

Nothing left to lose

BY TIM REDMOND

I'VE PLAYED on a lot of teams, with a lot of wonderful people, in a lot of different sports. I've worked on a lot of inspiring political campaigns for a lot of very good causes. And most of the time, I've walked away from the first practice or organizing meeting with the same basic feeling:

I'm glad this is fun; I'm glad we're on the Right Side; and I'm sort of glad nobody's risking a whole lot of money on us — because we're not going to win.

That's OK, sometimes. In civil disobedience, softball, and strip-me-naked bridge, losing is half the point. When the economic infrastructure that supports about 30 million people is in a state of rapid collapse, you want to get a little more serious.

I spent five hours last Sunday watching a new team of activists try to figure out how a progressive coalition could start to transform the California economy. Crazy idea; stuff of a thousand collegiate wet dreams. We're all getting too old for this.... And yet, when the meeting broke up, I walked out of that hot, cramped little union hall in Oakland feeling remarkably positive.

We were asking the right questions; we were approaching a few of the answers. Most of the participants were seasoned organizers, representing a wide range of progressive groups that don't always work well together — and they acted like real professionals. No nonsense, no angst, no blame; just work to do, and not a lot of time left to do it.

There were people who should have been in the room, and weren't. There are things that should happen, and won't. There are terrible obstacles. There's no money. Everybody's busy, and right now, nobody's in charge. We all know the drill.

But the California Network for a New Economy is just getting started — and even after missing the Giants, the 49ers, the Blues Festival, the Folsom Street Fair, and a stunning September afternoon, I don't think I was wasting my time.

NOW WHAT?

Saul Bloom, director of the Arms Control Research Center, set the scene rather nicely a few minutes into the program.

"I'm starting to think the watchword for our times is 'Don't ask for what you want, or you might get it,'" he said. "We asked for the end of the Cold War and a decrease in California's defense-dependence, and we got it — and now we have a big problem on our hands."

"We have our own problems, too," Bloom continued. "Things have changed so much globally in the past few years that our old agenda doesn't fit anymore. It used to be easy — you supported capitalism or you supported socialism. Now, just when we need an agenda the most, we don't really know what we support."

It's a serious dilemma, as speaker after speaker related. In some ways, for example, the shape of the emerging California economy could turn out to be a lot like the late 19th century economy of the industrial Northeast: Plenty of small, diverse manufacturing facilities, employing predominantly immigrant workers, clustering in and around urban centers, paying low wages and using new technology to increase output and cut labor costs.

On one level, small manufacturing is good: It creates local jobs, and often local wealth. Local owners tend to

have more ties to a community; they spend their profits in town and invest in local capital, instead of exporting all that cash to a giant absentee corporation in another part of the world.

On the other hand, a diverse group of small manufacturers can be hell on things like environmental regulations and labor laws — and it's often much harder to keep them from closing up shop, welshing on debts to local vendors and employees, and moving out of town with no notice, in the dead of night.

As Ted Smith, director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, told the group, "If we can't deal with capital flight, almost everything else becomes irrelevant."

That's still the easy stuff. It gets a lot worse. Gary Chapman, a founder of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, likes to tell the story of how the supervisor at a high-tech Toyota plant in Tokyo not long ago forgot to turn off the main power switch before a weekend break. On Monday morning, the staff arrived to find a few hundred shiny new Lexus sedans piled up at the end of the assembly line. The people had gone home; the robots kept on working.

"What happens if we realize that there aren't going to be enough jobs to go around?" Smith asked. "If even the most progressive conversion plan can't replace all the high-paid defense jobs one-for-one?"

"What if the next economy doesn't need anywhere near as many working-age people as we have in California?"

CLICHÉ SOCIETY

You can get paralyzed by questions like that, and a lot of people do. More often, we avoid even thinking about them. When you're fighting to keep the rape crisis center at the county hospital open, or to stop the latest round of state welfare cuts, or to protect the basic human rights of half a million immigrant children... well, the "next economy" stuff can sound pretty abstract.

That's a big part of the problem: Progressives have been so busy defending things for so many years that we've lost sight of how an offensive strategy might look. We've held onto a lot of clichés, like "sustainable development" and "environmental justice," but we don't know what they mean, right now, in the real world. We don't have a political program, much less a political strategy.

So the groups represented in the new network — unions, environmentalists, peace groups, people of color, and a whole rainbow of other advocates — usually wind up squabbling over tiny bits of turf. When they try to get together to talk, it's all egos, rhetoric, dizzy ideals, and a colossal waste of time.

But the people who met in Oakland last Sunday didn't seem interested in making speeches or wasting time. They weren't convinced that they need a whole new organization — they all have community organizations of their own. What they need, they agreed, was a network of progressives who could work together, set a serious agenda, and take the offensive on statewide economic issues. And I think, maybe, they might really want to win.

I'm a rotten cynic, and I've seen these things come and go, but I was also a Mets fan back in 1973, and sometimes I still remember the words: You gotta believe. ●

California Network for a New Economy can be reached, for the moment, through the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, 760 N. 1st St., San Jose, CA 95112. Please show a little courtesy to busy people: Write, don't call.