

A MARXIST NEWSLETTER

# Motion Forward Motion Forward Motion

AUG.-SEPT. 1984

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ CENTRAL AMERICA: THE WAR IS ON ▶ ▶ ▶

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### Dear Friends,

In Central America, the war is on. In the northern part of Nicaragua, between as many as 15 to 20,000 former Somoza National Guardsmen and others fight from inside the Honduran border, aided and organized by the C.I.A. and U.S. military personnel. They are terrorizing the people living in the northern part of Nicaragua. Inside the Costa Rican border are another 5000 or so "contras." Up until very recently, this group has been terrorizing people in the southern part of Nicaragua with frequent hit and run raids. Although led by a former Sandinista, Eden Pastora, only about 200 or

so of this group can make similar claims: many are mercenaries and right wing Cubans who dream of overthrowing Fidel Castro in Cuba. The C.I.A. has funded this group as well. Direct C.I.A. and U.S. military involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and other sabotage has finally filtered into the U.S. media in recent months.

When Somoza fled Nicaragua in July of 1979, he gave orders to bomb everything — factories, hospitals and homes — a final touch after forty years of oppressive dictatorship and a long, draining struggle to overthrow it. The Sandinistas brought land reform, literacy campaigns and free health care for all Nicaraguans. Capital punishment was abolished. Two years later, the Sandinistas granted amnesty to many political prisoners, including many former Somoza national guardsmen. These men regrouped to form the contra military dedicated to overthrowing the government and reestablishing military dictatorship. These are the people the Reagan administration calls freedom fighters.

Meanwhile, war continues in El Salvador. The U.S. presence is even more pervasive, right down to the C.I.A. participation in Napoleon Duarte's election campaign this spring. But the U.S. military effort on behalf of the Salvadoran regime is most important, and now spilling over from aid to involvement. Southern Honduras has been turned into a vast staging area through the U.S.'s "Big Pine" war maneuvers, and at the very least, Army pilots fly "combat intelligence" missions in close support of actual Salvadoran army operations.

Another U.S. war is on — not maybe, not just by proxy, not tomorrow, but now. This is the message of our lead article this month and this issue's theme. It is a war that may look more like the C.I.A.'s secret war in Laos or the Air Force's air war against Cambodia than the massive U.S. land war in Vietnam, and this makes the task of building an anti-war resistance here all the harder, but we just as surely need such a movement. To succeed we need both education about Central American conditions and organization geared to the nature of this war. Other articles in this FM report on some of the organizing underway in this country, and two others comment on two important issues in the Nicaraguan revolution today — agriculture and the Miskito Indians. We invite comment on the "The War Is On" perspective and on other dimensions of organizing work now being undertaken.

Thanks to J. Brassil both for her poem in this section and for help on this introduction.

\* \* \*

Rounding out this issue is the second installment in our "Party Up" series on the relevance of Marxist party organization today, plus the beginning of a very different FM series offering practical advice on current trade union organizing problems: *Dear Ralph and Alice*. Your correspondence is invited. Also, a look at recent generally regressive



changes in health care insurance and programs, and finally a review of Alice Walker's prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, now in paperback.

In our next issue: the fall elections plus developments in Southern Africa.

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### **CORRECTION:**

At the time the last issue was sent to the printers, we did not have the address for the National Office of the Progressive Student Network. If you are interested in further information about the PSN write to:

PSN National Office  
BOX 53263  
Temple Heights Station  
Washington, DC 20009

or call:

c/o John Allocca  
1-202-328-0722

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# Central America: The War Is On

Despite careful management, some news reaches us from Central America. It is bad news. That the situation in Central America goes from bad to worse needs little emphasis on the Left in this country. In solidarity activities of many kinds, the Left and others (most notably, a number of religious groups, often led by sections of the Catholic community) are trying to spread that message. But as the U.S. steadily widens the war in Central America, the Left is having trouble helping convert widespread disagreement with the war into effective protest against it.

One of the themes that the Left and liberals have used in their organizing efforts has been to compare Central America to Vietnam. The slogan "NO MORE VIETNAM" has been raised in the hope of galvanizing a mass movement that will prevent full-scale U.S. intervention. The Vietnam analogy works quite well for a while, and it could very well work even better in the near future. Consider only some of the similarities:

## PARALLELS WITH VIETNAM

(1) There is an incredibly oppressive client regime of the U.S. The class contradictions in El Salvador are more acute than those in Vietnam. The regime consists of a vast killing machine, a fleet of U.S.-built Cherokee station wagons that roar into the barrios, drag people away, mutilate bodies, then dump them in conspicuous places. Since 1979, El Salvador qualifies as one of the most murderous regimes in modern times, and it's been a crowded and highly competitive league in the last few decades.

(2) There's the U.S., by tradition and yanqui custom the grand patron of the army, landowners, and the fascist right. With one hand, the U.S. establishes, organizes, finances, gathers intelligence for and helps direct the death squads. (For a grim exposure of the U.S. role, see Allan Nairn's report in the May, 1984 *Progressive*. His information has been almost completely ignored in the national media.) With the other, the U.S. finances and controls demonstration elections, or, in the *New York Times'* delicate phrasing, the C.I.A. "helps to insure an orderly election." (May 11, 1984). (The term "demonstration elections" comes from an excellent, just published book by Frank Brodhead and Edward Herman, *Demonstration Elections*, South End Press.)

(3) Against centuries of landlord oppression and against U.S. imperialism and military rule, the people have risen up, arms in hand. The insurgency in El Salvador does not yet have the extraordinary level of popular support that the Vietnamese struggle enjoyed, but it is undeniably a popular, mass-based struggle expressing the aspirations of the Salvadoran people. As the experience of popular war in this century would predict, those at the head of the revolutionary movement find their experience

confirmed, their problems addressed, by the Left and by Marxism. The Left's partisans make the greatest sacrifices; the Left's strategy wins the most resolute fighters for the Salvadoran nation; the Left's ideas blend into the language of the Salvadoran people.

(4) Meanwhile the U.S. subverts every other regime in the area. The Pentagon has converted Honduras into the forward staging area of the U.S. Southern command. In the Central American mosaic, Costa Rica seems called upon to play the role of a present-day Cambodia, where a neutral state undergoes repeated attacks on its sovereignty by the U.S., until finally a new regime proceeds to the elimination of the neutralist elements.

In all these ways, the Vietnam analogy works, and it works down to many of the details; like the old hands at the Saigon embassy or in the Phoenix program of rural assassinations who keep popping up. Congressional fact-finding commissions jet in and out of Central America every week, Congresspeople complain about this or that blow to the U.S. image, and a Democratic Congress does what Democratic Congresses always do, vote more money for U.S. subversion and war.

The analogy will probably get better before too long. We can look forward to some manufactured incident, like the the Tonkin Gulf incident, that will trigger massive escalation in the U.S. wars in El Salvador or Nicaragua. We almost had one: anybody who lives in a city knows that there are blocks you do not stand on at certain hours of the night, but the U.S. army took two U.S. senators within shooting range of Salvadoran guerrillas on the Honduras border recently, a set-up if there ever was one. We should also expect, and we should tell everyone to expect, a phoney peace initiative by Reagan this summer-fall, a "secret peace plan" hard to distinguish from Kissinger's infamous "peace is at hand" speech of the 1972 election campaign. (Schultz's surprise visit to Managua and the much publicized scale-down of maneuvers in Honduras may signal the beginnings of this.)

Most importantly, we should prepare for resistance to what comes immediately after November. If Reagan wins, which in all likelihood he will, we will then get what Walter Mondale has begun calling Reagan's "December surprise," a surprise that will probably closely resemble in ferocity and inhumanity the "Christmas bombing" of 1972. In the unlikely event that Mondale wins the election, there is still good reason to think the U.S. war effort will escalate. It is a majority Democratic House that has voted Reagan the funds all along, and it was Mondale's last running mate, Jimmy Carter, who oversaw the rapid domination of the 1979's "Revolutionary Junta" by far-right military men, and sharply escalated the war in 1979-1980. No section of the U.S. ruling class is prepared to see an independent, socialist-oriented El Salvador.

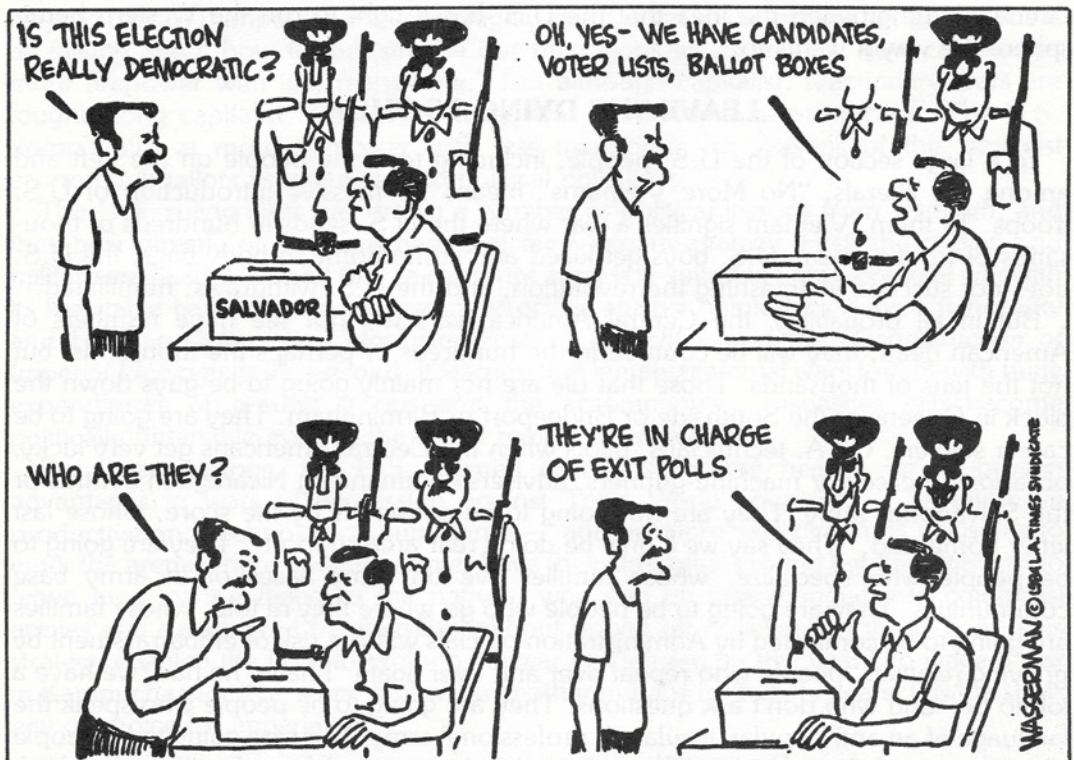
## **WHERE THE VIETNAM ANALOGY BREAKS DOWN**

But despite all these and many other similarities, the analogy with Vietnam does not sufficiently alert people to what is happening and what will happen in El Salvador and Central America. Worse it threatens to mislead us because the factors which made the Vietnam war unpopular then may not apply to Central America.



Here we get to the popular ideas about Vietnam. To a vast section of the U.S. people, Vietnam symbolizes above all an "unwinnable war." Vietnam represents a "quagmire." We must remember that within the majority opposition to the Vietnam war a major component was the "win or get out" sentiment. Alongside those who thought the war should not be won by the U.S. were all those who thought the war could not be won. Some thought it could not be won because the Vietnamese people were united in their opposition to US aggression and would never accept US domination. Some thought that it could not be won because this country was so divided about the war that we lacked the national resolve which would allow us to win it. And some thought that for political reasons, the U.S. was not fighting the war all out, and if we weren't going to do that, we should get out.

So there's the first major problem with the Vietnam analogy. The analogy says: El Salvador is unwinnable for the U.S. But is it? In the long run, of course, the people will triumph, the U.S. will be beaten and the landowners will live in Miami, California and New York. But the people will also triumph one day in Grenada, in Indonesia, in Thailand, in East Timor, in Azania (South Africa) and a lot of other places. Between here and universal sisterhood it is possible to suffer some bone-crunching defeats. Guerrilla wars win sometimes, but it is no historical accident that in all of Latin



America, where there have been guerrilla wars in almost every country, there has only been one successful prolonged popular war, that of Nicaragua plus Cuba's successful much briefer and largely guerilla struggle.

El Salvador is a very small country. The people have no friendly borders, as the Nicaraguans had during their liberation struggle. Compared to the U.S., of course, Vietnam was also a small country. But compared to El Salvador, Vietnam is a big country. If the U.S. put the number of troops it had at one time in Vietnam in El Salvador, there would be something like 85 or so highly equipped U.S. troops for every square mile of El Salvador. If the U.S. put all the tanks and other armored vehicles it had in Vietnam at one time in El Salvador, a lot of the country would look like bumper cars at an amusement park. El Salvador is a small country that does not have very many people. The Left should not promote a simplistic idea that no united people (and no people faced with the corrupting and terrorizing domination of the U.S. can be totally united) can ever be defeated. Small countries usually *don't* defeat large ones. If the United States should start to win militarily in El Salvador — if it should carpet-bomb large sections of the Salvadoran countryside and then swoop in and fire away from its helicopter gunships — the Vietnam analogy is going to backfire. Quite simply, imperialist victories breed jingoism. The success of the U.S. invasion of Grenada strengthened the idea that the U.S. has a right to run the Western hemisphere the way it wants to.

### **LEAVE THE DYING TO THEM**

To a large section of the U.S. people, including to many people on the Left and among the liberals, "No More Vietnams" means no massive introduction of U.S. troops. To them, Vietnam signifies a war where the U.S. sends in hundreds of thousands of troops, many U.S. boys get killed and come home in body bags, the U.S. does not succeed in smashing the revolution, and the U.S. withdraws, humiliated.

But in all probability, the Central America wars will not see huge numbers of American dead; they will be counted in the hundreds or perhaps the thousands, but not the tens of thousands. Those that die are not mainly going to be guys down the block in Queens or the Southside or Bridgeport or Birmingham. They are going to be career soldiers, C.I.A. technicians, pilots when the Central Americans get very lucky, occasional helicopter machine-gunners, advisers commanding Nicaraguan contras or the Salvadoran army. They are not going to be conscripts by the score, whose last letter home said, "They say we'll only be doing rear area support." They are going to be people who specialize, whose families live on army bases or in army base communities. They are going to be people who go where they're told, whose families are going to be comforted by Administration officials without risk of embarrassment by grieving relatives, people who repeat over and over again "I have/he had/we have a job to do" and who don't ask questions. They are going to be people who speak the language of an anti-popular, insulated, professional army. They are going to be people like the troops who went into Grenada and Lebanon, and have families who don't



criticize.

