Molly Rush, Housewife with a Hammer to Bear
By Paul Garver

Hammer of Justice: Molly Rush and the Plowshares Eight
By Liane Ellison Norman

Our popular heroes often seem to come from Luke Skywalker’s far away galaxy, or other distant times and places. They do not often appear in the guise of a small, unassuming working-class woman from Dormont, a neighborhood in south Pittsburgh. Yet, if our human species and our green earth are to survive and flourish, it will be because of people like Molly Rush.

Liane Norman’s narrative sets Rush’s developing life in the familiar context of Pittsburgh’s traditional, family-centered neighborhoods. Rush came from a family that knew insecurity and poverty, in part because of her father’s alcoholism. The oldest of eight children, Molly had to help raise her own younger siblings, some of whom were at one time temporary wards of juvenile court. Although awarded a scholarship to Duquesne University, she chose instead to forego college, marry early, and begin to bear her six children.

In the short intervals a busy mother of a large family can find, Rush read voraciously. She began to widen her horizons; her activism grew from family, community, and religious roots. A connector rather than an alienated rebel, Rush widened her family circle first to the community, and then to the world. Her passionate commitment was to all the children, beginning with her own. She joined the Catholic Interracial Council to fight segregation, and came to oppose the Vietnam War. One of her favorite authors was Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who found religious relevance in the struggle for civil rights and against nuclear weapons and war. When Pittsburgh’s progressive Catholic movement founded the Thomas Merton Center to struggle for peace and justice, Rush became its first director and mainstay. Every day she worked quietly, almost invisibly, for the many causes of peace and social justice.

And then, one day in 1980, Rush entered a nuclear weapons factory in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. Along with seven other religious peace activists (together they comprised the Plowshares Eight), she hammered two missile nose cones into scrap, and then quietly waited for the police to arrive. To her husband, her brothers and sisters, and to most of her community, it appeared as if Rush had lost her balance. For this symbolic action against nuclear war, she had risked a long imprisonment, and a lengthy separation from her children and her useful community work.

Most of Hammer of Justice is dedicated to locating the various threads of explanation as to how Rush came to pick up that hammer. Liane Norman reaches back to the early history of Pennsylvania, to William Penn’s trial for civil disobedience resulting from his pursuit of religious freedom; this provided Norman with marvelous parallels to the latter day trial of the Plowshares Eight. The author also recounts acts of oppression in regional history relevant to Rush’s case, such as infecting Indians with smallpox; similarly she invokes local history to explain Rush’s family roots.

This is generally interesting and useful background. I would have

Molly Rush and five others in the Plowshares Eight were released this spring after a York County judge commuted their sentences to time served, with court costs and probation. In February 1989, the state Supreme Court had overturned their original sentences on grounds of judicial bias. Three other members of the group remain in custody on charges stemming from other acts of civil disobedience.
liked more attention to the specifically Catholic strand of Rush’s inheritance, and more than passing reference to what she learned from Merton’s seminal writings. We know the Plowshares Eight prayed together, but we learn little about that process. While some aspects of the Catholic tradition can be narrow and parochial, the universalism latent in Catholic thought may have expanded Rush’s sense of the family of mankind.

I find most useful in the *Hammer of Justice* the material drawn from Rush’s prison letters and diaries, from her statements during the trial and from interviews with her. These present a remarkably consistent picture of a person whose strength flows directly from her everyday life as a housewife and mother, and from her disciplined reflection upon that life. Norman is very sensitive and helpful to the reader, providing apt quotations at the right times. It’s tempting simply to make a pastiche of some of Rush’s reflections:

I’m no heroine. Lots of people make sacrifices for their kids….I want my kids to live. I want to have grandchildren, and I want those children to live….Every mother ought to think about the threat that’s hanging over her kids and ask what she’s going to do about it…That (a mother) is not all that I am, but it is certainly part of it.

Convinced as she became that nuclear war threatened all that she had worked for as a mother, Rush felt that she had to do something to break through the “psychic numbing” that causes our inability to deal with the omnipresent threat of annihilation. She wondered how people could go to work every day, to build the weapons that could kill their children and her own. If she could not end the arms race, Rush could at least act on behalf of life, and thereby connect with some people to break through the numbing.

Perhaps most difficult for Rush was discussing with her family the possibility that she might be separated from them by her action. Her own brothers and sisters were mostly opposed — one brother even informed the FBI of her plans. Her husband, fiercely opposed and feeling himself abandoned, tried every way to dissuade her. Rush’s own children, the youngest of whom was 12, were anxious. From prison, she wrote: “Maybe you’re wishing right now that you had a normal mother instead of me….You know that it (nuclear war) has to be stopped soon before it’s too late….Why me? Because I know, because I love you.”

Knowing that she had cracked her family’s world open, Rush feared that she would fade out of their everyday reality, that she herself would be walled off from the family she loved and from her frustrating but satisfying work for peace and justice. Yet even in prison she felt freer than before. Her action freed her from the “myth of her own powerlessness.” She no longer felt oppressed as she had felt when she was not acting consonant with her beliefs and feelings. At her trial, Rush tried to prove that she and her friends “consciously, knowingly, and willfully acted to protect and save the life of the human family.”

