

Interview

A Talk With Bernardine Dohrn

By Jon Hochschartner

An iconic figure of the New Left, Bernardine Dohrn was a leader of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Weather Underground. She now teaches at Northwestern University Law School. She was interviewed on May 3, 2011.

Industrial Worker: What are your initial thoughts on the killing of Osama bin Laden?

Bernadine Dohrn: Well, it's hard to separate from the kind of jingoistic response in the United States, isn't it? I think that the killing of the leader of Al Qaeda at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks may have been justified. Or bringing him to a world court, you know, to the International Criminal Court, for war crimes, would have been justified. But I think that the triumphalism is obscene. I think the arrogance of U.S. military power is dangerous, intoxicating, narcissistic, and has nothing to do with justice. We're now in some kind of orgy that comes with the slaying of the [bin Laden] monster...It really masks a kind of growing economic weakness of the United States, and a kind of accelerating end of the U.S. empire, with a really phony notion of U.S. military power. So I think it's exactly the wrong direction. Of course, the direction we need to go [in] is something much closer to becoming a nation among nations, creating meaningful work, learning to live differently, and shutting down the—whatever it is—172 U.S. military bases abroad (*Editor's Note: the actual number, according to the U.S. Defense Department's 2009 Base Structure Report, is 716 foreign bases. However, this is incomplete as it doesn't include all the bases in Iraq and Afghanistan*). I think it's just important at this kind of time to stand for peace.

IW: I heard you and your husband went over to Wisconsin to protest. Do you see what happened there as a sign of the future for the right wing or a high water mark?

BD: Too soon to tell. It's in play. I think it's fully in play. I think that the occupation of the capitol by the nurses, teachers, firefighters, police forces and security forces, was wildly popular. The governor became wildly unpopular in Wisconsin. I think that it was a rollback of the election of the Tea Party people across the Midwest.

We'll see, but that's what the opinion polls suggest.

IW: Candidate Obama said that if workers were denied their collective bargaining rights, he'd "put on a comfortable pair of shoes" and join the picket line as president. Were you surprised he didn't find those shoes?

BD: No, I'm not surprised. He's always said he's a centrist politician. People on the right and the left don't believe him. They each think that he's something else. So, you know, that doesn't surprise me. Some things have surprised me. The turn to war and becoming a war president surprises me a little bit. But when you occupy the chair of empire, and particularly an empire in crisis—the end of late capitalism or whatever you want to call it—that's who you become in terms of your policy. That's what your job is.

IW: You've said the Tea Party movement could only happen at this particular historic moment. I was hoping you could explain what you meant.

BD: I think that one of the signs of this kind of economic crisis—which is not the first and not the last, but the big economic crisis that we're in—is the lack of a recovery at the bottom. So we're in this framework of discontent and of "Wait a minute, I was promised this..." We now have, this decade, a majority of kids entering school who are black and brown in the United States. So that changing demographic, the decline of U.S. economic power, those are all the elements that create simple solutions, and solutions that demonize some part of the population, and claim white privilege. You can't separate race from what's happening. [The Tea Party] is a white movement. It's a white, older-people movement. It's people who are clinging to a version of America that is over, if it ever existed.

IW: According to the *Washington Post*, half of the \$38 billion that Obama agreed to in federal budget cuts came from education, health and labor programs. Do you think this is reflective of his priorities, or



Bernardine Dohrn speaking at a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) reunion held at Michigan State University.

Photo: Thomas Good

just his being a poor negotiator?

BD: I wouldn't pick either of the above. I think that he's running for reelection. He thinks that his base will stay with him. He is reaching to the middle, the people who voted Republican a year ago. I think he's wrong, of course, even in his own terms. You just had 89 disability rights activists arrested [May 2] in the U.S. Capitol building. People in wheelchairs who are protesting 35 percent cuts to Medicaid. It's atrocious what's happening. It's absolutely unconscionable. General Electric paid no taxes last year? Not a single tax dollar. We should look to these disability activists and we should take Wisconsin all the way to D.C. It's just incredible. We're just being lied to about deficits, and how

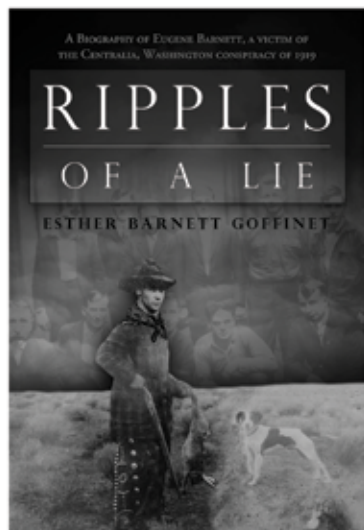
we don't have any money. We didn't have any money to invade Libya, but we didn't apparently have to have an appropriation.

IW: What would you say to the young, disillusioned Obama voters of 2008?

BD: I would say we need a peace and justice movement more than ever. One of the best things that the president said when he was a candidate was when somebody asked him whether Dr. King would support him or Hillary Clinton. He said, "Neither of us; he'd be out in the streets building a movement for justice..." It was a great answer. And it's totally historically true. Keep your eye on what we need. We need a movement for peace and economic justice just like Dr. King was building. They are tied together.

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