This is the second problem with the Vietnam analogy: for most people, it suggests the early and middle stages of the Vietnam war. To many people, a *real war* involves huge U.S. troop commitments. But that is not the war that is going on now, and it is not the way the war in Central America is likely to develop (though we will certainly see more U.S. troops, and not just disguised as advisers or C.I.A. commando squads) in action. We should remember that "Vietnam," meaning large U.S. troop commitments, does not cover all of the Vietnam war, and it never applied to the other Indochina wars — Laos and Kampuchea. The analogy that fits El Salvador and Nicaragua best is Vietnam in the later stages (the so-called "Vietnamization" of the war, involving massive bombing) and the "secret war" in Laos (which destroyed the traditional culture and economy of Laos, period).

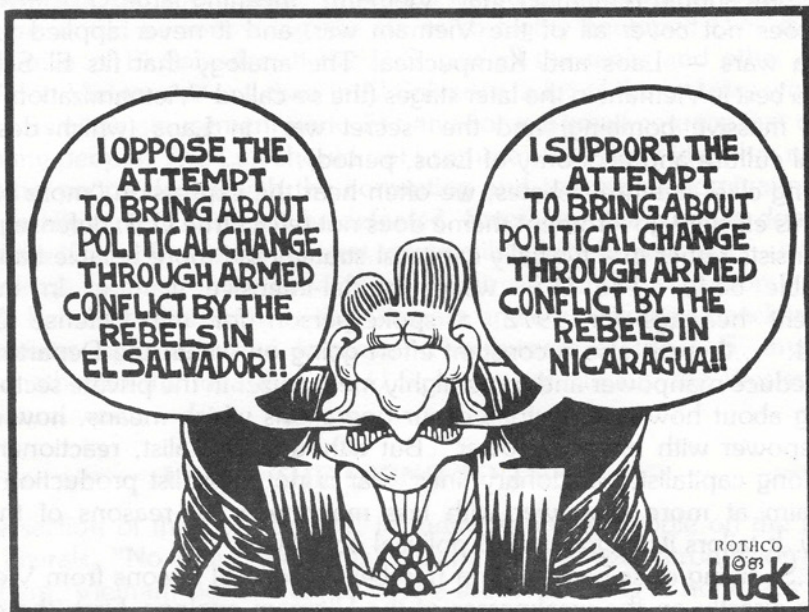
In ruling class defense debates, we often hear the expression "more bang for the buck." This efficient government theme does not reflect true U.S. defense philosophy, which consists rather in a typically capitalist strategy of "more reliable bang for every less reliable body." The U.S. wages capital-intensive warfare. In the Defense Department hearings for 1972, a spokesperson for the Defense Department explained: "...there is also a constant effort going on within the Department to find ways to reduce manpower and more highly mechanize. In the private sector we would be talking about how to industrialize our operations which means, how can we get more firepower with less manpower." But although capitalist, reactionary wars are fought along capitalist, reactionary lines, war is not capitalist production. The U.S. doesn't aim at more firepower with less manpower for reasons of the capitalist economy. It tailors its aggression to political objectives.

The U.S. ruling class has drawn a number of political lessons from Vietnam, and they bear directly on the weaknesses of the Vietnam analogy. First, the civilian and military leadership learned that "a conscript army is ill-suited to fight a colonial war with its inevitable barbarism and incessant atrocities against helpless civilians." (Chomsky and Herman, *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*, p.7). Second, it learned that lengthy colonial wars fought with huge expenditures of ground troops and the accompanying casualties can become politically untenable even in the major bastion of imperialism.

For these reasons, the U.S. learned to rely still more heavily on its proven advantages in wars of aggression against Third World countries — its immense productive and technological superiority — and be more selective in its decisions to enter the arena where people's armies have their strengths, ground fighting. It is best to leave most of the dying to the natives, who can be press-ganged into colonialist armies and slaughtered by guerrillas without setting off riots back in the U.S.A. This strategy enabled the U.S. to prolong the war in Vietnam for five years, to wage a war in Kampuchea for five years, and wage another in Laos for twenty years. It is the strategy of choice for imperialism.

The United States is determined to wipe out revolution in Central America for the

rest of our lifetimes, including through the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. Besides the post-election period, the dangerous moment for Nicaragua is not going to be when the contras score a few victories, but when the "contra" strategy no longer brings significant results. The Allende government in Chile was overthrown after it had shown an ability to increase its electoral support in the 1973 elections. As the Nicaraguan regime consolidates itself in the face of contra attacks, the United States will have to move.



When the moment comes, or when U.S. bombing of Salvadoran guerrilla positions begins in earnest, the wars will still not look like Vietnam, at least not the Vietnam of 1965-1970. If we continue to treat the Central American situation as a potential replay of Vietnam, and the Reagan Administration continues to mount wars that avoid the appearance of Vietnam (even while having its essence), we risk disorganizing and demobilizing opposition to the war. We have to stop telling people that El Salvador could *become* another Vietnam, that the U.S. people must stay the hand of the U.S. from *creating* another Vietnam.

Using the Vietnam analogy encourages people to think that the signal for the advent of war in Central America will be the introduction of large numbers of combat troops. It implies that the war is not here yet, and we have to organize to prevent it from happening. The war is on. The U.S. is already waging it. And the war it is waging is not Vietnam, anymore than Grenada was Vietnam or the Dominican Republic was Vietnam or Laos was Vietnam or even Vietnam in 1970-75 was Vietnam. If we keep raising the spectre of Vietnam in Central America, and Vietnam never quite comes, people will be falsely reassured and demobilized until it's too late. For this reason



we have to stop thinking about the movement we are building as an anti-intervention movement. If the war is on, then the movement we are building is the anti-war movement.

## **A NEW ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT**

This movement has a greater degree of anti-war sentiment to draw on than prevailed in the early stages of the Vietnam and Laotian wars. It counts many veterans of the anti-war movement and veterans of the war itself. But anti-war organizing has to confront a level of popular ignorance about the war comparable to that which enveloped the U.S. people during most of the Vietnam war (for example, the majority of U.S. voters today do not know that the U.S. wants to crush the rebels and prop up the government in El Salvador, while it supports the rebels and wants to overthrow the government in Nicaragua). And anti-war activists face an Administration schooled in the Vietnam defeat and the pressures that mass resistance to imperialist adventures can exercise. In the struggle for public opinion, the Reaganites have had almost everything their way, including a passive Democratic House of Representatives.

Some of what's needed is familiar. Anti-war activists have to build the broadest possible coalition against war and mass slaughter in Central America. That effort cannot afford divisions around the eventual or historic role of Democratic party liberals; refusal to allow a George McGovern to speak before an anti-war demonstration, for example, represents an irresponsible blindness to the real relation of class forces in this country and to the weakness of organized resistance to the war. At the same time, the election of Democrats in November will do virtually nothing to stop the war, as both recent and past history proves. At every opportunity, we must propagate the great truth that a strong, mass anti-war movement can limit the options of even the most right-wing President, while a weak, elite-oriented anti-war movement will witness even the most apparently dovish President press the war to the bitter end. Vote against Reagan, but march against war in Central America.

Two issues will decide the configuration of class forces in this country through the rest of the decade. One is the current drive to shore up the system of white favoritism and with it the existing pattern of male favoritism. Jesse Jackson's challenge to white rule through the two-primary system in the South represents a key aspect of this struggle, as does the Reagan Administration's and the Supreme Court's effort to bolster the last-hired, first-fired principle of white male unionism. The other issue is the struggle between the wave of popular revolution in Central American and Yankee terrorism. The two are intimately connected, as imperialist war and white supremacy have been since the war with Mexico and the annexation of the Southwest.

The right of the U.S. to rule over the rest of the Western Hemisphere (and the world) is an extension of the right of white people to dominate Black, Latin, Native American, Asian American and Pacific Americans in this country. When one of those rights is successfully challenged, the other is weakened. The independence movements in the former colonial world had a major effect on the Afro-American

movement. Conversely, successfully over-running Latin American countries or Grenada strengthens white prerogatives at home. White people will drive through Latin communities in this country with a different feeling, a sense of the temporary and rightfully disenfranchised character of those communities if the U.S. succeeds in depopulating the Central American isthmus. A stubborn war in Central America, with growing U.S. casualties, will undoubtedly occasion racist pogroms in certain Latin communities, particularly those with high concentrations of Salvadorans. If U.S. aggression and terror prevail in Central America, the most right-wing sections of capital will gain strength and attempt to extend their advantage at home. A winning coalition for a Marxist-free Western Hemisphere will produce a far stronger coalition for a union-free environment.

To defeat a new war, the popular movement in this country has to think a new way. The anti-war movement to be built will necessarily be a different kind of anti-war movement than the last. We face difficulties. We also face extraordinary opportunities, and here is the background to the biggest one: the United States is not a European or an Asian country, it is a Western hemispheric one, and increasingly a Latin one. The Western hemisphere is a mainly Third World hemisphere. Many of the Latin Americans pushed off their land by U.S.-owned agri-business corporations, by landowners subordinated to U.S. markets, emigrate to this country in search of work. Many of the Latin Americans whose country's industry cannot employ them arrive here. For anti-war activists, the connections are there for the making between U.S. imperialism, white supremacy, deindustrialization of the Midwest and Northeast, International Monetary Fund control of Latin American economies, and a host of other issues. The people reside in this country who have lived those connections. Let Central Americans beat U.S. Marines, and Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Black people will walk through white communities with a knowledge of the temporary character of white supremacy. And Central America will win, if we can build an anti-war movement reflective of the Latin realities of this country, an anti-war movement that speaks Spanish as often as English, that is steeped in the contradictions of Catholicism more than those of the Democratic party, that educates white people about their place in the joys and sorrows of this hemisphere. That anti-war movement will shake the foundations of this country. It will help determine who walks in whose community, and the future of segregated white communities.

The news from Central America is bad. But it will get better when anti-war organizing begins to make news again.●



## **EL SALVADOR**

**Tenemos hambre,  
Tenemos tristeza,  
Tenemos cansancio.**

**They come at night (vienen a noche)  
Or just before the dawn — They come  
Guns loaded  
Wanting to kill — Coming to kill  
Coming to kill us.**

**¿Quien es el enemigo?  
¿Somos los enemigos?  
¿Por que?  
¿El enemigo de quien?**

**Solo queremos vivir,  
solo queremos ser  
en El Salvador!**

**— J. Brassil  
1984**

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# Overcoming Dependency: Agriculture in Nicaragua Since 1979

As the fifth anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution approaches, "flexibility" and "pragmatism" describe the Nicaraguan people's approach to transforming their country's agriculture. Given the lack of information about Nicaraguan life in the U.S. media, and the distortions of the Reagan administration, a look at evolving policy in this key economic sector may be helpful.

When the Sandinistas came to power, the Nicaraguan people gained control of an economy with many of the problems common to peripheral nations dependent on the capitalist core. Their entire economy was overwhelmingly dependent upon world commodity prices. Although by 1972 a measure of export diversification had occurred, cotton accounted for 25% of exports, beef 15%, coffee 13%, and sugar 6%. The export of these raw materials left little stimulation for the creation of a significant export-related manufacturing sector and therefore, the development of a strong internal market structure (such as a home-based textile or apparel industry). The economy was thus heavily dependent upon finished imported goods, affordable only to the wealthy. A recent interview with Felix Contreras of the Ministry of Planification demonstrates this problem.

*...we export cotton, the most important export product in our country. Only 5 percent of all cotton production is processed inside the country because we have to export the cotton, and then import the coarse thread needed to produce textiles. We also see that there is no industrial structure that allows for the cotton to reach its final stage, which would be the production of garments. That is, the links which would permit the completion of the process do not exist. ("Nicaragua: Planning for the Future," The Black Scholar; March/April 1983, 32.)*

The state structure that coalesced under the Somoza family dictatorship supported and promoted this skewed economic path because of the vast profits benefiting those associated with this strategy.

The consolidation of military power under the domination of Anastasio Somoza Garcia in 1933 brought an end to twenty years of direct U.S. troop presence, but not an end to U.S. influence in Nicaragua. Supported by the United States, Somoza used his position to expand his power and influence particularly in economic matters. Exerting control over such institutions as the Central Bank, Somoza encouraged financing the modernization and diversification of agriculture and in the process, stimulated new sources of wealth in which Somoza himself was a prime beneficiary.

Western style modernization of agriculture meant increased reliance on imported



western technologies, both machinery and chemical fertilizers. Lack of ecological concerns led to significant soil erosion and dust storms in the Pacific region. Land and wealth concentrations combined to displace rural peasants, forcing many into urban centers in search of work. By the 1970's, Nicaragua had the highest urbanization level in Central America with almost 50% of its people living in cities, one-third of those in Managua alone. Attempted reforms, such as Alliance for Progress-sponsored land reforms, were superficial. Poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition combined with a rigid state apparatus to nurture a popular opposition that even larger budget allocations (made possible by increased foreign lending) to the military could not contain. In the end, the Somocistas departed leaving behind one of the largest per capita debts in Latin America, U.S. \$4,000 per family, the equivalent of U.S. \$1.64 billion.

Although a multi-class alliance struggled to overthrow Somoza, state power fell to the organization composed of the most dedicated workers and peasants, to those who had formed the backbone of the revolution, to the F.S.L.N. The immediate concern of the new government became the restoration of production, but for the Sandinistas this had to be accomplished in a manner acceptable to both workers and peasants. Because of the central importance of agriculture to the Nicaraguan economy, and because of the historic sacrifices and injustices suffered by the rural population, the state gave it primary attention.

## **LAND SEIZURES AND NATIONALIZATION**

One of the first acts of the new government was to nationalize the properties of the Somoza family and their associates. Within a short time the state found itself in control of over 20% of the farm land. What to do with these lands became the immediate problem for policymakers as they grappled with the need to restore both basic food production and export crop production vital for foreign exchange. In many areas the landless rural workers were not waiting for the resolution of this contradiction. Land seizures spread.

