

Why Take Demonstrators Seriously?

THE placard held by a demonstrator on the University of Oklahoma campus read: "We refuse to accept all unfair administrative policies."

The clear implication was that the group represented, if any, would decide what policies were fair and which were unfair. This seems to be the typical attitude of swarms of demonstrators who may be rallied to protest on any issue, wherever a TV camera might show up.

Nobody challenges their constitutional right to assemble peaceably and declare their political or personal opinions. However, nobody has to take them any more seriously than they deserve, either.

The president missed seeing a coalition of anti-Reagan demonstrators holding a mock funeral for "the American dream" on the state capitol steps. A spokesman said they had pledged to have a peaceful rally of labor, ERA supporters, anti-nukes, non-interventionists, handicapped, minorities, education and social program beneficiaries.

Since single protest groups might not carry a great deal of weight

even if they attract thousands of participants and onlookers, coalition demonstrations have come into style.

A year ago in Washington, D.C., 157 organizations joined in a national coalition to try to block the president's budget cuts. Later, 49 environmental forces formed the "Global Tomorrow Coalition."

A couple of years ago an alliance of labor, consumer, environmental and religious groups, led by professional protester Ralph Nader, began soliciting contributions for a coalition called "Americans Concerned about Corporate Power." Any issue will do.

Separately or as coalitions, such pressure groups often exert considerable influence on national political policies, even overriding what may appear to be sharply defined public opinion.

National officials have admitted that vital decisions and federal regulations have been dictated by mission-oriented bureaucrats, specialized professionals and political activists.

Not only are demonstrators band-

ing together to produce bigger crowds and bigger shows; they also are beginning to look alike.

A friend sent a copy of a magazine called "War on Drugs" containing a lengthy article titled "Who's Behind the Herbicide Scare?" It focused on West Coast states to show how protest groups control marijuana production and distribution there.

The article also reviewed political postures of a number of protest leaders, including several members of Congress. Fred Miller, a leader of Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides, was quoted as saying, "I want to wipe out capitalism, eradicate it from the face of the earth."

Others in this "Who's Who of Protesters" include Sen. Alan Cranston, Rep. Don Dellums, Tom Hayden and Willie Brown.

The right of peaceable assembly should not be abridged, but Americans would do well to peaceably analyze both overt and ulterior motives of protest demonstrators. Politics makes strange bedfellows, and coalitions often make strange politics.