In 1990, as the imminent nightmare of global war recedes a little, we can easily forget that in 1980 the United States was accelerating the nuclear arms race, and that President Carter’s Directive 59 contemplated a first strike on Soviet missiles. We don’t need to agree on whether Rush’s hammer blows helped save the human future. The miracle is, and remains, that this quiet mother’s heroism is the right stuff that our beleaguered planet needs for its survival. Environmental destruction, widespread war, famine, the legacy of injustice that condemns Brazilian farm laborers and ghetto teenagers to short and brutal lives — any or all of these in combination threaten the future of our children and grandchildren. “Peace demands the most heroic labor and the most difficult sacrifices. It demands greater heroism than war….” (Thomas Merton, as quoted in *Hammer of Justice*.)

I am reminded of those other mothers and grandmothers whose courage in the Plazo de Mayo helped overthrow a brutal military regime in Argentina, simply by patiently demanding an accounting for the tortured bodies of their children. I am reminded of women in western New York state who are defying the law to prevent their communities from becoming dumping grounds for nuclear waste. There are many women, like Rush, who love life so much that they break through the passivity of the female roles culturally allotted them, by organizing, demonstrating, trespassing, and sometimes risking imprisonment or death.

As a father and grandfather, I find some hope for the future of my children and grandchildren, and the world they are inheriting, in the expansion of “maternal thinking” (see Sara Riddick, *Maternal Thinking* [Beacon Press: 1989]). Just as Rush expanded the sphere of preservation and nurturance of her own children to all of the world’s children, so more of us must overcome our individualistic, greedy, militaristic patterns of culture and thought to take responsibility for future generations and the health of the planet. Even as the threat of instant nuclear annihilation recedes, we still are leaving a heritage of environmental despoilation, hunger, poverty, and hopelessness for the majority of the world’s children (and for too many in our own country). There will be no peace and no security for any of our progeny in such a world. Perhaps men like my son who fully share in
the tasks of child-rearing will find "maternal thinking" more congenial than men have usually found it.

Meanwhile, we have much to learn from our own Molly Rush, and thanks go to Liane Norman and the Pittsburgh Peace Institute for telling her story. ■

Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World

By Sal Salerno


The Wobbly, a rank and file member of the Industrial Workers of the World union, has assumed almost mythic proportions in labor history. In The Rebel Girl, an Autobiography (New York: 1955), Elizabeth Gurley Flynn summarized the image: "They were strong and hardy, tanned and weather-beaten by summer suns and winter snows. They regarded the city workers as stay-at-home softies — 'scissors-bills.' They referred to a wife as 'the ball and chain.'" As portrayed in the historical literature, the Wobbly legend bears some relation to sustaining myths of the American Republic; the legend captures the American values of frontier independence, physical strength and personal rebelliousness. It is also a myth of native born radicalism and masculine solidarity.

Sal Salerno's Red November, Black November offers labor scholars a new glimpse into the history of the Industrial Workers of the World through the lens of culture. Salerno's main argument is that historians have neglected the role of immigrants in the I.W.W. Ignoring elements of its ideology directly influenced by European syndicalism (a trade union movement that advocates bringing the means of production and distribution under the direct control of a federation of labor unions), historians have focused instead on the union's indigenous roots. Salerno sets out to correct this omission by asserting direct links between the I.W.W. and French and Italian anarcho-syndicalism.

The weight of the book's argument falls on an exploration of syndicalist symbols, language and organizing strategies in the I.W.W. Employing the familiar icons of the wooden shoe or Sabot, and the cartoon characters of Sab Cat and Mr. Block, Wobbly artists wove themes of class conflict and solidarity with folk symbols expressive of resistance and solidarity. According to Salerno, Wobbly subculture addressed the confrontations between capital and labor through its embrace of syndicalist tactics of direct action and sabotage.

Salerno argues that immigrants and ethnics played a central role in the formation of the I.W.W. At the founding convention in 1905, anarchists and libertarians helped to develop the Industrial Union Manifesto and the I.W.W.'s preamble. The German anarchist community in Chicago provided some of the ideological underpinnings for the movement. More important, Salerno highlights the relationship of the I.W.W. with the French syndicalist organization, the Confederation Generale du Travail (C.G.T. or General Confederation of Labor). While the I.W.W. rejected open affiliation with the C.G.T., rank and file Wobbles had full knowledge of its range of tactics and imitated them. Salerno argues that the symbolic uses of the Sabot and Sab Cat express C.G.T. influence. Further, William Z. Foster, later the organizer of the steel and meatpacking industries, helped adapt French tactics and ideology to the I.W.W. For Salerno, Foster's departure from the union to form the Syndicalist League of America is yet another sign of the adaptability and range of syndicalist influence.

There are aspects of Salerno's approach, however, which undermine his case for the immigrant origins of the I.W.W. Despite his use of illustrative cartoons, most of Salerno's textual argument is concerned with refuting the historical interpretation of the Wobblies, and not with primary sources. The limitations of the secondary literature on this specific subject make it difficult for Salerno to construct a convincing case. Furthermore, by focusing on I.W.W. activity in the West, the author neglects Italian syndicalists and anarchists who were central to the organization of workers in such towns as Paterson and Lawrence.

In exploring the nature of Wobbly culture, Salerno also ignored an important theme which might have opened up his discussion of the I.W.W. — that is, the ways in which the notion of solidarity itself was constructed by and for Wobblies. The image of the "footloose rebel" and the independent, manly laborer broad-