A MARXIST NEWSLETTER

Forward Motion Forward Motion Forward Motion

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staying alive in local union politics

nicaragua: a black perspective

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Dear Friends,

A few Sundays ago, the *Boston Globe* Business section headlined its feature story, "Are These Men Out of Touch?" Below this appeared the photos of ten leading figures of today's AFL-CIO. All men. All white. All past their prime, you might say. Now this has become a familiar type of story about the unions these past few years, but it did happen to coincide with the AFL-CIO Executive Council's annual Bal Harbor retreat. And its press statements this year used such dramatic phrases as, "new course for labor," "facing up to change," "workplace revolution." There is talk of new categories of membership for pro-union workers not under collective bargaining agreements; new types of emphasis on organizing the unorganized; attention to "new" issues like pay equity and workplace democracy. It is easy to be cynical about pronouncements like these. For all the talk about what is new in the way of work and jobs, when it comes to labor issues, the AFL-CIO still makes scant recognition of the impact and greater dynamism of the Black and other minority movements and the women's movement.

It is easy to be cynical, but we should not. Some of the proposed new recommendations are interesting. They reflect the pressure of more progressive social forces now part of the labor movement equation. To put it bluntly, the unions never have and won't now reach out to new categories of workers without more of an opening to the left than presently exists, or without these social movements forcing their way in.

The interview we feature this month gives a strong sense of the kind of pressure the union hierarchy has come to face, here and there, from successful local-level challenges from the left. In this case, the challenge comes from the left by way of women's struggle for equality and representation. The interview is sobering in portraying the everyday reality facing the new trade unionists running locals throughout the country. Yet it is also refreshing and optimistic about what careful work can bring. If the AFL-CIO proposals turn out to have any substance, this kind of controlled energy and determination should stand us in good stead.

Another important challenge we ought to take heart from is posed by the continuing struggle for social transformation in Nicaragua and by the connections and solidarity we in the United States can build with that struggle. Based on a recent visit to the country, "Nicaragua: A Black Perspective" makes those connections and reaches for that solidarity in an important and useful way. Complementing this article is an opinion piece on the state of and way forward for the anti-war, anti-intervention movement.

Rounding out the issue is part 4 of our continuing "Party Up" series, poetry from an American Indian friend, new materials by and about Mila Aguilar, and a thought on International Women's Day 1985.

We'd like to thank those who responded promptly to our request for renewals and new subscriptions. Other readers should be getting letters shortly, and we ask you to help us do the job that *FM* is trying to do here. Thanks.

Forward Motion is a magazine of socialist opinion and advocacy. Editorial responsibility for *Forward Motion* is exercised by the FM collective.

Forward Motion welcomes letters and articles. All items submitted for publication must be typed, double-spaced, and signed as you want your name to appear. At this time, all correspondence should be addressed: Forward Motion, P.O. Box 1884, Boston, MA 02130.

The editors will read all materials sent to us and, to the extent possible, acknowledge them and let you know their disposition. We cannot, however, be responsible for the return of manuscripts unless you also send us a self-addressed stamped envelope. Letters may be edited for space.

Taking It All On In The Locals

Portions of this interview originally appeared in CATALYST *magazine as part of a larger article.*

Could you tell us first about your union and how you came to be President?

I am President of SEIU Local 285, a local of 10,000 members in Massachusetts. Our local is similar to an "amalgamated" local. We have members in private hospitals and mental health centers, state workers as well as public workers in cities and towns throughout the Commonwealth. We negotiate and service over 70 contracts, with some for groups of workers as small as 1, to several units with over 1,000 members.

I have been President of the local for 3 years. I came "up through the ranks" as a steward for workers at Boston City Hospital (BCH). I am still a Medical Records clerk at BCH, and have worked for the City for over 11 years.

When I say I "came up through the ranks," I don't mean that I set out to play the game of union politics. Back in 1973, I worked with numerous City employees to begin to shake up our local. At that time, we had a President who had never been elected, a non-existent stewards system, contract ratifications without published proposals, and negotiating committees that never got invited to negotiating sessions! Our local President made front-page news when it was discovered that he and his wife received three no-show jobs from the mayor of Boston. The City Treasurer explained that the jobs for the President were a good deal: in exchange the President had assured the acceptance of lousy contracts for the clerks and technicians he was supposed to represent.

It took 3 to 5 years of organizing against this state of affairs to make enough trouble to get the local put into trusteeship by the International. But in 1979, the local got its first elected set of officers, Executive Board, and a recognized place in the local labor movement.

The next three years produced big changes in SEIU 285. We merged with SEIU 880 (a healthcare local), and the Licensed Practical Nurses Association of Massachusetts. Stewards were elected and trained. Members became active. Boston City Hospital workers led the first successful city strike in Boston's history.

But there were also growing concerns about how the new administration ran the local. Decisions were largely in the hands of the staff. A decertification drive cut the membership by almost one third. A poorly run dues election vote put the local in debt by close to $250,000, and half the staff was laid off. It was then that a group of members began meeting to decide who should be supported in the 1981 local elections. We eventually decided to take on the current leadership (progressive though they were), and run as a MOVEMENT FOR A BETTER LOCAL 285. We were considered a

women's slate (all three top officers were women), though we shied away from pointing that out ourselves. We won 17 of the 21 Executive Board slots. We won in nearly every unit, even though another breakaway slate appeared at the last moment.

You said the leadership you took on was considered progressive. How would you define a progressive union leader and what made your brand of progressivism different enough from the incumbent's that you felt he should be challenged?

To me, a progressive union leader is someone with a political perspective that is left: someone who does not think that the present free enterprise system best meets the needs of working people in this country. Someone who also has a broad definition of working class interests; who does not separate the needs of women or different minorities from the needs of the more "traditional"—white male—labor movement.

I actually think that various progressive leaders have different aspirations, though we may share a common left agenda. This might be reducing things down a little too far, but I do think the same attraction to power, authority and influence tug at each one of us—pulling us to become one of the "aristocrats of labor." Even among the growing number of progressive leaders here in Massachusetts, the stakes are high and some individuals are climbing the ladder of success quickly. Maybe I'm confusing personal ambition with aspirations. But I think that one's politics or union agenda cannot stay left forever if the pull of personal ambitions wins out. So what today appears as a wide divergence between newer, more liberal union leaders and the "old guard" of the State Federation might tomorrow appear as no significant difference at all. We face the same pressures to compromise, sell-out, give-in as the rest of the labor movement. Hopefully our left perspective will be a force in keeping us from caving-in as quickly. We have an advantage, but we're not immune.

But getting back to the question of why we challenged the old leadership. They were progressive in many respects. But they ran the local in a very tight-fisted manner. The organization was theirs to lead and control. What we found is that members were not learning to develop and use their power, that the rank and file's power was considered a threat by the leadership, something to be resisted and stopped. It's really a matter of how serious one is about empowering workers. I find many progressives who take the right positions on broader political questions, but still run their organizations like the army. The flow of information, the place where decisions are made, remains in the hands of a select few. Not that there are millions of people out there just waiting to be "empowered." Rather, I see it as our job to teach members to struggle with people about what they can do, what they should do. Help them learn to take power, instead of limiting their right to power.

There also has not been enough attention placed on defining the role and authority of the *staff* in most locals. I know our staff has been consistently critical of how decisions and priorities are made, how it gets decided what they do or don't do. They carry out many of the policies of the Executive Board on a daily basis and are expected to make split second decisions. Without structuring them into the decision-making pro-

cess, they either become opposition or disgruntled employees...they want the same respect and empowerment that other members do.

What progress do you think you have made in running your local?

