

DEC.-JAN.

*Motion Forward Motion Forward Motion*

1986

A SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

\$2.50

BETWEEN THE TWO SUPERPOWERS

war and famine in eritrea

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### Dear friends,

As this *Forward Motion* goes to press, the 1985 Summit between Reagan and Gorbachev has just ended. To no one's surprise, the world has not noticeably moved closer to peace as a result.

"Summitry" reminds us that the world lives in the shadow of two overwhelming world powers—two superpowers. The last ten years have seen virtually a new cold war between the United States and Soviet Union, and the threat of nuclear extinction has grown once again. Both countries have also continued to spawn regional wars, prolong freedom struggles, and otherwise add to the people of the world's miseries. Despite this, when our frightful president finally agrees to his first encounter with the Russians, the world is meant to stop for a week. We are asked to look on and applaud hollow appeals for peace and human rights.

The week's spectacle suggests that the superpowers are truly a world apart. Yet despite an expanded conflict between them, their leading groups still have much more in common with each other than with the rest of the world. In this Rambo era presidency we have, it takes something like the multi-media summit pageant to even suggest such a comparison between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. But sadly today, quite a few countries and peoples do not just live in the shadow of the U.S. and Soviet power. They are caught between the superpowers.

In the spirit of the 1985 Summit, the theme of this FM is "Between the Two Superpowers." As much as any other place in the world, the generation-long struggle in Eritrea fits that description. We are very pleased to be able to include a detailed and informative first hand view of the situation there. Companion pieces update the continuing struggle in Nicaragua for independence and the Philippine freedom struggle, while a book review examines the Khmer Rouge debacle in Kampuchea—all shaped by this context of superpower rivalry. And a report from the recent UN Women's Conference in Nairobi offers insight into this other critical dimension of the freedom struggle today.

The Eritrean national struggle for independence from Ethiopia was set in motion by an earlier era's summitry. With scant consideration of Eritrea's claim to self-determination, the dominant Western nations arbitrarily handed it over to Ethiopia after the World War II defeat of Italy.

By all rights, Eritrea should have won the liberation struggle that steadily grew. Eritreans waged a sophisticated, self-reliant political and military struggle through long years of U.S. world dominance. Close to victory, the Eritreans suddenly faced a new threat, a militarized Ethiopian regime armed and assisted by the Soviet Union. But as we see in the article which follows, at a time of acute drought and famine as well as continuing war, the Eritreans have once again managed to bounce back, hold their own, and make some new advances.

FM is also very pleased this issue to "Welcome, Freedom Road." The Freedom Road Socialist Organization organized this fall through the merger of two groups whose members have made FM possible—the Proletarian Unity League and the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters. The statement is a strong optimistic one, and we encourage interested readers to contact Freedom Road at the address in the article.

Other items of interest in this FM are FM's first look at the farm crisis in the United States and a review of the recent movie, "Kiss of the Spider Woman." As we close out this year and begin to plan next year's articles and themes, we thank all those who gave us your support and help in 1985, and wish us all a stronger, better 1986 for freedom and justice in the world. ■

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## FM Interview

# War and Famine in Eritrea

*For ten years and more, Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Dan Connell has followed the long and truly heroic independence struggle in Eritrea. He is also responsible for much of American media coverage, however sparing it has been, of that struggle. Over the last two years, through Grassroots International, of which Connell is Executive Director, he has pressed for Eritrea, as well as the neighboring Tigray region, to get their fair share of famine relief from the West. Recently, Forward Motion's Bill Fletcher spoke in depth with Dan Connell about Eritrean politics and prospects. (For more information about Grassroots International and a sample copy of its newsletter, write P. O. Box 312, Cambridge, MA 02139.)*

**FM: News from Eritrea is hard to come by in the United States. What can you tell us about the current situation there at the time of your last visit?**

**Dan Connell:** I visited Eritrea for a month in January of 1985 for the first time in four years. I had been there a dozen times before in the 1970s up to 1980, and I was back again in Sudan on the border last May. When I went back I was struck by two things. One was the condition of the people. It was the worst that I have ever seen in ten years of visiting Eritrea. At the same time I was struck by the level of organization of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Eritrean Relief Association, which was higher and more extensive than I have ever seen it before.

It was a mixed experience—a great sadness and a great inspiration at the same time. The general condition of the people has been very poor for a long time. It is a terribly impoverished country—held back in its development for decades by Ethiopian occupation. Before that its progress was severely distorted by Italian and British colonial occupation through the early half of the century.

Over the last five years, however, drought and war have taken an enormous toll. Drought set in in Eritrea in 1980, and during the last two years there has been barely any harvest to speak of in much of the country. I travelled extensively in some of the areas that have in the past produced the most food in Eritrea, and I saw no evidence of a harvest at all during this past year. January comes right at the end of the harvest season. I visited peasants' houses and looked into the big ceramic bins that they store grain in and almost all of them were empty. We also saw dozens of abandoned villages whose entire populations had just left.

Some of that was also due to the war. The war has been quite intense, especially in

western Eritrea, for the last several years, and it is the combination of war and drought that created the current crisis. The war caused tremendous dislocation and suffering and also severely disrupted the relief effort. What you find now are massive numbers of people who have been displaced from their home villages unable to produce food. Over a half million have gone to Sudan in the last twenty years, but there are probably a million more Eritreans within the country who have moved around from one village to another. Hundreds of thousands live either in small camps run by the Eritrean Relief Association or camped out in improvised tents and shelters made out of cardboard, plastic and whatever else they can find.

The biggest change in the last five years is probably the extension of the EPLF's operations throughout the country. In 1978 two liberation fronts, the EPLF and the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) were active. At that time they controlled almost the entire country—all but three major towns, the two ports and Asmara, the capital (plus a couple of small garrisons, including Barentu in western Eritrea, which was extremely hard to capture).

In mid-1978 the war took a sharp turn, with a massive influx of Soviet military hardware and, in effect, a new Ethiopian army trained and armed by the Soviet Union. A major invasion by about 110 to 120 thousand Ethiopian troops supported by hundreds of tanks and jet aircraft forced the Eritreans to retreat from most of the large towns they had held. They went back into the countryside. After that, almost annually, large scale Ethiopian campaigns attempted to extend their control. These were stalemated, mostly by the EPLF since the ELF had suffered severely in the 1978 fighting. Efforts to bring about a unity agreement between the two movements broke down in 1980, and civil war broke out between them. In 1980 and 1981, the EPLF drove the ELF entirely out of Eritrea.

By the time I got there in 1984 the EPLF was the only front operating in the country and it had extended its control into all regions. This is a remarkable change. A lot of the areas that I travelled in this year were formerly controlled by the ELF. Now operating among all the peoples you have a front with a democratic program committed to equality among all nationalities and the two major religions of Eritrea (Christianity and Islam). The social base for any other sort of opposition based on tribal or religious grounds is gone. A lot of the problems that Eritrea had before that, as with many Third World countries in this situation, stem from right-wing movements that really base themselves in a religious or minority ethnic identity. By tackling that during the early part of the 1980s, the EPLF probably resolved the most fundamental problem of the struggle.

By 1984 the EPLF was in its strongest position ever. Opening the year by going on the offensive for the first time since 1978, the EPLF captured the western town of Tesenei and then went on to capture a large section of the Red Sea coast. It even mounted an operation in Asmara in which thirty or so Soviet aircraft were knocked out in the country's main airport.

Despite their advantage, the EPLF pulled back after that. By 1984, the major prob-

lem had become the famine. Famine had spread during the previous four years to the point where the population today is severely threatened. For this reason, the EPLF halted offensive military operations, continually raised calls for a cease-fire and put most of their efforts into dealing with civilian problems associated with the drought and famine. They built new roads and set up a logistical operation that could reach people throughout the country. By the end of the year, massive numbers of people were starving in Eritrea. In the past, Eritrea has had problems with malnutrition and large numbers of deaths associated with hunger, but not real starvation as in Ethiopia, where famines have taken place every eight to ten years. Now for the first time the impact of the drought coupled with the war threatened large segments of the population. Many people could be reached only by animal caravans because the EPLF could not get trucks in. Worst of all, even with the tremendous international response to the famine, very little aid was getting to Eritrea. Almost all was going to the Ethiopian government.



When I went in in January 1985, I saw large movements of people within the country. Many were war victims or displaced because of the war, not simply the drought. Many were moving toward the Sudan border. The Relief Association attempted to hold them in small camps camouflaged from aerial view—otherwise they would be bombed—so relatively few actually crossed into Sudan. Large numbers were piling up in the small camps in Eritrea. I saw people starving in a number of these camps for lack of emergency food items, especially milk. I also saw large amounts of internationally donated food being sold in the markets. Food had gone through the Ethiopian government to the major towns it controls, and now merchants there said they bought the food from military officers.

So you see that the necessity to deal with the famine offered an incredible contrast to the ongoing military situation. Almost every day we were there, Ethiopian aircraft buzzed overhead looking for targets of opportunity. In the central highlands, there was a significant amount of fighting early this past year—skirmishing really—around the main roads linking Ethiopia with Eritrea. Since then, in early July 1985, the EPLF returned to the offensive and captured the town of Barentu in western Eritrea. The Eritreans had been unable to take Barentu in the 1970s because it sits on top an extremely well defended hilltop. This time they mounted an attack based primarily on

artillery and tanks—captured Soviet weapons. They took it in a nineteen hour battle. This startling victory gave them complete control of western Eritrea, from the seacoast all the way down to the Sudanese border. This offers the Eritreans a very substantial base area, including protecting the civilian displaced peoples camps, a key part of their strategy.

There has been and will continue to be fairly heavy fighting in the area around Barentu in the central Eritrean highlands. The Ethiopians recaptured Barentu and Tesenei at the end of August by bringing in 35,000 reinforcements and parachuting some of them behind the EPLF lines. One other consequence was the loss of an ERA agricultural project at Ali Ghidir where 5,000 hectares were under cultivation by local farmers. This will only increase the hunger problem next year. Nevertheless, the EPLF is pushing to force the situation in that area, and I think they expect to see considerably increased combat over the coming six months. They are now finally in a position to break the stalemate. The EPLF is at the early stages of a counteroffensive which could very well end up in 1986 with a repeat of what happened in 1977, with cutting of the main roads, surrounding and isolating of the main Ethiopian-held towns and eventually even the siege of Asmara itself. I think the EPLF now feels the Ethiopians have severe morale problems among their troops. They have serious political problems that arise from the combination of famine, economic collapse, and the failure of their military campaigns over ten years. So the opportunity is there to try to force negotiations to end the war.

**FM: Are there any signs of cease-fire negotiations?**

**Connell:** There have been isolated talks off and on during 1985 between the EPLF and the government but they have not led to anything. The EPLF has a position on a peace settlement that calls for an internationally supervised cease fire leading to an internationally supervised referendum giving the people a choice between full union with Ethiopia, a federation with Ethiopia or some form of regional autonomy. The EPLF have insisted that the people of Eritrea will have to decide. The Ethiopians for their part have shown no inclination to enter negotiations that include even the possibility of independence. The fact that the government has talked may show that the Ethiopian authorities are aware that they face a serious crisis here that has to be dealt with in some way. But there has been no progress toward this.

**FM: I want to return to the issue of the famine for a second. One thing that is not clear to a lot of people is whether the famine that hit not only Eritrea and Ethiopia, but Chad, Mauritania and elsewhere is a natural phenomenon or something else.**

**Connell:** We are witnessing something qualitatively different from a natural disaster. It is the cumulative result of economic exploitation, political manipulation and horrendous mismanagement of resources principally by the narrowly-based elites in cooperation with the industrial countries. Africa has always had drought; the climate runs in cycles. In every eight to ten years, there are bad years for rain. Yet people have never starved in Africa in the numbers they are now.

Some people raise the question of overpopulation in Africa, which is nonsense when you look at the actual numbers and land areas involved. Take Sudan, for instance. It is one of the hardest hit countries but 80% of the arable land is not under cultivation. In fact they have a population shortage and are unable to take advantage of their resources. With even the simplest advances in development toward mechanized farming and light industry, they would have an extreme shortage of workers to be able to handle it. So population is a distraction from the issue.

The problems really stem from the misallocation of resources over such a long period of time. The impoverishment of the people of these countries is such that they live on the brink in good times; when bad times come along, it has a tremendous impact. Whether they are associated with East or West, these countries are deeply in debt. This has entered them into a cycle of increasing the use of good land for cash crops to pay their bills, forcing more people onto more and more marginal land. In the West African Sahel countries, you find the nomads pushed off of the bad land with their animals. That increases the pressure on that land as the goats nibble away at what little grass there is. As that happens, desertification takes place: the desert spreads. It is really important to understand that this is only partly a natural phenomenon. It is fundamentally a social and economic phenomenon, because of increasing pressure on the Sahel, which is an Arabic word meaning border of the desert. The increased pressure on the border areas is what causes them to be exhausted, eroded and then ultimately turned into desert.



Photo courtesy of author

There are ways of dealing with this problem, but they mean going back and taking a hard look at the international indebtedness of these countries. Simultaneously, it means taking a hard look at the internal control of resources. Peasant farmers and the nomads make up 80 to 90% of these societies, but narrowly based elites supported by the industrial countries reap the fruits of what little is produced. The whole structure of the economies of most of these countries is based around the same process of extraction of resources for export as they were in the colonial period. The cycle of indebtedness encourages this at an ever accelerating rate.

**FM: Does the technology exist to reclaim the desert land?**

**Connell:** Yes it does. But it requires a multi-year investment: first simply sowing the type of grass that holds the soil in place, and then not grazing on it for periods of time. You have to set aside land to do it. You can see the same thing anywhere in the U.S. If you go to Provincetown (on Cape Cod, Mass.), you can see how they have stopped the sand dunes from moving, (or any of the beaches along the coast). You sow grass, you fence it off, and pretty soon you have grass all over the hills. Similarly, reforestation can take place but that also has to be a multi-year investment.

You need to mount a significant campaign to bring about the changes. You need a combination of emergency assistance to provide people with basic food, medicine and other supplies, a serious medium-term investment to increase available production, and a long term investment in rehabilitating the land and developing alternative forms of production that are integrated into the local surroundings.

Let me give you one simple example. The Tigray region in Ethiopia is probably the worst area in Africa right now. We have seen somewhere between three and five hundred thousand people die out of an estimated population of five million in the last year—absolutely extraordinary. This is the area that produced more than one hundred thousand refugees into Sudan in the past six months. It is also the area that produces the tremendous refugee camps that were filmed for TV and really focussed world attention on this. In one area of Tigray this past year, among the worst drought-affected territory, there was an experiment in terracing and irrigation to increase the yield. They ended up this year with an eightfold increase in production while everything else around them dropped to almost nothing. It took almost no sophisticated technology to do it. You can build terraces on hillsides with a level and a hoe and stop the erosion and catch the rainfall.

