

“The Genesis”

The history of our movement begins in California in 1958. Nineteen fifty eight was not exactly a vintage year for communists in this country. It was the year of the House Un-American Activities Committee, of Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon. In 1958, some of our people joined the Communist Party USA in California. Those that did became part of a dissident element in CPUSA. They were working in Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers at the time as field organizers.

Three different tendencies developed within CPUSA against current leadership policies. The first group was opposed to the defensive stance of the party in response to the McCarthy hearings. That was the time communists went before HUAC and took the Fifth and First Amendments. The Party was defending itself saying they really did not have to testify on political grounds. The group that opposed this felt that the Party should take a more offensive position. Their position was that where asked in they were a communist they should respond, “Yes, I am a communist, the kind of communist you have never seen, an ass-kicking communist” and come out of the stand feet-first into the prosecutor's face and start swinging.

The second group opposed to current leadership of CPUSA was opposed to its close following of the line of the Soviet Union. Remember this was at the time that the Chinese/Soviet split was developing on the international scene.

The third grouping was unhappy with the Party's lack of contact with the masses. They felt the Party was not in touch with the people it was supposed to represent.

People from these three tendencies together formed an illegal oppositionist tendency within CPUSA and called themselves Progressive Labor Movement. Progressive Labor Movement was led by people such as Milt Rosen the Eastern Industrial organizer, Jake Rosen (no relation to Milt), Charles Llewellyn the West Coast Industrial organizer, Jared Israel the head of the Party's Youth Fraction and Mort Scherer. We put out a newspaper that we arrogantly called *The Spark* after Lenin's *Iskra*.

Portions of that leadership worked to form an oppositionist party. What that means was that you read *The Daily Worker* and everywhere they said yes, you said no. Now some of us on the West Coast did not think this was such a good idea because first of all CPUSA might not be wrong on everything they said, and secondly, one of the problems with CPUSA might just be that it was addressing the wrong issues. We did not think it was such a good idea to let your opposition decide all the issues.

In the West, members of PLM attended the HUAC hearings and they were called to testify. HUAC hearings were being held in Washington and San Francisco. When asked if they were or ever had been a Communist, they said, “Yes, I am, but I'm the kind of communist you have never seen, an ass-kicking communist.” Then they came out of the stand fighting. This began a riot in San Francisco.

Fulton Lewis III used film clips from these riots to make an anti-communist movie called *Operation Abolition*. In this movie, all of the scenes in which there were communists were dyed red with mercurochrome.

This movie *Operation Abolition* began playing in John Birch halls and American Legion halls and on college campuses across the country. Members of PLM began to follow the movie wherever it played. After the movie was shown, they would get up and say, "My name is ...," and say whatever name they were using at that particular time. Communists in those days changed their names almost as often as they changed their shirts and for pretty much the same reason – the last one got too dirty.

They would stand up and say, "My name is whatever and I am a member of the Communist Party and I'd like to tell the truth about that movie." A fight ensued, they would be beaten up and then the police would get to beat them up again. That is how a lot of us got the faces we have.

Remember that on your college campuses today. There are many Marxist professors on those campuses. There did not used to be. It used to be to get a copy of *Capital* out of the library you had to go to the librarian and give your name and address and they would get it for you out of the back. We paid with our faces for the freedom of those academic Marxists to teach on those campuses. After a while, it came that the American Legion halls and John Birch halls were not so interested in showing the movie since it always ended up in a brawl.

Along about this time Milt Rosen printed in the PLM newspaper an editorial opposing Ho Chi Minh and the People's Liberation Front of North Vietnam, claiming Ho Chi Minh had sold out the Vietnamese revolution for Moscow gold. Charles Llewellyn wrote back that people were shooting at Ho Chi Minh and that no one was shooting at Milt Rosen and until they were shooting at Milt Rosen then maybe Milt should shut the fuck up.

PLM expelled Llewellyn and his followers and changed their name to Progressive Labor Party or PL, as they are known today, and changed the name of their newspaper to Challenge. Llewellyn's people were mostly working class: a group in Seattle where Llewellyn was and a group in San Francisco. In Seattle, the group took the name Marxist-Leninist Caucus.