This development immediately aggravated the class tensions within the government and threatened its commitment to national unity. If the government allowed the seizures to continue, the agrarian bourgeoisie vital to reconstruction would be alienated. In the end, the government moved to stop all future land seizures, allowing those that had taken place to stand. Those whose land had been taken would be compensated. For the owners who had lost land, despite compensation the decision must have indicated an unfavorable class orientation in the new government. Equally problematic however, would have been the thwarting of just peasant desires for the return of lands long ago stolen. The final decision marked an attempt by the Sandinista government to satisfy both parties and thus preserve national unity.

The solution regarding the usage and control of the former Somocista lands was in the end dictated by the nature of these 2,000 farms themselves. The majority of these farms were large, modern and orientated toward export production. A small permanent wage labor force provided further evidence of their advanced relationship to



production. For reasons of efficiency and because of their central importance to the economy, these farms were not broken up and turned over to cooperatives, but were placed under the management of the state sector. The desire for access to land among the rural population was enormous. *The fact that the Sandinistas were able to convince peasants and rural workers of the necessity of this decision, attests to the considerable degree of trust that these groups had in their new government.*

The consolidation of this new state farm sector and not land redistribution became the focus of the Sandinista agrarian policy during the first two years of the agrarian transition. Under this program, full-time wage work was dramatically increased on the state farms in an attempt to counter an unemployment rate that had reached a national level of 34% following the war. Much of the increase resulted from higher state spending for roads, local schools and clinics, and similar projects.

The improvement of social services known as the "social wage" was another attempt by the government to improve the condition of workers. The literacy campaign conducted at this time was part of this effort as well.

Accompanying the social wage were wage increases, or more exactly, the enforcement of the minimum wage. On the average, this meant that rural wages increased 20 to 25 percent above the level of inflation during the first year. Wage increases have not been raised since that time, however, while inflation has averaged roughly 25%. This has placed an even greater reliance on the social wage to provide improvements in rural living standards. In fact, the inability to provide adequate rural wage increases was one of the primary factors leading to the shift of agrarian policy by mid-1981.

## **RURAL CO-OPS**

Another major priority of the agrarian transformation during the first period was building the rural workers organization, the ATC. This too, was a cornerstone of Sandinista policy and had been a part of their pre-revolutionary strategy. The ATC was designed as a form of popular power to represent the interests of rural workers and semi-proletarians before the state and/or private capitalists. The ATC sought just wages and better working conditions. In addition, the ATC guarded against decapitalizations (withdrawal of private capital) and other counter-revolutionary activity. In the long run, the ATC was to provide the training ground in both technical knowledge and political education that would enable workers to become more fully conscious of their greater power within society. The ultimate goal was participatory management over the running of the state enterprises.

The other major task of the ATC was to encourage and assist in the creation of cooperatives. During this period two main types of cooperatives were created. The first, production coops (CAS) were composed of small farmers — those comprising 42% of all farms, but holding only 2.2% of cultivable land — willing to pool their land and work with others. This form of organization had been successfully encouraged in FSLN liberated zones prior to the end of the war, but because these coops represented the



most advanced levels of social relations, they were slow in taking root. Only 24 true coops of this type existed after the first three years of the revolution. To further encourage their growth, idle state and private lands were rented to peasant producers under the condition that they work together at basic food production. As a result, by June 1980, 1,327 production and collective work groups had been formed on state and private lands.



Far more popular were the Credit and Service Coops (CCS); 1,200 of this type were registered in the first year alone. CCS's allowed for the individual to work the land separately, while joining with others in the purchase of inputs and the collective marketing of outputs.

Of major importance is the variety in cooperative organizational forms. Coop arrangements are largely dependent upon what works best at the local level and as such, represents a flexible and decentralized approach. The classification of a coop as CAS or CCS serves merely to provide a broad definition.

As a result of its activities, membership in the ATC surpassed 59,000 by November of 1979 and continued to grow to 120,000 by June 1980. The ATC was assisted in its organizational work by government policy that provided favorable investment terms to cooperative arrangements. Increasingly however, the ATC was attempting to represent a heterogeneous population, sometimes members faced widely differing and even contradictory interests. An improved understanding of these differences and even the creation of a separate organization to better represent peasant producers, the UNAG. This institutionalized a shift away from earlier assumptions that the rural population would be organized as workers to recognizing the peasants as producers.

As successful as the ATC and the government's Agrarian Reforms Institute were in encouraging cooperative development, their financial consolidation proved to be particularly problematic. Technical assistance was limited (averaging about one technician per thousand clients), credit arrived late or was used for purposes other than

production, and transportation and storage difficulties resulted in marketing losses. The percent of repaid debt fell from 58.7% in 1979 to 33.6% in 1980. Production levels were disappointing and cooperative membership fell off by almost 30% during this time as well. The program of "spilling the credit on the countryside" was a misplaced tactic employed by the state apparatus that according to its own priorities required state attention be focused on the consolidation of the state farm sector. The failure of this program also represented the lack of knowledge, training and experience on the part of policymakers concerned with agrarian development. Clearly, the lack of trained personnel is one of the greatest obstacles facing the entire country today.

### THE 1981 FRAMEWORK

In July of 1981 a new Agrarian Reform Law was passed. The new law marked the beginning of the second period of the agrarian transformation and represented a shift in emphasis away from the state sector to focus more on the concerns of peasants as producers of basic food production.

The law guaranteed the right of private ownership of land, irregardless of size, on the condition that the land be used productively. In addition, all pre-capitalist forms of production that were to be eliminated. The Agrarian Reform Law served clear notice regarding the continued decapitalizations occurring in the agrarian sector. Those unwilling to act in a socially responsive manner would lose their lands.

Prior to the Agrarian Reform Law, government figures for 1980 estimate large capitalist land ownership at 62.9% of the total amount of land under production. Yet, the new law estimates that this sector will own only 35% by the end of the land redistribution period. This decrease provides unequivocal evidence of the degree of decapitalizations that have occurred or ones that the government estimates will occur.



The question remains why has the private sector chosen to withhold new investment and opted for decapitalizing despite the guarantees by the state protecting their right to exist and providing policies allowing them to receive advantageous financial arrangements. (An example of the latter is the favorable exchange rate given to large cotton



producers of 15 to 1 when the official rate is 10 to 1.) Statistics indicate that under Somoza 80% of investment came from the private sector, but by 1981, only 10% came from this area. During this same period US\$500 million illegally left the country, in addition to US\$800 million taken out in the last two years of the civil war.

There are several reasons explaining the lack of private investment. In the first case, despite the following governmental incentives — adequate credit levels below the rate of inflation and an agreed upon guaranteed price for agricultural exports, calculated to ensure a profit even if international commodity prices fall below this level — profits are essentially regulated. If commodity prices rise above the guaranteed level, then the government taxes this boon progressively. Gone are the days of exorbitantly high profits. Profit levels are also affected by governmental policies that enforce the minimum wage, better working conditions, lower land rents and increased taxes, particularly on the rich.

A second reason for reduced private investment is that the concerns of these investors no longer *control* state policy, they represent only input into it. Because of this new relationship, the private sector has been given what they would consider to be the unsatisfactory option of continuing production at smaller profit ratios, at the risk of losing everything. By-and-large, this sector has responded by maintaining the minimum productivity levels necessary to retain their properties. This factor compounds the burden placed on the demand for state resources and is becoming particularly problematic as levels of key export crops fail to recover (cotton) aggravating current account deficits.

Other major aspects of the Agrarian Reform Law sought to satisfy peasant demands for permanent access to the land and to stimulate the drive for self-sufficiency in basic food output. Despite the demand for land, the INRA moved cautiously, allocating in the first year only 40% of the land eligible for distribution. This slower pace reflected the desire to avoid earlier mistakes and placed greater emphasis on the successful consolidation of redistributed lands. New credit policies coincided with this approach as well. The financing of basic grain production fell 44% in 1981, representing a more accurate assessment of the repayment capabilities of borrowers. As a result, in 1981, 73% of that year's debt was repaid.

The cautious pace of land redistribution also reflected the continuing debate over the best forms of property allocation. In the end, the UNAG's proposal that individuals be allowed to choose the form of property organization they desire, appears to avoid the errors of forced collectivizations made in other Third World countries. However, as early statistics indicate, in the early period of this second phase, the government clearly favored land grants to those willing to engage in some form of cooperative arrangement. According to the October 1982 cooperative census, of the land redistribution by the Agrarian Reform 68% had gone to CAS's, 22% to individuals/families in CCS's and other forms of organization received 10%.

As stated earlier, self-sufficiency in basic grain production was the other major aspect of the new law. Under the new PAN (Programa Alimentario Nacional), the state raised

the guaranteed prices paid to small farmers, traditionally the suppliers of basic foods (except rice). The price of beans was increased by 50% and as a result, bean production doubled in 1981. That same year corn prices were increased only 25%, on par with inflation, and consequently its production did not increase substantially. Thus, better financing arrangements appear to have had a positive effect on output and have proven to be considerably cheaper than buying imported grains. However, total basic food subsidizations, a cornerstone of government policy adopted to ensure the proper nutritional needs of all Nicaraguans, amounted to 10% of the national budget in 1983. This is a significant figure for a country facing both large external debt repayments beginning in 1985 and the escalating costs of national self defense. The ability to maintain historically low consumer prices for these essentials may become compromised as these tensions develop.

Paradoxically, the escalating war with the "contras" has required that the government improve its self-defense capabilities and as a result has had the effect of greatly speeding up the land distributions. While in the first 18 months of the Agrarian Reform saw only 91,555 hectares distributed to some 6,500 beneficiaries, the last year (1983) has witnessed the distribution of 338,193 hectares to 22,072 people. The increase to individual owners not associated with the cooperative has jumped as well.

The speed with which land distribution has taken place has the potential to create further difficulties, however. With roughly 750 agrarian technicians throughout the country, demand for their services will continue to outstrip supply. This fact will compromise the vital need to increase the productivity levels on currently producing plots. Additionally, the large transfer of properties may also affect the ability of the seasonal wage labor force to perform their necessary function at harvest time.

In the final analysis, Nicaraguan agricultural development has taken great strides in overcoming its dependency relationship. The 1982 index of agricultural output indicates that production of basic foods has surpassed base year, 1977, levels. This occurred despite ruinous floods that caused an estimated US\$350 million in damage to the nation's infrastructure and washed away at least 20,000 acres of newly planted crops. Nicaragua is clearly approaching food self-sufficiency, breaking the strangling cycle of importing expensive grains. Export production has also recovered, with the exception of cotton production which is still substantially below base year levels. In addition, Nicaragua has achieved substantial market diversification for its exports, ironically because the US has pursued a policy of discouraging Nicaraguan imports.

The country has embarked on a policy of developing their internal market. One foreign loan from Czechoslovakia for example, will aid in the development of coarse thread, allowing the country to complete the cotton/textile production cycle mentioned earlier. This development will also allow Nicaragua to begin to export finished products and earn greater revenues as a result.

The increase in popular power has undoubtedly been one of the major achievements of the Sandinista government. Particularly impressive has been the organization of at least 20% of the agrarian EAP into cooperatives, 80% of those in CCS's. From



neighborhood committees, to a unionized workforce of roughly 80% in more than 650 unions, popular participation remains at the heart and soul of the revolution. It is in this sense of will among the people that will be further tested if the legacy of dependency is to be overcome. With fighting raging on two fronts, a debt now approaching US\$350 billion, and the increasingly belligerent tone of the United States, the outcome remains highly uncertain.

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—P. Brown  
April, 1984

Note: This article was abridged and edited for publication here, and footnotes were omitted.

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# Indian National Rights in Nicaragua

Dear folks at FM.

I've been especially disturbed by a couple of articles I read in back issues (from last year) of *Akwesasne Notes*, the newspaper of the Mohawk Nation and probably the largest, most prestigious Indian newspaper in the United States. In these articles testimony was brought forward by Dr. Bernard Nietschmann, Professor of Geography at Berkeley, that there were many human rights violations perpetrated by the Sandinista government against the Miskito, Sumo and Rama Nations in eastern Nicaragua.

The article said that numerous violations had occurred including the killing of livestock, the destruction of crops and homes, the confiscation of valuables (radios, watches, etc.), forcible relocation of the indigenous inhabitants, rape, torture and killing of these inhabitants on the pretext that they were "contras" when the Indians refused to leave their homeland.

Using as sources the Nicaraguan government's published information on the subject, the International League for Human Rights in September, 1983 made a report which stated, among other things:

- In 1981, the entire Indian leadership was arbitrarily arrested, imprisoned and interrogated.
- The Indians' organization (Misurasata) was disbanded by the government.
- Up to 14,500 Indians were forcibly relocated to camps where they have been detained or where freedom of movement is questionable.
- Some 13,000 Indians fled to refugee camps in Honduras to avoid relocation to the camps in Nicaragua.
- 39 Indian villages, including livestock, personal effects, crops, fruit trees, and so forth, were completely destroyed by Nicaraguan government forces in January and February, 1982. To date, there has been no compensation.
- The entire Indian region has been under strict military rule, even at the village level.
- Many hundreds of Indians have been injured, arrested, and imprisoned in an escalating pattern of confrontation. There are credible allegations of numerous killings and, in any case, the government has not made an accounting.

The Nietschmann testimony goes on to say that he talked to many Indians who had been tortured and who had seen tribal members killed.

There was also testimony from Miskitos that there had been numerous instances of rape of Miskito women by Sandinista soldiers. In a follow-up article in the Winter, 1983 issue of "*Notes*", some of the Sandinista leaders were quoted as saying the Nicaraguan



government's Amnesty Declaration of December 1, 1983, concerning the relocation of the villages was an error (Commandante Ortega) and Commandante Thomas Borge has described the conflicts in the Atlantic coast as the result of "stupid policies on our part." In the same article there was a quote from Armstrong Wiggins, a Miskito Indian working on International Indigenous Human Rights in Washington, D.C. — "Our villages have already been devastated, our people scattered throughout Central America, hundreds dead. But, the amnesty is a welcome step in limiting hostilities."