**FM: Is that the major disaster area, and is it the area controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front?**

**Connell:** The program took place in areas controlled by the TPLF, and it was done under the auspices of the Relief Society of Tigray with some international assistance, but not very much. During the past year the Eritreans have mounted another program—building small rock and earth dams around all the villages. They have a problem of flooding during the limited rain season as well as drought during the rest of the year. Water management is the key. They mobilized people to build these dams all around the area to catch the water for small-scale irrigation. They have avoided mass-

ive starvation in Eritrea in part because of this little project. This took no money and no technology. What makes it possible is that the EPLF in this case is rooted so deeply on the village level. Through the peasant associations, the youth and women's associations, they can mobilize large numbers of people to put simply two days a week during the key periods into building these. It is so starkly simple to deal with some of these problems if you take the appropriate political and social steps.

**FM: You were talking about the Tigray before. About a year ago I was surprised to see an interesting article in the *Boston Globe Magazine* about the Tigray movement. It is a little-known movement and most people have no idea where it is, let alone how to pronounce it. How do you compare that movement and the Eritrean movement, their objectives and organization?**

**Connell:** There are some interesting similarities and contrasts. There are a number of similarities in the political and social approach of the two movements, in the way they organize their people and involve them in the struggle. Certainly both of them are isolated from both major world blocks. They depend almost entirely on their own resources. Both do wage a military struggle and also the social and economic struggle.

There are also significant differences, and they start with the fact that the Tigrayans are Ethiopians proper. The Tigrayans share a history with the Amhara who presently control Ethiopia. They go back hundreds of years together. The core feudal culture that runs through Abyssinia into the twentieth century and becomes Ethiopia is Tigrayan as well. They have been dominated in the empire by the Amharic, but they identify themselves as Ethiopians. They are not struggling to separate from the rest of Ethiopia.

They are also incredibly poor, much more backward, less developed than the Eritreans. When you cross the border from Eritrea to Tigray, you notice differences immediately. It is like walking through a time warp back into the Middle Ages. You see it in the rags they wear, the poverty of the land itself, the feudal deference to foreigners where people bow toward you when they see you. There have been very few roads, few communications under the Amhara rule in this century. No industry was located at all in Tigray; scattered small plot farms still dominate the economy.

Tigray is not ethnically homogenous as a region, but there is a core of Tigrayans while Eritrea is made up of nine different ethnic groups. Eritrea is really a new creation out of the colonial period. The Eritreans include people who overlap with the former French colony Djibouti and also with Sudan. Now the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front has insisted that they have the full right to self-determination, up to and including secession. In practice, however, their program has been to try and build a united front with other Ethiopian movements, both national movements and multi-national movements, with the common aim of overthrowing the Ethiopian military regime. Their goal is a democratic Ethiopia that would promise equality for all nationalities. They are actively engaged in discussion on this now with the OROMO Liberation Front and with a relatively new movement, a multinational movement in Ethiopia called the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement. The EPDM is based principally among the

Amhara people of Wollo and Gondar province in Central Ethiopia. The three have been talking seriously about a united front. They have supported the right of the Eritreans to independence, and the Eritreans have supported their efforts to confront the regime.

**FM: So principally they are democratic movements as opposed to secessionist ones.?**

**Connell:** Right.

**FM: I recently read the book, *Never Kneel Down* and it referred a lot to mass organizations. I was curious about the way the EPLF is organized, and specifically its conception of peoples democracy.**

**Years ago some friends visited Grenada after the revolution. When they came back they talked about the way things were organized according to mass organizations—the women’s organization, the workers’ organization and the students’ organization. After Bishop was killed, and the U.S. invasion, people went back to sum things up. One observation that they have made is that while these mass organizations existed, there were still problems of actual democracy in the way things were run. To what extent do you get a sense that the EPLF has summed up and learned from the experiences of different socialist countries and movements in terms of democracy?**

**Connell:** Well, I think that the question of democracy is fundamental to any revolutionary movement now. That is one of the lessons that we all have to take out of the several decades of successful and unsuccessful struggle.

You know every regime that comes to power in the Third World these days with any attempt at presenting itself as progressive puts forward the notion of organizing the people and setting up mass organizations. Having mass organizations in and of itself means nothing. The Ethiopian government has mass organizations. Everybody has mass organizations. The question of *democracy* is the fundamental one. We have to look at these organizations to see to what extent they represent a bottom-up mobilization of the people and to what extent are they simply a mechanism for controlling the people. They can be either one.

Let me answer your question by talking about how the mass organizations are structured in Eritrea which I know much better than Tigray. When the EPLF first goes into villages (which they did recently in the areas that had been controlled by the ELF; in other areas it goes back to the mid-70’s), they start a variety of social programs to improve the lot of the people. They may present cultural programs where they will explain their programs and their positions on things just to win the confidence of the people. They will provide medical services, veterinary services and other things. They will begin with political cadres in the village getting to know who are the most active people in the village. Eventually these will be organized into small study circles which will eventually form the core of mass organizations.

The mass organizations include youth—people from age 16 to 25— women’s organizations and the peasant organizations in the countryside. In the towns there are also the workers’ associations, but these, of course, are almost all now clandestine and

broken up into smaller groups. In addition, there are professional associations of the people in the middle class: merchants may be in one, teachers in another and doctors. In effect this class is divided up in many different organizations.



Photo courtesy of author

The EPLF brings health services to the people.

These associations in their turn are subdivided based upon class analysis of Eritrean society. For example, the peasants have been roughly categorized as poor, middle and rich peasants, depending upon their relationship to their means of production. If they are forced to sell their labor to survive, for example, they come under the heading of poor peasants. If they are able to survive on their own resources they are middle peasants. If they have surplus land and hire other laborers to work on their land then they come under the heading of rich peasants. It is a little more complicated than that but those are the rough guidelines. Now the associations themselves are divided into subgroups based upon those categories. In one village, you may have ten different poor peasant groups, two middle peasant groups, and one rich peasant group, but each with fifty people in it who are active in a peasant association. Women's associations and youth associations are being broken down similarly. Each one of these subgroups elects a leader who sits on the village assembly, a kind of congress for the village. In this way, the power in the village sits in the hands of the least enfranchised population, the poor peasants and the women.

That is the structure, and the process has been fascinating to watch. The people

there have no experience with democracy, and inevitably at first they will elect the person who speaks the loudest or had the most influence or who they feared would hit them from behind if they voted for someone else. In the early stages of their organizing, the EPLF maintains a lot of control over what happens in these associations; then they gradually divest themselves of it. They might hold elections as often as every three months simply for the opportunities to explain what elections are for. You sit down and you analyze: this person did this and didn't do that. Did he or she teach you? Serve you? Here are the issues that have been before the village: where does this person stand? EPLF representatives go through that time after time to try to educate people to recognize their interests. They also encourage a tremendous amount of public demonstrating. What you have is a process that probably has as much importance as the content of the political education. They are attempting to build a confidence among the people in their own ability to make changes. That is the key.

I was very struck this past year at how widespread the notion is that we—that labor—can really change the world. The slogan in Eritrea is that our own cooperative efforts can transform the situation in which we live. People do not say that there anymore; they are doing it. Wherever you go if people have nothing at hand to do, they are decorating or they are moving things. Nobody sits still because it is now so much a part of the daily mentality that change is possible. That is an enormous breakthrough for a feudal population which has centuries of training that the world is as it is because God made it so and there is nothing you can do about it.

In Eritrea today, you have political education, you have the process of teaching people what elections are for, and you have these two coupled with practical transformation. A whole series of land reforms have been put into effect in Eritrea. Land reform in Ethiopia has been by fiat, by government proclamation. The Eritreans did it by agitating at the grass roots level to the point where the people in the villages demand it. When demand gathers force and where a majority of the people get behind it, the village actually puts it through. The process operates at different speeds in different localities depending upon the immediate situation. That in turn is summed up at the regional and national levels under the constant attempt to pay attention to areas that are moving faster or slower than others.

But you asked about the historical experiences of other struggles. One of the things that you hear from people in Eritrea looking at the Soviet and Chinese and other experiences is that key changes were imposed on those populations and fostered a gap between the political leadership and the people. The Eritreans are concerned that if it takes ten times as long, the momentum for change has to come from the base. They have encouraged this upward motion through so many different approaches that you sit down at meetings and people have no hesitation to criticize the EPLF, or if they have concerns they will demonstrate against the EPLF.

Another important point worth bringing out is that the EPLF has made it quite clear for years that they are not going to transform the Front into a political party when they win independence. Instead they have been organizing political cadre for fifteen years

now within the front and within the civil organizations. These cadre provide the political core leadership and will form the basis for a party. This party will include as many or more civilian cadre as military cadre, so it will not be a militarized party as has been the case in many African struggles.

**FM: What would that mean practically speaking? As far as I understand, the EPLF has not united different organizations as such, it has functioned as a party, hasn't it?**

**Connell:** It has some of the characteristics of a party, but the EPLF is very careful about identifying itself as a national liberation front. No, there are not different organizations functioning within it and they don't permit caucuses within the front. In that sense, it is like a party. They have at the same time called for an agreement with other Eritrean factions now based in Sudan that would give them the right to come in and agitate within Eritrea. They have said that they would not permit more than one army in Eritrea so that they will not get into a PLO-kind of situation where there are a lot of different armed movements with different political positions operating. On the other hand, they have also said that they favor a multi-party system after independence. They truly have a distinctive advantage, but they are willing to permit open agitation by other political parties and persuasions so long as they do not disrupt the political and economic situation and are not armed.

Here is perhaps a minor point, but it illustrates something to me. On the Ethiopian side in the war, the troops can be arrested and even executed if they are caught listening to the EPLF radio, which broadcasts several times a day in a number of languages. The EPLF has encouraged the people to listen to the Ethiopian government radio and they hold seminars on it. What they are saying is that if the consciousness of the people is clear, they have nothing to fear from political ideas.

**FM: A lot of people have said similar things, but have had varying degrees of success in actually doing it, whether in the Chinese party or various national liberation movements in Africa. A commitment to a multi-party system and this trust in people is real grounds for optimism.**

**Let me ask you two other things. The Eritrean movement by all reports gets little international support, at least not any large scale military support. It is clear why the Soviets do not support them at this point. I wonder if you know whether the United States has made any overtures to give them any kind of aid. Also, why haven't other forces supported them. Years ago we used to hear that a number of countries, China included, would not support movements that aimed at changing the borders within Africa. Is this a factor, or what does account for the lack of international support?**

**Connell:** The reasons tend to be fairly straightforward and political. Many progressive countries and movements supported the Eritreans before the Soviet Union came into Ethiopia. Now many of them have either downplayed their solidarity or turned it inside out and supported the Ethiopians against the Eritreans. The Eritreans are political mavericks: they don't fit any easy categorization. They totally oppose the

Soviet Union, not only in the immediate military sense, but in a fundamental political sense. They oppose the Soviets' approach to organization, their relations with the rest of the world and their political and social programs. Yet the EPLF has not denounced the Soviet Union as socialist imperialist, so they don't fit another leftist movement category which might draw them more attention from the U.S.

The U.S. perspective apparently runs that, to start with, Ethiopia is a bigger prize than Eritrea. Also, a popularly-based left-oriented movement is much more dangerous than a narrowly-based military government holding power through a coup d'état, even if that government is now hostile to the U.S. But the Soviet Union has much more control over Ethiopia than simply the support of one or two people, and the situation is not as simple as in some other Third World countries which have suddenly shifted East to West. Still, it has been my impression that the U.S. has really looked at this situation all along from a perspective of how to win back Ethiopia. The Eritreans have been considered a bit too hot to handle. It has been quite striking to me in the ten years I have covered the situation that contacts with U.S. government officials inevitably get down to the question of, "well, how Marxist are these Eritreans?" They are trying to determine if these are people they can work with.

During this past year, the U.S. has indicated a willingness to provide at least humanitarian assistance across the border into Eritrea and Tigray as well as massive amounts for Ethiopia. Perhaps they expected the Eritreans to come hat in hand, begging. Instead the Eritreans have affirmed their unreadiness to join the U.S. camp, thoroughly angering some people here. The EPLF office has always maintained that the U.S. is the most dangerous country they have to deal with, whether through the backdoor or across the trench, and they have been wary of any assistance. The EPLF has said that Eritrean Relief Association operations should seek aid from any place they can, including the U.S., but the EPLF has declined to request direct U.S. military assistance.

As far as China, I don't know their actual position. Years back, the Chinese did offer the EPLF support conditional on the EPLF denouncing the Soviet Union as social imperialist and denouncing the Gang of Four [former Chinese leaders removed as ultra-left—ed.]. The EPLF responded that, as far as analysis of the Soviet Union, we are a national liberation front, not a party, and we do not have a position on the character of the Soviet Union, nor will we denounce it in these terms. They also maintained that the Gang of Four was an internal Chinese matter on which the EPLF would have nothing to say. They did not get any Chinese help.

They have managed; they have built a whole strategy around fighting with mainly captured weapons. It has taken a much longer time than might otherwise have been the case, but they now have somewhere between 200 and 300 tanks and armored cars giving them one of the largest mechanized forces in Black Africa. The EPLF also has very sophisticated military leadership who have demonstrated time and again that the determination of strategy and tactics and the morale of the fighters themselves ultimately are more decisive than the quality of the hardware. At the same time, when

they are outgunned and outmanned, as they have been at different periods, they have had to fall back. That extends the war and increases the cost on both the Ethiopian and Eritrean people, but it has not changed its basic course.



Photo courtesy of author

Unexploded Soviet-made bomb in the Eritrean countryside.

**FM: In an earlier conversation, you indicated that the Eritreans got a surprising level of support from the Socialist International in Europe.**

**Connell:** Yes, and they have maintained a certain level of support within some of the Eurocommunist parties, though it is an ambivalent support. For example, the Italian Communist Party supports the right to self-determination for Eritrea, and it also supports the Ethiopian government. Cuba has taken a borderline position—declining to get involved in the Eritrean struggle because it is an internal matter, yet training Ethiopian soldiers who fight there.

In the last several years, the socialist parties in Europe have provided at least more moral support. The British Labor Party has a position that if it come to power, it will provide direct material assistance to the EPLF. The French socialists support the Eritreans, but now that they are in power, the French are not providing them with significant material assistance. The EPLF, however, relocated its foreign office there from

Beirut. The ERA has gotten considerable humanitarian assistance from European organizations outside the political sphere, particularly the churches, and especially from the Scandinavian countries, from Holland, Belgium, and also from Australia and a small amount from Canada. Only a very small amount has come from the U.S.