I think we have made significant, though not startling, progress. We have repaid (in three years) close to $200,000 in debt from the previous administration. The local has grown in membership, its staff has increased, members feel like they can influence the running of the local. There are not any terrible rifts among the membership. In fact, in December we were re-elected, unopposed.

We have moved to make the local more democratic by changing the union structure, but sometimes I wonder how significant that really is. We have made more of the top officers actual members of the staff, as well as trying to recruit union reps out of the membership. But we have fallen down in some of these goals because out internal training of stewards and members is not good enough. While we now have active committees, an adopt-a-legislator network for more grassroots lobbying, chapter chairs in various locations around the state, annual conventions and leadership assemblies, we have not found a great "upsurge" in membership participation.

We have consistently raised issues of civil rights and discrimination at all levels of the local. We've also been able to avoid any tremendous white backlash. However, many resolutions passed in favor of affirmative action or superseniority in lay-offs remain only paper resolutions until we are able to raise the issues in chapter contract negotiations. Top down battles don't produce much even when you "win." The battles that seem to have more lasting impact are the ones that are fought at a chapter level.

The same thing with issues on intervention in Central America. We were able to lead in a fight at our International convention, and got a very progressive Central America resolution passed, and got our International to agree to join the National Committee for Human Rights in El Salvador. Our local has helped build a broad Massachusetts committee that now has nine VP's of the State Federation on it. The local now has a membership-run committee that works to do outreach in the local and educationals at all assemblies. And yet on the membership level I don't know how strong an impact we have made. Most members still don't see Central America as a trade union issue. We have been able to clear some room for progressives to do work about Central America. But we haven't solidified a broad base of support for non-intervention. I should also say that not all of our Executive Board agrees with this position. But they feel the room to disagree, and have been willing to accept the vote of the majority.

So when I look at what others have accomplished at the local level, I would say we have made relatively significant progress. When I look at where I would like us to go, I would say we have scarcely scratched the surface.

What has your success as an elected union official meant for you politically? What do you gain and what do you lose by achieving a high union position?

You face a lot of pressures and compromises as you move up the current AFL-CIO "ladder of success." If you are to survive for any length of time, you begin to learn to

pick your fights. The labor movement is like any movement. You have to find out who you can rely on, who you can ally with, and figure out who the enemy is. You have to make "deals" (or "united fronts" if you like) on some issues to have friends for later battles. While you might win a temporary battle over Central America, that doesn't necessarily mean you will win one on affirmative action or super-seniority. That doesn't mean that you have to give up your position. Everyone felt tremendous pressure to get behind Mondale early on. Even VP's who supported Jesse Jackson let their locals endorse Mondale, while they spoke out only as individuals. You have to decide when and where to fight.

Photo by Steve Mazur

—Celia Wcislo

I think the biggest pressure most of us will face is the pressure to distance ourselves from the left: the organized left or the left in our own locals. We are pressured to be seen as a leader of the whole local: left, center and right. It is easy as you move up to get known as the leader who can handle both the left and the right; the leader who falls somewhere in the center. You can't throw stones as easily from the inside as the outside. You feel the responsibility of protecting the organization, not just taking the correct position.

Even if you got elected by left forces, once in office you are no longer a voice just for the left. You don't necessarily find yourself at the front leading angry progressive forces. Sometimes you find yourself leading by brokering a compromise between the left and the right which everyone can live with. And if the left is not organized in your local, you can find yourself drifting very quickly, responding to whatever pressure is coming from the members. Sometimes you can't *lead* the left openly; you have to get the left to accept a compromise. While sometimes you might be in a position of holding back the left, I don't think that has to be your role.

Our local endorsed Mel King for mayor of Boston. We narrowly averted a white backlash to that decision. This past year a vocal number of members and staff wanted the local to endorse Jesse Jackson for President, but it was clear that the membership was not in the same place. By leading with the left in this situation, we could have seen a tremendous backlash. Instead, we openly debated the issue, and had the membership vote. They voted for Mondale. Now, I could have then begun wearing a Jackson button, but I would have felt like it was breaking a trust. I was elected to represent the local, and the local endorsed Mondale. I chose instead to wear a DUMP REAGAN button. Not a perfect solution, but a compromise. While I didn't hold back the left, I wasn't very leading for a left point of view. I put the political realities of my local on an equal standing with the "best" position.

And there are tough times ahead for progressive union leaders. As the labor movement sums up what it did right or wrong in this presidential election, I'm sure one of the major lessons the leadership will draw is that a coalition of liberals and progressives is not on next year's agenda. Officers such as myself will find that our opinions and loyalties isolate us more and more in the union bureaucracy. I suppose what I'm concluding about this recent dive by the AFL-CIO into electoral politics is that they will endorse more and more conservative politicians; they will work to become more acceptable to their voting membership. They will find it harder and harder to be in coalitions with women's groups, with anti-intervention groups, and especially with groups of oppressed nationalities. And that will make my job so much harder.

There is nothing too earthshaking about what I'm saying. As you buy into any system, you become limited by the players and rules of that system. That's true for the trade union movement. That's true about most reforms. That's why the trade union movement, why reforms, ARE NOT ENOUGH. You need to understand the trade unions, the political forces within them, and do with them all that you can do. But they aren't meant to fundamentally change anything.

What obstacles have you come up against as a progressive woman union president both inside the union and in relation to outsiders?

When our slate came to power in SEIU 285, we faced a lot of opposition and roadblocks from our International and from the State Federation. We had to prove (and prove quickly) that we were competent. We had to learn how to operate a million dollar plus yearly budget, pay off huge debts, and not step on any hidden land mines. We inherited the mess of our local and the "experts" decided to sit back and see if we

could sort it out on our own. If we had made any crucial mistakes, they would have trusteed us. But we didn't.

I've found that along with the skepticism (or antagonism) we faced, there is a huge roadblock of male supremacy in the labor movement that makes you feel invisible or insignificant, even when you are doing great. I find this even among "progressive" union leaders (who in turn are predominantly male). You can run a local two to five times as large as the next guy, but your opinion is overlooked because your voice is higher! For example, shortly after we became more visible in the state AFL-CIO, all the guys of the State Federation began to gossip about the sex lives of the "girls" of 285. Not just gossip, but ask questions and generally be snoopy. In some ways, our politics weren't as upsetting to them as whether or not it was really true that I was a lesbian. I didn't make an issue of it, but they sure didn't know how to act around me for the longest time.

It was also that we represented the service sector—both health care and public employees. In Massachusetts, the building trades had dominated the State Federation for years. And suddenly the service unions were making it onto the map. The guys from the State Federation wanted to know what made us tick. We were aliens to them. They looked at us like we were wild guns just loaded and waiting to go off. We also knew a lot about issues they weren't knowledgeable about. Like health care. And we could organize. That was threatening. They were afraid that we would use those skills to go after their power. It was hard to be effective initially when everyone looked at you like you were a young hothead who had to be taught a lesson.

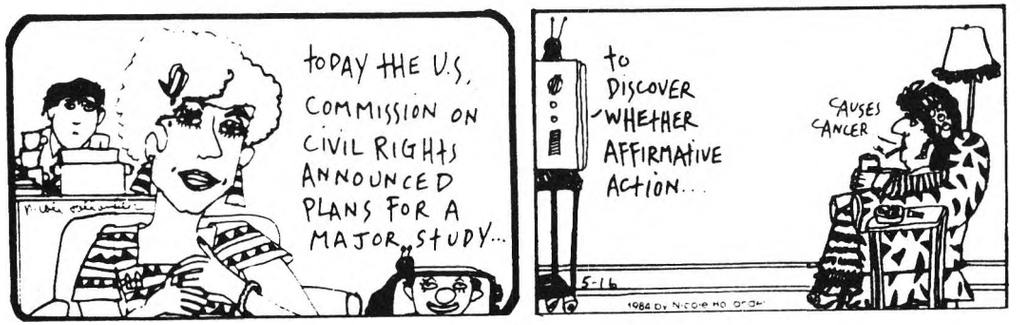
What difference does it make to the style and structure of the union that your workers provide human services? Or that they, and their clients, are mainly women?

