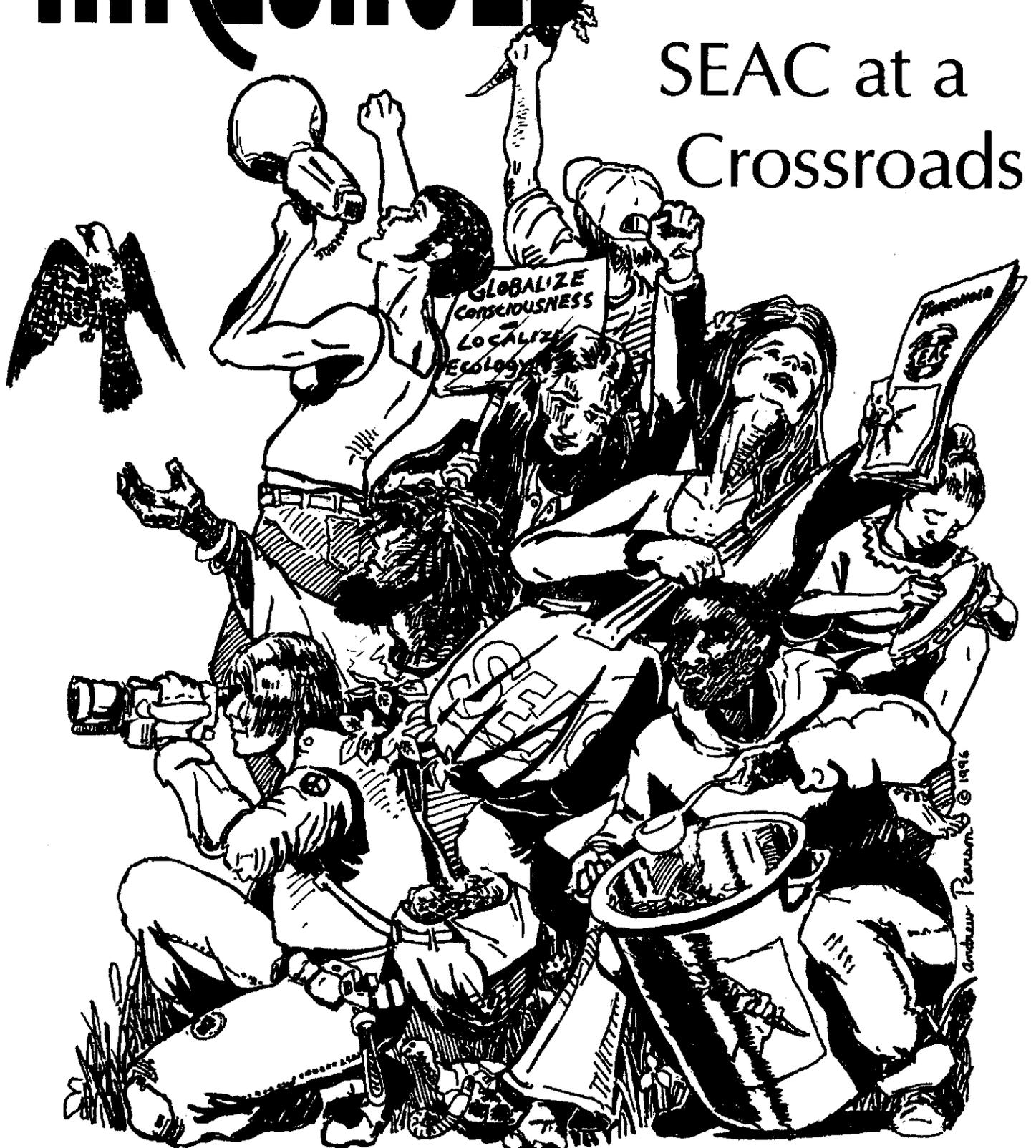


# THRESHOLD

## SEAC at a Crossroads



# Crisis in SEAC: Just What's Going on Here?

BY ERIC ODELL

SEAC is in crisis. Most people in the SEAC network are probably surprised to learn this. We are in the biggest crisis in SEAC's history, one which leaves the organization's future in doubt. Right now, our national office is about to be closed, we have no national staff for the coming year, and every program which SEAC had established to benefit the grassroots of the organization is kaput.

In fact, one indicator of the depth of the national crisis is the very fact of its surprise—that something this momentous could be going on behind the scenes and outside the attention of the grassroots of the organization.

So, this piece is part of an attempt to examine the crisis—why it developed and still rages on—and to propose a course of action to get us out of the mess. While there are a lot of names and events thrown around, it's key for as many SEACers as possible to understand what's going on so we can work together to solve the problems.