**FM: That leads to a last question. If the principal or immediate enemies of the Eritreans are the Ethiopians and their Soviet allies, what can people here actually do?**

**Connell:** What is important to point out here is that while the Soviet Union is the immediate, battlefield enemy of the Eritreans, the U.S. has also acted in a hostile way towards the Eritreans. There are things we can do, particularly targeting the role of the U.S. in the region. The Ethiopian regime is really supported by both the Soviet Union and the U.S. The Soviet Union provides the military hardware. The U.S. and Western countries in general provide the economic means for survival without which the regime in Ethiopia would not have survived a day. It is not only humanitarian assistance which is literally keeping large sections of the population alive in a kind of welfare system that permits the government to continue to wage war. Ethiopia also receives economic assistance through the European economic community, through the World Bank and through a variety of other mechanisms. The U.S. remains Ethiopia's largest single trading partner. I cite these as examples of the ties we do have.

Where the U.S. can probably be confronted is on the human needs in Eritrea, which are enormous. The Eritrean people receive only a tiny fraction of the aid going over there. This aid is politically motivated to support U.S. policy interests and make friends in Ethiopia. That aid should be turned around so that an appropriate amount goes directly to the Eritrean people. At a simple level, Americans can challenge the U.S. government as well as private agencies, churches and every other channel. The "U.S.A. for Africa" right now has 50 million dollars ready to spend and we should make sure that this money serves the people who need it most.

Second, there is the question of a solution to the crisis over there. It is important to say that the U.S. has a historical responsibility for the Eritrean crisis as it is now. In 1950, the U.S. sponsored the federation of Eritrea to Ethiopia in the first place against the wishes of the Eritreans for independence. We should push the United States to support peace negotiations to end the war. The U.S. could raise the issue in the United Nations. We could raise it through our local politicians saying, "Enough. Twenty-four years of war is enough." The Eritreans should have a perfect right to self-determination, and the U.S. should not stand in the way of it any more than the Soviet Union.

So while the situation is a little different from some other areas, the U.S. is very much involved, and there is much we can do.

**FM: Thank-you, Dan, for talking with us.**

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# National Democratic Front of the Philippines

## International Day of Protest

*In recent months, the Filipino struggle is back in the news. The call to protest we printed below summarizes the situation there including the essential support our government provides the Marcos dictatorship. The two items which follow—a poem and a letter from a Filipina activist, indicate some of the road ahead as well as the spirit of the Filipino people.*

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The Filipino people have always observed September 21 as a day of protest since that infamous day in 1972 when the Marcos regime, prodded and supported by the then Nixon administration of the U.S. government, declared martial law and established the U.S.-Marcos dictatorship.

Today, it is very appropriate that overseas Filipinos and foreign friends also observe this day as an international day of protest against the Marcos dictatorship. It is a measure of the gains that the international solidarity movement supporting the Filipino people's struggle have achieved. However, the more urgent reason is that U.S. imperialism under the stewardship of the Reagan administration currently steps up its interference in the purely domestic affairs in the Philippines, to support the tottering Marcos regime and to lay the ground work for the possible direct intervention of American troops in the future. The international dimensions of the current internal conflict in the Philippines have consequently broadened and heightened.

Certainly, the National Democratic Front, the united front organization of the various revolutionary classes, groups, organizations, and individuals in the Philippines, has always taken the view that the democratic struggle against the Marcos dictatorial regime is inseparable from the national struggle against its U.S. imperialist master.

U.S. imperialism is the dominant power in the Philippines over most of this century until the present. The historical precedent for the carnage that was the Vietnam War was the U.S. invasion of the Philippines at the turn of the century, which deprived the Filipino people the fruits of their hard won victory over the Spanish colonialists and which cost over 600,000 Filipino lives.

Since then and through the present semicolonial period of sham independence, U.S. imperialism maintained its dominant position through a system of U.S. bases, economic leverage, cultural imperialism, and most important, a loyal local regime of puppets and opportunist politicians such as the present Marcos dictatorial regime.

The gains are huge. A globally strategic position was secured. The Philippines henceforth figured prominently in various strategic U.S. imperialist schemes—in joining the plunder of China, in the containment policy during the Korean and Cold Wars, in supporting the U.S. aggression in Vietnam, in the Middle East and in Korea, and in the Reaganist proposal for a U.S. and Japanese “Pacific Rim Community.” Economic advantages were reaped: a profitable source of colonial trade profits of \$1B to \$2B annually, investment superprofits of around \$3B to \$4B yearly and loan interest earnings of at least \$1.5B per year. Indeed, U.S. imperialism never had it so good,

Such economic exploitation and geopolitical position of the Philippines directly translate into grinding poverty for at least 85 percent of the Filipino people and their virtual political enslavement: first, under direct U.S. colonial rule; second, under a semicolonial two-party dictatorship of local puppets with a formal democratic facade; and third, when the deception grew too thin, under the open terrorist rule of the U.S.-Marcos dictatorship. Misery and tyranny are the current lot and bleak future for the Filipino people under U.S. imperialist rule.



The valiant Filipino people have never consented to such a grievous fate. Not a decade of U.S. direct and indirect rule passed without armed and mass resistance to its rule. The present armed struggle of the New People’s Army and other armed opposition groups and the massive open mass movement of the people are the continuation of these various struggles. Different from these struggles, however, the present-day

revolutionary and democratic movement threatens the U.S.-created ruling system as never before. Even the establishment of a fascist dictatorship failed to stem the tide of the people's resistance.

In relation to this scenario of a puppet dictatorship teetering on the brink of collapse can one explain recent U.S. imperialist moves, essentially directed at propping up the Marcos regime and intensifying attacks against the anti-imperialist and democratic forces led by the NDF.

Economically, this means using the IMF-World Bank and its own economic aid in an attempt to stem the acute economic crisis and thus stabilize the economic base of the dictatorship. Also, economic aid is used as leverage to attain certain economic and political returns from the Marcos regime designed to attract the anti-Marcos factions of the ruling class into reconciling with the fascist dictatorship.

Politically, this means giving a new mandate to the Marcos regime while inveigling the anti-Marcos factions in the ruling class to participate in the coming 1986 and 1987 elections with promise of U.S. support. U.S. imperialism hopes in these elections to ensure the peaceful competition in the ruling class and develop a new crop of reliable puppets from whose ranks the successor to dictator Marcos will be chosen. The isolation of progressive forces through rabid anti-communist attacks is also being pursued to prevent them from drawing the people to the correct revolutionary path.

Militarily, this means propping up and training the reactionary Armed Forces of the Philippines for intensified counter-insurgency campaigns, thus unleashing a new and more intensive reign of terror in both cities and countrysides. This is done through the U.S.-planned "OPlan Katatagan" and an integrated civil security program. Along with military aid, U.S. military advisers are being introduced into the Philippines disguised as "mobile training teams". The objective, of course, is to lay the groundwork for the possible massive intervention of U.S. troops in the future.

U.S. interference in Philippine affairs translates directly into more economic misery and political terrorism of the Filipino people. They will never consent to this bondage and slavery.

Since the establishment of the U.S.-Marcos dictatorship, and especially since the political assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Jr., in 1983, they have been launching bigger and extensive mass struggles, both armed and unarmed, in the countrysides and cities, to overthrow this hated dictatorship.

The international front of the Filipino people's struggle marches along with the struggle in the home front. The NDF committees and support groups in more than twenty countries are striving mightily to consolidate and answer the call of the Motherland for the massive support from fellow Filipino patriots abroad and foreign friends.

To the latter, the NDF addresses the calls to intensify and raise to a higher level the solidarity movement against U.S. intervention in the Philippines and to provide larger political and material support to the Philippine revolution.

**Long live the unity of the Filipino people and other progressive peoples of the world!**

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## Dear Friends at Forward Motion:

I have spent several years as an activist in the Philippine support movement, first as part of a family of Filipino activists, then on my own as a student in the Philadelphia area, and lately, as part-time organizer for the Friends of the Filipino People, and other organizations in Boston. Last summer, I began to experience the symptoms of burn out, and it took a good friend telling me “You sound burned out” before I realized I should do something about it. I felt angry, resentful, and tired, but the guilt I felt about feeling that way kept me from pulling back from my organizing work.

What follows are my reflections about the problems I encountered in the peace and justice solidarity movement from the point of view I had as a Philippine issue activist.

The group I have worked the longest with, FFP, has had both trials and triumphs over the past 13 years of its existence. The Friends of the Filipino People face some of the same problems that face all of us in the anti-intervention struggle. I break them down into three categories: 1) internal to the organization (for example, the lack of a clear structure in the group); 2) demographics (that is, the need for greater participation from the third world community); 3) external to the organization (that is, the need for a stronger politics of anti-imperialism among progressive groups). These are not easy problems by any means. Nevertheless, the long-term feasibility of maintaining an operating organization depends on how the group handles these issues.

The Friends of the Filipino People is at a crucial juncture in its own history. Events in the Philippines are gaining momentum, and the FFP needs a stronger internal structure as well as more resource people who can build support within the U.S. public. In this time of great urgency, we should be developing new resource people, not relying on old dependable resource individuals. We should be thinking about new ways to reach the media, not falling into routinized and hackneyed forms of networking (mailing flyers and holding potlucks get boring after a while). Individual anxiety and guilt keep us from stepping back to consider what is best for the development of the organization; instead, we have been led by the needs of the struggle—lobbying Congress needs to be timed to Congressional debates, human rights developments need immediate publicity, etc.—to the detriment of the group itself.

I believe that there are some of us who wish that we were leading the revolution in the Philippines (or in Nicaragua or El Salvador or South Africa), and in our delusions of grandeur, we have forgotten to think about the survival of our own movement.

The lack of a politicized, participating Filipino community is a very real dilemma for Philippine-issue activists. As a Filipina-American, I often feel torn and isolated between my longing for Filipino contacts and the pressures to continue working with my U.S. comrades. I must note that FFP has been very effective precisely because of its strong U.S. constituency. At the same time, what I see happening because of the lack of a Fil-

ipino orientation within the FFP is the collapse of the time frame in the minds of our organizers. Instead of integrating a variety of issues and concerns, e.g. political, cultural and social, the FFP is short-term issue-oriented. But this problem has more complex causes.

The strength of FFP has always been that we appeal to the public on the basis of their concern for individual freedoms and weapons disarmament, but we go no further to educate them about the evils of imperialism.

In the solidarity movement as a whole, this problem of fragmenting issues has become the source of disappointment to me. In our efforts to procure small changes in the big system, we have lost sight of our real dream for justice and peace and the right to self-determination. Our humanism has become lost in our pragmatism, and we choose liberal reforms, promising ourselves that later, we will deal with the problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia among ourselves. What we need to learn from our brothers and sisters in the Philippines, in Nicaragua and El Salvador, in South Africa, is that what lies ahead is a very long fight to recapture control of our lives, to redefine our purpose from mere survival to something more meaningful. This requires a political view grounded in theory and refined by experience. We have to stop thinking of our day-to-day organizing as an end in itself, and this is what seems to be happening around me today.

Sincerely yours,  
Karin Aguilar-San Juan

*—Karin Aguilar-San Juan is currently working for the release of her aunt, Mila Aguilar, now a political prisoner in the Philippines.*

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# Researcher Reporting on the Dumagats \*

Left alone,  
the tribal *kainginero* \*\*  
will not always seek new forests.  
He merely moves  
from one *kaingin* to another  
to preserve the cradle  
of his sustenance.

## 2

Dried up  
by three whole days  
of bright undiminished sunlight,  
cut vegetative cover  
burns rapidly,  
leaving less damage  
to the precious soil  
than slow-burning fire  
on half-dried vegetation.

## 3

Weeding is not practised.  
Left fallow  
for years,  
shrubs and trees  
quite naturally reforest  
the *kaingin*.

## 4

Ashes  
provide food to the crops.  
Look at the first harvest,  
the ashes were still there  
at planting.

Surely yield declines  
with the memory of ashes  
eaten up  
or washed out by the rains  
of time.

**5**

They let the sun  
do the stamping  
on *baguntao*\*\*\* seeds sown a dozen-strong  
in holes  
left happily uncovered—  
until the rains come.

**6**

*Mayas* are allowed  
to feed on palay.  
For once driven off,  
their loud cries  
bring more *mayas*  
to the rescue, and the attack  
destroys.

**7**

For supplement  
they gather honey.  
A single beehive  
could produce  
anywhere from one to three gallons,  
depending on  
the magnitude of flowering:  
fewer flowers  
mean less honey.

So too  
with people,  
I imagine.  
We do not always seek new forests,  
left alone  
unweeded  
and uncovered.  
Indeed we grow,  
strengthened by the elements,

leaving less damage  
than those who are continually  
driven off, or shackled,  
deprived of their  
full flowering.

*They* leave no honey—  
not even precious ashes,  
I would have you know.

—*Mila Aguilar*

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\* Tribal group in the Philippines.

\*\* Slash-and-burn planter.

\*\*\* Staple grain crop.

—*Mila Aguilar, the Filipina poet, is still imprisoned at Camp Bagong Diwa in Bicutan, over a year after her arrest. An international support group is now working for her release: in the U.S., please contact Committee to Free Mila Aguilar, P. O. Box 1726, Cambridge, MA 02138 for up-to-date information.*

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# Nicaragua: Zero Hour . . . Again!

## Revolution in the Revolution

In 1969, after having escaped from a Costa Rican prison to temporary haven in Cuba, Carlos Fonseca Amador, revolutionary fugitive, visionary, and architect of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, published one of the most important documents of the 47-year revolutionary struggle against the Somoza dynasty, entitled *Nicaragua: Zero Hour*.

By 1969, Silvio Mayorga, Modesta Duarte, Julio Buitrago, Carlos Tinoco, and other founding members of the embryonic liberation movement had been trapped and murdered by Somoza's National Guard, jailed, or hounded into exile like Fonseca. As much in despair as in analysis, the bespectacled Fonseca examined the conflicting forces in Nicaraguan society and the tactical and strategic errors made in enfranchising or defeating those forces. His masterwork became the ideological springboard from which a reconstituted, redirected FSLN launched its armed campaigns in 1974 and 1978, culminating in the final offensive and victorious general insurrection of May-July 1979.

Here, in part, is what the godfather of the Sandinista Peoples' Revolution said:

The people of Nicaragua have been suffering under the yoke of a reactionary clique imposed by Yankee imperialism virtually since 1932, the year in which Anastasio Somoza Garcia was named commander-in-chief of the so-called National Guard (GN), a post that had previously been filled by Yankee officials. This clique has reduced Nicaragua to the status of a neocolony—exploited by Yankee monopolies and the local capitalist class. . . .

