

Seminar Illuminates UN's Successes

By Lindy Davies

In a seminar titled "In the Line of Fire: the UN at 50," given on February 9th at the NY-HGS, three speakers made a convincing case that the United Nations has strongly changed our world for the better in its first fifty years, and should continue to do so. Alanna Hartzok, NGO Representative for the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, chaired the program.

Jim Morgan, NGO representative of Architects and Designers for Social Responsibility, summed up the UN's successes in five major categories, which he listed, Letterman-style, in reverse order:

5. The UN commitment to human development and culture has enriched us all. Without the work of the UN, human rights could never have become the major world issue that it is today; international tensions would have driven it right off the table.

4. UN specialized agencies have literally changed the world. The list of agencies working around

the world is long. In the wealthy US, we have a tendency to forget that poorer nations sorely need the help provided by such agencies as the FAO (Food & Agriculture Association), WHO (World Health Organization) and UNEP (United Nations Environmental Program).

3. The UN has an unparalleled record of peacekeeping and democratization. A long record of success in these areas was highlighted by the UN's major role in the peaceful change of regime in South Africa.

2. The UN played a major role in keeping the cold war cold. In spite of resistance from the United States — the source of 75% of all the world's weapons exports today — international treaties on nuclear and chemical arms would have been all but unthinkable outside of the UN's framework.

But most important: **1. The UN has survived the cold war — not the other way around.** "Now some might call that a silly statement," he continued. But he noted that the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, died after 16 years, never having gained the support of the US Congress — and was unable to muster the support to stop Italy's incursion into Ethiopia. Had an international organization with the scope and respect of the UN existed in the late 30s, it is quite possible that World War II could have been averted.

The 1990s has seen the UN's peacekeeping challenge grow in many ways. In some two years, the UN's peacekeeping operations grew from 20,000 troops operating in three places, to a total of 80,000 troops in seventeen places — all at a time when the UN's funding was decreasing. Additionally, the UN must come to terms with its proper role in struggles which, however brutal, nevertheless happen inside the boundaries of sovereign nations — and hence outside of the UN's jurisdiction.

The General Assembly, Morgan said, despite all its difficulties and problems, "really does function as the voice of the world's people. Each of the major UN conferences, which Ann Zanes will tell you about, grew out of a Resolution made by the General Assembly."

Ann Zanes, who serves as a Board Member of the Communications Coordination Committee of the UN, (*continued on page six*)



Jim Morgan



James Olson



Ann Zanes

(*continued from front page*) and the NGO representative of Peace Links, has attended a number of UN Conferences. This seminar had come, she noted, during the period of intense activity in preparation for the upcoming Habitat II conference. Delegates from thousands of NGOs were meeting in 28 caucuses, negotiating terms for the official language to be adopted in the conference's document. This conference will mark a breakthrough in the influence and viability of the NGO movement; the efforts of NGOs have been instrumental in ensuring Habitat II's unprecedented emphasis on action, not just discussion. Also, groups representing women, the aged, youth, the disabled, and planners, will contribute separate analyses.

Ms. Zanes spoke on the major recent conferences, including those on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), Population (Cairo, 1994), the Social Summit last year in Copenhagen, and of course the Women's conference in Beijing — about which all manner of myths and rumors were circulated, both in China and the US. The influence of these conferences, she affirmed, has been real and vital, although it has come about in gradual, incremental steps.

James Olson, Vice President of National Programs for the UN Association of the USA, said that after his colleagues' glowing reports, it unfortunately fell to him to give the bad news. "This is a critical time in the relationship between the UN and the US. This country is in a process of selective withdrawal from the UN." The irony of this, Olson said, is that the UN generally has a high level of support in the US population; people generally report greater approval of the UN than of the US Congress, and support is higher here than in Western Europe.

Unfortunately, although support for the UN is broad, opposition to it is deep and focused. A bill to withdraw from the UN, introduced by Rep. Scarborough of Florida on the date of the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the UN charter, now has twelve cosponsors. While the bill has little chance of passing, Olson said, it shows the level of antagonism toward the UN in some circles, particularly among new right-wing members of Congress (and supporters of USA-first candidate Pat Buchanan). Meanwhile, the US continues to refuse to honor its commitment to funding the UN; half of the \$3 billion in unpaid dues is owed by the US alone. Without these funds, the UN faces a severe financial crisis. Even as work goes on toward the pivotal Habitat II conference, a subcommittee is meeting to try to find some way for the UN to meet its payroll for the coming year.