I don't think that there is much that necessitates a different structure or style for a human service local, but I do think that human service workers are open to building a different type of union and structure. As times get harder, as public funds are cut, or as hospital cost containment changes the type of services that are provided, workers in our locals automatically turn to the political arena or to the community for support. To defend services (as well as fight lay-offs), it is easy to see why an alliance between the unions and the community is vital. We find ourselves in the same lifeboat in a wild sea. Also, the impact of politicians is real, and many union members are active in electoral politics. Taking on political campaigns is not just an added task, but part of protecting your services.

Close to 67% of our local is women. I don't think we could have won our election as easily if this wasn't true. This has meant an openess from some of our members to take on women's issues that the rest of the labor movement has shied away from. Daycare, or VDT legislation for example. Support for affirmative action. Comparable worth is an issue that we haven't acted on, but has wide support from our nursing and clerical members.

I also think because we provide services in urban centers, our local has a great po-

tential to deal with issues of discrimination and civil rights in a way which goes far beyond what the traditional labor movement is willing to do. The old leadership was able to be "silent" on civil rights, and there wasn't a huge uproar. (Maybe that's because people's expectations of unions are so low.) But we have been able to do some fairly good organizing around civil rights, and without unleashing an overwhelming white backlash. We set up a civil rights committee, got the Executive Board to support affirmative action and super-seniority in lay-offs; supported Mel King in the Boston mayoral campaign against Ray Flynn. We have had several negotiating committees negotiate super-seniority language in their contracts; did affirmative action hiring within our union staff; as well as brought several busloads of members to Washington in support of MLK day. And this occurred in the first 2½ years in a local that had no record of civil rights support previously.



How have you tried to affect the quality of and access to the services your members provide?

Probably most importantly, we try to get our members and chapters to address service issues directly and routinely, and not to wait until a crisis comes up. I want to give you a couple of examples.

After the 1980 strike at Boston City Hospital, many of the active members there realized that building up a lasting "worker-community alliance" was no easy project, especially when the only time we went to community groups was when we were in trouble. An alliance can't be a one way street. We can't expect help from community organizations if we aren't out there in front with them. So the three unions at BCH set up the All-Unions Outreach Committee. The committee has functioned for several years, focusing its work on service and access issues. Several people began work on "Staying Alive," a newsletter about changes in the Massachusetts healthcare system. The Outreach Committee helped keep the sickle-cell center open when Reagan's cuts meant it might lose its funding. They gathered clothes and furniture for the elderly floor at BCH. Several members wrote a 40 page paper that exposed (and actually stopped for the time being) the hiring of an outside management firm that was being considered to run the Department of Health and Hospitals (DH&H). They helped to coordinate

community support to block the political appointment of someone as director of DH&H by outgoing mayor Kevin White in his last days in office. Most recently, the committee intervened to stop some new billing regulations that would greatly limit access to care. They have lobbied, attended meetings, written and spoken to various community groups.

But here's an example where we were less successful. The Boston Election department has been infamous for years for its unwillingness to register voters (especially minority voters). A consent decree was won against the Election Commission. My local represents the registrars. Many of the registrars have worked for the Commission for years, and have many of the same attitudes as the commissioners. They are opposed to wider registration. ("If people want to vote, they can come here to register" or "Why should we register people who can't even read or write.") Many community groups want more widespread registration, more helpful registrars, more registration sites. They would even like volunteer registrars (something the paid registrars are violently opposed to). This all comes at a time when $900,000 was cut out of the Election Department budget, leading to some lay-offs of clerks and possibly registrars.

Initially the union had tried to convince registrars (who only grudgingly agreed) to a plan the community would accept. But when the lay-offs came, the commissioners convinced our members that their jobs were all on the line, and that the community was out to get their jobs (a threat with subtle racial overtones). Our members in the Election Department all turned against any new plan for registration, or any possibility of volunteers. They ended up more backward, more of a roadblock, then they had been before. While education and patience will help, the progressive leadership had its hands tied by the conservative views of its membership. It's clear that our members are often seen (and often are) an obstacle to delivering better voter registration services. And we're having real problems in changing their attitudes or views towards the people they serve.

What are your long-range goals for the human service workforce and how are they connected to some of your specific activities in the union today?

I don't think we have a conscious plan for "human service workers" per se. We do want to help people to grapple with broader political issues (not just lay-offs, but what type of voter registration do people deserve in a democracy; who has actually been disenfranchised). We want people to become actively involved in the political process as trade unionists. Also, we want to help our members, many of whom are women without a long history of trade unionism, working in service jobs, to develop a more class conscious outlook on their lives.

Striking is a major problem for unions in the public service sector or the healthcare industry. The potential for hurting patients often holds back militancy. How to resolve this problem, to get people to see that you win more by fighting than by being "nice" or calling a local politician—and how you get people to learn that when striking is such a frightening thought—that is still something we need to work on. Perseverance in building alliances between the workers who provide the services and the people who use

the services will be a key to making militancy a possibility.

What would be your goals for your union, say in ten years?

First, I would like to see an Executive Board that was composed of ACTIVE members. I would hope that people would be proud of their local; that they would want to wear a 285 jacket, or come to a union picnic. I would hope they would have a vision of the way life should be; that they would expect dignity and respect because of what they learned in the union. And that the overall atmosphere in the union would make equality (racial, sexual, etc.) something people felt they could fight for, know they would get backing for. Finally, I would hope that the local was growing; that it was helping to lead the labor movement out of the destructive rut it has gotten itself into.

—Celia Wcislo

Editorial: International Women's Day 1985

International Women's Day '85 has just come and gone, offering a stark contrast to IWD celebrations ten years ago. Back then, a hot topic was whether to celebrate "International Womens Day" or "International Working Women's Day," a dispute symbolic of the "left" sectarian bitterness already destroying the communist movement—and doing no good for the women's movement either. In 1985, the issue seems to be finding any celebrations at all. *Socialist Review* devoted its January-February issue to socialist-feminism, beginning a year-long review of the problems faced by that political tendency. Socialist-feminism, most typified by the Women's Unions in several cities during the 1970s, fell on difficult times by the late 1970s and early 1980s. One explanation for this decline has placed blame with the communist movement. Communist ultra-"leftism" did wreck socialist-feminist—as well as many other—mass organizations. Most communists have never seriously and adequately addressed the truth of this. Yet the crisis which faced and continues to face socialist-feminism cannot be viewed apart from the problems faced by other Marxist tendencies, despite real particularities. And while it would be wrong to exaggerate the strength of socialist-feminists and communists among women generally, these two tendencies together played a central role in promoting among the general population International Women's Day and issues which flow from that day.

The women's movement was able to sustain itself through the 1970s and make a deep, long-lasting impression on the life of the people of the U.S. Catalyzed during the 1960s by the Black liberation movement, a new women's movement developed a life of its own. As such it also drew the attention of an increasingly rabid and vocal religious Right-wing—the New Right. Some of the very basic and seemingly un-radical tenets of the women's movement so threatened time-honored male supremacist practices that it aroused the furor of the Right. The women's movement represented, for the Right-wing, a destabilizing social force for the U.S. as a whole.