The Sandinista National Liberation Front understands how hard the guerilla road is. But it is not prepared to retreat. We know that we are confronting a bloody, reactionary armed force like the National Guard, the ferocious GN, which maintains intact the practices of cruelty that were inculcated in it by its creator, the U.S. Marines. Bombardment of villages, cutting of children's throats, violation of women, burning huts with peasants inside them, mutilation as a torture—these were the study courses that the U.S. professors of civilization taught the GN during the period of guerilla resistance (1927-1932) led by Augusto Cesar Sandino. . . .

The Sandinista National Liberation Front believes that at the present time and for a certain period to come, Nicaragua will be going through a stage in which a radical political force will be developing its specific characteristics. Consequently, at the current time, it is necessary for us to strongly emphasize that our major objective is the socialist revolution, a revolution that aims to defeat Yankee imperialism and its local agents, false oppositionists, and false revolutionaries.

Despite the triumph and escalation to power of the Sandinistas since 1979. Carlos Fonseca's reading of the Nicaraguan people, the opposing forces that sought or smashed their unity, and the role, purpose, and direction of the Sandinista National Liberation Front carries as much gravity today as it did at the nadir of the popular struggle.

Without a definitive halt to the four year old, CIA-coordinated "contra" war of attrition, an expansion of the stalled agrarian reform program, an equitable resolution to the demands for political autonomy and economic self-determination by the indigenous people of the Atlantic Coast, and a practical clarification of their uniquely mixed economic program, the Sandinistas face a public policy nightmare. We can foresee unconsolidated programs and disgruntled peasants in rural areas, U.S.-financed bloodletting expeditions on border residents by neighboring collaborators, and an increase of urban and rural "fifth column" organizing and sabotage intended to provoke heavy-handed official response.

It is in this climate of the unpredictable death of innocent civilians, endless popular sacrifice, unkept or deferred promises, compounded by the price of grinding, daily "anti-development," that the U.S. imperial state has been able to effect reverses in the developing world's march toward socialism; those in doubt need only examine the pre-conditions for counter-revolution achieved by U.S. "agencies" prior to the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973 and the "coup" against the Bishop government of Grenada in 1983.

Nicaragua is again at "zero hour," and it has fallen to the young "government of guerillas" and all progressive internationalists and humanists to not only defend, but to *extend* the gains, the experience, and the survival of the best alternative model of development in the western hemisphere.

### **Reagan's Two Big Lies**

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and its broad base of supporters (depending upon the source, 50-80 percent of the 3.5 million Nicaraguans) have been rhetorically condemned and economically isolated by successive U.S. regimes since they wrested power from the the imperial Somoza dynasty on 19 July 1979.

However, since 1981, it has been the Reaganites who have scoffed at world opinion and counter-vened international law in a pathological attempt to overturn the Sandinista revolution, and reverse the beneficial policies it has brought to the poorest of Nicaragua's people.

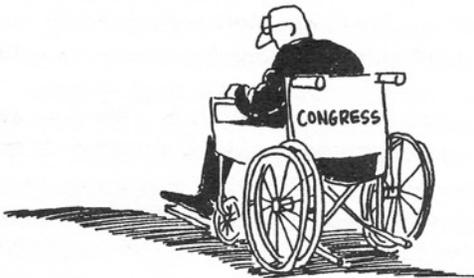
By portraying the Sandinistas and their supporters as Soviet-directed communist proxies in the western hemisphere, Reagan and company have bullied a bi-partisan Congress and snow-jobbed a largely uninformed citizenry. There is wide public acceptance of the internationally condemned mining of the Corinto harbor and the bombing of the oil refinery there, the escalation of covert military operations throughout Central America and the Caribbean Basin and the militarization of these uniformly poor

countries, and the haunting prospect of a full-scale invasion of Nicaragua, either by U.S. regional "assets" or combined U.S. forces, reminiscent of the disastrous CIA-led Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961.

By depicting the contras as noble "freedom fighters" and counterparts of America's revolutionary "founding fathers," and by providing them with cash, weapons, military intelligence, and official approval, Reagan and his criminal cabal condone and facilitate the murder, torture, and rape of Nicaraguan teachers, primary health care workers, and rural farm families. Compounding this human tragedy is the willful destruction of food reserves, agricultural machinery, and fishing boats, in an attempt to decimate the remaining productive sectors of this tiny, embattled political anomaly and create the material conditions for a Chilean-style coup d'etat.

FOR YEARS HE SUFFERED FROM  
"VIETNAM SYNDROME"

UNTIL ONE DAY A FRIEND TOLD  
HIM ABOUT *Contra-Aid*...



The campaign picked up momentum with this summer's gratuitous State Department revelations, unsubstantiated by a shred of hard evidence, that U.S. citizens had become fair game for Nicaraguan "terrorist squads" roving through Honduras. The capture and kidnapping of 29 American members of the anti-interventionist ecumenical organization, Witness for Peace, and 16 U.S. reporters on 7 August 1985 by CIA-funded "contras" has completely discredited these absurd allegations.

In fact, it becomes increasingly apparent that non-governmental U.S. travellers have a great deal more to fear from the backward, fanatically right-wing, U.S. financed elements of Central America (e.g., the El Salvadoran Treasury Police, the Honduras Air Force, the paramilitary death squads of Guatemala, and the contras) than they do from the young, unapologetically armed population of Nicaragua.

The Reagan administration's transparent campaign to overthrow the Sandinistas revolves around two axial lies:

**Big Lie #1: Nicaragua is a communist satellite of the Soviet Union in the backyard of the United States.**

The classic Soviet-model communist state, in the western hemisphere and elsewhere, is characterized by the nationalization of capitalist formations (banks, corporations), a centrally planned, government-subsidized or owned national economy,

and, as an expressed philosophy, the redistribution of wealth and power, from the ruling and middle classes to the poor and working classes.

Despite their protestations about encroaching "state capitalism" and the imminence of "a full-blown communist government" in Nicaragua, the Supreme Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP), a 114-member organization with ties to Harvard University, continues to function aboveground. Although 3,000 manzanas of unproductive land (1 manzana = 1.73 acres) in the fertile region of Masaya and some agricultural hardware were confiscated on 14 June 1985 from COSEP's outspoken president and in-country opposition leader, Enrique Bolanos Gayer, by Sandinista Minister of Agrarian Reform Jaime Wheelock and transferred to 8,000 landless peasants, this was more a remedial action than a Sandinista hardening of anti-middle class policy.

In general, it is fair to say that the Nicaraguans have internalized the bitter experiences of their Cuban *companeros* regarding widescale nationalization, confiscation, or state ownership and control of private production. The untutored visitor to Managua will find the major multinational corporations doing business as usual: the greenest urban gardener can see the mix of large private landholdings, state subsidized farmers' cooperatives, state-owned agribusinesses, and small, campesino-run farms coexisting together in the countryside.

Other than military equipment and a few Lada automobiles, there is almost no sign of heavy equipment or industrial plants from the USSR and the Warsaw Pact countries that one usually finds in the radical developing world. It appears as if the communist countries, with the notable exceptions of Cuba and Bulgaria, are looking for substantive action behind the Sandinista's revolutionary rhetoric before cementing bilateral relationships with necessary inputs for Nicaragua's development.

### **Big Lie #2: The Contras are "freedom fighters" and the counterpart to the founding fathers of the United States.**

The Nicaraguan "contras," or counterrevolutionaries, are composed of remnants of the National Guard, the private army of the dictatorial Somoza dynasty created by the U.S. Marines during 1927-1933.

With the military victory of the Sandinistas, many of the most demented of the National Guard escaped into Honduras and Costa Rica on foot; others were arrested by the Sandinistas and subsequently released. It has been these elements, along with shanghaied, illiterate campesinos, led by CIA-financed mercenaries and expropriated *Somocista* property owners, who have tortured, raped, chopped off the hands and feet of, and cold-bloodedly murdered almost 12,000 Nicaraguan men, women and children since 1979. The \$27 million allocation of aid to the contras voted through the U.S. Congress this past summer will undoubtedly be translated into more acts and instruments of torture and destruction during the next year. In late October, the U.S. press reported that the Honduran army, certainly no friend of the Sandinistas, had confiscated the first shipment of this so-called "humanitarian aid" to the contras when it was discovered to be U.S. military combat boots and uniforms.

The urgent priority given to contra backing by the Reagan administration is reflected

in the high level of U.S. involvement. According to the *Washington Post* of 11 August 1985, Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, aide to national security affairs adviser Robert McFarlane, has acted as a key liaison between the National Security Council (which secretly and illegally allocated the first \$14 million to the contras in 1981) and contra leaders. North is credited as the pivotal player in the decision to resume U.S. funding of the contras in June 1985, revitalizing the almost-defeated reactionaries after a 7-month cessation of their activities. When asked about his aide circumventing the October 1984 law against contra funding, McFarlane told the *Post*, “. . . We had a national interest in keeping touch with what was going on, and second, in not breaking faith with the freedom fighters.” Questioned further about what it meant “not to break faith,” McFarlane said, “Nothing more or less than that the United States believes in what they [the contras] are doing.”

Whatever else may be said, the contras are certainly no ally of western-style democracy or economic development. In 1984, according to David Ignatius and David Rogers in a two-part *Wall Street Journal* series (3/5 and 3/6/85), the contras attacked 45 private Nicaraguan businesses, firebombed the Esso oil refinery at Corinto (in cooperation with the CIA), and mined Nicaraguan harbors, sinking a Dutch tanker and damaging another American ship. Nineteen of the missions, including the Corinto bombing, were carried out by CIA personnel alone, presumably Central American and U.S. “assets”.

The contras offer no alternative vision of government or concern for the social well-being of the Nicaraguans. Their single agenda is to topple the Sandinistas *by any means necessary*, including the daily liquidation of the overwhelmingly supportive population and internationalist technicians and administrators.

In addition to direct financial aid, the Reagan administration has beefed up the presence of military intelligence and assault troops in the region and the Caribbean Basin, as they did prior to the 1983 invasion and occupation of Grenada. High-flying reconnaissance aircraft, known as Blackbirds, make regular passes through Nicaraguan airspace from bases in El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama. The 224th Military Intelligence Battalion sends plainclothes personnel on commercial flights to gather information and shape Nicaragua-bound passengers' opinion. On top of this, 1,000-2,000 “military advisors” work out with contras on the Honduran frontier.

### **Who Pays the Tab?**

The two main bodies of contras, ARDE (the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, led by former Sandinista Commandante Eden Pastora), and FDN (the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest, led by former Nicaraguan Coca-Cola distributor Adolfo Calero) have also received significant material and financial support from private parties in the U.S. The *New York Times* of 13 August 1985 confirmed the establishment this summer of a third faction, the Nicaragua Opposition Union (UNO), led by former Sandinista junta member Alfonso Robelo. Robelo recently split from the

FDN and is attempting to fashion UNO into an "umbrella" organization.

According to the *Boston Globe* of 14 August 1985, wealthy right-wing ideologues like Texan anti-communist E. Garwood have contributed up to \$25 million to the three bands. Garwood also funds the feudal Afghan mountain tribes in their armed rebellion against Soviet troops. The 98-year-old Texan is the largest individual contributor to the United States Council for World Freedom, an anti-communist funding front founded by retired U.S. Major General John K. Singlaub.

Testimony from two U.S. mercenaries imprisoned in Costa Rica from May to July 1985 sheds more light on the diverse sources supplying the contras. During a lengthy videotaped interview with Belgian independent TV producer Jan Van Bilsen, the two U.S. citizens told of being recruited to perform sabotage missions against cooperatives and small farmers in Nicaragua. Their operational base was a CIA-owned farm near the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border, and they received logistical support from members of the Costa Rican rural police, who ultimately double-crossed them under international pressure.

Most interesting were their sources of arms and transportation during the operation. The two waited in a Howard Johnsons Hotel in Miami for almost two months before a second contract was made with them. During that time, one, an ex-cop, made contact with anti-Castro officers of the Miami police force, who subsequently "gave them a few things to take along": flak jackets, shotgun shells, and two weapons.

Finally, the two and three others (two British, one French) were picked up and driven to a private jet at Miami Airport. Together with their arsenal of weapons and explosives, they were flown to the U.S. Air Force base in El Salvador, where, as one said, "It was pretty clear we weren't going on vacation with Brazilian pineapple grenades and .308 Luger sniper rifles."

Once in Costa Rica, the two claimed to receive regular shipments of weapons and supplies from persons connected with the right-wing paramilitary publication *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. One said it was his job to scrape the "Soldier of Fortune" name and logo from everything received.

However, it is the Alabama-based paramilitary organization Civilian Military Assistance that holds the dubious distinction as the private U.S. group most actively involved in contra violence. In 1984, four CMA members, who often train contras in special weapons and terrorist tactics, were killed in a crash during a helicopter reconnaissance mission in Nicaragua. In June 1985, the Sandinista daily journal *Barricada* reported that it had captured CMA member Sam Hall while on a mission inside Nicaragua. (Hall is the brother of U.S. Representative John Hall of Ohio.)

### **The Facts and the Factions**

What I learned during a month of travel and daily life throughout Nicaragua, influenced by my perspective as a trained reporter of public policy in the developing world, is that despite the implementation of some poorly conceived or totally

inappropriate social and economic policies by the Sandinistas, despite the public sacrifices and deprivations caused by the forces of the four-year-old counterrevolution, Nicaragua remains one of the most sincere efforts to raise the national quality of public welfare in today's complex world.

I found this to be an opinion shared by most of the Latin American, North American, and European internationalists experiencing day-to-day life as technical assistants to or documentarians of this unique model in Central American development. The Latin Americans, particularly, seemed to have flocked to aid the embattled revolution as a result of their own bitter national experiences. James Petras makes this observation in his 1981 work *Class, State, and Power in the Third World*:

From all over Latin America, volunteers from fifteen to forty years of age joined the FSLN, among them veterans and novices, militants and idealists, to oust Somoza, symbol of tyranny, corruption, and wealth, of U.S. training, support, and subservience. The internationalists included Costa Ricans who, coming to politics, saw the gap between the professions of democracy and the practice of privilege; Chileans, who suffered the defeat of a revolution without a struggle at the hands of the military and the United States and who sought to redeem themselves; Mexicans who came out of the peasant struggles and who saw in Nicaragua a chance to relive the struggles of the past, equalizing the odds.

Also included were those from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, who suffer similar terror and destruction and saw a chance to even the score, ending the reign of the regional gendarme and perhaps opening a new chapter—the first truly sovereign state in Central America governed by the people, not by the oligarchies of a few dozen families, or less. They came from Colombia's occupied universities, the offices and factories of Caracas, from the Chilean and Argentine diaspora, from Zapata country—the Latin American revolutionaries building barricades with the embattled street fighters from Managua, Esteli, Leon, cities made famous throughout the world by the thousands of anonymous militants who took the streets and defended their barrios with rifles against Sherman tanks and moved from city to city until they captured the last bunker in Managua.