We in San Francisco formed a loose group called Bay Area Radical Union or BARU. BARU was not even really centralized. It was a loose grouping of individuals. We had people from the old Committee to Elect Helen Gahagan Douglas, people from the Committee to Elect Jerry Voorhis, etc.

BARU began to put up candidates for local office, city council, etc. BARU had another goal – a goal never reached before by any leftist organization in the United States, a truly revolutionary goal. We wanted to put out a publication of leftist intent and content that someone would actually read. To this end, we began looking for writers and we found two: John Gerassi and Robert Scheer, later editor of *Ramparts*. Both of these men had

written books about Cuba, which had been accepted by the Cuban Center and they were in contact with Cuba. Cuba told them that anyone of their political persuasion would be welcomed at the 1965 Unity Convention to be held that summer in Havana. Sixteen of our people associated with BARU went to the convention.

At this time, one of the comrades was in a Texas prison convicted of armed robbery. Another prisoner, also convicted of a felony, had just won appeal on the grounds that the nine man jury then being used in Texas was unconstitutional in the case of a Class A felony. This made our comrade also eligible for bail pending appeal. A half an hour after making bail he was seen in a Hawaiian shirt with a ukulele, sunglasses and a straw hat crossing the Mexican border on a tourist visa on his way to Mexico.

To understand what happened at the Havana Unity Convention, we need to go back a little.

In 1960, Fidel Castro, in a speech at the United Nations, announced that he was a Marxist-Leninist to the UN and thus to the world. The USA immediately began an economic blockade against Cuba, a blockade that is still in effect today. The Cubans are receiving support from the Soviet Union to the tune of about 1 million dollars a day.

Fidel also said, "The International Communist Movement is not a lodge, it is not a front, it is not a church. The International Communist Movement is a movement of revolutionary fighters. You can call yourself an eagle without having a single feather, but only those who are revolutionary fighters can call themselves communists. It is the duty of the revolutionary to make the revolution."

Following this statement of proletarian internationalism in 1963, Fidel Castro Ruiz offered to send one thousand Cuban combat troops to Vietnam to fight in the struggle there. Immediately the Soviets began screaming like wounded eagles.

The Soviets said, "We are trying to establish detente with the United States. We are in the United Nations. We deal with the United States every day on many issues of trade, etc. With your troops in Vietnam all the United States is going to say to us in all of those meetings is, 'What about your puppet troops in Vietnam?' Don't internationalize the struggle."

The one thousand Cuban troops did not go into combat in Vietnam. They did do everything else: they were teachers; they reported for the Cuban papers, they worked in hospitals, everything except actual combat duty.

In 1964, Major Ernesto Guevara led five hundred communist soldiers to aid the developing struggle in the Belgian Congo. Again, the Soviets screamed like wounded eagles. The troops did everything except actual combat.

All this history leads up to the 1965 Unity Convention in Havana. It was a strange convention. The first 23 speakers were American CIA agents who had been captured by

the Cuban government. They spoke about what they had been sent to do and what they were doing in Cuba. This set the stage and made it clear on everyone's mind that American Imperialism was the main enemy in Latin America.

Fidel Castro did not speak at the convention. His speech was read by his deputy president Pedro Minaya. Fidel's speech announced the formation of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAL). Cuba was a member of Tri-Continental – an international of 270 minority parties headed by the Cuban Center.

Most of the countries also had major parties in communist parlance, parties following the Soviets. The majority parties were pursuing mostly parliamentary and trade union struggle and had worked very hard to legitimize themselves in their respective countries. Many of the minority parties were pursuing military focus following the Cuban example.

In Venezuela, for example, Douglas Bravo, head of the Party's Youth Fraction had left the party with most of the Youth Fraction and unkind critics said a considerable portion of the Party's treasury, to pursue a focus in the mountains.

The majority parties screamed to Moscow to do something about this, that the guerrilla bands were destroying all the credibility they had built up, that the bourgeoisie couldn't tell one communist from another and so in response to minority forces, repression was coming down on everyone. The Soviets again screamed to the Cubans. The situation was extremely tense by 1965.