The decline of International Women's Day celebrations (though they continue to occur) reflects the weakness of the Left, but also the defensiveness of progressive social movements generally. The New Right has chosen to go after the national movements and the women's movement because these two forces offer fundamental challenges to the ideological and social fabric of the U.S. The women's movement's advocacy of reproductive rights, women working outside of the home, equal pay for equal work, shared housework, comparable worth, and so on, undermines basic "American" notions of male supremacy. The New Right, a most *ideological* Right, cannot permit the women's emancipation struggle such a beach-head.

The bombings of abortion clinics, gay-baiting and homophobia, the bullet through Supreme Court Justice Blackman's window (author of the 1973 opinion in favor of the woman's right to choose) as well as increasingly conservative court decisions with regard to "women's issues" are all part of the Right-wing offensive aimed not only at turning back the clock, but the creation of a so-called Christian and moral U.S.A.; in other words, a male supremacist utopia in the here and now. The fact that supposedly legitimate Right-wing voices can excuse away the abortion clinic bombings indicates the extent to which this Right-wing crusade against women will go. That these bombings have not been fully condemned as terrorism and prosecuted as such also indicates the level of actual tolerance and support which Reagan's in-Justice Department is willing to permit.

Responding to the Right on an issue-by-issue basis is important, but also incomplete. A response to the Right must include countering the Right-wing's social vision with an *alternative, majoritarian* vision of our own. To that extent, the largely white women's movement (and certainly its left-wing) lost a valuable opportunity in 1984 when, for the most part, it sat out the primaries and failed to unite with the Jackson Rainbow Coalition in the presidential elections. While recognizing problems of male chauvinism which existed within the Jackson campaign, the reality was that his campaign mobilized Black women in great numbers, and Black women have historically felt—and been—excluded by the policies and practices of the largely white women's movement. In addition, when Geraldine Ferraro was nominated for the vice-presidential slot on the Democratic ticket, white women in the Democratic Party missed a valuable opportunity to unite with oppressed nationality women in continued support of the Rainbow planks. That this support was largely not forthcoming was indicative of a failure on the part of white women Democrats to acknowledge that Ferraro was picked largely as a result of the Rainbow challenge to the Democratic Party.

To paraphrase a now current cliche, as the liberals have moved to the Right, the Left has rushed in to fill the seats of the liberals. Without an active and articulate Left-wing,

ground will inevitably be conceded to the forces of reaction. Women who see themselves as socialist-feminists and communists need to get to work rebuilding a Left-wing presence of the women's movement. This work will get underway in an atmosphere very different from that which existed back in the 1960s. Yet we can offer a similar theme: that the views of the women's movement are "common sense" and a majoritarian perspective. In that spirit, we need to reaffirm another commitment: that a powerful women's movement demands the active particiation and support of oppressed nationality women; without it, the women's movement we seek will only be a possibility.

—R.T. Simms
Executive Committee, PUL

Nicaragua 1985: A Black Perspective

In the fall of 1984 I worked as a member of Blacks for Empowerment to gain acceptance, in the Black Community of Boston, of a ballot referendum to cease U.S. government military efforts to overthrow the current government in Nicaragua. The Black community responded to our efforts and to its own conscience by overwhelmingly endorsing the referendum, also called the "Peace Referendum." In some Black precincts the vote was 9 to 1 in favor.

One never knows why people vote the way they do. Did people support the referendum because they view the Nicaraguans as their brothers and sisters? They could have, since many Nicaraguans look like Afro-Americans in terms of complexion, hair texture, and facial features.

Did they support the referendum because they view the Nicaraguans as fighting the exploitation of big business and chauvinism of the U.S. government just as are Blacks in the U.S.? This would have been a valid reason for supporting the referendum.

Did the large vote reflect the deep seated religious tradition in our community which promotes both peace and self-determination? If so, this sentiment is matched by the progressive church in the New Nicaragua.

Or did the Black community support the referendum because we feared the creation of another Viet Nam in Nicaragua with unemployed Black Youth making up the cannon fodder of the U.S. military offensive? Given our historical experience, such thinking would be more than justified.

In the organizing done by Blacks for Empowerment for the referendum we addressed all of these issues. My recent trip to Nicaragua, however, has helped to deepen my understanding of these four points.

I. Who Are the Nicaraguans

Nicaraguans are a racially mixed and culturally diverse people. Geographically, the country is divided in half. There is a side facing the Pacific Ocean on the West and a side facing the Atlantic Ocean on the East. The people on the west coast have a mixed native Indian and Spanish ancestry. Although the Indian peoples by far outnumbered the Spanish, the dominant cultural influence was exercised first by the Spanish conquerers and later by the U.S. Yankees. One of the efforts of the Sandinista government since it came to power in 1979 was to uncover and promote the culture of the native Nicaraguan — the music, poetry, art and dance of the urban poor and peasant farmers and fisherman.

Although the Indian peoples of the Atlantic Coast often have the same physical features as the Nicaraguans on the Pacific Coast, the Indians of the Atlantic coast have maintained their centuries old cultures and traditions. The four main population groups are the Suma, the Rama, the Garifuna and the Miskito Indians. They maintained their culture because of the strength of their heritage and because of the poor communication between the Atlantic and Pacific sides of the country. For example, no road connects the capital of the country, Managua, on the Pacific side, with the largest town on the Atlantic side, Bluefields.

The two coasts also have different political histories. When the Spanish conquered the Pacific side they brutally murdered many Indians, spent much energy destroying the religious traditions of the Indians while replacing them with Catholicism, and sanctioned intermarriage or at least sexual relations between Spaniards and the natives. In contrast, the Atlantic side was settled first by British pirates, then British planters from the West Indies and later dominated by U.S.-based corporations. The British did not want to fight the Spanish directly for control of the Atlantic coast so the British "crowned" a line of Miskito Kings, giving them authority over all the other inhabitants of the Atlantic coast and guns to fight the Spaniards. In return for this "authority" the Miskito provided captured Suma and Rama slaves to work in the British run plantations and mines.

From the 1600s onward there was another group of slaves brought to the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. You guessed it — us. Blacks were brought directly from Africa and in many cases were brought from plantations on West Indian islands. Other slaves escaped from slave ships headed for the West Indies and made their way to Nicaragua. After slavery was outlawed by Britain, British companies continued to bring in Black workers from their West Indian colonies. As the British released their hold in Nicaragua, U.S. companies came in. A large timber company based in Georgia brought many Afro-American workers to the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. Quite a few of these Black Americans stayed in Nicaragua after the company ceased operating. The end result of this Black migration to Nicaragua is a sizeable Black English-speaking population living primarily in towns and villages with the names Bluefields, Corn Islands, Pearl Lagoon and Puerto Cabezas.

I was fortunate to spend a week in Bluefields, living there with a Black family. The grandmother of the family told me that her father was from South Carolina. The English spoken by Blacks on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua has a kind of West Indian accent with many Spanish words sprinkled in. In terms of facial features, they look like any of us walking around in Roxbury. So one can say that Afro-Americans definitely have relatives in Nicaragua.

II. Common Oppression

The Spanish government released its claim over Nicaragua in 1821. The British continued to directly rule the Atlantic Coast until 1894. The U.S. government and its large

corporations began muscling into its Central American neighbor's territory in the beginning of this century. This strong-arming included occupation of Nicaragua by U.S. Marines from 1912-1933. At stake were the timber, gold, bananas, cotton, beef and coffee of Nicaragua. The extensive rivers in Nicaragua also provided an alternative to the Panama Canal for a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Peasants were routinely thrown off their small plots of land. Mine workers labored for a pittance in horrible conditions and suffered from serious respiratory ailments such as silicosis. In the Bluefields area fishing and lumber have been the major industries, but for all the years the U.S. companies monopolized the area no significant roads, sewage system or other infrastructure were built. The people were pacified by allowing them to spend hard earned wages at the company store for imported soaps, canned goods, gadgets and fabric.