One man from one oligarchy became the focal point for the organized anger of these disparate progressive elements: Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the urbane, West Point-educated, "Last Marine". Somoza Debayle, dictator of Nicaragua at the time of the Sandinista takeover, became the richest man in Central America through his super-exploitation of public and human resources. By the late 1970s, Somoza personally owned or controlled 168 businesses in Nicaragua, including the central bank, the only Mercedes-Benz dealership, two TV and radio stations, and three of the country's four meat-processing plants. Somoza functionaries and cronies controlled labor relations and important decisions of a rubber-stamp National Assembly and were rewarded with monopoly contracts, huge estates, and international travel junkets.

In 1972, the year of the earthquake that levelled most of Managua and the last year for which a census is available, the average Nicaraguan earned roughly US\$35 per year, one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world. As a result, infant mortality ran at a consistent one hundred deaths per one thousand births. Also, 60-70 percent of the population was illiterate. The cash crop/wage labor system imposed by the coffee, cotton, lumber, meat, tropical fruit, mining, and fishing industries starved the people while driving them deeper into poverty.

Adding physical injury to economic insult, the National Guard, Somoza's personal militia trained by the U.S. Marines, tortured and killed dissenting political activists and innocent civilians alike, as many as 300,000 according to some credible estimates, during the Somoza dynasty's forty year reign. Many Americans were introduced to the senseless brutality of the Somoza and National Guard in 1978, when they witnessed the summary execution of ABC news correspondent Bill Stewart on the nightly broadcast.

Comandante Tomas Borge, the only surviving FSLN founder and current Minister of the Interior, left no doubt of the hatred of *all* Nicaraguans for the National Guard in the minds of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission when he addressed them on 10 October 1980:

You never had a chance to talk to the peasants who had grease smeared on their genitals so that the dogs would eat them. You could not talk to the men who were scalped alive and had salt and vinegar rubbed into their wounds so they would suffer until they died. You certainly never had a chance to talk to the peasant women who were raped, as almost 100% of them were in some northern provinces. . . .

Think about the fact that there wasn't a single family in Nicaragua that escaped the repression, not even the family of Somoza himself. Because Edgar Lang, a Sandinista martyr and hero, was a relative of Somoza's; many members of Somoza's family were victims of repression. Repression under Somoza went so far beyond the normal limits that it touched his own family and the families of friends. There wasn't even a single Somozaist family that escaped the repression. That gives you some idea of the magnitude of repression under Somoza.

### **“We Are Sandinistas!”**

In their troubled six year tenure, the nine new men who compose the National Directorate—Comandantes Daniel Ortega, Humberto Ortega, Tomas Borge, Victor Tirado, Jaime Wheelock, Luis Carrion, Sergio Ramirez, Bayardo Arce, and Daniel Nunez—have made remarkable progress in two clearly defined areas: a general redistribution of public and private wealth to the poorest, most exploited people and, even more important, a renaissance of self-worth and dignity, earned through armed struggle, that rejects both institutional and individual racism, sexism, and repression.

With only US\$3 million left in the national treasury on the eve of Somoza's retreat to Miami in 1979, the Sandinistas have strained both the national economy and the public morale in their efforts to redress the excesses and corruption that were Somoza's only legacy. Despite the blockade of World Bank and other credits to Nicaragua by the Carter and Reagan administrations, the National Reconstruction government has launched subsidized primary health care, a literacy campaign (dubbed “the battle for the fourth grade”), and housing reconstruction programs in both rural and urban areas of the country. Somoza's extensive personal holdings and those of his buddies have been confiscated and nationalized or leased to the public for lower-than-market values.

Food and agricultural produce, the staff of life and the traditional export of the developing world, has been radically transformed by the agrarian reform measures implemented by the Sandinistas. Both the agricultural producer in the countryside and

the urban consumer in Managua and elsewhere are subsidized by the government: the producer has a guaranteed market at a predictable, controlled price, and the urban consumer is assured that all food not earmarked for consumption by the military forces will be available at a price commensurate with their income. Although nine staple food items are currently being rationed because of escalating military demands, there is no sign of the abject hunger so prevalent in so-called "free market" neocolonial economies.



Several Sandinista militiamen during the rally for the fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Popular Sandinista militia at the Plaza de la Revolucion in Managua. (Photo by Isaac Narvaez/New York Times)

On the riverain Atlantic Coast, where fishing and North American boom-bust wage labor have traditionally provided the only livelihood for English-speaking Blacks and Miskito Indians, there have been fledgling attempts to fortify the stagnant economy by creating fishing cooperatives and introducing new crops, like the African palm, that are suited to the soil, the climate, and the cultural norms of Atlantic Coast residents.

There were and are still extreme polarities in the hows and whys of social organization, self-determination, and development between the indigenous people of the Atlantic Coast and the Sandinista leadership in Managua. Many of these differences have been addressed by Comandante Borge, Minister of the Interior, and elected Atlantic Coast members of the National Assembly during this past year's "autonomy talks". However, there are fundamental contradictions between the traditionally European models of cooperativization, agrarian reform, and the division of labor favored by the

Sandinistas and the kinship-based land cultivation and work practices of the region's indigenous people that will take years of trial, error, and mutual goodwill to reconcile. In fact, the depth and breadth of empowerment afforded the hemisphere's most exploited class, the Native Americans, by the National Reconstruction government poses one of the most formidable litmus tests of the Sandinista's political economy: in the absence of a satisfactory consensus, the embryonic revolutionary administration could inadvertently cause the opening of a new armed, but unaffiliated, front by disenfranchised Miskitos and black criollos.

The institution of new restraints on civil liberties by the Sandinistas during October 1985 has been roundly criticized by both friends and enemies of the revolutionary administration. But according to President Ortega, in an angry statement issued during an appearance on U.S. television, the Sandinistas are doing no more than was done by the wartime U.S. administration during World War II. U.S. electronic media has been so intent on characterizing the National Reconstruction government as heavy-handed Stalinists that it totally ignored the report by the *Washington Post* of 1 November 1985 that the Sandinistas had rescinded many of the restrictions after protests from their U.S. supporters.

The fact remains, however, that this political anomaly will ultimately be forced by external and internal factors to either harden its revolutionary policies in favor of mass benefit, or to weaken, thereby falling into the inexorable logic of capitalism that holds the rest of Latin America and the developing world hostage.

Harry Burgold, U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua and a cold warrior of the Reagan mold, told a source recently, "The contras are our best policy bet in Nicaragua." Che Guevara, the Latin American revolutionary said it differently: "It is easier to kill a guerilla (or a government) in the womb than in the mountains." With more than 60,000 men, women, and children under arms today, and as Latin America belatedly comes to the aid of Nicaragua through a broadened Contadora process, the predatory murderers among us will find both the infant Sandinista revolution and its humble, combative citizen-soldiers ready for death before defeat.

—Mackie McLeod

[The author is an independent journalist and media analyst specializing in international affairs. He spent June and early July of 1985 living and travelling throughout Nicaragua.]

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## Report From Nairobi

# U.N. Women's Forum 85

*Last July some 16,000 delegates travelled to Nairobi, Kenya, for Forum 85. The ten-day unofficial gathering of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and individuals marked the end of the United Nations' Decade of Women. One U.S. delegate was Ardrella Lenard of Chicago. Mrs. Lenard is the mother of eleven and the grandmother of thirty. She is a founding member of the Black United Front and a long-time activist against police brutality. Mrs. Lenard serves on the Board of Directors of Crossroads, a progressive foundation which funds community-based organizations working for social change. Mrs. Lenard discussed her experiences at the Forum with a Forward Motion correspondent.*

For a week and a half, Forum 85 overwhelmed Nairobi. There were twice as many attendees as hotel beds in the entire city of Nairobi. More than 1000 workshops took place. The university grounds which held the event were jammed with women talking, meeting, at various times arguing, dancing, singing, and demonstrating. "You could be talking to a friend," Mrs. Lenard commented, "and turn your head for a moment, and then look back to see that the woman you had been talking to had been carried away by the crowd. You had to start the day by agreeing on a meeting place—a particular tree near a certain tent—and a time, or you would never find someone you wanted to see."

Mrs. Lenard explained to FM that it is impossible for one person to give an accurate overview of Forum 85. It was simply too massive, too rich in experiences, for one person to come away from with a perspective on the whole. In this discussion, Mrs. Lenard spoke of some of her own experiences at the Forum, especially what they showed her about differences and similarities in the Black experience in Africa and the United States.

Forum 85 meant struggle from its beginning. Conference participants, half of whom had come from other African countries, had to sit-in to protest a shortage of accommodations. Women who had come to attend the NGO conference were told to vacate hotel rooms in favor of official government delegates, even though they had reserved and paid for the rooms in advance. Mrs. Lenard described sit-ins in the leading Nairobi hotel, the Inter-Continental. In one case, a government official was blockaded in a hotel room by filling the outside corridor and preventing him from opening his door. A compromise was eventually reached, and no NGO women were evicted: they agreed to share rooms, opening up about thirty hotel suites for incoming delegates.

Mrs. Lenard came away from the Forum with two particular lasting impressions. One was the similarity in concerns felt by women in Africa and women in the rural

South in this country. During her trip to a village outside Nairobi, she saw the effects of a Women's Water Project. In this village, the women had joined together to bring in fresh water to the village. They had done so despite a lack of government assistance for their project. The women of the village described how important this water project was to them—how they would no longer have to spend hours every day hauling heavy jugs of water from polluted wells, unable to keep themselves and their families clean or to protect the health of the children who drank the water. Before this project was completed, women had spent much of their time each day coping with the water problem.

The problem of assuring a supply of clean water continues to be a struggle in the rural U.S. South today. Mrs. Lenard grew up in a small town in Arkansas, near Little Rock, and her family still lives in the area. In her home town now, the water supply is polluted and unhealthy, and clean water is a luxury. Women still have the responsibility for coping with the water problem, and still suffer, and see their families suffer the resulting serious health problems. For Mrs. Lenard, there was a very real parallel between the effects of discrimination here and the problems of development which people of color face in the Third World.



### **Comparing Experiences with the Police**

Mrs. Lenard also co-lead a workshop at Forum 85 on police brutality. Her husband, Bennie Lenard, was severely injured while in the custody of police in a suburb of Chicago in January 1978. Following a minor traffic incident in which his car was hit by a car driven by a young white woman, he had asked the police be called to the scene to establish that he had in fact been the victim. Instead, he was arrested, badly injured, doused with water and left under a fan by an open window on the coldest day of the year on the concrete floor of the police lock-up. Despite his description in federal court of the brutal beating he received at the hands of the Melrose Park police, an all-white jury found only that the officers had conspired to violate his civil rights. Another jury subsequently awarded Lenard \$267,172 in damages for the injuries he suffered. The Lenards, however, have still received no payment on the award. The fight to win a favorable jury verdict, and then to enforce the verdict, has been a focal point for both Bennie and Ardella Lenard for close to ten years. [See, "The Bennie Lenard Case: A Seven Year Struggle for Justice," in *Forward Motion* February-March 1985.]

At the Nairobi workshop, Mrs. Lenard joined with other victims of police brutality in relating experiences and efforts to win justice. The workshop was packed with listeners from North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa. Mrs. Lenard described how the Lenard case was a fight not just for victory in one person's legal case, but was part

of a much broader movement for equality, and against racist violence and national oppression.

The presentations were received with a great deal of interest. "Most of the questions came from African women," Ardrella Lenard reported. "And each time an African woman would ask a question, she would also talk. She would say, 'I am asking the question because this is what happens here.' They did not know this kind of thing happens in the U.S. though they did know we have problems here." She said she was somewhat surprised to find that the violence Bennie Lenard and other American victims of police violence had experienced were even worse than her listeners described happening in Africa. But in another way, she was not surprised, because "as I thought of it they [in Africa] are like we are in the South. In the South, Bennie would never have asked to call the police because he would have known what to expect." In the North in the 1970s, the expectation was that things were different. "But just as I knew what to expect, and Bennie did, when we lived in the South, women who spoke said they knew what to expect from the police. And here [in Chicago], we know there is racism, but we didn't know it was the same, or worse, as it is in the South." Mrs. Lenard said that women explained to her that racist practices carried over in Africa from colonial days. "In colonial Nairobi, there had been parts of the city that if by chance Blacks got over into them, they knew what to expect." Perhaps because of the similarity of experiences, Mrs. Lenard said she thought "overall their questions were very good. And their response [to the workshop presentations] was very good."

She compared responses to her talks about her husband's court case in the U.S. with the one she gave in Nairobi. "Here, when you go out and talk with people, and ask them to join the committee or come to the trial, the first thing people will say is, 'well, maybe he should have been beaten up'—they assume he did something wrong. Or they will question why we make the response political. There, they think it is right to respond the way we did. They say, 'if more people would do what we are doing here, it would make the world better. We cannot say, Africa will be better, or your country will be better, but the *world* will be better.' Only a few progressive people in this country will talk that way. People there take a broader view. In Chicago, it is very hard to get people to take literature or write a letter about the case. In Nairobi, I did not have enough literature to hand out. Village people and hotel workers sent letters to the insurance company in Bennie's case to ask them to pay the judgment." Mrs. Lenard said that people came up to her days after the workshop and took buttons and wore t-shirts that the Bennie Lenard Support Committee had put out. "The clerks at my hotel were wearing the t-shirts," she said.

Forum 85 was one part of the U.N.-sponsored gathering in Nairobi. It was followed by the official U.N. conference of governmental delegations headed by such luminaries as Maureen Reagan on behalf of the United States. The U.N. decade has been highlighted by a series of very large and political conferences, beginning in Mexico City in 1975, including a mid-term gathering in Copenhagen in 1980, and concluding in Nairobi last July. Mrs. Lenard said it was a problem that the NGO conference took place

before the official U.N. conference, and was not empowered to pass resolutions or agree on recommendations to be presented at the United Nations. She felt this weakened the impact of the NGO gathering. The networking and exchange of ideas that did take place were extremely valuable, and participants could have had an even more positive effect if they had been empowered by the U.N. to adopt positions formally.

In a future article for *Forward Motion*, Mrs. Lenard plans to share other of her experiences in Nairobi.

—Reported by Peggy Baker



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## Review

# The Democratic Kampuchea Experience

Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.

The three and a half years from the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in April, 1975, to the capture of the same city by Vietnamese troops on January 7, 1979, mark the most radical social experiment attempted in the name of communism. They also mark the most dispiriting such episode for socialists since Stalin's time. The regime that ruled Cambodia/Kampuchea during that time, Democratic Kampuchea (DK), has been transformed by the efforts of *Readers' Digest*, sonorous editorials and films into an emblem of the inevitable horrors of socialism and of the dashed hopes of the Western anti-war movements. *The Killing Fields*, the title of the film and currently best-selling home video, has entered popular consciousness as a symbol of communism, alongside the Gulag Archipelago and show-trials.

