

Award Winning Flashpoints Radio Show Under Threat by KPFA Management

The Concerned Listener's supported management is now retaliating against activist programming at KPFA trying to shutdown Flashpoints. They have violated the union contract in cutting the hours of Nora-Barrows Friedman and others at the show while not cutting hours of other CWA staff with shorter seniority.

So much for Concerned Listeners concern about union rights and the union contract.

By Peter Phillips and Mickey Huff 12/11/09

The Flashpoints radio program is being directly threatened with closure by station management. Budget cuts implemented by KPFA management; reduce staff time for Flashpoints by some 75 hours per week. Flashpoints, an award winning national radio program, originates at KPFA in Berkeley, California, and reaches some thirty cities in the US and serves an on-line audience worldwide.

Nora Barrows-Friedman wrote on December 9, "KPFA has effectively destroyed Flashpoints this week, beginning with the layoff of our technical producer position. Just hours ago, they called me into a meeting and casually informed me that my hours will be reduced by 50%. I cannot afford to keep this job if I'm on 20 hours a week."

Ms. Barrows-Friedman is a long time investigative reporter specializing in Israel-Palestine issues and is one of the few reporters in the country who covers this sensitive issue in a straightforward manner. She taught herself Arabic and often reports from the ground in the Middle East. Along with Flashpoints producers Dennis Bernstein and Miguel Molina, Ms. Barrows-Friedman was the recent recipient of a lifetime achievement Media Freedom Award from Media Freedom Foundation/Project Censored.

"Nora Barrows Friedman has seniority over at least a dozen more recent and less experienced staff people. She has done an outstanding job at Flashpoints, showing a special dedication and talent. She has top professional qualifications and standards, tested by time and performance," stated long standing political commentator and author Dr. Michael Parenti.

With the latest cuts Flashpoints has lost some 30% of its annual budget. Flashpoints producer Dennis Bernstein believes that, "This has now been elevated to a political battle. Management has pumped up the budgets of the programs of their internal political supporters, and at the same time tried to kill Flashpoints through intimidation and attrition, and outright disrespect. Over fifteen people were hired after Nora, and yet Nora is one of the first to be hit and hit hard. It appears to the Flashpoints team, and our key advisers and supporters, that KPFA management is about to deal the show a final blow."

Local KPFA listener Dianne Budd, M.D., a regular contributor to KPFA, threatened on December 11, to withhold her annual contribution to the station. "I have donated regularly to KPFA, sometimes well over \$1,000 a year. This year I had planned to donate towards the end of December for tax reasons; however, if this decision to decimate and make impotent the Flashpoints staff is not overturned immediately, I will not make any donation," Dr. Budd stated.

In a December 11 letter to KPFA station management, Arab community organizer Eyad Kishawi writes, "When the national Pacifica organization attempted to conduct a corporate takeover of KPFA, we the Arab, Muslim, anti-war and Indigenous communities conducted an all out campaign in support of your/our station that carries our voices and the voices for equality and justice. Let me remind you that we lived up to the spirit of 'Listener Sponsored Radio' and started organizing fundraising events to keep the station going, and in particular supported Flashpoints . . . Flashpoints had been a thorn in the side of corporate and state-sponsored media. By attacking Flashpoints, you are pitting a large number of your listener sponsors against your station."

Richard Becker, Western Regional Coordinator, A.N.S.W.E.R. Coalition and Barbara Lubin, Executive Director Middle East Children's Alliance jointly stated in a letter on December 11, that "We are shocked and dismayed to hear about the draconian cutbacks that KPFA management has announced against Flashpoints, the most incisive and cutting edge of the station's programs. Flashpoints reporting and analysis on a wide range of struggles— from Honduras to Iraq, Haiti to Palestine, political prisoners, and many, many other critical international, national and local issues is unparalleled. The activists and organizers of the A.N.S.W.E.R.–Act Now to Stop War and End Racism–Coalition and the Middle East Children's Alliance, along with thousands of other activists and listeners in the Bay Area, have the highest regard for Flashpoints and its dedicated team."

Becker and Lubin call upon the station to restore Nora Barrows–Friedman and the technical producer position immediately, and threaten that "this is not an issue that will simply go away. On the contrary, if these devastating cuts are not reversed, you can be assured that it will only escalate."

Factional disputes within Pacifica and specifically KPFA have recently emerged among programs like Flashpoints, Guns and Butter and Hard Knock that take aggressive critical positions towards major social justice issues including: racism, American empire and the military–industrial–media complex, Israel–Palestine, Haiti, and other hot button issues, vis-à-vis those programs that favor a more NPR like approach that includes news from corporate media sources like Associated Press and softer more entertaining programming.

Richard Phelps, former KPFA local station board chair, stated in an interview, "that given that the KPFA mission is to bring to people the stories that the corporate media refuses to cover, Flashpoints is one of the most important programs at the station. KPFA management seems to be wanting to tone down programs like Flashpoints and move the station into being just slightly left of center of the Democrat party."

"The KPFA management doesn't want critical reporting," said Attila Nagy former North Bay representative to the KPFA Local Station Board. "They have their priorities backwards," Nagy added.

The mission statement of Pacifica radio states, "(d) In radio broadcasting operations to engage in any activity that shall contribute to a lasting understanding between nations and between the individuals of all nations, races, creeds and colors; to gather and disseminate information on the causes of conflict between any and all of such groups; and through any and all means compatible with the purposes of this corporation to promote the study of political and economic problems and of the causes of religious, philosophical and racial antagonisms; (e) In radio broadcasting operations to promote the full distribution of public information; to obtain access to sources of news not commonly brought together in the same medium; and to employ such varied sources in the public presentation of accurate, objective, comprehensive news on all matters vitally affecting the community."

Dr. Ben Frymer, Director of Project Censored issued a statement today, "It is quite troubling to learn of the recent drastic cutbacks to the Flashpoints program. These cuts will almost certainly be crippling to the vital efforts of the Flashpoints team in raising awareness of social injustice on a global scale. We at Project Censored and the Media Freedom Foundation find these efforts so valuable that we just last week presented life–time achievement awards for Media Freedom to the Flashpoints radio team on KPFA: Dennis Bernstein, Miguel Molina and Nora Borrowers–Friedman."

KPFA management did not return e–mailed question regarding this article. Persons wishing to comment should send e–mails to the general manger at KPFA: gm [at] kpfa.org and Dennis Bernstein at Flashpoints: dbernstein [at] igc.org

Peter Phillips is a professor of Sociology at Sonoma State University and President of Media Freedom Foundation: peter.phillips@sonoma.edu

Mickey Huff is a associate professor of History at Diablo Valley College, and serves on the executive committee of Media Freedom Foundation: e–mail: mickeyhuff@mac.com