DRAWING BY: PAUL GOODNIGHT

There are quite a few Black people that I talked with in Bluefields who look back longingly at the good old days when products like Ivory soap were plentiful. This situation is in some ways comparable to the economy of Boston's Black community. Blacks generally work for white-owned business, then spend our meager earnings in white-owned stores, while little of the profit we help create goes in to fixing up our streets or for community development. Yet we get so caught up in acquiring the trinkets our money can buy that we fail to question how our community is not being developed. These relations become even more insidious when an entire country is being exploited by unequal trade arrangements enforced by the threat of military invasion — as has been historically true in the relations between the United States and Nicaragua.

Maybe this line of thinking led to the high vote in Boston's Black community in the November Peace Referendum.

III. Religious Tradition

There are two political traditions in the Black church. One tries to quiet protests and stifle the struggle to end societal injustice and discrimination. The far nobler tradition of the Black church is to stand at the forefront of the fight for freedom. The refusal of Bishop Richard Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to be segregated during worship service in 1816, the Black socialist minister George Washington Woodbey in the early twentieth century, and the activist ministry of Rev. Dr. Martin L. King exemplify a proud tradition in the Black church of resisting injustice.

There is a similar historical dichotomy in the Nicaraguan church. The Catholic church is the principal church in the western half of Nicaragua. While some Catholic church leaders ignored the cries of suffering of the poor and the victims of torture and assassination under the Somoza regime, others based their ministry around the poor. The current Minister of Culture, Father Ernesto Cardenal, insists that it was his rereading the Bible with poor peasants that helped him understand better Christ's mission to the downtrodden. Father Cardenal eventually joined with the Sandinista National Liberation Front. While in Nicaragua I participated in a discussion with a local priest who stated that "to be a Christian in today's world is to be a revolutionary, because a Christian can not sit idly by and watch a brother or sister in pain or oppressed." He added that Christian revolutionaries have the added inspiration of faith and the strength provided by the power of God. This father was also a member of the Sandinista Front.

In Bluefields on the Atlantic Coast I talked with both the Pastor of the Black Missionary Baptist Church and the Pastor of the Moravian Church. This Baptist Church is a member of the National Baptist Convention based in the U.S. — which is the largest Afro-American church denomination. Although the Moravians are a small denomination in the U.S. they represent the largest protestant church in Nicaragua. The pastors of both the Baptist and Moravian churches in Bluefields support the positive efforts of the FSLN government and work to build greater utilization of the beneficial social programs initiated by the government. The Baptist Minister is especially concerned about

improving social conditions among the Black population and concerned about maintaining the language and culture of the Blacks of the Atlantic Coast. These efforts have become part of his ministry. The FSLN government supports his efforts by paying the teachers' salaries in the school run by the Baptist church.

This socially conscious view of Christianity is comparable to that found in many Black churches in the U.S.

IV. A New Viet Nam

Much of the dialogue we in Blacks for Empowerment participated in during the referendum campaign focused on preventing another Viet Nam. To a certain extent the anology holds up. In the U.S. the all "volunteer" army has been aided in its recruitment by 50+% unemployment among Black youth. Racism in all branches of U.S. military service relegates Black recruits to combat training rather than to technical or supervisory positions. So should the U.S. government militarily invade Nicaragua the bulk of the fighting troops would be young people of color. In Nicaragua I was thoroughly impressed by regular citizen's readiness and preparation to defend their homeland from a Yankee invasion. The Nicaraguans are convinced that there would be many casualties on both sides since they are prepared to fight to the death for their freedom from foreign domination. If we value the lives of our Black youth, we must make every effort to either keep them out of the military or to prevent an invasion of Nicaragua.

Those of us using the Viet Nam analogy, however, often miss the point that the war against Nicaragua is already going on. People are dying almost daily from contra military attacks. I know because I saw the bodies during my visit to Nicaragua. And in a country with a total population of 2½ million, the many hundreds of people murdered or kidnapped by the contra is as destructive as many thousands of people being killed in the U.S. The way the U.S. is involved is more like what happened near the end of the Viet Nam war when efforts were made by the U.S. to "Vietnamize" the war, that is, to call the shots from the rear and provide guns for the Vietnamese to kill each other. The Pentagon trains and equips the "contra" — (largely members of the Nicaraguan National Guard under the Somoza dictatorship, but also including some Miskito Indians) to kill other Nicaraguans. The U.S. also helps recruit North American mercenaries to fight in Nicaragua. Officially, U.S. troops are there only as advisors. Yet without U.S. economic aid, equipment and military leadership and surveillance, the war would soon end.

Another very important similarity to the Viet Nam war is the use of economic destabilization. One tactic of the U.S. military was to starve the North Vietnamese into submission. Food crops were bombed, burned, or destroyed by Agent Orange. The results of such direct tactics still haunt the U.S. military, and Vietnam vets continue to make their suffering from Agent Orange known. In Nicaragua the U.S. uses to the same end the tactics of mining Nicaraguan harbors, disallowing trade, and terrorizing workers who dare to go to the country-side to pick coffee or cotton.

Conclusion

For these and other reasons Black folks in the U.S. have a stake in what happens in Nicaragua. We also have much to learn from them. Nicaraguans through the Sandinista Government decreased illiteracy from 60% to 12% while illiteracy among Blacks in the U.S. is growing. They significantly lowered infant mortality and improved early childhood nutrition while social programs for Black and poor youth in this country have been cut. Their government financially supports and nationally promotes the cultures of their Black and Indian populations including granting political autonomy to the ethnic groups of the Atlantic coast while Black culture is continually relegated to second class status or denied outright in the U.S. And we all know how much respect the U.S. government has for native Americans or Indians here. The people of Nicaragua I met were willing and prepared to defend their villages and neighborhoods from outside attack while we in Roxbury and Dorchester feel powerless in the face of drug pushers, gangs and racist attacks. The Nicaraguans have gained the strength of unity and the wisdom taught by struggle. And yet for all they have to teach us, many of them know much more about Afro-American history and struggle than many of us here.

What they ask of us is that we support their struggle for self-determination. Not by going to Nicaragua to fight alongside them, but by pressuring the U.S. government to leave them in peace. I urge you to join the efforts of groups like Blacks for Empowerment to educate our community about the situation in Nicaragua so that all our efforts to effect U.S. policy towards people of color at home and abroad can be more effective.

Thank you.
Vivien Morris
February 19, 1985

(FM thanks the author for allowing us to print the talk she gave at a March 1 forum, "Nicaragua: A Black Perspective" at Northeastern University in Boston.)

A Background: The U.S. and Nicaragua

In 1821 Nicaragua and the rest of Central America declared their independence from Spain and formed a federation called The United Provinces of Central America. The federation dissolved in 1838 and Nicaragua became a republic.

Shortly thereafter, the now long history of US intervention began. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, enterprising companies sought to exploit the rush for gold. A company belonging to Cornelius Vanderbilt—The Accessory Transit Company—was established. "Vanderbilt envisaged fat profits and went to Britain for financing for a shorter competing line across Nicaragua . . . His passengers went by sea to the San Juan River mouth, upriver to Lake Nicaragua and the Bay of Virgins on the Pacific . . . that passengers reached San Francisco two days earlier than the Panama route."[1] It is believed that Vanderbilt netted eleven million dollars in all for the transit innovation.

The Nicaraguan Governmnet was not consulted when the U.S. and Great Britain signed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty. This document gave both the U.S. and Great Britain rights to share a trans-Nicaraguan canal. That both the U.S. and Great Britain saw future investments in Nicaragua, so did Cornelius Vanderbilt, who again seized an opportunity to gain wealth and prestige by financing the plunder of a defenseless Central American country.