One of the chief virtues of Michael Vickery's book, *Cambodia: 1975-1982*, is that he shows Democratic Kampuchea was not a symbol of anything. It was not, as some Western specialists have claimed, a radical application of Maoist principles, or an extension of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to a close ally. It was not a representative example of Indochinese socialism. An indigenous Kampuchean phenomenon, it was not a typical case of communism in power either: Democratic Kampuchea embarked on a course of development radically opposed to that envisaged by orthodox European Marxism, and even by every previous communist party that had found itself in power.

### A Rural "War Communism"

Independent revolutions led by communist parties have so far all taken place in overwhelmingly agrarian countries with low agricultural productivity. Once in power, those revolutions have faced the problem of how to generate the economic surplus necessary to develop industry, raise agricultural productivity and the people's standard of living. The most common solution has been that first taken by the Soviet Union, which sought to extract a "tribute" from the peasantry that would support a crash industrialization program. Essentially this approach has meant the state exploitation of peasants in favor of urban-based industry, cheap agricultural products for the cities' industrial workforces (thereby allowing the government to keep wages low), and strong curbs on peasants' standards of living. Such policies provoke resistance among a peasantry that controls the means of production (owns land and farm implements, controls the crop). For this (as well as other) reasons, countries attempting socialism

have turned to collectivization of agriculture as a means to implement these policies. In different periods since the 1949 liberation, the Chinese attempted to complement this model with another one in which industrialization would develop from the agricultural communes' own surpluses and take place in the countryside, but this had mixed results.

Because the Democratic Kampuchean regime only lasted a short time, we cannot know what its ultimate line of development would have been. Three and a half years is not much longer than the period of War Communism in the Soviet Union. Some of the extremism of DK policy stemmed from the extraordinary catastrophe that had befallen Kampuchea in the war of 1970-1975: conservative estimates put the dead during the war at 600,000 to 800,000 people, or better than 10 percent of the population, and half of all Cambodians were refugees by the war's end. In the midst of this U.S.-induced chaos, DK ferocity had some resemblances to Soviet War Communism. But in the brief time of its existence, the policy that triumphed in Democratic Kampuchea reversed the usual priorities of socialist countries. Instead of the peasantry paying a tribute to urban industry and an industrial proletariat, most of the people in the Kampuchean urban classes were reduced to the status of a disenfranchised workforce in the countryside, dominated both by Khmer Rouge cadre and by established peasant society.

The workforce was created by the infamous evacuation of all Kampuchean cities immediately after the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975, and the deportation of urban residents to the fields and to thinly populated forest areas. With a peasant frame of reference, the Khmer Rouge called this deportee workforce the "new people," contrasted to the "old people" of the peasant base areas. Currency was abolished, commodity exchange and most market relations suppressed, removing most levers for regulating the economy. Although libraries were apparently not disturbed, all education above primary school was ended, and in many districts even that did not take place. Those of Kampuchea's relatively few factories that continued to function did so with untrained laborers taken from peasant areas, while the small proletariat was dispersed in the rural areas.

Because of the extraordinary secrecy and isolation in which the Khmer Rouge operated, all accounts of Democratic Kampuchea come from two sources. One is refugees who fled to Thailand and then sometimes to the West, both during and after the DK period. The other available source is Kampucheans still in Kampuchea, who now either belong to the Vietnamese-sponsored government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) or live under its rule. One of the qualities that makes Vickery's book really exceptional not only in the literature on Kampuchea but also among that on other socialist countries is his treatment of refugee reports. He outlines what he calls, a trifle awkwardly, the Standard Total View of the DK regime, and makes clear that this Standard Total View is that of many of the refugees themselves, as well as the atrocity-hungry Western media. According to the Standard Total View, the DK tried to kill everybody who had served in the military or civilian administration of the Lon Nol government, or who belonged to the rest of the urban elite, or had more than a prim-

ary school education (especially doctors, teachers and technicians) or even simply wore glasses or had uncalloused hands. The Standard Total View also holds that the DK regime deliberately abolished medical care, and that it deliberately worked to death masses of people.

### **Society as a Great Peasant Commune**

In a careful evaluation of each refugee account that he collected and of other refugee reports, Vickery shows that this Standard Total View does not hold up, that what took place in Kampuchea was actually a much more complex process. The extent of starvation and number of executions differed greatly from region to region and even from district to district in the same region, and it also changed over time: based on refugee testimony and other evidence, he classifies one-half to two-thirds of Cambodia as "relatively good" areas before 1977, "in which conditions of life were no worse and deaths in excess of normal peacetime conditions no more numerous" than could reasonably be expected in the extraordinarily grim situation left by the war. In the remaining areas, however, conditions were horrific, especially for the new people. With the outbreak of serious fighting between Vietnam and Kampuchea in 1977, and in a related development, the unfolding of a murderous purge within the Kampuchean party, executions became commonplace in a number of once "good" areas.

Vickery's research shows that four distinct processes intertwined in Kampuchea during those years. As in the aftermath of other civil wars, the Khmer Rouge victory ushered in a period of struggle against the defeated but still numerous and powerful Lon Nol forces. Central policy apparently did not call for killing the officer corps of the Lon Nol army, but rather for dispersing them along with the rest of the urban population. But central policy allowed for a great deal of local initiative, and a great many of this group were executed. To some extent, this process corresponds to the terror after the French or Russian revolutions.

There was also an immediate forced collectivization in agriculture, without the intervening period of economic stabilization and reliance upon some market forces that occurred following other revolutions. The deportation of the urban population and creation of a subjugated class of agricultural laborers accompanied this process, and entailed an enormous destruction of resources and of human beings. While a large number of some urban populations were displaced peasants (particularly in Phnom Penh), the rest of the new people made lousy peasants, produced too little food to sustain themselves, were resented by many of the old people because of their poor work, and starved to death in great numbers.

Then there was the conflict between the Vietnamese party and the Kampuchean. This had origins in the 1950's and 1960's in disagreements over whether the Kampuchean party should try to overthrow Sihanouk, and in the Vietnamese tutelage of the early Kampuchean revolutionary movement. Vietnam wanted a neutral Sihanouk in its war against the U.S., allowing the NLF to bring in supplies through Kampuchean territory, to move troops across a safe border, and most importantly to prevent flanking operations by the U.S. army. Suffering from extensive repression and possessed of

their own views on Kampuchean society, the Kampuchean communists, especially that group led by Pol Pot, sought to prepare an armed struggle. After both movements had won victory, border disputes erupted, skirmishing developed into major battles, the Vietnamese invaded part of Kampuchea once and eventually invaded for good.

Lastly there was the party purge. The purge grew out of differences over all of the above policies, but particularly relations with Vietnam. Some Kampuchean party members and leaders had been trained by and lived in Vietnam since 1954. They returned to Kampuchea during the war, and the liquidation of some of them occurred while the war was still going on. Vietnam was the major issue in the purge not because some Kampuchean communists were essentially Vietnamese agents, however. That was true, but only part of the story. The Pol Pot faction appears to have believed that opposition to its general policies could only have stemmed from betrayal, which could only have its origin in Vietnam. Immediately after the liberation in 1975, the Pol Pot group executed a number of very prominent figures in the resistance movement, and ultimately the purge extended to all the veteran communists in the Kampuchean party not aligned with the Pol Pot faction.

Taken by themselves, none of these processes, with the possible exception of the party purge, was entirely irrational in its initial premises; all had significant support in the Kampuchean party. As Vickery points out, the Khmer Rouge had no hope of gaining the benevolent neutrality of the Lon Nol military and administrative elite, and so had to find some means to neutralize its opposition. The Khmer Rouge also had no means to feed Phnom Penh—no transportation infrastructure to get rice to the cities even if they had it, which they did not. Phnom Penh had to be severely reduced in size.

It would take a lot of space to assess the responsibility for the Kampuchean/Vietnamese war, but there seems little question that Vietnam saw itself as the dominant power in Indochina and wanted the Kampuchean revolution to move along approved directions. With the exception of the Hanoi returnees who had spent better than 15 years in Vietnam, all major groupings in the Kampuchean party appear to have had some serious differences with the Vietnamese, though not necessarily antagonistic ones. Finally, once serious conflicts on other issues had broken out in the party, the Pol Pot faction logically reasoned that opposition groups might be used by Vietnam in its struggle against Kampuchea, as some Kampuchean Eastern zone cadre eventually were.

But the forced evacuation of the cities, the dispersal of the urban elite, the rechanneling of all available resources towards rice production were not simply temporary expedients to deal with the national emergency. They belonged to an overall strategy for a direct transition to communist society organized as a great peasant commune. Vickery argues that the Kampuchean experiment reflected the triumph of "poor peasant populism," and that it brought about an unprecedented disaster because it rejected "Marxist communism" in favor of a peasant-romanticism. His conclusions about Democratic Kampuchea seem accurate, but those he draws for socialist transition in predominantly agrarian countries beg major historical issues. Vickery is an

extremely skilled historian and his discussion of the real difficulties facing the Kampuchean revolution after 1975 is a model of materialist history. But his theoretical conception of socialism veers in an economic determinist direction, in which backward societies can only advance through the type of industrialization familiar from the Soviet Union and countries that have followed its road. As unprecedented disasters go, collectivization in Kampuchea has nothing on collectivization in the USSR. As murderous purges go, the Pol Pot faction was neither worse nor better than the Stalin faction, and indeed there are many parallels between them.

Vickery's book has one other fault, in some respects a more serious one. Just as he is very good in disassembling the Standard Total View about Democratic Kampuchea, as disseminated by both the Western media and the Vietnamese since their occupation, so he is good in scrutinizing the Standard Total View about the Vietnamese-installed People's Republic of Kampuchea, as disseminated by U.S. imperialism and the Democratic Kampuchea-remnants. In discussing the Vietnamese role and the history of Kampuchean communism, however, he often stops talking from the available evidence. In some places, he relies on other researchers such as Ben Kiernan whose handling of refugee reports or of PRK officials' accounts is much less careful and critical than Vickery's own. For example, Vickery repeatedly refers to the Vietnamese invasion as the "Salvation Front-Vietnamese forces," giving the Kampuchean group allied with the Vietnamese greater prominence than their backers. He does this without ever giving any figure for the numbers of Salvation Front soldiers, which we know numbered very few and played an insignificant role in the invasion.

He also refers to the Kampuchean party formed under Vietnamese auspices as having greater legitimacy in the history of Kampuchean communism than the Pol Pot-led Communist Party of Kampuchea. Again he does not give any estimate for the size of this group, which we know must have been tiny and even now after six years of representing the government of Vietnam-occupied Kampuchea is very small, hardly in a position really to run the country. Further, it is hard to accept claims of legitimacy for a party that was headed by Pen Sovan, a man who had been in Hanoi since 1954, never returned to Kampuchea during the entire war of 1970-1975, never returned during the Democratic Kampuchea regime, and only set foot on Kampuchean soil in the company of Vietnamese battalions. (He has since been dismissed due to reported conflicts with the Vietnamese, and is now according to the Far Eastern Economic Review under house arrest in Hanoi). Vickery's grasp of historical issues is much less sure in these sections, and his conclusions very problematic.

It is a tribute to the strength of his book, though, that his sympathy for the People's Republic of Kampuchea does not sound like pro-Vietnamese bias. Vickery forces readers to come to grips with the realities of Democratic Kampuchea and of Kampuchea today. These are realities Marxism will have to come to terms with, making Vickery's book well worth reading. He has written the best book on Kampuchea so far available, and an important work on the historical experience of transitions to socialism.

—Charles Sarkis

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# Welcome, Freedom Road

Revolutionary unity is always precious, often elusive, and over the years U.S. socialists have had a good deal of trouble building and preserving it. The Marxist-Leninist movement of the early '70s, which initially showed great promise but by the end of the decade was essentially defunct, was not widely known for building unity among the people or on the Left. Yet two determined survivors of that movement—the Proletarian Unity League and the Revolutionary Workers Headquarters—have recently unified in the Freedom Road Socialist Organization.

In different ways, both the RWH and PUL originated in struggle against the ultra-left orthodoxy which held sway over the Marxist-Leninist movement. A dominant ultra-left ideology and politics wreaked havoc on what had been the fastest-growing and most multinational section of the U.S. Left, setting the stage for an epidemic of disillusion, demoralization and defeatism which followed. The retreat of the mass movements and the decrease in militancy weighed especially heavily on the Marxist-Leninists. Born in a period of mass offensive, the new revolutionary organizations did not adjust well to a period of retreat. For many activists, particularly those from radical student backgrounds, the sacrifices, discipline and drudgery necessary to militant activity lost much of their rationale once the scale of struggle had shrunk. And when most of what they had understood as Marxist truth was revealed to be little more than left-wing posturing, many simply abandoned revolutionary politics altogether.

Both the PUL and RWH lost members during the final disintegration of that movement, but both survived as organizations. Both recognized changes in the period, analyzed the errors of the Marxist-Leninist movement, and opened discussion of the many issues raised by the international crisis of Marxism. And alongside these understandings, both our groups continued to believe that daily work in the people's struggles had to go on as the basis of any organization, and that revolutionaries should organize themselves now to take advantage of the opportunities which were sure to come. For the most part, the memberships of both groups kept on keeping on in the confidence that what we had to offer was something sorely needed in the peoples' movements.

Despite these similarities, our organizations had very different origins and developed along different lines. The RWH formed in a split within the Revolutionary Communist Party (formerly the Revolutionary Union), one of the dominant ultra-left groups of the '70s. The PUL, on the other hand, united a number of local collectives opposed to that dominant line during the heyday of founding Party Congresses. Corresponding to these different experiences were a number of differences in ideology and politics. In building unity we had our work cut out for us.

We agreed to focus serious debate and education on an issue central to any revolu-

tionary strategy and tactics in our country—the struggle against white-supremacist national oppression. Since its inception, the PUL placed enormous emphasis on this issue, an emphasis reflected in labor and other organizing, publications, internal study, and recruitment. While the RWH came out of a tradition which downplayed and sometimes opposed the fight against national oppression, its leadership moved quickly to rectify that situation. They turned the attention of their entire group to the national movements, doing extensive collective study which led to a substantial publication, and carrying out a national campaign in support of the United League in Tupelo, Miss. as well as numerous local campaigns in support of Black struggles. The unity process between our groups led to considerable unity on the peculiar nature of national oppression in U.S. society, on the special role played by white-skin national privileges in the history of class struggle here, and on the centrality of these issues to the peoples' movements.