### An overview of the crisis

The first sign that there were problems developing was in January when a National Council meeting planned for that month failed to happen, and the Coordinating Committee met instead. (For those who aren't up on SEAC's structure, the "CC" is basically a smaller executive body of the National Council, or "NC," which has up to about 50 members.)

While this didn't occur intentionally, it set up a pattern, which was to develop further later on, of the CC beginning to substitute itself for the NC, the highest decision-making body, which is responsible for making all substantive policy-oriented decisions. Keep in mind that the NC is most directly chosen by the grassroots (at least in theory), and thus the most connected to the pulse at the base of the organization. The CC is elected by the National Council.

The next event, at which the crisis began to emerge full-blown, was the CC meeting in May. At this meeting the CC suddenly decided to kill the national training program. This program consisted of a series of local weekend organizer trainings set up by various local SEAC groups around the country and conducted by people who themselves had been trained in giving these sessions.

From its inception until the time it was canceled, this program had led approximately 1,000 local activists through the weekend sessions. Tens of thousands of dollars of grant money had been given to SEAC to fund the program and had been spent on program development. The majority of that money would have been raised back through the fees collected from the training sessions that were to be conducted during the coming school year. (The previous year the program had been 85% self-sustaining.) In fact, the trainings had raised more money for SEAC than membership dues. This was a serious example of the CC making a policy decision that wasn't in its purview. In fact, it didn't even formally alert the NC that it had done such a thing.

As a result of this arbitrary decision, the staffer who had spend the entire school year developing the program resigned. Other staff stepped down in solidarity and to protest the CC's failure to consult with them. (In fact, the CC took the step, unprecedented in SEAC, of actually barring the staff from their meeting.) As of the time of this writing, we're down from seven staff to two; next month that number will drop to zero.

For every expected foundation grant since the crisis emerged, SEAC has either been taken off the docket or the money is being withheld pending some sane resolution of the crisis. There is no money for SEAC to operate on.

In August the next National Council meeting and SEAC Summer Institute (a leadership training program for NC members and other SEACers) was scheduled. The same thing happened as in January. The meeting was called off, and a CC meeting was held in its place (which again attempted to exclude everyone but CC members from attending). A proposal for structural change in SEAC came out of this meeting.

Related to this was a messy struggle which developed starting in May within the People of Color Caucus. A number of people who were burned by this internal struggle have dropped out of the caucus, and some out of SEAC entirely.

### Every crisis has causes

These events point to a number of underlying problems. The first one is the most obvious: the disconnection of the national leadership from the base of the organization, and an overall vacuum of leadership at the top.

How did this disconnection develop? Well, it's always been present to some degree. In an organization like SEAC which tries to both have reasonably strong national institutions and be pretty "networky" in its structure, such a tension is pretty inevitable. In an organization characterized by a strong, deep grassroots, a lot of SEACers in more stable chapters underestimate the importance of building a strong national organization.

This historical condition became all the worse over the last year. Much of the National Council was either disengaged from national decision-making or from the particular constituency they were supposedly in their seats representing. The CC started taking the functional place of the NC, and the problem just kept getting worse.

There's a political aspect to this disconnection as well as an organizational one. There is a layer of activists in SEAC who in the course of various struggles have come to a certain level of understanding of the interconnection of the environmental crisis with structures of white supremacy, class oppression, male supremacy, etc. in the broader society. They understand that our activism ultimately needs to be more than just around the narrowly defined environmental issues that historically have been the particular concern of the white middle class.

It's the responsibility of more experienced people not to "slam the door" on newer activists, but to help them broaden their understanding too. This is especially important, considering that young people come into the movement affected by all the poisons of the mainstream US society: white chauvinism, individualism, sexism, middle-class prejudices, etc. We've learned that we have to grapple with these things. They can too, but only if we maintain strong connections between the more experienced and less, and between the national leadership and the base.

White chauvinism is also an underlying factor in the crisis. Its importance is highlighted by the fact some SEACers of color have come to the decision that struggling within a predominantly white group drains too much of the energy they need to build the struggle of their communities. To insist that they stay in SEAC would violate the principle of self-determination for people of color which SEAC should strive to uphold. This same principle demands concrete support for people of color who want to join or stay in SEAC and build it.

White SEACers must not abdicate their role in the struggle against white chauvinism. This means grappling with all analysis and proposals, and not uncritically embracing a position because it is put forward by a SEACer of color—which amounts to racial liberalism, another form of white chauvinism.