In 1855 William Walker, an American and 58 of his followers were given financial backing, free passage on Vanderbilt's ships, and no doubt emotional support to overrun Nicaragua. And this is exactly what William Walker did. He declared himself president and promptly reestablished slavery. U.S. President Pierce recognized the new government.

Other Central American countries, fearing the same would happen to them, united with Nicaragua to defeat Walker in 1857. He was able to take refuge on a U.S. Navy ship.

Some fifty years later in 1912 U.S. Marines were sent to Nicaragua. "President Zalaya had cancelled U.S. concessions in Nicaragua, borrowed money from Great Britain and appeared to be in favor of granting Great Britain or Japan rights to a canal across Nicaragua."[2] Canals, once again.

[1]Gregorio Selser, *Sandino*, trans. Cedric Belfrage. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981) p. 12.

[2]Joseph Collins, *What Difference Could A Revolution Make*, (California: Institute For Food and Development Policy, 1982), p. 164.

By 1914, U.S. political dominance was solidified when the Nicaraguan Government signed the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty which gave the U.S. exclusive rights to a canal across Nicaragua. By 1925, the U.S. Marines left Nicaragua only to return a year later, six thousand strong, when the pro-U.S. Government faced open hostility. One General Augusto Cesar Sandino refused to adhere to the peace pact imposed by the U.S. Government and organized a guerilla force to oppose U.S. occupation of Nicaragua.

U.S. troops left Nicaragua in 1933 after establishing a National Guard headed by Anastasio Somoza Garcia. Showing the force of his title, Somoza ordered General Sandino killed after Sandino met with Pres. Sacasa to discuss peace. By 1936, Somoza assumed the presidency through less than honest elections. In the 1950's, it is believed that Somoza permitted the CIA to use Nicaragua as a staging area for the CIA sponsored coup against the democratically elected Pres. Arbenz of Guatemala.

Pres. Somoza was asassinated in 1956, his son Luis assumed the presidency, while another son Anastasio Somoza Debayle became head of the National Guard. It is believed that the CIA again used Nicaragua, under Pres. Luis Somoza, to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba in 1961.

Anastasio Somoza Debayle became president in 1967. Twelve years later, he was forced to flee when the Sandinistas (FSLN) triumphantly entered Managua.

"Welcome, Indians"

Welcome signs are everywhere—
hospital, bar, church, school,
jail, graveyard.

Pass go and collect
four hundred years
of broken treaties.

The streets of Gallup, New Mexico
are an old, dirty riddle.
My spirit makes a song
for all my sisters and brothers
who have perished there.

In the bank, they shuffle
our welfare checks
nervously.

In the Post Office
we find our faces
on Wanted posters.

It's more than a little strange,
the sort of welcome we get

in this land that was and is
and always will be— OURS!

E. Hall

★★★

"Tribal Marks"

The wrinkles on my forehead,
The razor scars on my wrists,
The surgical scar on my belly where
they robbed me of my children—
tribal marks.

The lesions on my liver,
The callouses on my hands,
The sores on my legs—

The wounds to my pride,
the constant threat of genocide,
The broken places in my language—

The shattered rituals,
The shattered history,
The mismatched geneology—

The holes in my chromosomes,
The chewed-out piece of my heart,
The decaying memories—
tribal marks.

Our grandparents and their grandparents
decorated themselves
to record a connection to each other,
or a vision, or a memorial
to loved ones fallen in battle.

We decorate ourselves
with the names of the night
where we lose our way
beneath the smallpox-pitted moon—

We decorate ourselves
with the names of a new day
where we find our way
in the glare of a thermonuclear sun—

tribal marks.

E. Hall

★★★

"Seeing Red"

The red of my eyes—
crying for four hundred years
has made my eyes RED!

I know you don't know me.
You have no way of knowing
when you hurt me.

Right now my heart
is beating red and loud
in my chest.

If I cried now,
red tears would fall,
one tear for each

red woman and red man
who once walked
the red road of life.

Night falls quickly
these days.
You will never kill us.

Watch out!
Red eyes watch you.
Red eyes watch you.

E. Hall

★★★

"Something Coming To Us"

Something coming to us from the sun,
Something coming to us from the sea,
Something coming to us from black cloud;

Something falling and something rising,
Something falling and something rising,
Something falling and something rising.

Something coming out of the woods,
Something coming out of our dreams,
Something coming out of our creator's times.

Something lying twisted on the riverbank,
Something lying twisted in my heart,
Something lying twisted in my mind.

Something coming to us on the wind,
Something coming to us on the smoke,
Something coming to us on the rain.

Something coming to us.
Something coming to us.
Something coming to us.
Something coming to us.

E. Hall

★

Free Mila Aguilar

News Release

With the Philippine crisis hitting the headlines of the U.S. mass media, an intensifying campaign of international support for Mila Aguilar, a distinguished writer, journalist and teacher, and now a political prisoner in Bicutan, has begun the formation of the Committee to Free Mila Aguilar based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Among the luminaries sponsoring the Committee and supporting the widely-circulated petition to free Aguilar are, to cite a few: Noam Chomsky, MIT linguist and commentator; Nobel-prize winner George Wald; world-renowned writers Nadine Gordimer, Arthur Miller, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, Denise Levertov, Grace Paley, Alice Walker, E.L. Doctorow, Amiri Baraka; PEN American Center president and novelist Norman Mailer; feminists Audre Lorde, Kate Millett, Zillah Eisenstein; Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould; Bishop Walter Sullivan (Richmond, Virginia); Bishop Peter Rosazza (Waterbury, Connecticut); Bishop Lyman Ogilby; economists Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff; Barbara Ehrenreich and Michael Harrington, co-chairpersons of Democratic Socialists of America; historians Howard Zinn, William Hinton; theologian Harvey Cox; and the Hon. Kris Glenn, acting justice of the Supreme Court, State of New York.

The London-based PEN INTERNATIONAL unanimously approved last November 1984 the resolution proposed by the American PEN Center urging Aguilar's release, which was immediately cabled to all Philippine officials.

After Amnesty International circulated an Urgent Alert upon the arrest of Aguilar, Cynthia Nolasco and Willy Tolentino (the latter two have been released recently), U.S. Senators Dodd (Conn.), Kennedy (Mass.), Matsunaga (Hawaii); Specter (Philadelphia); and Representatives Gejdenson (Conn.), Hughes (New Jersey), Fowler (Georgia), Conte (Mass.) and Snowe (Maine), among others, have inquired from the State Department, U.S. Embassy and Philippine groups about Aguilar's situation.

Over five thousand cards, cables and letters demanding humane treatment and justice for Aguilar and other political prisoners have been sent to Marcos, Solicitor Estelito Mendoza, and other officials.

At present, the Committee is appealing to the U.N. Human Rights Commission; to various journalists, teachers and women's groups, basing its argument on the Quezon City Trial Court's dismissal (last August 14, 1984) of the military's charges; and also on the legal findings of the New York-based The Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights, and the International Commission of Jurists, Geneva. This is meant to open up cases against other political prisoners in Bicutan and elsewhere being detained on the same grounds.

Update on Mila's Situation (Winter 1985)

Mila is still in prison despite the five thousand postcards we've sent, the appeal of PEN INTERNATIONAL for her release, cables and letters to Marcos and the U.S. Ambassador, and dozens of letters sent to Congresspersons.

Mila is being held solely on the basis of a Presidential decree (PDA) which is considered by the International Commission of Jurists and The Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights as "a regulation typical of a dictatorship" which violates the Constitutional right of citizens to the writ of habeas corpus. All the charges brought by the military against Mila have been dismissed by the civil court.

We would like to suggest that people write their Senators and Representatives urging them to write Marcos directly, instead of channeling their requests to the U.S. Ambassador or State Dept., for the release of Mila.