The other major focus of debate in the unity process had to do with organizational principles and methods. We reaffirmed our commitment to building strong revolutionary organization, to using that organization to help lead the peoples' struggles, and to persuading other activists to join us in that work.

### **Where We're Headed**

Freedom Road will undertake a broad range of work. Both the PUL and RWH have had significant success in struggles for trade union reform and in winning local union leadership. Likewise both have made some real contributions in electoral struggles. The PUL also brings to Freedom Road its work in the Black liberation movement, its experience in fighting discrimination in the unions, its work in the gay and lesbian rights movements, and its work among women of color. The RWH brings significant activism in the contemporary student movement; it also brings broader experience in anti-imperialist and international solidarity work as well as its experience in conducting national political campaigns. With vital work in the unions, Black, women's and student movements, in electoral politics, for gay liberation, and in solidarity with Central America and South Africa, Freedom Road looks forward to making a much greater contribution than either the RWH or PUL could on their own.

The name "Freedom Road" calls to mind one of the greatest, most inspiring episodes of revolutionary struggle the people of our country have ever seen—the mass democratic upsurge in the South during and after the Civil War. It bears the mark of the Black movement, which in its centuries-old fight for freedom has always carried forward the demands of all progressive movements. And it unites with the aspiration of millions of people in the U.S. for freedom based on economic equality, political justice, and full popular participation in the exercise of political power.

With the disintegration of the 1970s U.S. Marxist-Leninist movement, a little world collapsed, and many people gave up on socialism altogether. The unification of our two organizations is a small blow against the demoralization so prevalent within the

revolutionary Marxist Left. For demoralization could not be more short-sighted. If you wanted to fight along with the U.S. people for equality, peace and socialism, there has never been a better time to try your hand at it. More people are looking for new and if necessary radical alternatives. True, many are now looking Rightward, but many will also look Left. Some will go Left, some become their own Left. How many do either depends on what they see. The country has never needed a Left, including its small revolutionary Marxist contingent, more.

In uniting these two very different organizations, in wrapping up this long process and moving on to different challenges and wider growth, we are building a bridge. It is only a small bridge, but one worth building. It will help connect the last period of great upsurge in the U.S. class struggle—the period out of which both our groups arose—to the next. In so doing, we will cross some wide open spaces and rough terrain. We have to help tie in what is left of a generation of revolutionary activists with the leaders of today's new struggles in order to help prepare the resistance of tomorrow. And in putting behind us the movement which spawned our groups, we need to insure that the next generation of revolutionaries will benefit from our largely negative experience, not just by hearing the old stories from the old comrades, but by working closely with militants now adapting hard-won knowledge to new situations. The Freedom Road Socialist Organization has to grow and help build this bridge—and at the same time cross it to merge with what is new.

—*Freedom Road National Executive Committee*

If you are interested in reading the detailed documents adopted by the Unity Conference of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, please write to PUL, P.O. Box 3108, Boston MA 02107.

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## Storm of Resistance Builds

# Farms, Not Arms!

With 17,000 Minnesotans converging on the Capitol steps in St. Paul on January 21, 1985 to protest the collapsing rural economy, the farm revolt of the 1980s took its place in history. Over the course of 1985, it emerged as a legitimate, full-blown uprising in the best traditions of the Washington D.C. tractorcades of the 1970s and the penny auctions of the 1930s.

New grassroots activists—not only farmers, but small-town businesses, ministers, and homemakers—are rallying in rural America, packing state legislatures, protesting at state capitols. The cause: saving a lifestyle threatened by farmers' economic woes. "I'm not just talking about saving my farm. I'm talking about saving the American family farm system, and about saving rural America as we know it," says Bobbie Polzine, 48, a Brewster, Minn., farmer and leader of Minnesota Groundswell.

For almost two years, Nebraska farmer Merle Hansen, chair of the North American Farm Alliance (NAFA), went from one farm crisis meeting to another across the Midwest, and perhaps 25 or 30 people would show up to commiserate over low farm prices, high interest rates and foreclosures. Late in 1984 that all changed. All at once at Wahoo, Nebraska, there was a meeting of 600. At Verdigre, a priest organized and there were 500. On January 17, 1985, 5000 farmers and rural residents packed the Sioux City Auditorium in Iowa to discuss solutions to the rural crisis and to build unity on key principles of the 1985 Farm Bill.

The following actions, which have been duplicated hundreds of times throughout the agricultural states, give some feel for the breadth and depth of this movement:

- \* Hill City, Kansas. The foreclosure sale of 240 acres of farmland owned by Black farmers Ava and Bernard Bates was protested by 300 supporters in October 1983.

- \* Centralia, Missouri. On July 28, 1984, farmers staged the first successful "penny auction" since the 1930s.

- \* Hutchinson, Kansas. On October, 1984. Congressional candidate Darrel Ringer unveiled his "Nine-Point Agriculture Reconstruction Plan," and won 1/3 of the votes on a progressive platform.

- \* Willmar, Minnesota. 1500 farmers and rural people held one of four tractorcades in the state of Minnesota in September, 1984.

- \* St. Louis, Missouri. Farmers from the Missouri American Agricultural Movement (Grassroots) joined union members from Farmers Home Administration in a tractorcade and depression-style food distribution in support of Jesse Jackson.

- \* Pierre, S. Dakota. Unity was the theme as 6,000 farmers and supporters rallied to

hear 31 speakers call for farmers, bankers, business people, workers, politicians and educators to work together to save South Dakota's largest industry.

\* Ames, Iowa. 15,000 farmers, business people, and union members overflowed the Hilton Coliseum at Iowa State University to attend the National Farm Crisis Rally on February 27, 1985.

\* Plattsburg, Missouri. Over 1000 farmers and union members from Kansas City and St. Louis demonstrated March 14, 1985, to stop the sale of 73-year old Perry Wilson, Sr.'s farm. State troopers beat up several protestors. A month later, a similar number returned along with Jesse Jackson to protest the sale of the Wilson's homestead.

The basic demands of this grassroots movement developing in rural America have emerged to be: fair, "parity" prices for farm products; a moratorium on farm, home and small business foreclosures; and debt restructuring at longer terms and lower interest rates. In a historic show of unity, leaders of major U.S. farm and labor organizations formalized unity on these demands, as well as fair trade policies, at a meeting in St. Louis on March 23-24, 1985. Over 100 delegates from 17 states and the District of Columbia laid the foundations for a new political alliance. What is behind this movement? Where is it going?



Photo by John Croft, Minneapolis Star and Tribune

**Over two hundred buses helped bring 17,000 Minnesotans protesting farm and rural crisis to capitol rally. At least 34 schools and hundreds of businesses closed in solidarity.**

## Crisis in Agriculture and Food Production

The facts behind the present agricultural crisis are basic.

\* Farmers have been losing money every year for the past five years, spending more to produce their crops than they receive in the "free market."

\* Farm family purchasing power is lower now than it was during the "Great Depression." The parity ratio, the cost of living index for farmers, averaged 66% during the worst four years of the 1930s. Today it stands at 58%.

\* Interest payments in 1982 totalled \$23 billion, while net farm income was only \$20 billion.

\* Farm debt has skyrocketed to over \$223 billion, an increase of almost 1,000% since the late 1960s, shouldered by little more than two million farm families. By comparison, the foreign debt of Brazil is only \$100 billion spread over 100 million people.

\* Delinquency rates of Farmers Home Administration loans are close to 50%. Foreclosures and bankruptcies are up over 500% since 1980.

\* Close to 10% of the nation's farmers are being forced out each year, almost 200,000 next year alone.

\* Black-operated farms have gone out at a rate 2½ times that for whites. Fifty-seven percent of Black farms were lost in the 1970s, and unless major changes are forthcoming, Black-owned food-producing land will disappear by the 1990s.

\* The farm depression is creating ghost towns throughout rural America. A University of Nebraska study projects that almost all towns with fewer than 900 people will disappear by the year 1990. In Nebraska, this will mean a loss of over 500 communities in the next five years.

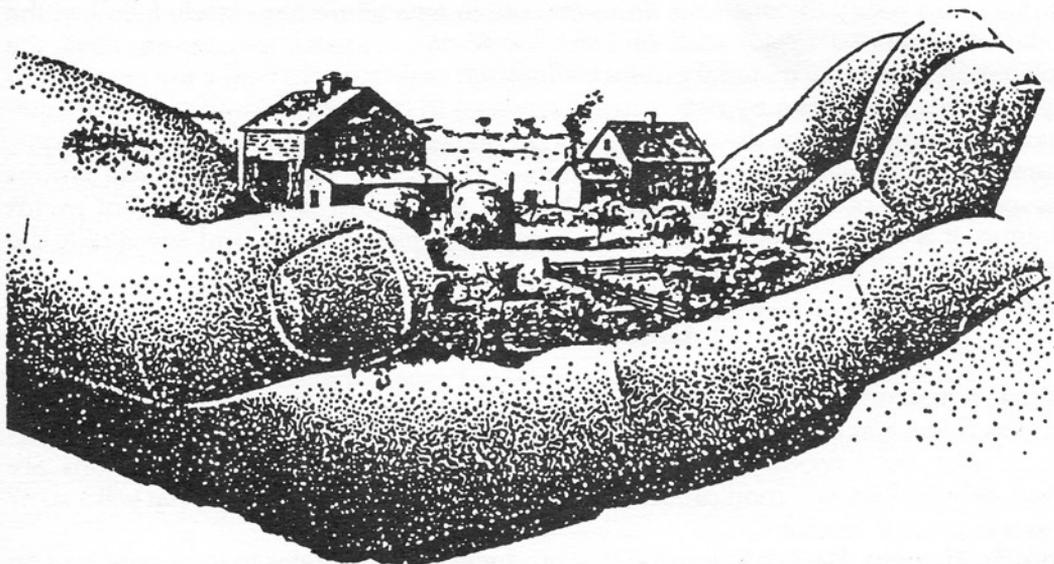
\* A recent Farm Credit System study, dubbed "Project 1995" predicted that total farm debt will reach \$465 billion by 1995 and one third of the existing rural banks will fold.

These grim economic statistics are but a reflection of the growing pain and tragedy in the quality of rural American life, as exemplified in the movie *Country*. There is an epidemic of farm suicides, spouse and child abuse, family breakups, and emotional depression and stress due to the farm crisis. Social isolation will continue to increase as the farm population dwindles and as those families who are still hanging on must work almost all of their waking hours in an attempt to survive. Rural community life is decaying as businesses fail and human services become scarcer. Churches and schools lose members and financial support as the need for their services increases.

This decimation of the ranks of family farmers has been no accident, nor has it been the result of "bad management." In 1945 the U.S. Chamber of Commerce published a strategy for the modernization of American agriculture which called for the gradual concentration of land and capital into fewer and larger units, dismantling the New Deal farm policies.

The single most successful farm program of our nation has been the New Deal Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) non-recourse loan program administered by locally-

elected county committees of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS). This program has allowed farmers to withhold their crops from the market if prices offered by the grain corporations fall below a pre-determined level. Farmers can pledge these unsold crops as collateral on a loan from county ASCS, which allows them to pay their bills until the grain corporations offer a fair price.



Since farmers are able to withhold their crops (ultimately turning them over to the government stockpiles if prices don't rise), the market price—including the *world* market price—eventually rises above the established level. Farmers then sell their crops and repay the loans with interest. If farmers using this program are participating in an effective supply management program, no huge surpluses develop, and there are no costs to the government.

From 1933 to 1952, when this program included strict supply management, it actually earned \$13 million in profits to the U.S. Treasury from the interest paid on the loans. It is this program the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and agribusiness set out to undermine and destroy.

In a 1947 editorial, then influential *Life* magazine called for implementation of the Chamber of Commerce proposal. They labelled family farms as “breeding grounds for Dillingers and Pretty Boy Floyds,” and stated, “agriculture must become big business.”

In the early 1950s, the Committee on Economic Development, dominated by multi-national agribusiness interests, wrote a similar strategy paper for the Eisenhower Administration. The method for removing “excess” resources (“primarily people”) from agriculture was to significantly reduce the price support levels set through the CCC loans. From 1952 till the 1970s, these price supports were steadily reduced, reaching 70% in 1970. As noted earlier, they now stand at 58% of parity, and the Reagan

Administration proposes to reduce them to 52% on the way to total elimination and a return to the "free market." Since "parity" is a price level computed to equal the actual costs of production of agricultural commodities plus a minimum wage for farmers, it is not difficult to see how these government policies have worked to drive some nine million people off the farms since 1960.

In fact, this policy of conscious disinvestment in agriculture has closely followed the model of imperialist exploitation of Third World raw materials producers. First, the exploitation of the raw material producers through paying prices below the cost of production. This is followed by debt servitude, which in turn produces forced farm liquidations, accompanied by the concentration of ownership of farmland by corporations, insurance companies, banks, other lenders and wealthy individuals. These groups now own 27% of the food-producing land in the United States. If current trends continue, it is expected that 4/5 of the present 2.3 million farms, and specifically the family farms, will be lost by the 1990s.

### **Global Implications**

While it may not be immediately obvious to the average urban American, the consequences of this forced reorganization of agriculture and the rural economy are staggering, in both their economic and political dimensions. Fundamental questions are raised. Who will control food production? Will there be enough food? What will it cost? Who will get the income?

**World Hunger.** We live in a world that produces enough grains to feed everyone on the planet a 3000 calorie a day diet (what the average American eats), not counting the beans, potatoes and other root plants, vegetables, fruits, nuts and grass fed meat. Yet 500 million people suffer from hunger. There is something basically wrong already, and getting worse! We have starvation amidst abundance.

Farmers are going broke because they produce too much food in a world where hunger is five times greater than it was in 1950 and getting worse each year. One third of the children in Third World countries die of hunger or hunger-related causes before the age of 10. How can there be peace when there are so many people hungry in the world, yet there is so much food? In our country, 41 million people are below the poverty level, 12 million more than when Reagan took office.

Why? Most people, including most family farmers, look at food as a basic human necessity like water and air, one of the three essentials of life. On the other hand, corporations, who already control most of the processing and marketing of food and are moving rapidly to control the actual land and production of food, look upon food as a commodity to be bought cheap from farmers (the raw materials producers) and sold dear to the consumer like steel or rubber.

A recent United Nations study of 83 countries showed that hunger, starvation, and malnutrition was connected to the ownership of land and resources. Where a few owned the land and resources the many went hungry. Bishop Dingham of Des

Moines, Iowa, has warned that the United States is headed toward an El Salvador type of agriculture where 80% of the land is owned by 3%.