Fidel's speech at the 1965 Convention announced formation of OSPAAL and Tri-Continental's participation in OSPAAL. OSPAAL was far enough removed from the Cuban Center – Cuba was a member of Tri-Continental, Tri-Continental was a member of OSPAAL – which the Soviets could not hold the Cubans responsible for actions of OSPAAL and through it they could continue to support revolutionary struggle around the world. Seventeen of our people at the Convention signed the founding document of OSPAAL.

The second thing they announced at the Convention was that Che Guevara had renounced his Cuban citizenship and left for parts unknown. This brought the convention to its feet in cheers. Everyone knew this meant Che was somewhere in the world starting another focus.

After the convention, some of our people stayed in Cuba feeling their welcome would be no warmer than before in the USA. Some with military experience joined the Cuban Army; others joined OSPAAL forces in Latin America. The Cuban Regular Army training base was in Manzanillo, near Havana. OSPAAL forces were training members to go to Guatemala. Our people decided to resign from the Cuban army and joined the OSPAAL forces. Everybody wanted to join the focus in Guatemala and other Latin American countries.

Guatemala was a good example of the mistakes of purely armed foco. The leader of the Guatemalan foco was a colorful man by the name of Marco Yon Sosa. Yon Sosa was an ex-young ex-officer in the Guatemalan military. He used to dress up in his old Guatemalan military uniform and show up unannounced at military balls. There was always a caucus of his former fellow officers that wondered what they should do. Is it proper to kill a former fellow officer at such an occasion or is it better to wait until afterwards? Prudence generally won out over chivalry. They would usually decide that they should kill him. At that moment, Yon Sosa would make his exit, usually through a window in a hail of revolver fire to the almost visible palpitations of the senorita's hearts.

When OSPAAL forces arrived, Yon Sosa was apparently dead. He had not died in some act of revolutionary heroism. It was released that he and his companion had been killed when their car ran into a concrete abutment in downtown Guatemala City when they were dead drunk.

The foco group itself was split when the oppositionist Trotsky group tried to take control of the movement. The OSPAAL troops had to fight their way into the mountains where they found out not only did they have to convince the peasants that there was a revolution going on, they had to convince them that was a place called Guatemala going on. When OSPAAL troops left Guatemala two and a half years later, there were fourteen of the original ninety left alive. They went their separate ways out of the jungle.

To return to the USA they left the mountains with nothing but their clothes and their arms. One comrade tells a story of hitchhiking with a SIG submachine gun. It is funny how many people were going exactly where you want to go when you are hitchhiking with a SIG submachine gun. Most of the focos ended just as pathetically. Our people found their way home by various means.

Back in San Francisco in 1968, they found things very different from in 1965. There were red flags and revolutionary slogans everywhere. In addition, through it all little old ladies with their shopping lists and carts, as though this were an everyday occurrence. BARU had grown to include thousands of people, under the guru ship of a young man named Bob Avakian who announced his intention to build BARU into a multi-national party of Maoist implication. Being BARU was comprised mainly of white middle-class college students and having just returned from direct experience with armed focos, our people merely labeled the effort 'premature' and formed a tendency within BARU, grouping ourselves around a rival theoretician, Dr. Bruce Franklin, head of the English Department at Stanford University.

We called ourselves Venceremos. The others at BARU called us the armed struggle people. We had been recruiting to Venceremos though BARU. BARU got more and more loose and we began recruiting directly to Venceremos instead of through BARU. In 1969, Venceremos seized the East Palo Alto campus of Stanford University and renamed it Nairobi U in cooperation with the Black Panther Party who seized the Oakland campus of the State University and renamed it Malcolm X College. That day BARU came and picketed us with signs that said "No Split No Split No Split." The next

day eight of their secondary leadership had been shot, not all of them fatally and BARU knew we were not going to get down and read the funny papers with them.

Venceremos believed at that time that the clinical conditions existed in the USA for armed struggle. There was a burgeoning anti-war movement. Dr. George Gallup polled 73% of the Mexican public as being against the war in Vietnam; the growing anti-war movement has a strong left wing.

The leftist portion of the anti-war movement was for the most part being led by the Socialist Workers Party. They had announced a series of national Moratoriums to End the War in Vietnam to oppose the war in San Francisco and Washington D.C. It was to be one day in November, two days in December, three days in January, etc., until the war was stopped. The first San Francisco moratorium in November was attended by 350,000, the one in Washington by 500,000.