It is certainly true that Reagan has been using the difficulties in Eastern Nicaragua as propaganda to erode support for the Sandinistas and to discredit the Revolution prior to invasion in this country. But *Akwesasne Notes* is devoted to the rights and sovereignty of indigenous peoples throughout this hemisphere, indeed — throughout the world. They support the struggle of Indian people in El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, Canada and the United States against the racist, repressive regimes Indian people live under. They are only interested in supporting Indian survival and denouncing any government which abuses the human rights and treaty rights of Indian peoples. I don't think their credentials can be seriously questioned. These articles are found in *Akwesasne Notes*, Fall and Winter, 1983.



I have been told by someone doing Nicaragua support work that, yes, there have been killings, relocations, and the destruction of villages, but they had been greatly exaggerated by the enemies of the Revolution; the Sandinista government had made some mistakes but they were made out of the inevitable confusion of a war setting. He said that the contras had turned the Indians against the Sandinistas by telling them that the Communists would give them pills to make them sterile, so when the Army came, they were frightened and ambushed the Sandinistas, the Sandinistas fought back and Indians were, regrettably, killed.

Then, their villages, crops, and livestock were destroyed so that the food wouldn't fall into contra hands and so the people would leave, because, as he said, they wouldn't leave willingly. He stressed that the Government had to move the Indians out of the region so that they could be educated about what the Revolution was so the contras wouldn't use them to fight the Sandinistas. He also said that now the Miskitos are making great progress in their new homes and have been given land to farm on new locations. He didn't know when or if the Government plans to allow them to return to their ancestral lands.

I plan to talk to other people about the Indian Situation in Nicaragua, but I am really saddened and outraged by these reports. Indian people in this country are looking very closely at how Indian rights are treated by any socialist government. I frankly don't think that I, or any other Indian person, will feel inclined to support any Revolution or government which denies Indian sovereignty and seeks to relocate and assimilate Indian Nations. Working class power is and should be only one-half of the socialist equation, the other half being equally important — the rights of nations to self-determination. Self-determination as a People, as a Nation with sovereign rights which cannot be summarily cast aside for whatever "good," and "well-meaning" reason.

I'm writing to you because I hope you will understand and appreciate my concern about this compromise of socialists principles. I believe that the Nicaraguans must be questioned about these hegemonous acts against indigenous peoples and they must be held accountable and criticized in a spirit of socialist criticism.

I intend to continue to try to find the truth about what's happening to the Miskito, Sumo and Rama peoples, I feel that if the Sandinistas don't make restitution and a full accounting to the Indian peoples who live within their borders, then I, as an Indian person cannot support their Revolution. None of us should be asked or expected to ignore our struggles for freedom and justice for the convenience of any Revolution.

—E. Hall



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# New Work, Old Debates

## Some Thoughts About Organizing Around Central America and the Caribbean

Old debates re-emerge in new forms — this was what I was thinking when I left a local meeting of activists who had gathered together because of their common desire to do something about U.S. military aggression in Central America and the Caribbean.

People with a lot of different politics were there, although everyone would probably consider themselves on the left. Almost everyone was white, and most weren't working class. But still there *was* variety — some people would call themselves social democrats, some were probably close to the Communist Party, a few were, of the ecumenical movement, others had followed a course of anti-war activities since the Vietnam war of the sixties. One thing was interesting — this group was overwhelmingly women, something I've heard about other such groups organizing around Central America as well. I felt a certain respect for these people hanging in there, despite the conservative climate, despite for many of them pretty heavy home and work responsibilities, trying to find a way to counter U.S. military intervention in Central America.

Still, there were, unavoidably, these differences...

Talking with a friend of mine later, I learned that she has been very aware of a division I had hardly noticed. For her, there was a real difference emerging between those newly involved with electoral politics and eager to try out their electoral wings on an issue like Central America (referenda, voter registration — these were the priorities for such people) and those like herself for whom the priority was education. What she was interested in was the slower-paced process of bringing political issues home to people through articles in the local community newspaper, slide shows, presentations in the churches. What she wanted to do in this group was figure out how best to do this, what approach to use that would really bring the issue alive in a predominantly working class community like the one where we all lived, and bring some new, "non-lefty" people into the core. Of course, I'm sure she would agree, the two things — activism and education — can't altogether be separated. Education without a practical goal eventually loses momentum; a practical effort in electoral politics is often a very useful vehicle for education. But what she was worried about was that the education was getting short shrift because of a precipitous plunge into activism. She was feeling like the practical demands of the current project (in this case, a referendum against budget allocations for military intervention in Central America) was pushing to the sidelines the priorities she has most in mind. Everybody was getting strained and drained by the urgencies of the campaign — collecting signatures, organizing volunteers, juggling deadlines, mapping wards and precincts. Once again people were

forced to stretch themselves so thin that there was no energy left over to think about involving non-leftists, to really concentrate on how best to present the issues in a popular way.

She gave me an example. "We had to put out a leaflet," she said, "to get people to support the referendum. What do you think the headline said? US MILITARY ATTACKS REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT OF NICARAGUA!"

"Well," she went on, "most people will look at that and think: 'Sure, and why not.' The point is that people just don't automatically equate 'revolutionary' with 'good.' Now someone I really respect wrote that leaflet. The problem isn't the person; it's that we're not really *thinking* about what we're saying. We're in such a rush that we fall back into rhetoric which, of course, turns people off."

All this sounded very familiar. This tension between giving in to the immediate demands of the campaign and doing more consistent political educational work was the old "mass organizing" vs. "agitation and propaganda" discussion in a new context. I'd definitely been through it before.

In my own case, what I was most aware of right away was a different old conflict emerging — this one around which kind of approach we should take to the political situation itself, what we should stress as the main issue in our work, in short, what our "political line" should be.

This came out in a beginning way when we reviewed some of the current organizing being done, particularly through the churches, to protect political refugees denied refugee status in this country: the fight for extension of refugee status, the setting up of underground railroad networks and sanctuaries.

One person said they thought this work was some of the most militant and strongest work around, that it was no coincidence that it had some of the broadest appeal among a broader-than-left constituency. This person said these issues brought out a lot of the right questions: Why aren't Central American people safe in their own countries? Why is our government so ruthless with them? It was a dramatic mobilizing activity with an immediate human focus and a graphic challenge to the government.

Another person disagreed. The work was alright for the suburbs but wouldn't have the right impact in a working class community. Here it shouldn't be a priority. He described what he thought would be a typical working class response when the plight of Central Americans and Caribbeans got raised. Working class people would retort, "Why are you people always worrying about someone else all the time? What about your own people? We've got enough problems of our own right here."

For him, the best way to reach working class people was to start with those issues that are most immediate to their own lives — the issue of military expenditures. For him, the most effective approach was to point out how all the money being spent on military hardware to be used in Central American can be better spent on human services back here. And a second issue was the threat to American youth, the threat of another Vietnam. To him, the Vietnam parallel was crucial. Involving Vietnam vets in the anti-war movement of today was a great way to bring home to people the threat



to their own communities, the threat of working class youth being sent to fight another war that made no sense and couldn't be won.



**Dan Wasserman**

Well, as I thought about what he said, I definitely could agree that involving Vietnam vets was a good idea. Although not all vets have learned the same anti-Imperialist lesson (some wish only they'd been "allowed to win" by unleashing even more of the U.S. military machine) most have learned a healthy distrust of the military, and a large number have learned the hard way — and so more deeply than most of us — what Imperialist wars are all about. These last are men and women whose credibility for any anti-war activity is an invaluable asset, especially in working class communities.

No, the problems I had with this person's arguments were not his interest in involving Vietnam Vets. My problem was with the idea that we can best appeal to working class people by focussing on their personal self-interest (more money for us) and on the threat to the lives of their own sons.

First of all, while I've certainly heard the reaction he was talking about — "Why do you do-gooders always worry about *them*; what about *us*?" — I don't think it's entirely representative of the working class in general. For one thing, it's not the reaction of a large and growing segment of the working class today — people from the Caribbean,

from Indochina, Central America, and Poland, to name a few, people who themselves are fleeing political repression and terror. To say the "why them" argument is typical working class is to draw a fairly narrow, and disproportionately white, picture of who the working class actually is. (When the response "what about us?" comes from minorities, particularly Afro-Americans, it usually has a different twist. Then, often, it seems based on a suspicion that white people are blind to national oppression and political repression when it exists in their own backyard.)

Second of all, even when people *do* respond this way, I don't think it makes a whole lot of sense just to go along with it. Often it comes from a kind of backward, chauvinist place. People have to be won over to seeing that what happens to people of different nationalities is important and that especially where our government is responsible for maintaining a reign of terror in other countries, it definitely is our concern. The argument that getting out of El Salvador, or Nicaragua, or Guatemala, or Grenada...will potentially put more meat and potatoes on the average U.S. citizen's table doesn't help bring this point home. It doesn't *move* people towards a progressive, more internationalist outlook. It doesn't really give us the opportunity we need to deal with the issue of Imperialism.

And even on a practical level, it doesn't hold up very well. For example, what about war reparations for Vietnam? Most of us probably think that would have been just. What about less exploitative North-South trade relations? We'd probably think that was important too. Aid to South African freedom fighters? We'd probably not oppose it. But using the "more left for us" argument won't work here. None of these directly translate into economic surplus for U.S. coffers and trickle down for the people. In fact the opposite is true. All of these measures would be a drain off money to the third world. So while in the particular situation of military expenditures in Imperialist wars the argument "more money for working class communities" is a reasonable point to make; it can't be the central point we rest our foreign policy case on.

And what about the issue of US boys dying abroad? Again, a point definitely worth making. Beirut. Grenada. These were tragic situations for US soldiers to die in. But they were a tragedy not simply because they were *US* soldiers, but because they were lost propping up a reactionary regime, invading a sovereign nation, they were lost fighting for the *wrong* side. These deaths were also sorrowfully symptomatic of an unjust society in which overwhelmingly working class (and minority working class in particular) sons are the ones who die. But, *still*, this argument about US lives has its limitations. It was not an outrage for US soldiers to lose their lives in World War II, nor for the volunteers of the Lincoln Brigade to lose their lives in the Spanish Civil War. Some causes are worth the loss of life, even US lives, even on foreign soil. Granted a scenario where the US would be sending its men (and women) off to fight a just war seems pretty remote. But it could happen sometime. I just wouldn't want to reinforce too strongly a complete isolationist, as opposed to internationalist, view of what an ideal foreign policy would look like.

Finally, focussing too much on the threat of US soldiers being killed in Central



America may turn out to be crying "wolf." We have to consider there might not be a wholesale invasion of US troops. Reagan and the ruling class in general were probably smart enough to learn their own lessons from Vietnam — that it might be better to fight wars by proxy and by saturating third world nations with US military hardware while leaving US soldiers at home except for a few little forays (like in Grenada) for heroics' sake. Perhaps they too have learned that the US public is, on the whole, remarkably tolerant of military intervention in the third world as long as it doesn't come down to the draft here at home. And so, perhaps, we should be making it clear that *the war has already begun*, that it isn't a question of mobilizing to circumvent some future massive intervention.

The old arguments haven't gone away, I came away thinking. They haven't become entirely clear yet, but they're definitely there. It wouldn't help to pretend any different. My hope, though, was that this time around we could be a little more tolerant, be able to learn something from each other's point of view, keep talking about it, but keep working. My hope was that the old differences wouldn't immediately lead to new splits, that we could all keep in perspective that in some very basic ways we were on the same side — we had a common goal of opposing US military intervention, US meddling in Central America, in the Caribbean and for that matter, in the world.

—Nadine Myers  
June, 1984

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# Labor Solidarity With Central America

Support among trade unionists for the struggle in Central America has been building in Washington, D.C. for several years. Two years ago the D.C. Central Labor Council endorsed the March 27th, 1982 rally for 50,000 that was held in Malcolm X Park in Washington. Last year, the Central Labor Council voted to sponsor the tour of a Salvadoran trade unionist who was disavowed by the AFL-CIO. When a couple of trade unionists met last September at a CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) meeting organizing for the November 12, 1983 mobilization, we were not starting from scratch.

## GETTING STARTED

Our interest was in organizing trade union support for our Central American sisters and brothers. Several early decisions were critical in placing our efforts on a secure footing. First, we organized autonomously, rather than as committee of CISPES. Second, instead of making an open call to get something started, we sought out a dozen trade unionists that we trusted and respected. These were people rooted in their workplaces who had the respect of their fellow workers; most of them also held union office (local president, executive officer or chief shop steward, etc.); most were affiliated with left organizations. After half a dozen meetings of this 'organizing committee,' we put out a public call to form an organization: the Washington Area Labor Committee on Central America. The call was signed by 17 local union presidents. It was received well; the initial meeting drew over 75 trade unionists. We were off to a flying start.

Our first meeting featured Fred DeMars and Sam Pizzagatti from the national staff of the NEA, who had been on the national labor tour to Central America in July. (Only the NEA members went to Nicaragua.) This turned out to be a superb choice and an excellent future connection. NEA affiliates, along with AFGE and AFSCME, are the most represented in our city-wide committee.

There were two debates at the business half of the meeting following DeMars' and Pizzagatti's presentation. The first centered around whether to expand the Washington Area Labor Committee on Central America to include "and the Caribbean." Earlier our 'organizing committee' had voted against including all of Latin America in our focus, and the national committee was only organized around El Salvador. But the inclusion passed with only token opposition; the U.S. invasion of Grenada had taken place



three weeks earlier. The other disagreement had occurred over a proposal by a more moderate member of the audience to criticize both superpowers for their interference in the region. This motion received little or no support; most of us felt that this even-handed resolution would muddy the question of who the major obstacle was to peace and justice in the region.

The Washington Area Labor Committee on Central America and the Caribbean has now held five of these monthly programs, followed by the 'take care of business' side of the meeting. We generally draw 75 to over 100 for the presentation and about half stay for the entire meeting. The other programs we have done include a presentation by three of our members who participated in a recent trade union visit to Nicaragua, a program on Grenada, a presentation with Marta Alicia Rivera from the teachers' union in El Salvador, with our most recent program reviewing the work inside our locals. Our June program will present two leading members of FETSALUD, the Nicaraguan health workers' federation, who are on a U.S. tour.