### The struggle needs SEAC

In its short life SEAC has contributed to victories in struggles like James Bay, Mount Graham, and the defense of old-growth forests. SEAC has challenged the complacency and racism of old-line environmental organizations and their ability to set the agenda for the movement. Thousands of new SEAC activists have developed a critique of the system, which many of them have taken with them to other struggles after graduation. Ours is an invaluable organization. It has much to contribute in the ongoing struggle against greed, exploitation, and oppression. Let's build it, not kill it.

*Eric Odell is a founding member of SEAC and a former editor of Threshold. He now works on Forward Motion magazine and with SEAC-New York.*

# SEAC National Update

## THE CC PROPOSAL

Last month, the Coordinating Committee drafted a restructuring proposal to be considered by the National Council when it meets in October. Unfortunately, despite the fact that they wrote a report for *Threshold* mentioning the existence of this proposal and despite its intended gravity, they have evidently decided not to share it with the readership. In the interest of democracy the entire organization needs to hear about this proposal; this piece will summarize it based on available reports. This is how it goes: SEAC will be broken up into three distinct but related structures:

- The Regions, consisting of the local campus groups affiliated with

would also be an Organizing Committee of six people, two from each organization, which would connect the different bodies together and make any decisions which would affect all of these bodies.

## What's the problem with the CC proposal

Most fundamentally, the CC proposal is off-the-cuff reaction to the crisis. Its contents don't even address the main aspects of the crisis. (Let's not forget this was the body that triggered the present crisis.)

Considering its scope, the proposal is being pushed in a pretty undemocratic fashion. It was created in haste by the handful of people on the CC with little or no input from the rest of the organization. Something of this scale needs the involvement of the whole of the organization and a reasonably long, careful thought process. Its advocates are currently trying to ram it through with threats of leaving the organization if people don't support it.

It is not a proposal for a structure to effectively lead SEAC. In fact, it's not much more than a plan to divvy up resources, especially finances (which are presently nonexistent). Plus, it's an undemocratic structure. The Organizing Committee has no apparent connection to a grassroots base. Money is proposed to be distributed between the different organizations, but there is nothing in the way of direct structural accountability of any one section to the others or of the Organizing Committee as a whole to the locals.

Beyond allocating (presently nonexistent) booty, it is totally unclear what right or ability each pair of OC members would have to set policy for independent organizations which they aren't a part of. Why would organizations almost entirely independent of each other, without overlapping membership, submit their principles and policies to a small body, 2/3 of which has no organic connection to their work?

It tries to structurally equate a national network with thousands of adherents with two small much smaller collectives. For one thing, A SEED is a project, not an organization. Its true value is that it links SEACers with other young environmental and social justice activists worldwide. Making it an independent, baseless NGO shell would turn it into a useless resource sink.

The proposal in effect defines environmental justice activism as being the province of only the people of color (in fact, only a fraction of them).

SEAC. Their members would include all the white people and those people of color who want to work on "traditional environmental issues."

- The People of Color Caucus, restructured (and renamed) as a fully autonomous organization consisting of those people of color who want to work on "environmental justice issues."
- A SEED, SEAC's international project, which connects SEAC to a worldwide network of student environmental activists. Each one of these bodies would have its own separate office, budget, fundraiser and other staff, publication, etc. Any money raised by each body would be shared amongst the others according to a formula which remains to be proposed. There

## A Letter to SEAC From the Grassroots

This summer I heard the unfortunate news that SEAC's training program was cut.

Now we hear the entire national staff has quit except for one person. I firmly believe for student organizations to be viable, we must pay primary attention to training, recruiting and bringing new folks into struggle. Without a plan, we have nothing. It sounds like our National Council/Coordinating Committee has no plan. Connected to a plan is the essential role that the national office staff play. Staff can act like glue holding together broad and varied pieces of a national organization. I saw this with my own eyes, when I worked in the National Office in 1991, the incredible work that dedicated people can do.

At the University of Minnesota I work with others in the Progressive Student Organization (PSO) to get young folk involved in the life-long work for social and environmental justice. PSO and the Environmental Studies Club successfully pulled off a regional SEAC conference this past February. Despite the fact that National SEAC was not able to send a trainer then, we have been looking forward to getting a trainer here in the future. Our leadership (National Council/Coordinating Committee) missed an opportunity to do something exciting and coordinated after the national conference last Fall. We could have launched a national campaign.

SEAC's training program worked on a most important task—developing new leadership—one that in our line of social justice work, that is, with students, always something we must do. Once new leadership finds its bearings on whatever campus they are at, the staff in the office can play a day-to-day support role in whatever these folks might take up. Not making decisions for locals, but assisting their work to be tied into other campuses to be more effective. Staff can play a role that members of our national council/coordinating committee can't and shouldn't play.