The SWP slogan on the war was, "Bring the Boys Home." The interior slogan of Venceremos was, "Bring the War Home." The exterior slogan of Venceremos was, "End the War" because we knew that the American government could bring the boys home and continue the war with air support, money, advisors, weapons, etc. The moratoriums were going on schedule and gaining momentum.

After the November moratorium, Sam Brown announced that there would be no more moratoriums, that everyone should go home and pursue grassroots organizing in their own communities. Grassroots organizing has a nice earthy sound to it, but to take a national organization and break it down into its smallest component local parts just does not make sense. To this day, we do not know why he did that. It broke the momentum of the anti-war movement.

Under this situation, part of Venceremos thought that the scientific conditions for struggle had changed. Venceremos split into a left and a right wing. The left wing wanted to continue to pursue armed struggle. The right wing felt that the conditions of struggle had changed and what was needed was to begin building a traditional communist party, a clandestine organization of professional revolutionaries.

To avoid a split, a compromise was agreed on where the right wing program of building clandestine apparatus was the minimum program and the left-wing program the maximum program. Interestingly enough, anyone with any military experience was in the right wing.

Our comrades of the right wing returned to working in the clandestine movement and had trouble in doing illegal work in legal organizations. One comrade was arrested for driving a truck with 5,000 machine guns in it. It was decided that his image was not exactly the best for a pacifist organization. He was working for the United Farm Workers Union and Cesar transferred him to New York City to run the eastern region boycott.

Venceremos' Eastern Division drifted away from the center and began organizing through the Chavez movement, and allied apparatus on the East Coast. UFW was beginning Operation Leapfrog. They knew that they could not keep the struggle parochial to California and needed to expand it. The NYC Boycott people did some submarining on Long Island, talking a little union, talking a little strike, giving out some UFW membership cards. Venceremos cells were also being built.

In 1971, Cesar met with NYC boycott people in Ossining, New York. There they finally presented the proposal for organizing Long Island. Cesar said the decision for Operation Leapfrog had already been made. First decision was that the UFW would continue to pursue a boycott strategy. Second, that they would be going next into Florida to get contracts with Minute Maid and Donald Duck Orange Juice. Then to Michigan which by the way has the largest farm worker population of any state in the country, then into Arizona to fight right to work laws there.

Cesar said UFW would not be able to organize the Island for at least 10 to 11 years. To use a boycott successfully you need two things: a worker population of at least 600 to 700 people and an identifiable product. Long Island potatoes are Long Island potatoes for two months, and then they are mixed with Maine potatoes to become Eastern potatoes before they are mixed with Idaho potatoes to become just plain potatoes.

We told Cesar we would like to go it alone in Suffolk County. He agreed as long as we did not associate too closely with UFW since they thought our tactics to be somewhat different from theirs. We agreed to this and began to work to build EFWA. This began in May of 1972. In December 1972, EFWA staged the first organized farm worker strike in the history of the East Coast of the United States against I. M. Young Company of Riverhead, New York.

At the same time in December 1972, Venceremos took its thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth murder convictions: John and Angela Burt in San Bruno. As usual, they laughed at the judge and said, "Now you have convicted us. Just try to get us into prison." Well, this time they did not get them to prison. The prison van was intercepted by Venceremos cars, prison guards were executed and the Burts and a third prisoner in the van were taken to Venceremos safe houses in New Mexico and Arizona. Unfortunately, the third prisoner was an FBI agent and two days later eight members of the Venceremos Central Committee were arrested.

The East Coast Venceremos comrades said, "Basta ya. Enough is enough." We split Venceremos. Splitting Venceremos is not like splitting a group like SDS. A nationwide shootout took over a year. In the end, the right wing was in control of the organization and did three things.

First, they disbanded Venceremos. Second, they installed the Venceremos Continuations Committee and said anyone who wanted to could reapply. The only criterion available to judge applicants was the Continuations Committee's ability to judge politically mature people. Those that came in and agreed with our Analysis were allowed to join the Party.

The others – hippies, chippies, etc. – were told to form their own affinity groups or whatever and send a representative to the Continuations Committee. They never did. The right tendency unified around the present Analysis. CPUSA (P) was formed in 1973 as part of the split. Venceremos survived on the right wing split. The left wing never unified.