At this stage in the game, the Labor Committee is on solid footing. The interim steering committee has given way to an elected executive and steering committee which meets once or twice between monthly programs. We have a good working relationship internally and a sound financial base (made up largely of \$5/yr. individual dues and affiliation dues from union locals). We have been able to maintain our trade union character in the meetings. Washington, D.C. has a healthy preponderance of left organizations and we didn't want them hawking their papers, or any other kind of antics that would mar our 'coming out' programs. This has been an ongoing struggle and we have been able to make it clear that no group would be allowed to pit their special needs against the overall interests of the work. We have accomplished the task of setting up a center of activity for trade unionists who want to do support work in the labor arena for Central America.

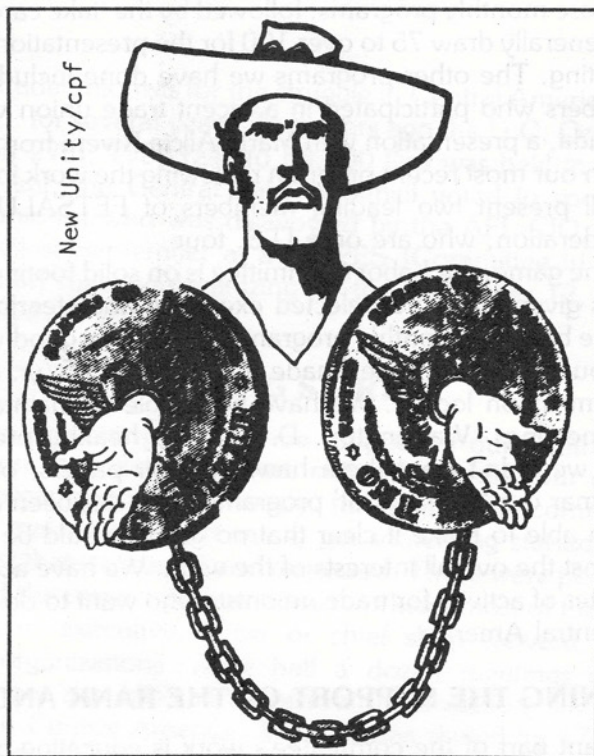
## **WINNING THE SUPPORT OF THE RANK AND FILE**

Another important part of the committee's work is educating and involving fellow rank-and-file workers. This is a long-term goal we absolutely have to accomplish. Much of the responsibility for this kind of work depends on the individual trade unionist who must fight to see this issue through his or her local. If you as an individual are not won over to the importance of doing this, then the issue obviously stops there. However, the Labor Committee has certainly facilitated this work.

My own workplace is a perfect example. Up until six months ago I felt this issue was not going to 'spin' in my plant. As a result of doing some Central American solidarity work on labor and community fronts, I increasingly became aware of the necessity of *perseverance*. The roadblock in my own head was the obstacle to overcome.

Certainly the situation is different in all our locals. The only previous discussion about El Salvador in my local's meetings came at the times of the March 27, 1982 rally in Malcolm X park and the Molina Lara tour. There was a big struggle over whether to endorse the March 27th demonstration — a surprise motion brought up by a member

of the SWP. The local was in the middle of mobilizing the membership for Solidarity Day at this meeting. Supporters of the demonstration quoted the Catholic Church on El Salvador, eventually winning the vote by almost 2 to 1. The Black workers, while not taking up the issue as their own, were solidly behind us in the vote. Afterwards, some of us went over to the bar to talk with some of the white workers who opposed us vocally at the debate.



During the Molina Lara tour, our local membership voted \$25 to FENASTRAS, a left-wing labor federation in El Salvador. Again the vote took the form of three or four leftists arguing forcefully for their position, this time with only token opposition, but with no apparent interest on the part of the other rank and file members. (Soon after this we received a letter from the AFL-CIO, mailed out to all its affiliates, telling us not to support any trade union organizations or trade unionists from Central America that were not officially sanctioned by the AFL-CIO.)

Little more than this went on in my local prior to my decision to campaign around this issue, and try to get other workers to see it as important. First, with support provided by the Labor Committee, I wrote an article for the newsletter about the rounding up of 65 trade unionists by the Salvadoran government. Increasingly, I began to talk up the issue, sometimes wearing a button on the shop floor, and bringing in literature for



those who would read it. I began to talk to people about the Phelps Dodge strike in Arizona, where three unions have been on strike for almost a year battling the company's attempt to bust them. In their pamphlet *El Salvador: Labor, Terror and Peace*, the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador reports that Phelps Dodge, Kimberly-Clark and Texas Instruments pay no taxes for products manufactured in, or exported out of, the country. This is clearly an issue I could talk to my fellow IAM members about. It shows the connection between our interests, the interests of all IAM members in the Southwest and our brothers and sisters in El Salvador.

Meanwhile, the Labor Committee on Central America began a campaign among the locals affiliated with the group. For a minimum contribution of \$25, any local could select a voting member to the executive committee of the Washington Area Labor Committee. This became a source of income for the committee and a chance to take the work into our locals and fight for the issue as a trade-union issue. Affiliation motions have passed in about ten locals, with more to come. We also initiated some outreach work to the locals, organizing slide shows, movies or speakers for local union meetings. This has happened in a few places.

At the May meeting of my local, I proposed that we affiliate with the D.C. Labor Committee on Central America. Acquiescence was the main response. Opposition was inaudible. But the most significant response of the membership was expressed by a Black worker from the shop committee. He said, "We don't want to affiliate with any cause or group that we're not going to hear about again." This sentiment was two-sided: people didn't want any motions pushed down their throats; but here was an invitation — really a challenge — to continue educational work on Central America. Naturally, I got into the issue right there: but I also realized I now had the responsibility to keep up the work. The membership (40 members present of 275) voted \$50 to the Labor Committee and endorsed the resolution calling out Reagan for his war-mongering. The wording of the resolution was bold more than it was well-phrased; it focused on our tax dollars spent, the nine Americans already killed in El Salvador, and the fact that our members and families would end up doing the fighting and dying for "a cause we know nothing about" in Central America.

## SOME LESSONS

In conclusion, I would like to underline the main lessons of my work. My main point is to persevere in making the struggle a popular issue, attempting to draw connections whenever possible. If no one else cops to the issue right way, that doesn't absolve us of our obligation. It is our members, our families and our class who will bear the brunt of the future fighting.

When setting up the labor committee, take care to select a good 'organizing committee.' This was crucial to the stable start in forming the group. The presence of sectarian infighting in some cities has hindered or downright crushed attempts at setting up

similar organization. Once this network was firmly established, it was important to emphasize going back into our locals and sinking deep roots around the issue.

Minority nationality participation in our Labor Committee has been present but minimal. Our initial attempt to bring in Black and Latin trade unionists for our first program met with some success, but we need to be more consistent and take up this question in its own right. In my local the Black workers are the backbone of successfully passing motions in support of the struggle there. Latins are new to our local, neither attending monthly meetings or voicing strong feelings on the issue.

Finally, national organization does exist on the issue. There is a full time staffer operating on grant money out of the ACTWU office in New York. To get in touch, write to National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador, c/o Dan Kantor, 15 Union Square, New York, New York 10003 (212) 242-0700. Response to this article can be directed to Pat McCann, 805 Brice Road, Rockville, MD 20852 (301) 762-4832.

—Pat McCann



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# 1984 SEIU INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION RESOLUTION FIGHT ON CENTRAL AMERICA

International conventions of SEIU are held once every four years. Between conventions, there is little (if any) contact between various locals or activists outside their immediate area. This year's convention was held in Dearborn, Michigan.

SEIU is presently one of the few AFL-CIO unions that is growing. We are now the fourth largest International in the AFL-CIO, with a membership of over 850,000. In the last 4 years, close to 250,000 new members have joined SEIU, primarily through mergers with independent associations. While these mergers have accounted for the quick growth of SEIU, it has not brought in many with a strong trade union history. The mergers have mostly been in the public sector, bringing a number of public sector members up to 53% of the total. In short, there has been a dramatic change that came about without much struggle or organizing. Many of the people at this convention were attending for the first time; over 30% of them were relatively new members.

SEIU has never encouraged floor fights or contested elections. Resolutions are never circulated before the convention, though locals are encouraged to submit resolutions. Resolutions are circulated at the start of the convention, and 1984 was no exception. No delegation had seen any of the proposed resolutions before the first night.

Five resolutions on Central America were submitted: one by the International Executive Board, and four others by locals 220, 535, 585, and 715. The most significant differences between the Executive Board's resolutions, and the other four, was in the attitude towards the present government of Nicaragua, as well as the lack of any concrete proposals for action by the International.

When it became clear that disorganization would mean the passage of the Executive Board's resolution, various progressive delegates met together to discuss whether there was any other alternative. All resolutions were to be heard (and recommended) by a committee. A number of progressives were on the committee that was to hear all resolutions dealing with issues of defense. The group's first approach was to see what type of amendments could be made through the committee. We decided to go onto the floor and scout out other sympathetic folks in case we needed another meeting. We were preparing for a floor fight.

After the committee meeting, we met again. All issues of defense and foreign policy

were put off for a day as the representatives of the Executive Board asked us to negotiate a compromise. It appeared that they weren't willing to move much, but that they wanted to avoid a floor fight at all costs. The caucus pulled everyone together, and came to several decisions. We decided that we wanted to negotiate, but would have to stick to our bottom line. We would prepare for a floor fight as if it were unavoidable. And we would get anyone we knew with influence to lobby the Executive Board and President Sweeney.

Our bottom line revolved around four points: 1) That all aid be cut off to the government of El Salvador, 2) that all aid be cut off to the 'contras' attacking Nicaragua, 3) that SEIU break with the Kissinger report and criticize it, and 4) that the SEIU rejoin the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador.

We thought that all of our points were achievable, except for the joining of the National Committee. President Sweeney had initially joined the committee, but dropped off under pressure from Tom Donahue of the AFL-CIO. Going back to negotiate, we thought we would be forced to a floor fight over rejoining the National Committee.

But we weren't forced to a floor fight. We won on each point, as well as some changes in resolutions on the defense budget (calling for the removal of Pershing and Cruise missiles)! When the resolution finally hit the floor, close to 400 of the 1000 in attendance were wearing buttons condemning U.S. involvement in Central America. Four delegates (from the East, West and Canada) spoke in favor of the resolution. And with a lot of enthusiasm from the floor, it passed unanimously!

The final resolves read:

"That the SEIU calls for an immediate end of all U.S. aid to the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador;

"That the SEIU opposes all direct or indirect U.S. military intervention in Central America, including aid to Nicaragua counterrevolutionaries and the C.I.A. campaign of economic destabilization against Nicaragua;

"That the SEIU support all efforts to produce a genuine negotiated settlement for peace in Central America, including the removal of all foreign troops and bases;

"That the SEIU rejects the conclusions and recommendations of the Kissinger Commission that are in conflict with the positions taken by the AFL-CIO;

"That the SEIU will implement this position on Central America by actively participating in the National Labor Committee in Support of Democracy and Human Rights in El Salvador;

"That this position be communicated to the AFL-CIO and be the basis for our active involvement in improving AFL-CIO policy in Central America."

This was clearly an improved resolution, and one which our International can be proud of. It is significant because it now means one of the largest unions in the AFL-CIO has moved to the left on the issue of Central America. It means that SEIU activists



can now join local chapters of the National Labor Committee in the name of SEIU. It shows that Kirkland does not and will not have the last say on labor's stand in Central America.

On a smaller scale, it was uplifting to see the impact this fight had on the whole convention. Next to SEIU pins, El Salvador buttons were the most popular. Until the speeches on the Central America resolution there had not been any speakers (for or against) any resolutions! As a result of our speeches, it was as if a floodgate were opened. Every resolution had two, three or more speakers, and the convention was charged with an atmosphere of debate. That's not to say there was any real chance of motions being changed once they hit the floor; but at least delegates began to feel they could speak to the resolutions without taking their lives in their hands.

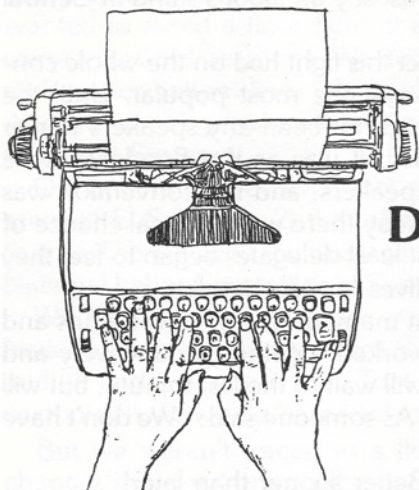
A resolution is a resolution is a piece of paper. But many of us met new friends and contacts from around the U.S. and Canada. We worked together productively and won what we wanted. Next convention none of us will wait to the last minute, but will share information and be prepared before we arrive. As someone said: "We don't have power yet, but they felt our influence."

Sooner or later, even Lane Kirkland will feel it. Better sooner than later!

Celia Weislo

May 1984





## Dear Ralph and Alice

Dear Ralph and Alice:

I am on the negotiating committee of a union which represents employees at a large municipal hospital. Our contract negotiations will be starting soon as our current contract expires on June 30. We expect there may be lay-offs in the next year. Do you have any concrete suggestions regarding how we can get the membership and negotiating committee behind contract language which will assure that our large and relatively recently hired minority workers will not be the first workers to be laid off?

Concerned

Dear Concerned:

We all know too well that most city unions have a bad record in hiring minorities. A great percentage of the new hires go into jobs at low wages like a lot of those in the hospitals.

Your members should be reminded that the unions promoted and won struggles involving such issues as equal pay for equal work, promotional opportunities, affirmative action, etc. to gain some measure of equality in the workplace for all of us. You don't want to make concessions now and lose those hard won improvements. If the employer is able to take advantage of any one segment of the work force he is able to take advantage of everyone.

Demonstrate the similarity between the treatment of women and minorities in the workplace. Show members how constructive seniority is a way of rectifying the effects of poor hiring practices.

You could also consider putting responsibility on the employer for training employees who are to be laid off and offering voluntary lay-offs for those close to



retirement with provisions for getting X number of years toward retirement if they agreed to retire during lay-offs. These kinds of things have been negotiated in other unions' contracts. Creativity is the key here.