We also urge you and your friends to write Vice-President Bush to demand Mila's release from Marcos.

Mila's book of poems *A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling* has been published by Kitchen Table Press, New York ($4.50 per copy plus $1.00 mailing).

If you know any organization, bookstore, or solidarity group, please encourage them to sponsor a campaign, or hold cultural events, for the release of Mila and other political prisoners in the Philippines. We also encourage the formation of a delegation to visit Mila in prison.

You can tell friends to write Mila through:

Sister Lulu Cipriano
TFD-MMA
81 Calamba, Sta. Mesa Heights
Quezon City, PHILIPPINES

FREE MILA AGUILAR!

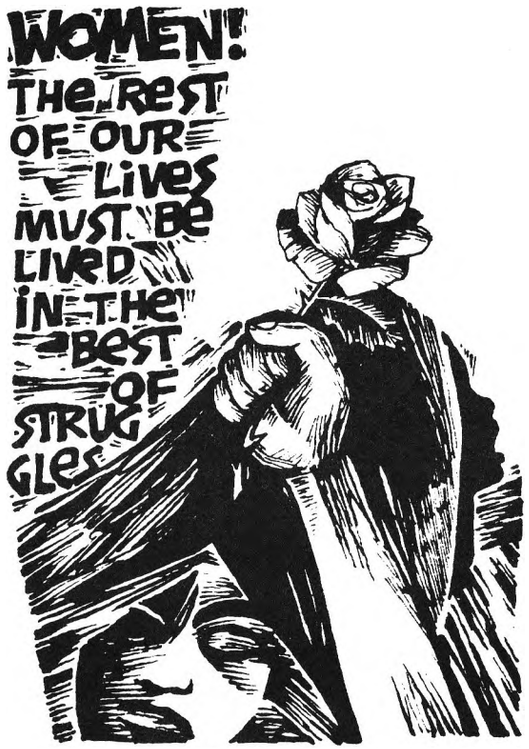
AMIRI BARAKA ROBIN BLACKBURN BETH BRANT NOAM CHOMSKY MICHELLE CLIFF REV. HARVEY COX
MARGARET CRUIKSHANK TOI DERRICOTTE E.L. DOCTOROW RENATE DUELLI KLEIN ZILLAH EISENSTEIN MONROE ENGEL
NADINE GORDIMER LINDA GORDON STEPHEN JAY GOULD MARILYN HACKER DOROTHY RAY HEALEY WILLIAM HINTON
RUTH HUBBARD RUSSELL JOHNSON GLORIA I. JOSEPH HETTIE JONES DUNCAN KENNEDY MARTIN KILSON MEL KING
DENISE LEVERTOV GENNY LIM AUDRE LORDE DON LUCE S.E. LURIA JUDITH A. McDANIEL HARRY MAGDOFF
NORMAN MAILER MANNING MARABLE PAULE MARSHALL ARTHUR MILLER KATE MILLETT NICHOLASA MOHR
CHERRIE MORAGA ROSARIO MORALES TONI MORRISON BISHOP LYMAN C. OGILBY GRACE PALEY HILARY PUTNAM
ADRIENNE RICH REV. NANCY ROCKWELL BISHOP PETER S. ROSAZZA DANIEL B. SCHIRMER RAYMOND SIEVER
BARBARA SMITH HENRY STEINER MOST REV. WALTER F. SULLIVAN PAUL SWEEZY KITTY TSUI ALICE WALKER
GEORGE WALD MARY HELEN WASHINGTON LORETTA WILLIAMS JOHN WOMACK, JR. HOWARD ZINN

Urge your Congresspersons to write directly to President Marcos to demand the release of Mila Aguilar.

To request more information, please write:

COMMITTEE TO FREE MILA AGUILAR
P.O. Box 1726, Cambridge, MA 02238

We would greatly appreciate donations of any amount.



To A Beloved Friend, On Parting

How lonely it is,
The harbor lights
Shimmering on the dark waters
As our boat drifts slowly away.

Beloved friend,
Between us lie
A million harbor lights
Shimmering the years

Out of sight.
But the salt water sprays my cheeks
and I am brought to life,
Cherished comrade,

In my mind's eye
The fishermen's boats dotting the harbor
Their low, mysterious lights
Bringing glad tidings

To an angry, expectant people.
We shall fight,
On so many fronts
We shall arm our people to fight.

Beloved comrade, cherished friend,
Though a million harbor lights
Divide us
We shall be together,

As every night in the years ahead
In the dark coves
Of island after island
A thousand mysterious boats land

Bringing glad tidings
To an angry, expectant people,
Creating trails longer
Than ever any trail has been.

by Mila D. Aguilar

★★★

To A Foreigner

You accuse me of sloganeering
And being unpoetic
My writing lines like
"Damn the US-Marcos dictatorship."

Friend, my reply is
You do not understand
The weight, the ocean-depth
Of our class hatred.

Yesterday I heard
A comrade had been ambushed.
One of five bullets
Had smashed through his young heart

When my ears caught
The uttered syllables of his name
The muscles of my jaws tightened
To the hardness of a gun butt

My fingers curled up
To a firm trigger-squeeze
And the heat of anger exploded
Like bullets out of my eyes.

Have you not heard
What the masses do to the traitors
Who betray their precious ones?
They cut them up

Into pieces so small
You could hardly tell
They once had the force
To murder a Red fighter.

You are a foreigner indeed,
Foreign to the rhythm of our struggle.
In the face of class murder,
How can we be lyrical?

by Mila D. Aguilar
May 20, 1975

★

PARTY UP, PART IV: ON A CONTRADICTION OF LENINISM

An earlier installment in this series argued that historical experience had demonstrated several facts about the broadly Leninist model of a Marxist party. It noted that communist parties had proven to be the most effective Marxist organizations over the last sixty years in organizing the people against the dictatorships of capital, semi-feudal reaction or foreign imperialism. Also, as a form of organization, the communist party has shown itself to be the most universally applicable of any socialist-oriented organization of the working class. The conclusion was that only a strongly organized revolutionary party could organize the people with the working class at its core, lead a sustained struggle against capitalism in the face of all the resistance U.S. capitalism has shown itself capable of, and guide the people in the decisive test that will determine whether a transition to socialism gets started.

The last installment looked at features of what "strongly organized" has meant for the Marxist tradition and in particular at the principle of democratic centralism, a sticking point for many friends on the Left. The objections to democratic centralism have a number of sources, but some of the hardest to answer emerge from a consideration of the historical experience of communist parties. Just as history has demonstrated the unparalleled effectiveness of "Leninist" parties in fighting class exploitation, it has also shown that a communist party structure can be an extraordinarily efficient instrument for suppressing democratic discussion, sheilding vain and self-serving leaderships, and driving out of Marxist politics those who may differ with the leadership's current orthodoxy. The success of communist parties in organizing and leading popular revolutions has brought an even more terrible and by now almost familiar phenomenon: the communist party in power that evolves into a new repressive elite, exerting a stranglehold on a society far removed from the popular, democratic control that can alone give meaning to the world socialism.