As Black writer George Harris warned in *Southern Exposure* magazine nearly 10 years ago:

The implications of controlling our own food is increasing as we realize that we cannot depend on agribusiness to provide the safest or most nutritious food—a fact we can readily appreciate if we pause to remember the incidence of mercury in fish, cancer-producing substances in meat, chemical additives, dyes, waxes, seductively-packaged junk food, the dumping of milk, pirating of wheat, slaughtering of calves, and the plowed under fields. To the degree that agriculture becomes business, it has the power to manipulate your diet for its own benefit, to provide or not to provide, or indeed, to put dog food in your bowl.

**Loss of Jobs** Farmers going broke can't purchase the goods and services of rural businesses and agri-business suppliers. The results have been business failures, plant closings and layoffs. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, there are three non-farm jobs lost every time a farm family is liquidated. Families pushed off their farms are forced to compete for increasingly scarce jobs, in both rural and urban areas. Minorities and women, already suffering high unemployment and low wages, are particularly hurt by this aspect of the farm crisis.

**Loss of Tax Revenues** Farmers losing money, bankrupt rural businesses, and unemployed workers can't pay taxes. In 1980 alone, lost tax revenues resulting from below parity farm prices totalled an estimated \$78.7 billion. The budget deficits that result from these lost revenues are forcing interest rates even higher. The net result is disaster for the economy as a whole, and bloodthirsty cutbacks in health care and human services.

**Environmental Damage** Farmers, squeezed by falling prices, are forced to extract every possible bushel from their soil, primarily through increased use of dangerous chemicals and fertilizers, and often under direct orders from their banker. Farmers suffering under "neocolonial" conditions are forced to shift toward ecologically unsound monoculture, instead of diversified agriculture.

As farm families are pushed off their farms, many are replaced by corporations or absentee landlords, notorious for their indifference to the preservation of our natural resources. For Wisconsin organic dairy farmer, and NAFA Board Member, Dixon Terry, the growing corporate domination is a threat to ecological sanity: "Nobody can take care of a farm like a family farmer. The corporate farmer oriented to short-run profit could let the soil all run down the river."

**Threat to Democracy** Concerned people, from all walks of life, must consider the potential political impact of losing 4/5 of our family farmers. In the U.S., farmers control almost one trillion dollars in land, machinery, and livestock, equal to the value of all manufacturing industries in this country. Unless the current trend is reversed, 4/5 of this, or almost \$800 billion, will pass out of the hands of working farmers and into the hands of banks, insurance companies, wealthy individuals and the government. Such a development would be a serious, perhaps fatal, blow to economic and social justice in our nation and to our democracy.

**Food As A Weapon of Control and Dependency** Food has long been used as a weapon in the U.S. imperialist arsenal. The gross political use and misuse of food in relation to Ethiopia and Africa today is blatant. Less obvious than the government's use of its reserves but equally damaging is the government-enforced policy of low prices. Our grain is sold today at such low prices that poor countries often direct their limited resources to more lucrative uses, such as high-return tourist facilities, rather than to self-sufficient food production. Beef is raised, and fed with American grain, on the best land in El Salvador, while the people of that country go hungry and only marginal land is available for food production.



Family type farming is losing throughout the world due to our country's policies. Western Europe has already lost 10 million farmers in 20 years, contributing to as much as 17% unemployment. Third World countries are stuck with low farm prices and prevented from developing their own food self sufficiency.

The key demand of the rural movement in response to this crisis is a **fair price**. A fair price can only be attained through government intervention in the marketplace, as history has shown. Therefore, the only solution to the farm crisis is political. The Farm Policy Reform Act of 1985 has been the focus of a lively political struggle. It developed through grassroots meetings and gained the support of a broad coalition of Americans as a sound and reasonable program to restore prosperity to rural America. The second part of this article will review the bill and assess the political results and prospects.

*--J. B. The writer has been involved in farm protest support in Missouri.*

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## Review

# Kiss of the Spider Woman

The movie *Kiss of the Spider Woman* tells the story of two prisoners who share a cell in a South American prison. Valentin (Raul Julia) is a revolutionary arrested while trying to smuggle a comrade out of the country, and Molina (William Hurt) is a drag queen convicted of molesting minors. The plot follows the developing relationship between these two almost comically opposed types. It's based on a novel with the same name by Manuel Puig and is directed by the man who directed *Pixote*, Hector Babenco.

### The Gay Trap

The first scene opens on a shot of Molina, swishing around the prison cell, spinning out his favorite romantic tale taken from a Nazi propaganda film, a red towel twirled around his head like a glamorous turban. It is this flamboyant characterization of Molina which has brought the movie most attention, both controversy and praise. Hurt won the Cannes Film festival for Best Actor, but the character has also provoked angry criticism from the gay community.

Is *Spider Woman* giving us an image of gay men as pathetically warped and doomed? Or is it using a gay queen to talk about what is strong and true in the "feminine" response to the world? Is Babenco trying to show the heroic potential people have, even (or especially) the least obvious ones? Or is he anesthetizing us with the notion of some universal human dilemma in which we all are caught—a web of self-destruction and reactionary fantasy? There is some of all these things in the movie, which is why it has generated so much controversy, particularly in the gay community. (For example, see Michael Bronsky's favorable review in the *Gay Community News*, 8/85 and Kenneth Hale-Wehman's extremely critical response—GCN, 10/85.)

First off, it has to be said that the movie's approach to homosexuality has its good side. For instance, simply having a gay man as one of the two key characters in a "serious" movie geared towards a predominantly straight audience is a plus; it's a slight move towards recognizing homosexuality for what it is—a legitimate and integral part of general human experience. Up until now, gays and lesbians have generally been presented in bit parts in movies, or as comic characters (*La Cage Aux Folles*), or have been confined to movies about a gay sub-culture (*Boys in the Band*) and, of course, porno flicks.

*Spider Woman* is also innovative in that it broaches the subject of a gay man and a basically straight man having sex together. If homophobia (the fear of homosexuals) is

generated mainly by straight people's panic about discovering their own homosexual impulses, then *Spider Woman* confronts this phobia straight on. Here the taboo is broken; a straight man is "enticed" into sex with a homosexual. The act could be interpreted cynically—Molina trying to seduce information out of his cellmate in order to further betray him and Valentin bribing a favor from Molina. But both Hurt and Julia play the scene with such frankness and even gentleness that it's hard not to accept it at face value—a genuine gesture of affection and farewell on both characters' parts. So, under the archetypically sordid and degrading conditions of a prison cell, the act does not seem sordid or degrading at all. Instead it comes across as an act of transcendence, of rebellion against the confining cruelty of the prison.

Another striking aspect of this scene is how little it changes our view of the straight man's sexual identity. Instead, it suggests that he, like all of us, lives with a whole range of amorphous sexual impulses which, under the right circumstances, we are capable of acting on. This image of Valentin not only undermines the dangerous idea that homosexuals can be labelled and definitively segregated from other people, it also defuses the paranoia lots of straights have about being seduced into homosexuality. It seems evident that contact with a homosexual, even sexual contact, on the part of a basically straight person like Valentin no more plunges him into the "abyss" of homosexuality than vice-versa—a straight encounter would drive someone as homosexual as Valentin into straightness.

So these are two ways in which *Spider Woman* deals innovatively with gayness. Unfortunately, these are not enough. Because as a character Molina confirms just too many common anti-homosexual prejudices. On the one hand, although Hurt plays Molina as a queen, he is not entirely convincing. The problem may be that most queens are ham actors themselves, putting on a gross parody of female style, and Hurt—too much the serious actor—couldn't bring himself to ham it up. But, in any case, Molina's personality still manages to confirm peoples' worst stereotypes of what gays are like. He's whiney, self-pitying, and narcissistic. And he initially comes across as utterly oblivious to any moral or political concerns, intent on escaping reality by wrapping himself in a gauze of romantic fantasy. Not only is he a convicted child molester, but he is completely unconcerned about the moral implications of what he chooses for his favorite movie romance—the story of love and intrigue from a Nazi propaganda film. If that's not enough, he also turns out to be colluding with his jailors. And when we see him on the outside, with his friends, they come across as lame-brained, vapid, and morally washed-out as him, a whole sub-culture of posing, preening lost souls.

Yet even this stereotyping of homosexual personality isn't the most offensive aspect of the movie. In spite of everything, Molina emerges as a likeable person. What is worse is the movie's underlying assumption that homosexuality is the hopeless longing to be of the opposite sex. Molina says his penis is an accident. His fits of self-pity are based on his impossible situation: he craves the love of a "normal" man, but any "normal" man could never love him. Yes, there are people who feel trapped this way,

caught in a body of the opposite sex. But this is not the experience of most homosexuals. Yet in an interview with the *New York Native* (August 26-September 1, 1985), Director Hector Babenco explains Molina's misery this way: "Molina cannot be complete in his relationships because he wants a real man, and what a real man wants is of course a real woman." Of course. Unless, perhaps, the "real" man happens to be a real, gay man. Babenco's assumption is unavoidable: there is no such thing as a real, gay man. And so, to him, Molina's pathos is not the relatively rare plight of transsexualism; it is symbolic of the general condition of all homosexuals. Unfortunately, this is how most people have been taught to view homosexuality, a view that will only be reinforced by this movie.

### **Crossing the Gender Gap**

The most interesting aspect of the movie, actually, is not what it says directly about homosexuality, but what it says more indirectly about gender roles. The movie starts with the exaggerated version of the feminine (Molina) and the traditional male (Valentin), and then the characters, through responding to each other, begin to move out of these limited roles. In this way, the movie chronicles a highly unconventional crossing of the gender gap.

If Molina exhibits some of the exaggerated flaws of the traditionally female response to the world (narcissism, sentimentality, low self-esteem, and so on), he also represents some of its virtues. He starts from a different place than Valentin, but the way he makes sense of the world begins to take on its own validity and worth. Molina shares in the life-supporting, loyal, and even potentially heroic aspect of the "feminine" code of responses and values. He is the nest-maker who even in prison tries to make the place liveable with drapes and tea he brews on a make-shift stove. His morality starts with the personal—his feelings about people, his mother whom he nurses, his lovers, and finally Valentin. He is a survivor, crafty and smart when he is fighting for something palpably useful like food—which he tricks out of the prison authorities with real gusto. And he is tender and nurturing and without squeamishness. This is what first amazes and moves his cellmate; when Molina takes care of him as protectively as if he were a baby, literally cleaning up his shit and swaddling him.

For his part, Valentin represents the opposing male virtues and flaws, someone who is, at least on the surface, entirely disciplined and admirable, motivated by his heroic cause. And yet he is, as the saying goes, out of touch with his feelings. He is uneasy not only with actual shit and piss, but also with his own emotions, the shit and piss of the human psyche. His true feelings (his passion for a bourgeois woman) are "politically incorrect" and so he refuses to acknowledge them until he blurts out her name in the unconscious ravings of illness.

So the movie does depict a significant crossing of the gender gap, a crossing under the most terrible and explosive and demanding conditions. For what could be more terrible than the conditions of a South American prison? What could lead to much

more explosive hatred and misunderstanding than the meeting of a jailed revolutionary and a swishing fag set up to inform on him? And what could be more demanding than the desire, on Molina's side, for the revolutionary to become his lover, and the desire, on Valentin's side, for Molina to risk his life on an obscure mission for the "revolution"? This aspect of the movie teaches us something about the possible stretching and learning of human beings, of the value of personal responsiveness and political conviction, and the possibility of starting with one, from either side, and ending up with some of both. But finally, this story of the crossing of the gender gap is overwhelmed by a more all-encompassing message brought home in the concluding scenes of the movie.

### Caught in the Web

Throughout the movie, there is a debate going on. "Your life is as trivial as your movies," Valentine tells Molina, and Molina retorts "Unless you have the keys to that door, I will escape in my own way thank you." Or when Valentin refuses to eat Molina's illicitly acquired groceries: "I can't afford to get spoiled," Molina answers him "What kind of cause is that, a cause that won't let you eat an avocado?" The depressing message of the movie is that both are right in the accusations they level at each other. Whether through escapism or useless martyrdom, they are both caught in the web.

The "cause" as represented by Valentin and his comrades is futile, absurd, and brutal, no matter what the motives. And we learn almost nothing about what motivates Valentin—his vision of justice or his love for the people. Instead we see him and his comrades locked in a doomed battle with an omnipotent state—the police, the prison guards. In telling the story of his arrest, he describes the old man whom he is supposed to help out of the country as a man who has spent his whole life waiting for the revolution, accomplishing nothing. And so the futility is magnified and repeated—Valentin wasting his life away in prison in martyrdom for a man who, in turn, has wasted his life away.

So Molina is right to steer clear of politics like the plague. His escapism, for all its weakness, is more in touch with reality than Valentin's hopeless heroics. Finally, at the end, he agrees to do a favor for Valentin (a senseless mission for which there is no clear aim). He swaps the red turban we first see him in at the beginning of the movie for a red scarf, a red badge of courage. Where does it get him? Locked in a meaningless and brutal embrace with Liliani, Valentin's movement girl-friend.

And what about Valentin? He has resisted caving in to weakness all along. He has said he will never give in to the drugs of the enemy how ever much they torture him. In the last scene he caves in. He takes morphine from a doctor who claims to be doing it behind the backs of the jailors. And, in a drugged-out stupor, Valentin is finally lulled into a fantasy right out of Molina's fascist flick. To underscore the point, the heroine of this fantasy, Valentin's rich lover is played by the same actress as the one that plays

Molina's glamour girl from the Nazi film. Valentin ends up transported in his dreams to a Fantasy Island type paradise with his bourgeois woman, a place where political struggle has no meaning, the place where we all—it seems—secretly long to be.

So in the end it is hard to find any real hope in the crossing of the gender gap. Molina and Valentin have simply crossed each other by and swapped fates—Molina destroyed by an absurd political escapade and Valentin lulled into bourgeois decadence. In the end there is no way of escaping the kiss of the spider woman—the universal banality of all our fantasies or the inevitable brutality of political struggle.

—Lucy Marx

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*Forward Motion* is a magazine of socialist opinion and advocacy. We say socialist opinion because each FM presents analyses of important organizing work and reviews of political and cultural trends. We say socialist advocacy because FM is dedicated to a new left-wing presence in U.S. politics, and to making Marxism an essential component of that presence. We share these purposes with other journals, but we seek for FM a practical vantage point from within the unions, the Black and other freedom struggles, the women's movement, the student, anti-war, and gay liberation movements, and other struggles. We also emphasize building working people's unity as a political force for social change, particularly through challenging the historical pattern of white supremacy and national oppression in the capitalist domination of this country.

Editorial responsibility is exercised by the Forward Motion collective: Susan Cummings, Tom Goodkind, Jon Hoffman, Lucy Marx, Arvid Muller, Claire Welles.

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*Forward Motion* is published six times a year by Center for Democratic Alternatives.

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