Strict seniority is not the sacred cow that some unions pretend. Point out that super seniority has been used by unions to give veterans preference and to protect elected officers during lay-offs.

Protection of provisional workers should be key to the affirmative action issue. Contract language insuring that the employer cannot fail to renew for disciplinary reasons, if a provisional is let go the position cannot be refilled for a year make it difficult for the employer to let people go at whim.

Don't isolate the affirmative action issue when meeting over negotiations. Many other issues are at stake and you need to involve as many members as possible.

Good luck,  
Ralph and Alice

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## Party Up, Part II: The Fundamental Things Apply

The most common question about the party raised today by activists once in or close to revolutionary left groups probably is: "what is the relevance of revolutionary organization or a revolutionary party to my work?" While understandable, this puts the problem of the party backwards.

The main question has to be: is a party necessary to help the people prepare themselves for the struggle for socialism? The question of the party has to be grasped in principle; it cannot be understood only in an empirical way, such as, what does talk about a party mean to this Sunday's employee picnic? It does no good to object that we can't "start from concepts," that we should instead start from "real life" or the "real world." The world is real alright, but what its reality is understood to consist in always depends on political and ideological struggles. That is also true about the need for and nature of a revolutionary party. The party has to be understood in theory before it can be felt in practice.

Theory reflects history, though not in any simple way. When we look at history, we are struck by a number of facts about socialism: that no people has ever started to construct socialism without first having a revolution; that no people has had a revolution that was not led by one or more revolutionary parties or by unified military-political commands (Cuba, Nicaragua, Mozambique); that these parties or unified military-political commands have taken Marxism as their guiding ideology. Therefore, the question is not the relevance of the party to my work, but the relevance of Marxism to the party, the relevance of the party to the revolution and the relevance of revolution to socialism. If these three issues are connected, then people who are asking what is the relevance of the party to my work are really asking what is the relevance of Marxism and of socialism to my work. The answer must come back: Marxism is necessary for a revolutionary party, one or more revolutionary parties are necessary for a revolution, a revolution is necessary for socialism.

The party is relevant then because it is necessary. A party is necessary to represent the interests of revolution and socialism in the daily reform struggles of the present; a party is necessary to help make the daily reform struggles relevant to the long, infinitely complicated struggle for socialism. The question is not: is the party relevant to my work, but rather, how the collective will help to make my work relevant to socialism. It is Marxist revolutionary organization that alone can make the varied struggles of many people consistently relevant to socialism.

Debate among Marxists about the party principle often consists in little more than



commentary for and against Lenin's book, *What Is To Be Done?* Some say Lenin's theory was appropriate only to Tsarist Russia, some say it had universal applicability, and if you restrict the discussion to that book and its immediate historical context, the argument can go on forever. Debate about *What Is To Be Done?* is still important, because it developed the first Marxist theory of a revolutionary party as a relatively autonomous entity (and few if any statements since have matched its strengths) and because the debate over the "Leninst" party is itself part of the ideological class struggle in the U.S., and can further or hinder the task of creating a revolutionary party. But at this juncture of U.S. and world history, it is more important to ground the debate about a Marxist party in historical experience than to add one more commentary on *What Is To Be Done?* To know how applicable the "Leninist" party is, we have to get out of early twentieth century Russia.

On some issues, the historical experience is unequivocal. Communist parties have proven to be the most effective Marxist organizations over the last sixty years. From the countries occupied by Nazi Germany to those ruled by U.S.-backed military juntas today, communist parties have proven to be the form of organization best able to survive the repression of the class enemy. The judgement holds true even where many Marxists think a particular party's politics dangerously reformist. For example, no matter what some people think about the responsibility of the Communist Party of Chile's politics for the isolation and vulnerability of the Allende government, the fact remains that the party has probably weathered best the savagery that followed the 1973 coup.

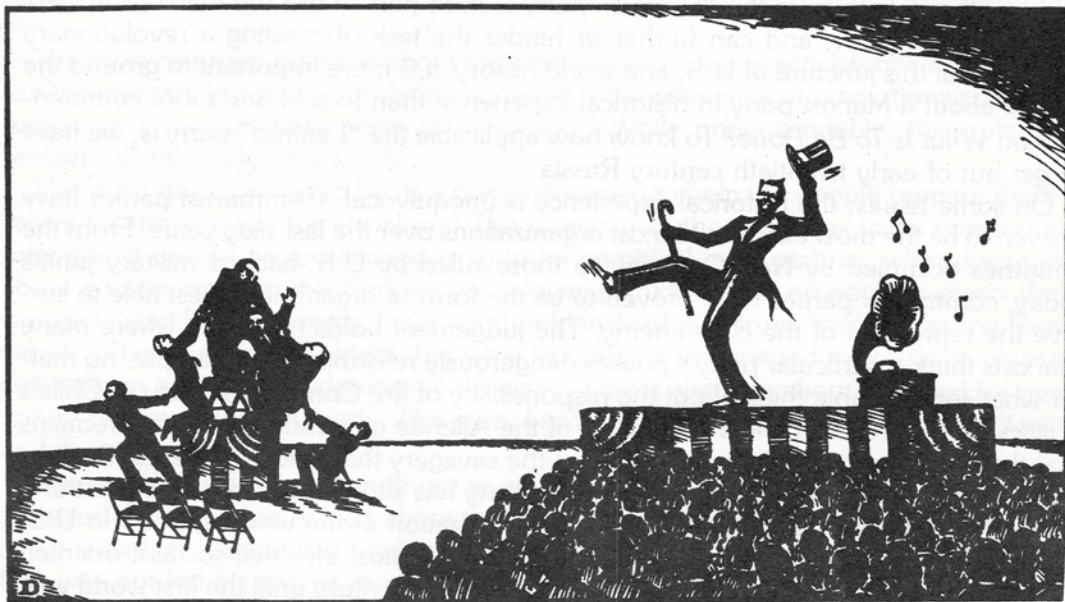
As a form of organization, the communist party has shown itself to be the most universally applicable of any socialist-oriented organization of the working class. In U.S. history, the Communist Party was the most durable, most effective socialist-oriented organization of the working class. From the turn of the century until the first world war, the Socialist party arguably organized a greater mass socialist consciousness among white people than any socialist-oriented organization since. But the nature of socialist consciousness at that time, before the rise of industrial unionism and the migration of the Black proletariat to northern cities, is not recapturable. Following a purge of its left-wing, the Socialist party collapsed. Innumerable attempts to build another party modeled on the Socialist party have failed.

From the late 1920's through the 1950's, the CPUSA overshadowed all other forces on the Left. Even in its violently pro-Moscow guise of today, it remains perhaps the most effective organization on the Left. Since the destruction of the CPUSA as an organization that, on balance, was revolutionary, the U.S. Marxist Left has been weak, by comparison to previous periods.

The Leninist model of the party has often been criticized for its hierarchical chain of command and discipline which borders on the military. But insofar as other types of revolutionary organizations have been successful in the mid-twentieth century, they have been more and not less disciplined and hierarchical in their model (the unified military-political commands in Nicaragua, Cuba, El Salvador and elsewhere).

Only a strongly organized revolutionary party can organize the people with the

working class at its core, lead a sustained struggle against capitalism in the face of all resistance U.S. capitalism has shown itself capable of, and guide the people in the decisive test that will determine whether a transition to socialism gets started. There probably will be several socialist-oriented parties in most of the countries that attempt a transition for the rest of this century and beyond. But one or more of them will be highly organized ones, along the lines of what we understand the "Leninist" model to be.



## THE SPECIFICITY OF THE MARXIST PARTY

A Marxist is not simply somebody who has Marxist ideas. A Marxist is somebody who engages in the practice regulated by the rules" of a given institution, a material Marxist apparatus. Or as Marx said, criticizing Feuerbach, "he. . . thinks it possible to change the word 'communist,' which in the real world means the follower of a definite revolutionary party, into a mere category."

The party is the material apparatus that structures the continuous struggle for the union of Marxist theory and the labor movement, for the union of Marxist theory and the entire range of popular struggles. This does not mean the Marxist party is the repository for the final truth of history. History has no final truth; and there is no single place where all the struggle to unify Marxist theory and popular struggles take place. A wide variety of organizations may also seek to unify the insights of Marxism with revolutionary movements and of course in most countries a number of Marxist parties exist.

Contrary to literal readings of *What Is To Be Done?*, the struggle to unite Marxist theory and popular struggles does occur "spontaneously." For example, if all Marxist



parties or groups in the U.S. disbanded tomorrow, there would arise out of the mass movements, in different organizations or institutions, attempts to unify insights from Marxism with different popular movements. But these efforts would either be abandoned or would inevitably take some kind of popular organizational form: sooner or later, new Marxist groups and parties would again be established.

The struggle for the unity of Marxist theory and the labor movement does not happen once and for all, as for example in moments of revolutionary mass action. It is a continuous struggle, constantly done and then undone by the contradictions within labor itself and by the class struggle of the ruling classes who foster these contradictions as part of their effort to secure their own base of mass support. Marxist parties are the only institutions that have as their principal purpose the *structuring* of the the struggle to unite Marxist theory and the labor movement. That struggle occurs elsewhere, both spontaneously and with active direction. Other organizations — mass women's organizations, oppressed nationality mass organizations, solidarity committees, student groups, professional associations — also direct the struggle for Marxist politics. But those other organizations do not have as their primary function the structuring of the struggle for the unity of Marxist theory and the mass movement. Insofar as they do turn towards that function, they tend to found or ally with parties. Marxist parties alone are defined by the struggle to systematize the lessons of popular struggle in the light of Marxism and to direct the popular struggle towards the weakening of ruling class power and the advent of socialism.

The party is the collective memory of a class. Without one or more parties, there is no ability to accumulate the experience and wisdom of the people in struggle. There is also no way to assess collectively present day struggle in light of the past. Individual activists or historians will still store up the experience and lessons of the past. But this individual knowledge is only available to the present-day movement in a chancy, haphazard way, and there is no collective ability to sum up the past. Without one or more parties, the socialist struggle loses its past. The collective memory of the U.S. working class of its extraordinarily rich past is extremely weak because independent working class institutions, and especially working class parties, are extremely weak to non-existent. The collective memory of the Black people of the U.S. is stronger (though still weak) because by comparison to the labor movement independent institutions are stronger in the Black community (especially because the Black church has some national content within its religious form).

## THE TWO PARTIES OF MARXISM

In the history of the Marxist movement, there have been two main conceptions of the Marxist party. One conception has largely indentified the party with the class. There is support for this veiw in Marx and Engels, and also in such revolutionary Marxists as Rosa Luxembourg, who defined the Marxist party of her day as "the very movement of the working class." According to this conception, the party does not attempt to prepare the working class and the people through their struggles to fight for

socialism. That would be undemocratic and elitist. Rather the party organization only arises as the expression of the growing class consciousness of the working masses.

There is a version of this first conception which defines the party as mainly an advisory group to theoretical study, endowed with a fluid, loose organizational structure. As the proletariat matures, this advisory group offers occasional advice. This is the main thrust of the description of the Communists given in the *Communist Manifesto*:

*The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties.*

*They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.*

*They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement...*

*The Communists, therefore, are...the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country...they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.*

Taken literally, as the huge army of scholars perennially attempting to rescue Marx from Marxists have tried to do, these lines lead to an untenable position. The working class stays in the old working class parties that follow the wrong line of march, while the resolute communists hope that those parties will take their advice in the final conflict. (To some extent, the end of Luxembourg's life illustrates the impasse into which this conception led). Along with disdaining to conceal their views, the communists should supposedly disdain building serious independent organizations. The workers, and the workers themselves, will overthrow capital when they are good and ready. At such time the communists will pass out maps of the national armories, some advice about nationalizations, and a copy of Robert's Rules of Order.

This first conception of the party as the broad movement of the entire class, or as a mainly educational society advising the broad movement, depends on a fatalistic view of capitalist crisis (the contradictions of capitalism inevitably led to a crisis so severe that the capitalists cannot get enough mass support to get out of it) and an evolutionist and equally fatalistic view of working class ideology (eventually the working class as a whole sees the hopeless crisis of capitalism and decides to put an end to the capitalist system).

The first conception has these and other wrong premises, but that is not the most important thing to say about it. The most important point is this: after 80 years of criticism of the Leninist model in the name of Luxembourg's and Marx's sometime view of a working class that has no need to "self-appointed vanguards," the myth of working class that comes to full socialist maturity on its own, through its undisturbed, unimpeded self-activity has never appeared. It has never appeared and it will never appear.

Lenin developed a second theory of the Marxist party. His theory differed radically



from the idea of the party as the reflection of the consciousness of the whole working class or as a theoretical society attached to the mass movement of the working class. Instead, Lenin viewed the party as a distinct political body which organized and led the working class movement and was composed of a minority of the working class, its leading section. For Lenin, the party was not consciousness or theory, but a material organization.

The "Leninst" model of the Marxist party is organized according to the principle known as democratic centralism. Our next installment will explore this principle, one of the two most controversial points of Lenin's theory of the party. And we will take up the question, is a party-form necessary today?

—Charles Sarkis  
June 1984

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# Health Care In The Reagan Era

Have you noticed that your health insurance rates are going up faster than your pay-check? Or that every time you win a wage increase, management is paying less of your insurance premiums?

## NEW CONCERN ABOUT HEALTH CARE COSTS

Today everyone is concerned about health care costs. Employers want to pass on rising insurance premiums to their employees. Doctors and hospitals, goaded by insurance companies and government, are trying to keep costs down while maintaining "healthy" revenues. They are cutting staff ratios, turning away the uninsured, and eliminating unprofitable services however much they may be needed. These rising costs and declining services worry workers and their families. As insurance premiums rapidly increase, workers find they cannot afford to keep their families fully insured. One crippling disease can financially ruin a family for life. The rising number of unemployed, uninsured and underinsured find they can't even get in the door of many hospitals and doctors' offices. And Medicare, and especially Medicaid recipients are at the mercy of budget-conscious Congressmen and state legislators looking to save money by cutting benefits or restricting who is eligible for benefits.

The federal government is concerned about health care costs, too. It has been floating legislative proposals that would make employer contributions to health insurance taxable on individual income taxes. That could mean, if your employer contributes \$200/month towards your health insurance, you would have \$2,400 added to your taxable income at the end of the year! While this would not directly limit health care costs, it would place more of the burden of health care costs on workers. Indirectly, it would discourage workers from subscribing to expensive health insurance plans.

