acted as his own lawyer, was not allowed to use his prepared defense that individuals have a right to defend themselves when a cop draws a gun on them. He still faces a federal grand jury that's been investigating the GJB.

Brigade Theory
Despite several tactical

In an unfinished draft written in January and titled "On The Weather Underground, Class Struggle, and Armed Struggle," Seidel wrote that the Brigade is "a product of various cultures, neighborhoods, fronts and forms of struggle. We have lived and worked among the people in this country and in the Northwest in particular... our practice has varied from leafletting, boycotting, participating in strikes, bombing and co-ordinating guerrilla attacks... whatever the situ-

straight white cocks."

The Seidel draft explains that revolutionary politics means more than "paying lip-service to struggles of oppressed peoples, writing radical and/or Marxist essays, or even placing pipe-bombs in a shithouse adjoining the local FBI office." To them it means confrontation "on three fronts: internal, among friends, and against the enemy," entailing critical and self-critical "analyzing... resolving... and transforming." The document specifies the "prime" internal "contradictions" as "sexism, impatience, and individualism."

Seid's was self-critical of the September Safeway action, pointing out the "error" of "not clearly identifying and isolating the ruling class from the masses and the masses of people, laws, and gimmicks where he hides." He also criticized those with a "gap between their words resolving... and transforming the armed struggle to 'the need for organization and the future goal of building a party to lead, direct, and be accountable to working people and all oppressed people.'" Revolutionary warriors," he stressed, must also be organizers.

Community Response

The Brigade has gotten mixed reviews, described as "a small, romantic sex" by some leftists while receiving critical support from others. Much of the criticism is directed at the first Safeway blast, the Tukwila robbery, and the GJB's analytical ambiguity. For instance, when they propose "building a party to lead" then reject the vague "vanguard," it's left unclear whether they're trying to build a hierarchical party or a decentralized federation.

The attitude of those who maintain critical support is exemplified by a Left Bank Collective statement which described the Brigade as "serious revolutionaries who have the right to be respected." Despite errors and inconsistencies, the GJB has been receptive to criticism as perceived self-critical, and they've engaged in some innovative, exemplary actions. Their responsiveness was expressed in the New Year's communique when they wrote, "we have tried to make this New Year's attack a reflection of the lessons we learned this past year." The simultaneous New Year's

continued on p. 26



Murdered by San Quentin prison guards: Jonathan Jackson (August 7, 1970); George Jackson (August 21, 1971).

they didn't fully utilize their tactical advantage because they had lacked enough firepower across the street from the bank. Although they had, Mead later said, set up an elaborate plan of diversionary fake bombs and smoke bombs, "over all" the communique explained, "this action failed because we were not prepared to meet police terrorism with a sufficient level of revolutionary violence."

The communique praised Seidel—"his contribution... is beyond measure." The Brigade said it's "learning to avoid the self-appointed 'left'; to go to directly to the people and rely on them for our strength." It's been given "shelter and sustenance and safety" by "people in our community... The victory (Sherman's rescue) belongs to the people."

Two days after Sherman's rescue, Mark Cook was arrested and charged with bank robbery, assault, and aiding a prisoner to escape. The only grounds for arrest when he was black skin police claim whoever helped Sherman was black), his background as a convict, and his

ments and communique, his little is known about the GJB's composition, analysis or strategic goals. Mead calls himself "a communist" whose concepts are "extracted from the teachings of all revolutionary leaders." GJB writings have commended such disparate revolutionaries as Mother Jones, Martin Sostre, Amilcar Cabral, Lenin and the SLA. To Mead, "The SLA was a real inspiration. Their declaration of war is a living document."

Like the SLA, the busted GJB members' militancy was crystallized through experience in the prison movement. In Washington's McNeil prison, Mead's awareness developed until he realized "it was not a criminal anymore. I saw that I was a radical." He became a jail-house lawyer and was involved in strikes so the authorities transferred him to Leavenworth. Paroled in 1972, he returned to Washington where he met Sherman (also a former convict). Seidel and others active in prison organizing, notably a newspaper called Sunfighter and the defunct Washington State Prisoners' Union.

ation called for."

Poems included in the Women's Day Communique provided further insight into the GJB. The Brigade's poetry asserted that "we're not all white and we're not all men... not the vague vanguard," it's a collection of oppressed people... this united few breaks barriers of race class sex workers and lumpen all going together combating dull sameness corporations, government and the isolated rule of

The Open Road welcomes correspondence and contributions (both editorial and financial). Write to us at:
The Open Road
Box 6135, Station G
Vancouver, B.C.
Canada