

HOT TALK: Interview with Davis author Dan Berman of *Who Owns the Sun?* by Nick Budnick, in *Sacramento News & Review*, March 20, 1997.

DAN BERMAN IS A PLAIN-SPEAKING, GRAVELLY VOICED BLUE-JEANS WEARING 54-YEAR-OLD BOSTONIAN. HE HOLDS A PH.D. IN POLITICAL SCIENCE FROM THE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY OF ST. LOUIS, AND SAYS WITH A TRACE OF IRONY: "I COULDA' BEEN A CERTIFIED INTELLECTUAL."

Instead, what Berman became was an activist—as a teacher, writer and organizer. He participated in the "Freedom Summer" action in Mississippi during the heyday of the Civil Rights movement; started a literacy school while serving in the Peace Corps in Brazil; became a pioneer in the struggle to shed light on the then-virgin territory of occupational safety and health with the publication of his 1978 book *Death on the Job*. Before he moved to Davis 18 months ago, he had been deeply embroiled in the battle to wrest San Francisco power grad away from Pacific Gas & Electric and give it back to the city, as required by a never-enforced federal law called the Raker Act.

Berman's latest book, co-authored with Massachusetts-based activist and environmental technology firm owner John T. O'Connor, took five years to write. Its title: *Who Owns the Sun? People, Politics and the Struggle for a Solar Economy*. In a foreword to the book, consumer activist Ralph Nader makes the claim that the book will do nothing less than "reactivate the solar movement in America."

Who Owns the Sun? begins with a simple enough question: Whatever happened to the solar movement? Berman and O'Connor proceed to lay an answer in

eight fact-packed, thought-provoking chapters. Ultimately, the authors argue that private utilities have blocked the development of alternative energy sources; that, in California, such utilities have even had the willing aid of an organization that is supposed to monitor them—the Public Utilities Commission. The authors also argue that the people who should be blowing the whistle—environmental groups—are not doing so. Maybe that's because some of them happen to rely on millions in funding from oil companies and utilities that funnel money through innocent-seeming environment foundations, suggest the authors.

With its call for public control over electricity, the book's message grows in importance given that the bulk of scientific opinion is now leaning toward acceptance of "global warming," the idea that our fossil-fuel economy is pushing the globe toward eventual calamity.

SN&R: Your book was released last October. How has the reaction been?

Berman: It's gotten great reviews in the publishing trade press. Publisher's Weekly did a fabulous review [as did] Kirkus Reviews. I mean, we were honored that they even reviewed it and it got a fabulous review. It's doing fine, and we're

going to do another printing next month. It's creating a lot of discussion, and that's our intent. It's a book that goes against the grain, and let me explain why. We make the argument that public ownership with local control, à la SMUD [the Sacramento Municipal Utility District], is a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for a solar economy.

What's the big deal about SMUD?

We use SMUD as our primary example: Nobody in the world [except SMUD] has shut down a nuclear plant after a vote of the people. There's no way a vote of the people can shut down [Pacific Gas & Electric's] Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, for example, because that not how a private utility is run. The board of directors of PG&E is there to make sure that profits are maintained for PG&E---it's not to make sure that a reliable, cheap electric service that is clean is delivered to their customers. This is just incidental to their prime goal, which is production of profits.

Our argument is we need more democracy to make a solar economy happen. It's a very nuanced argument, even though the book looks simple in some ways and doesn't use complicated language.

A solar economy? Isn't that just an expensive pipe dream?

We've reached a point where these technologies have become miniaturized, where in two generations we could have most of the economy running on solar, and the fossil fuels element could just be a backup, which is exactly what [off-grid homeowners are] doing on California's North Coast....There are studies that we cite done by PG&E that say we can cut electricity usage in the United States by 40 or 50 percent.

In Israel, 70 percent of the buildings have solar water heating....Israel imports 90 percent of its energy, and they save the necessity of importing 400,000 tons of oil [annually] because of solar water heating. Every new house has to have it....In Tokyo there's 2 or 3 million of these things on the roofs.

I would say also that the price of oil and fossil fuels is artificially low because the smog they cause is not paid for....They're taking away your right to breathe clean air--but that's not paid for. Our gasoline is what, \$1.30, \$1.40 a gallon? That's an artificially low price because in that calculation is not entered, among other things, the billions of dollars it costs to maintain control over the Middle East....If people were really paying the true price of gasoline, it would be \$5, \$6 a gallon.

How do you think public control over utilities would help create a solar world?

There is no democracy in the energy economy, and the corporations that run the energy economy are interested in keeping people hooked on fossil fuels, and on nuclear power. In places where there is democracy in the energy economy, it actually creates an opening for solar in its broader sense. And Sacramento's a perfect example of that.

The reason we prefaced the book with chapters discussing the history of both the electric utility industry and the energy industry is because to understand solar, people have to understand oil, and they have to understand coal, and they have to understand that these giant corporations want to control [all of it].

Let's say there's a lot of lignite [coal] mines in, say, North Dakota. That should be looked at not as an excuse to hook the state forever on lignite. What it should be is an excuse to set aside 10 percent of the gross revenue for alternatives---in this

case, wind. I mean, North Dakota should be the windpower capital of the United States because enough wind blows there to run the entire U.S. electrical system. But, of course, that's not happening because the people who control the energy economy, the electricity economy, they want people to burn coal because they own coal.

In your book, you argue that environmental groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council are allowing utilities to dominate public discourse on our energy future. What do you mean?

Take AB1890 [the state's electric utility deregulation bill], for example: The people of California are paying \$27 billion dollars, over \$3,000 per family, to pay off utilities' bad investments in nuclear power. What business does the state of California have subsidizing these corporations that have done everything wrong from the get-go anyway? I mean, hundreds of people were arrested, perhaps thousands, in the '70s trying to shut down the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant to prevent it being built. They marched right ahead and built it, and now they're crying because nuclear power costs too much. Our argument is that a real solar movement would raise questions about that at every turn. And they wouldn't say, "Please give this money to PG&E," which is exactly what the Natural Resources Defense Council is saying.

Do a side-by-side comparison with PG&E over something as seemingly laughable as shade trees. SMUD spends \$2 million a year planting shade trees: It cuts the summer peak [usage] somewhat; it makes it more bearable. PG&E today spends nothing on this....That's the kind of thing that people ought to be aware of, and they're not. Why doesn't NRDC jump up and say, "What is this crap?!"

I don't expect PG&E to tell you what a wonderful thing solar water heating is because they make their money through selling you kilowatt-hours and units of natural gas. I understand that. But I would expect the NRDC, to take one example, to talk about this.

In the long run, the goal should be to cut the actual use of electricity a little bit every year. And that's not on the agenda of any mainstream environmental groups.

So how can SMUD survive the new era of utility deregulation?

I think in the case of SMUD, they'll do fine. SMUD has extensive hydro resources. But I think also SMUD has to reach out to the people in this area and say, "Listen, we can supply electricity better and cheaper....We can start research, we can get people interested in solar alternatives, and we can get people interested in true energy conservation." I would like to see SMUD take over Davis, with all that that implies, with more energy-efficient measures than we have under PG&E here.

I think the kind of things SMUD does should be explained in the schools. I think people should be more aware of what a wonderful utility they have....SMUD is a leader in the kinds of things we're talking about, and I think that people need to maintain the pressure on SMUD. You have to keep turning Sacramento toward the sun....