## BUSINESSES' HEALTH AGENDA

As pressure mounts to lower health care costs, businesses around the country have formed over 100 coalitions to make sure they don't have to keep paying more. A recent survey of twenty Massachusetts cities showed that between the years 1981 and 1982, Blue Cross/Blue Shield (BC/BS) raised insurance rates 37.3% for individual plans, and 30.7% for family plans. There is now a fight to see who will pay these increases and others like them across the country. Business coalitions are proposing a number of alternatives that guarantee that they pay less:

*The use and marketing of Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs).* HMOs are health care facilities that keep costs down by controlling the use of medical services.



Presently in Boston, there are 14 HMOs which service 6.5% of the total insured population. Through marketing and negotiations, businesses hope to switch over another 15-25% of the workers they insure to HMOs by 1986. They believe that HMOs are more cost-effective and therefore cheaper than BC/BS. By closely supervising the care of each patient, they can control service utilization, limit tests, hospital admissions, and specialty visits.

Some state authorities hope to apply a version of the HMO concept to control Medicaid costs. They are developing managed care programs for Medicaid recipients under which every recipient is assigned to a primary care doctor. This doctor controls and must approve every aspect of their health care. The Commonwealth Health Care Corporation and the Boston Health Plan are two proposals of this sort that have yet to be approved.

*Cafeteria-Style benefits.* Industries have begun to offer health care benefits in a cafeteria-style with other benefits. Appealing to the individual needs of each employee, they want all benefits to come in one big package. The cafeteria approach lumps all benefit costs (vacation, sick leave, insurance, etc.) together into one sum of money for each employee. It would be with that lump-sum of money that the employee could "purchase" the benefits he/she desires. What is guaranteed is no longer the benefit, but the lump-sum of money towards benefits. It caps the cost to the employer, while the worker would be expected to pick up the difference if the cost of any particular benefit rises. With time, this would mean that the most expensive (and comprehensive) forms of health insurance would be dropped from the company's "menu" as fewer workers select it. One of the goals of the cafeteria approach is to make expensive plans look "less appetizing" than HMOs, virtually forcing workers with expensive private insurance to switch over to an HMO.

*Modify consumer patterns.* Given the strength of the traditional private practice physician, business recognizes that it will not be able to enroll all of their employees in HMOs. So they are attempting other ways to control costs within the framework of private insurance.

*Deductibles and co-payments.* One of the most effective ways industries have found to pass health care costs on to the employee is through changing the terms of the present insurance contracts. In negotiations throughout the country, unions are faced with proposals that raise the yearly deductible for hospital visits, or require co-payments from both the insurer and the insured. Since 1981, 468 out of 1390 businesses surveyed by *Fortune* magazine have done this (mostly for salaried personnel). The Rand Corporation predicts that business could increase cost savings by up to 50% by moving in this direction.

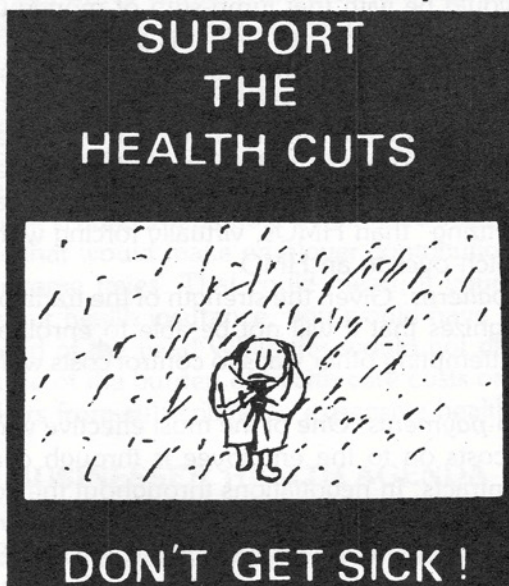
Neither co-payments or deductibles actually limit the cost of health care. However, employer advocates argue that when employees have to shell out money from their own pocket, it will discourage unnecessary use of health services and thus cut costs. Critics counter that it is doctors and hospitals that control the use of health services, not consumers. Furthermore, to the extent that co-payments and deductibles do discour-

age the use of health services, it is not at all clear that the care they are foregoing is unnecessary.

Copayments and deductibles directly shift the burden of health care costs on to the patient. They protect the profits of business and of hospitals and doctors, for they do not question the reimbursement system — i.e., how much and how hospitals and doctors get paid. These devices just guarantee that the patient pays more to get in the door.

*Second opinion programs:* Consumers are required to get a second doctor's opinion before having certain types of surgery. This is one program that, if the consumer can choose their physicians, is clearly both cost-effective and healthy. No one wants to undergo unnecessary surgery.

*Wellness programs:* Business and insurance companies are introducing programs to push individuals to be responsible for their own health and illness. Taking personal responsibility is important, and company sponsored exercise, smoking and alcohol abuse programs can be good things in themselves. But they are part of a broader campaign to minimize the responsibility of business and government for good health and lay the guilt on the individual for all his or her medical problems.



Cutting costs is an integral and important part of the "Health Thyself" approach. My favorite TV ad pictures someone returning to work a week after surgery. Meeting other employees in the elevator, he is asked how much his stay cost. He replies that he has no idea, that his insurance covered the whole stay. His fellow workers then proceed to lecture him, complaining that it is just such attitudes that could cost them each a raise, or a job, or a new typewriter. That will teach him to think twice before he has another gallbladder operation! An even more dangerous form of this approach is the



attempt of companies to screen out job applicants who are potential health risks, i.e., to refuse to hire smokers in industries with a high incidence of lung cancer.

*Control hospital costs:* The burden of a disproportionate number of proposals to control health costs falls on the consumer. But there have been some efforts to directly control hospital behavior and hospital costs. State and federal legislation is being tried out to cap hospital budgets, provide incentives for using less expensive kinds of care (i.e., out-patient over in-patient) and to avoid unnecessary or excessive services (x-rays, lab tests, etc.). In Massachusetts, a law — Chapter 372 — was passed recently that caps the budgets of acute care hospitals around the state. It increases payments for out-patient visits, tests, and surgery, while it lowers the reimbursement rates for in-patient services. Other federal legislation challenges the traditional reimbursement system whereby Medicaid or Medicare automatically pays whatever the hospital bills them for services rendered. Under the new prospective reimbursement, the cost of a particular medical service is determined beforehand and Medicaid or Medicare will only pay up to this predetermined amount.

But there are still some big loopholes in the reimbursement system which allow physicians and hospitals to continue to push up health care costs. For example, Chapter 372 allows all hospital capital expenditures of any year (new buildings, equipment) to “pass through” the budget and not to be capped. Yet capital expenditures are widely recognized as an important source of inflation of health care costs.

## **TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE HEALTH AGENDA**

The current interest of business and government in health care is almost exclusively an interest in controlling health care *costs*. Progressives can agree that cost containment needs to happen, although we also need to get people asking why inflationary military spending hasn't come under the same intense scrutiny. After all, contracts for the defense industry are still being awarded on a cost-plus basis. Moreover, we need to see that what we get are genuine *cost savings*, and not just cost shifting from businesses to the employees.

But perhaps most important, we can't let the current drive to contain costs obscure more basic concerns: How healthy are Americans today? What's making us sick? What's killing us? Can we prevent it? Do all Americans have access to the medical care they need? How good is the medical care people receive? Many of the changes being proposed by business today to control health care costs seemingly ignore questions of quality care, access and prevention. But when we take a closer look, we see that many of these proposals actually have negative implications for our health.

A problem underlying many cost containment proposals sponsored by business is that they rely on strengthening competition to control costs: they want to see hospitals competing, HMOs competing, doctors competing. This approach ignores the fact that in most U.S. industries control of the market has been captured by large monopolies as the initial competition falters. There is no reason to think that the health care system

will be immune from such economic forces. Blue Cross/Blue Shield and the American Medical Association already have a virtual monopoly on sections of the health industry. Is anything being proposed to counteract their influence? Furthermore, based on our experience of how capitalist competition works in industry, there is little reason to believe that competition in the health care field will produce either cost savings, better health care or a rational health care system.

Competition, in fact, means competition for privately insured patients — and the healthiest of privately insured patients at that. That's where the money is. So competition schemes lead to certain people being denied access to the health care system. To keep profits up, private hospitals start to curtail services to the poor or unemployed.



They start “dumping” the uninsured on public hospitals. Now even public hospitals are responding to economic pressures by narrowing the category of those to whom they will provide free care. In Boston, health administrators have proposed that free care be available only to those who can provide identification and proof of residence. All uninsured non-residents will be expected to pay 100% of their bill in cash before they can have an elective admission! Will residents who are immigrants, but without their green card, be willing to come through such a tightly monitored system?

Recently Medicaid and Medicare patients have been denied treatment by private physicians because of the lower reimbursement rate of these government programs as compared to private insurance. Throughout Massachusetts, OB-GYN doctors are starting to withdraw from Medicaid programs because they can make more money from privately insured patients. This will mean that Medicaid patients will be forced to use acute care hospitals and their clinics as the place of last resort. Yet acute care hospitals are the most expensive form of care!



What do the pressures of competition mean for the quality of care for those who do make it through the door? Based on the record of cost savings and high quality of care established by early HMO's like Kaiser Permanente and the Harvard Community Health Plan, there has been a major shift of preference by employers to HMOs. But these original HMOs developed under very strict federal guidelines and laws which required certain types of care be provided and a board made up of users and community representatives to be established. The insurance companies like Blue Cross/Blue Shield and other health entrepreneurs who are moving into the HMO terrain today, are trying to get waivers to these regulations. They hope to save costs by providing fewer mandatory services, less patient control and elimination of outside review. What will the quality of care be like in HMOs after 20 years of competition under different rules? And how many HMOs actually will survive?

In the long run, the only effective way to have a less expensive health care system is to have a healthier population. Yet an emphasis on prevention and preventive medicine have been noticeably absent from recent discussions. State and federal monies are being cut for lead paint programs, rodent control, sickle cell treatment and research and well-baby programs. For example, once free well-baby clinics in Boston neighborhood health centers now have to charge \$10 a visit because of cuts in federal maternal and child health grants. As a result, the centers have seen a drop in the usage of well-baby programs. At the same time, Boston City Hospital has had to set up special "failure to thrive" teams of professionals to treat the rising number of malnourished babies that are being admitted. Does raising the costs of health care in neighborhood health centers really save money? It certainly isn't producing healthier babies. One study found that from 1981-82 mortality among children in the first year of life rose 46% in areas served by five Boston neighborhood health centers hard hit by federal funding cuts.

There are many issues of public health that are going unresolved daily due to lack of funding for research and unwillingness to deal firmly with businesses' responsibility for widespread environmental and occupational disease. Close to 80% of all industrial waterways in the U.S. have cancer epidemics among fish. Acid rain, chemical waste disposal, exposure to toxic chemicals on the job, the use of pesticides like EDB in our food supply are all problems that continue largely unchecked. While business self-righteously demands that workers take responsibility for their health, they refuse to take responsibility for the fact that industry is killing us every day — in the factories, fields, offices and in our communities.

We have to get the fundamentals of a progressive health care agenda back into focus. Health care is a right, not just a privilege for those who can pay. Controlling unreasonable and unnecessary costs is an aspect of a strong health care system, but it cannot be seen as an end in and of itself. Individuals have to take responsibility for their own health, but when we are subjected daily to an unending number of unhealthy influences over which we have little control then our health becomes a social responsibility.

— Celia Wcislo  
April, 1984

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## Book Review

### *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker

At the end of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker adds a note: "I thank everybody in this book for coming." It is Walker who should be thanked, for introducing her readers to Celie, Shug, Nettie, and the other people in the book. They walk off the pages, stand in front of us and enter our memories as easily as friends and lovers from our own lives.

Walker should be thanked also for the way she writes. She writes the flow and music of the everyday talk and the feelings of Celie, the main character. Celie writes her feelings and observations in letters to God (and later to her sister, Nettie), and in this way we see Celie's world uncensored by the demands of correct spelling, grammar and form. The world we see is through the eyes of a poor, Black, poorly educated, abused, strong lesbian living in the deep South sometime in the 1930's and 40's. Just as surely, Walker writes in the more self-conscious words of Nettie, who clearly comes across as better educated and more worldly, but still naive. The contrast in the two sisters' struggle to *become* is clearly shown in what they write and how they write.

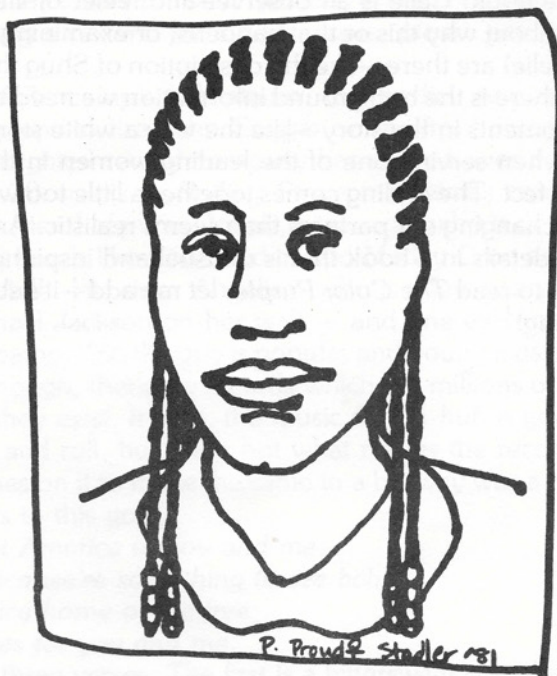
Most of all, Walker should be thanked for giving us heroines who are as ordinary and as special as any oppressed woman who struggles to survive and struggles for more than just survival. There are no comic book Superwomen here, or women who accomplish physically courageous acts that seem beyond the ability or nerve of you or me. Celie has taught herself to be a survivor, but then grabs hold of her chances to live a full and happy life. She doesn't do it all by herself; she has the help of her lover, Shug, and her female friends and family. And these women also become stronger and happier as the story progresses. Most of the Black women in *The Color Purple* go through some kind of positive growth. Most of the men and white women don't, but they aren't cardboard characters, either. All through the book, through the heroines and villains and the people in-between, Walker makes a lot of points about society.

