

Stop the presses



JUDITH SCHERR/FOR BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Former staff of Inkworks gathered Feb. 20 for a final salute to the workers collective print shop.

Inkworks closes after 42 years

Printing collective hosts gathering to say final farewell

By Judith Scherr

Correspondent

BERKELEY — Inkworks' giant presses rumble no more.

In better days, the Seventh Street loading dock would have been crowded with boxes of political posters, brochures and campaign literature. On Feb. 20, it was instead filled with recent and former Inkworks staff, customers and friends who came to celebrate the workers collective's 42 years and bid a final farewell to the union printer that had its last business day on Dec. 31.

"This is a celebration, not only of Inkworks Press, but the ongoing struggle and victories of a broad spectrum of politically progressive movements that we have had the pleasure of printing for over the last 42 years," Inkworks staffer Grendl Lofkvist told the gathering. She thanked the 100 or so "customers and allies for coming here today and for all the years of beautiful and powerful work you have given us to print."

Much praise went to the Cheese Board Collective, which literally saved Inkworks two years ago.

Faced with changing technology in printing, Inkworks was unable to recover from the recession; the Cheese Board bought the collective's building and leased it back at an affordable rent.

"That allowed Inkworks to go out in style instead of just locking the doors one day and saying, 'Sorry, we're gone,'" said Lincoln Cushing, who worked at Inkworks from 1981 to 2001.

Workers were drawn to Inkworks over the years for fair wages and for the collective structure: The workers owned the business and made the decisions.

"What I said did influence how things would go," said Nobuo Nishi, who began work at Inkworks in 1981.

"You're in charge of your own future," former bookkeeper Audrey Driver added. "You are the boss and the worker. It's freedom — that's what the collective means."

Working with politically progressive customers was important, Cushing said. Clients, which included the ACLU, the Rainbow Coalition, the San Francisco Mime Troop and the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements, came because they knew the printers cared about their message.

"We knew what we were doing, and we knew who we were doing it for," Cushing said.

One of Inkworks' best-known posters portrays three Filipino seniors, representing the 1977 fight against low-income residents' evictions from the International Hotel in San Francisco; another shows a map of Africa, with an African man breaking out of South Africa and the words "end Apartheid."

"Visions of Peace and Justice," available at East Wind Books in Berkeley, is Inkworks' two-volume set of political posters.

Though the operation itself is gone, the legacy of Inkworks is continuing in various ways: Community Printers, a worker collective in Santa Cruz, has already taken on a number of Inkworks customers; former Inkworks staffer Ranil Abeysekera liaisons with them from Berkeley. Founding Inkworks member Wakean MacLean will continue making political buttons and stickers from his home, and Design Action Collective, an Oakland graphic design spinoff from Inkworks, will continue its work. Contact information is on the Inkworks website.

The Inkworks archives won't be lost. One set will be at the Los Angeles Center for the Study of Political Graphics; a second set will be at Brooklyn's Interference Archive, and a third will likely be at the Oakland Museum of California, Cushing said.

The Cheese Board isn't ready to reveal its plans for the building — "making pizzas in the backroom," providing housing for co-op members or offering space to a co-op startup have been mentioned.

Cheese Board Collective member Olivia Yee was offering pizza slices to the crowd.

"We have plans (for the building)," she said. "They're in the works."