One of SEAC's first national campaigns was centered around energy, corporate greed, environmental destruction, job inequality and so on. Ericka Kurtz (deceased former staff member) played a leading role in facilitating

the campaign. Had we summed the experience up, SEAC could have learned from the mistakes that were made and improved future campaigns. The energy independence campaign came from the grassroots. It then moved and developed into a national campaign which brought young people into struggle, not just to recycle, but to ask, "Why are these corporations controlling our lives and getting rich off of it?" My point is that we need organization and coordinated strategies, and what that means is that we develop a division of labor. It makes me mad that we aren't moving in this direction.

So is it true that the training program is really gone? What the hell happened to make dedicated folks in the national office leave? The job can be grueling, but I know our folks in North Carolina are down for struggle. My gut feeling is that the Coordinating Committee is acting completely irresponsible and in an undemocratic manner. This year, the council meeting was postponed, and then not rescheduled. Then it was on again. There has been no communication through regular channels, only making matters worse. Literally thousands of young folks have toiled long hours to build SEAC. Now you (leadership) are pissing it away.

I guess I have to follow the ole adage, "Don't mourn, ORGANIZE." Well, this letter is the first step and I'm gonna tell everyone I know about the political crisis we have on our hands.

We absolutely must draw on our collective strengths to save the planet. Our future deserves nothing less. Now I also realize that this plea might fall on deaf ears. There have been many decisions made in the past months that affect the direction of the organization. They have truly been uninformed by what people in our base think, and do. As a voice of the struggle out in the "grassroots," I call on national leadership to keep the staff and the training program and focus on campaigns that throw young people into struggle. If we are not going to fight for change, who will?

—J Burger, Progressive Student Organization, University of Minnesota

## SEAC National Update

This goes directly against the historical accomplishment in SEAC of building an organization-wide critique of environmental racism and of old-school, narrow, white, middle-class environmentalism. What happened to the goal of promoting environmental justice activism as the model that all SEACers should be striving to follow?

The funding that the proposed structure would require to actually exist would be quite a bit greater than that for the existing structure. Considering we have burned a number of our existing funders in the present crisis, and are going to be operating on a shoe-string budget for at least the next couple years, where would all this new money come from? Overall, the proposal is pie-in-the-sky lunacy which bears almost no relationship to anything which would function effectively or democratically in the real world. History shows that when leadership of national organizations start messing around with organizational structures and substitute themselves for the rank and file, it doesn't take much to kill even a powerful and vibrant organization. The CC proposal presents that danger. It must be rejected.

### What's the alternative?

First off, we must defend the existing SEAC structure. It's certainly not perfect; in the save-the-planet business, nothing is. But over all it has

served SEAC well over the last six-plus years, and has been evolved and refined based on the collective wisdom of literally hundreds of SEACers. We must also rebuild proactive leadership within the organization based on true representation from, and oriented towards the needs of, the local groups. We must repair our relationship with funders—which will only happen through proving our stability. We must rebuild all of SEAC's programs which have been so assiduously developed over the years; central to this is reestablishing a well-organized national office and staff.

To make this stuff happen in the present circumstances, we must all be involved. We must tell our National Council representatives what we think about the situation and dedicate ourselves to the effort of rebuilding SEAC. If we set our minds to it and take advantage of the motivation provided by the crisis, we can make SEAC even better than it was before this all erupted. There's a National Council meeting coming up in October; get involved. —Eric Odell

Note: For folks wanting to get involved, you can try reaching the SEAC National Office (919.967.4600), Eric Odell (212.960.2246), or any of the contacts in the back of Threshold.

## Other Organizations/ Useful Contacts

### 50 Years is Enough! Youth Caucus

50 Years is an international network working for IMF & World Bank reform. 1025 Vermont Ave. NW Suite 300, Washington, DC 20005, 202.IMF.Bank

### Campus Ecology

They provide support/ training to students working on campus ecology issues. 8925 Leesburg Pike, Vienna, VA 22184, 703.790.4317

### Campus Green Vote

They assist in organizing student environmental

groups around electoral issues. 1731 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 501, Washington, DC 20009, 202.234.5990

### Center for Campus Organizing

They are an organization providing support & resources to student organizing. Box 748, Cambridge, MA 02142, 617.354.9363

### How on Earth!

They are dedicated to supporting young vegetarians and compassionate living. P.O. Box 339, Oxford, PA

19363, 717.529.8638

### United States Student Association

A student-led organization fighting the right to quality higher education. 815 15th St. NW, Suite 838, Washington, DC 20005, 202.347.USSA

### Unplug

A coalition of organizations working for commercial-free equal education. 360 Grand Avenue #385, Oakland, CA 94610, 510.268.1100, unplug@ggc.apc.org

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