There is a lot put into this book, more than can be adequately described here. Most important is that Celie is given the chance to do what too many don't have the chance to do—develop important parts of herself that are little known to herself and invisible to those around her. Celie is able to experience loving another woman, instead of being limited to conscious but undeveloped desires. She is given the chance to express and develop her creativity through sewing, in a form that is appreciated by other people and even leads to making money. She grows able to step out from under the heel of a male-dominated society and religion (and these are dominated by white men, as Walker shows) that have abused her mentally and physically. She survives years of rape, beating and insult by her father and husband, grows as a person and becomes



able to stand up to them.

At the same time as Celie is finding herself, Nettie is finding the world and becoming educated. She becomes a missionary to an Olinka village in Africa, traveling to New York City and England on the way. She makes mind-opening discoveries about African life, compared to what she learned in school or from other missionaries. She makes some interesting observations about the blending of Christianity with Olinka culture, at the same time as she sees the white, European destruction of that culture. (Meanwhile, in the U.S., Celie is gaining some insight into the whiteness of Christianity.) Nettie's life in Africa gives Walker the chance to explore some of the ties between Black people's life in this country to their African backgrounds.



Walker and Celie have endless admiration for Shug, the woman who changes Celie's life. The importance of artistic creativity and of warm sexuality are shown in Shug, and they are reinforced by their presence in other heroines in the story. The thread of African ancestry is also most clearly seen in Shug, as we can see in her taste in home construction and decoration.

Walker's belief in the harm men cause themselves because of their sense of superiority over women is also clearly shown—and also provides some of the humor in the book. But these men aren't simply bad and foolish—they are very human. Celie's husband is the most developed male character, and the complexity, pain and growth we see in him are often as powerful as what we see happening with Celie.

Two more aspects of Walker's artistry need to be mentioned. One is how effortlessly

the various threads of the story are woven under, over and alongside each other. Some threads (the color purple, for instance), appear once, briefly, disappear, then reappear briefly somewhere else. Other threads are more visible throughout the book (such as ways that Celie's creativity is always pushed to the surface through her mastery of daily household tasks). Walker doesn't dwell on the connections the threads are making, but you don't need a course in literary analysis to pick up on what Walker wants us to see. The connections are as obvious and surprising as they are in real life. In fact, *The Color Purple* may remind you of some threads in your own life, as it did for me.

The second aspect is the lack of details and explanations for the events and changes in all the lives in the book. Celie is an observer and feeler of life. She doesn't spend much time thinking about why this or that happens, or examining every detail. The important details (to Celie) are there—like the description of Shug the first time Celie sees her in person. And there is the background information we need to understand the setting and the developments in the story—like the way a white storekeeper rips a length of fabric off a bolt when serving one of the leading women in the Black community.

The book isn't perfect. The ending comes together a little too well. There is more acceptance of people changing sex partners than seems realistic. And a few other things. But these are small details in a book that is unusual and inspiring. And if you are not convinced by all this to read *The Color Purple*, let me add—it's short, it reads fast, and it has a happy ending!

—E. Rader  
Los Angeles



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## Review: John Mellancamp's *Uh-huh*

*This is the first installment of what is intended to be a regular Forward Motion column on rock and roll and other popular music. Reader response has everything to do with whether or not it will continue and what subjects it will deal with. Please let us know what you think. All letters will be answered, in the column or directly, and if you are interested in writing a column for a future issue, please get in touch.*

*Uh-huh* is John Mellancamp's fifth album. It's the first one on which he gets to append his real last name to the John Cougar on the front cover. It's a platinum record, meaning the delighted record company has moved over a million copies. And it's got legs — after 30 weeks in *Rolling Stone* magazine's chart, it's still hovering around the top 20. A friend of mine, Jonah, a teenager who is devoted to fairly unappetizing, heavy metal bands like Iron Maiden and Motley Crue admits he was soft on *Uh-huh* for quite a while. His sister Angelica, who is a few years younger, has about forty pictures of Michael Jackson on her wall — and one each of the Stray Cats and John Cougar Mellencamp. "So the guy is popular and young kids like him. Big deal," I hear you say. True enough, there are records which sell millions of copies and give me a rash just knowing they exist. In fact, the music on *Uh-huh* is good, solid, fun, you-can-dance-to-it rock and roll, but that's not what makes the record so interesting.

One of the first tunes on it to make the radio in a big way was a number called "Pink Houses." The chorus to this goes:

*Oh but ain't that America to you and me  
Ain't that America we're something to see baby  
Ain't that America home of the free  
Little pink houses for you and me.*

Set off against it are three verses. The first is a bittersweet snapshot of a black guy remembering to his wife the days when she "could stop a clock." In the second a greasy kid grows up to find out he's not really going to be president. The third sums up that it's the common man who pays society's bills. The song's greatest strength, though, is in that simple image of little pink houses as a summation of this country. America definitely does not deliver all that it promises, but it can still deliver something (as we have learned the hard way in a decade and a half of working for socialist revolution in this country).<sup>1</sup>

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1. In a wonderfully ironic development, the pink house that MTV (the rock and roll cable TV channel) was holding a drawing for in a Mellancamp-linked promotional contest turned out to be built right next to a toxic waste dump! They had to find another pink house to raffle off.

This is meaty stuff for a rock star — trying to explore what the U.S. is all about, to grapple with its promise and contradictions, its mythology and reality. A critic named Greil Marcus, in the finest book on rock and roll I know, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock and Roll*, argues that the best of American rock is shaped by the tension of the great contradictions at the core of this country.

The Band was perhaps the first group to *consciously* make this a central theme in their work, but I don't think they're who paved the way for Mellancamp. More than anyone else it was Bruce Springsteen, the most influential mainstream rocker of the past decade, who made it not only a possibility but a challenge for musicians to look at life in America and try to figure it out. His brand new album, which may be his best yet, is called *Born in the USA*.

Springsteen is the foremost of a group of musicians who have recently produced a body of work that might be called death-of-industrial-America rock. A typical example is "Johnny 99" from Springsteen's last album, the echoey, eerie *Nebraska* with both its themes and solo guitar/harmonica sound profoundly influenced by his discovery of Woodie Guthrie. It is the story of a man who loses his job when the Ford plant in Mahwah, N.J. closes down, gets tanked up, tries to pull a hold-up, kills a night clerk and winds up with a ninety-nine year jail sentence. Others who have taken a long look at the same turt include Bob Seger who sings about the rot in Motor City where he grew up, Billy Joel on "Allentown," Ohio-bred Chrissy Hynde of the Pretenders in "My Town Was Gone" and nearly all the music of the underrated Iron City Houserockers, who are now reported to have gone the way of so many Pittsburgh area steel mills. These artists are striving to portray the human costs of the massive and anarchic destruction of unprofitable productive capacity that is such a central part of the current crisis of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Some of them have done a damn good job, too, although the irony of a multi-millionaire who can't walk the streets without risking a mob scene placing him or herself in the boots of a working stiff is yet another of the contradictions which gives rock its tension and crackle.

For all his close kinship, musically and in outlook, with Springsteen, Seger and some of the others, it is Mellancamp's differences with them that raises some interesting questions about the nature and future of rock and roll. On *Uh-huh*, he never adopts a persona distinct from his own or even runs out a third person narrative like his summer 1982 hit "Jack and Diane." These devices abandoned, neither does he make any direct comment on the fate of the industrial worker in the Rust Belt. Yet, in his music there is a bit of a vision — a left populist vision — of who the enemy is, which is lacking in many of the more specific tunes by the others. For instance, in "Golden Gates," he sings "In these days of uncertain futures/Who knows what the masters

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2. I believe I have found the earliest precursor to this theme in rock and roll. The plaintive—O.K., whiney—Dicy Lee cut, a tune called, "The Day They Closed The Sawmill Down." Plot—kid goes to work in mill to earn money to marry and support girl next door; mill goes bust; girl's father, who works in mill like rest of population, moves family out of town in search of work; heartbreak. It appeared on the flip side of an "answer song" 45 entitled, "She Wants To Be Bobby's Girl," which must place it around 1962. Nominations for earlier candidates are welcome.



might do," and snarls at the money men and the authorities.

A nice sense of class consciousness also pervades Jackie O., a restrained but boppy shot at the time-tested poor boy/rich girl theme, co-authored by John Prine, a name to conjure with when it comes to lyrics. The first three lines combine distance, taunt and the admission of vulnerability:

*So you went to a party at Jacqueline Onassis  
If you're so smart why don't you wear glasses  
So you can see what you're doing to me.*

Compare all this with Springsteen's nifty new *Born In The USA*. When there is a hint of an enemy at all, it is a faceless "they." This in an unfortunate term to use in a country where racism with a polite veneer often refers to Black people as "Them." Here, "they" is just vague, a personification of life-changing events seen to take place outside of people's control. This is even more striking on another new album, by the long-time guitarist of Springsteen's E Street Band, Miami Steve Van Zandt. *Voice of America* by Little Steven and the Disciples of Soul is ardently political (although the politics are chaotic and unsophisticated). The back cover is a detail from Picasso's *Guernica* and the tunes have titles like "Solidarity," "Los Desaparecidos," and "Undefeated;" still the cause of the suffering Van Zandt is decrying turns out to be "they" again, or maybe even "we," no more.

Mellancamp's greater explicitness is a good thing, cheering to lefties and, it is to be hoped, a positive influence on the consciousness of his millions of fans. At the same time, there are two other points of distinction that set his music apart which cut much more to the quick.

One is that he writes for adolescents. Mellancamp himself is in his early 30s, but traditionally rockers have generally been older than their teenage audiences. Turn for contrast back to Bruce Springsteen, whose biggest AM radio hit before this year was "Hungry Heart," which starts out, "I got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack/I went out for a ride and I never came back..." I'm not arguing that young people can't relate to that experience, or try to, but this is music aimed at those of us who were teenagers in the 60s, the baby boom generation, the genealogical bulge demographers call the pig in the python.





So what? Well, rock and roll is music that for thirty years now has at its heart been dealing with the problems people face during the prolonged and ill-defined coming of age process characteristic of advanced capitalist society. Rock and roll is kid's music. They care passionately about it, in a way that adults with their more established lives and more pressing concerns simply cannot. They use it to define themselves and draw lines with the rest of society. And it is from the passion and the problems and the perceptions of the young that rock and roll will renew itself if it is to remain a vital and potent musical form.

*Uh-huh* underlines the importance of rock and roll in a cult which asserts with a snarl, again and again, "This is serious business/Sex and violence and rock and roll." It is authentic in the same sense as Joan Jett's hit of a couple of years back, "I Love Rock and Roll." These may not be the brightest songs ever written, but they make you want to sing along. When Bob Seger tried an anthem, he came up with a plea to the aging — "Come back, baby, rock and roll never forgets" — and that was half a decade ago!<sup>3</sup> A Bruce Springsteen creates magnificent music, makes rock face new issues and feels profound links with and responsibility to his millions of fans — but Johah is probably not going to take Van Halen off the stereo to listen to him and it's even less likely his picture will wind up on Angelica's wall. He isn't talking to them.

The final area I want to touch on is tricky — a theme that is an essential facet of rock and roll, transcendence. Much of the best rock and roll is about breaking out of the ordinary day to day world, about vibrating with energy, about having anything and everything seem possible, however briefly, about feeling like the whole world is yours.<sup>4</sup> It comes up again and again in countless different guises — "Quarter to Three," "Eight Days a Week," "Break On Through," "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now," "Every Picture Tells a Story," "Heat Wave," "Free Bird," "Train In Vain."

Anyone who has ever loved rock and roll can think of songs she or he might put on the list and have a good idea of where the transcendence in them lies. Sometimes the music itself stands the words on their head, transcends their formal content: "There's just no place for ..." grouched Jagger, but in '69 that song said trash a bank, stop the pig, fight the power.

But this is 1984. Transcendence is harder to come by than it was in 1956 or in 1965. Has life in a decaying superpower hedged our lives around with so many limits that the best honest possibilities are surviving with your self intact and connecting with other people? A lot of the music that tries to look at life in the U.S. today says yes, but that other eruption of the spirit is still there.

"Dancing In the Dark," the first single off Springsteen's new album shows how things work these days. Tired of his life, even his looks, he sings:

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3. Actually, as a young rocker in the '60s, he did pull off a real anthem in "Heavy Music," a local smash in the Midwest, which only underlines this point.

4. This is complex stuff to deal with in a short column focused on something else. Readers are referred to Marcus' *Mystery Train*, especially the section entitled, "The Presleyiad."



*You can't start a fire without a spark  
This gun's for hire  
Even if we're just dancing in the dark.*

A call to break out (itself a reversal of the optimism in Mao's "A single spark can start a prairie fire), a proclamation of readiness then the sudden sense of limit, even the threat of futility. But driven by its music the song overcomes its tentativeness until in the last chorus, Springsteen commits: "You can't start a fire worrying about your little world falling apart." Yeah!

It's an exciting piece of music. And one which, in a sense Springsteen retracts on the next cut, the album's finale. "My Hometown" starts with the singer, a proud young boy, steering the car from his father's lap and touring his town. At its finish he is taking his own son on a ride past vacant stores, deserted streets, closed plants and telling him, "This is your hometown."

Mellancamp doesn't force his way as deep into the social fabric but his take is healthier. "The Authority Song" is his tribute to, and rewriting of, "I Fought the Law (And the Law Won)," the Bobby Fuller Four classic popularized for today's youth in a fine version by the Clash. Mellancamp's protagonist is no longer a robber driven by poverty, but a straight up rebel:

*I fight authority, Authority always wins  
I fight authority, Authority always wins  
I've been doing it since I was a young kid and I've come out grinning  
I fight authority, Authority always wins.*

The best part comes when he asks a preacher for help and is told to grow up. This advice he spurns:

*Growing up leads to growing old and then to dying  
And dying to me don't sound like that much fun.*  
And back to the chorus:  
*I fight, I fight, I fight authority. . .*



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▶ ▶ ▶ john mellancamp's uh-huh ▶ ▶ ▶ & more ▶ ▶ ▶