Hazards of Democratic Centralism

The revolutionary Marxist Left of the 1960's and 1970's had direct experience with the potential hazards of democratic centralism. Indeed, it had far more experience with those hazards than many of the traditional or New Left critics of Leninism. It accumulated that experience through its emergence as a distinct trend on the Left throughout North America, Western Europe, Latin America, parts of Asia and of Africa. Though the development of a mass revolutionary Marxist Left had to await the growth of the

mass student movements that characterized the late 1960's, the political and theoretical roots of the new Marxist organizations usually lay in the convulsions undergone by the international communist movement in the 1950's. In different ways, the reinvigoration of Trotskyism, the birth of the pro-Chinese Marxist-Leninist parties, the widespread development of the unified political-military guerrilla groups patterned on the Cuban success and various hybrid revolutionary groups owed their origins to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, the consolidation of the Soviet party's 20th Congress line in the vast majority of the communist parties and the invasion of Hungary. Resistance to those policies quickly showed what any close observer of the international communist movement already knew: the operation of democratic centralism as practiced in the communist parties of the 1950's and 1960's would not allow the expression of that current of opinion sympathetic to the Chinese views on the international communist movement. Nor would most of the Latin American parties later allow the expression of pro-guerrilla currents in the early to late 1960's. The parties the revolutionary Marxist Left then founded were generally not known for their lively internal debate either.

The revolutionary Marxist Left picked up still more experience with the risks of democratic centralism during the crisis that brought about its steep decline. Its activists learned how difficult it can be to re-examine the basic assumptions guiding an organization when that organization practices certain versions of democratic centralism, or maybe even any version of democratic centralism. They learned how difficult it can be to establish leaderships more attentive to new problems and opportunities when an entrenched leadership whose politics have failed still stand at the centralist peak of a democratic centralist organization. Besieged labor union activists trying to cope with the realities of industrial work while their leaderships pursued more glamorous and world-historical issues began to wonder whether you could have a democratic centralist organization and also have some attentiveness to shop-floor developments. These experiences, together with the general rightward shift in the political climate, left many former members of the revolutionary Left convinced that strongly organized Marxist groups sooner or later became obstacles to the development of viable socialist politics.

But the most compelling case against the Leninist model of organization remains the behavior of the parties that came to power, and most especially the Soviet prototype. Disappointments with post-Mao developments in China, the direction Vietnam or Cuba has taken, the revelations about Kampuchea have all combined to give renewed force to the old idea that Stalinism simply represents Leninism come of age, a Leninism faced with the burdens of power. Among disillusioned ex-leftists especially, this line of thought often discovers the seeds of every future Stalinism in Lenin's *What is to be Done?* and the idea of a leading Marxist party. This is a fundamentally ahistorical argument. It ignores the history of violent class struggle that saw Stalin's rise and consolidation of power, and the sweeping transformation of party, state and Soviet class relations that Stalinism produced. It is also a theoretically clumsy argument which must necessarily pass over lightly the radical changes the Stalin leadership imposed in Soviet

political doctrine, most especially in the dominant form of Marxist ideology. Perhaps if there is an interest in it, a later installment in this series might look more closely at the Lenin/Stalin problem as it bears on the issue of the revolutionary party.

But it is foolish to think that the post-revolutionary fate of a number of parties that called themselves Leninist, beginning with Lenin's own, has nothing to do with the principles that helped give the name "Leninist" to those parties. What happened to those parties, and with them the post-revolutionary regimes they led, was always the result of the particular histories of the countries concerned. But the larger pattern also grows out of the contradictions of the Leninist model (and not just the Leninist party: it also applies to the unified political/military guerrilla leaderships).

The central contradiction of the Leninist model may be formulated in the following way. A revolutionary party exists to help the people organize themselves, to lead them in a successful struggle for socialism and for a transition to a classless, communist society. During the period of transition from capitalism to communism, the working class and allied classes and movements continue to have need of a state. But in order to build a just, socialist democratic society on the road to a classless, communist one, the people must begin to assert their direct popular control over all facets of the economy, over civil society and political life. This is what Marxists since Engels have meant by the "withering away" of the state. It is not just the bourgeois class state which must begin to "wither away" through the expansion of popular democracy: it is any state, because the existence of any state requires to some degree the political dispossession of the people.

Characteristics of the Class Enemy

But the "withering away" of the state and the content of that process, the expansion of popular democracy, run up against a major and unexpected obstacle. Unexpected because this resistance comes from the avowed instrument of the popular will for socialism, the revolutionary party itself. In order to help the people organize and to lead them in the political struggle against the bourgeois state, any revolutionary party most acquire many of the characteristics of the leadership of the class enemy it opposes. History is full of instances in which the ruling classes have unleashed an awesome savagery against an organized populace and its organizations. Socialist parties must therefore take steps against infiltration, maintain a certain amount of secrecy in some facets of their organization and take political initiatives that catch their opponent unprepared. Marxist parties have their own version of state secrets. All these conditions limit democracy within socialist parties. In the face of a class enemy whose leadership is centralized through the state power, Marxist parties have executive leaderships which concentrate a great amount of power. In a number of crucial and sensitive areas, these executives make decisions that while they are supposed to adhere to policy guidelines established by congresses of the membership, are nonetheless made with limited forms of prior consultation. Just as Marxist parties have strong, centralized executives, so they also have a parlimentary side too. The congresses of Marxist parties

often serve move like a check or balance against the executive than as the sovereign decision-making body of the organization.

In a number of its attributes, a Marxist party functions like a state machine, and not just any state machine, but the state machine that it confronts. Here lies the contradiction: in the oppressed's struggle to deconstruct the oppressor state, one of their major instruments is a machine whose characteristics are partially determined by the characteristics of the oppressor state. Once state power is achieved (to the degree that state power is ever "achieved" by the working class, a class whose interests lie in the destruction of all states), that state machine (the party, in its state characteristics) is immediately pulled towards becoming the new, "perfected" state, because it already has a number of the characteristics of such a state. To put the case in an exaggerated way, a communist party is always, already a bourgeois state in miniature.

The argument here has been stated in a schematic and therefore one-sided way. But the contradiction discussed is an objective one: it is not the product of power-hungry central committees that have bent Marxist parties in statist directions, or of bad interpretations of *What is to be Done?* Objective means that this contradiction is a formative part of the revolutionary struggle. Marxist parties must adapt to the conditions of struggle imposed on them by the enemy they seek to defeat: understanding that and drawing the conclusions from it as part of Lenin's great contribution. Those adaptations create major dangers for a socialist society: that is the conclusion we must draw from what has happened in many post-revolutionary countries. Because it is an objective contradiction, we cannot simply wish it away: we have to live with, and be lived by it.

Ways out of the Contradiction

There have been a number of attempts to wish away this contradiction. The orthodox wish it away by denying the state characteristics of a revolutionary party. Of course, even while proclaiming the absolute democratic and anti-statist nature of the party, the orthodox do not fail to make good use of the statist mechanisms of the party once in power.

The libertarian critique of the Leninist party recognizes all too well the statist features of a Marxist party. The libertarians conclude that the problem lies solely in those features, and not in the reality which forces those features upon a revolutionary party. Therefore they conclude that the people need a party which is not like a state: a party which has no representation, no delegation of powers, no secrets, no machine, no bureaucrats (no full-time office holders). All shall be delegates, all shall be leaders, everyone will represent him or her self and no one else. This wish may produce a very free debate for a time, but it cannot produce much in the way of organization (which always requires representation, delegation of powers, machine and office holders). No working class organization, whether political or trade union, could exist under such conditions. The libertarian critique will certainly never produce anything that might lead a struggle for socialism. Generally the libertarians wisely restrict themselves to a catalogue of the faults of the Marxist parties (often very accurate) and leave problems

of leading a socialist struggle to future generations, when they don't simply denounce it as the root cause of Stalinism. Utopian fantasy or refuge for comfortable academics, either way the libertarian critique disorganizes the struggle for socialism.

Finally, some Marxist have thought they saw a way out of this contradiction by creating organizational guarantees against the growth of too powerful an executive. They seek these guarantees through the institutionalization of organized factions within Marxist parties. The "right to organized tendencies" is supposed to curb the development of central committee tyrannies. As the history of the Trotskyist movement eloquently demonstrates, however, organized tendencies inevitably acquire the properties of parties themselves, and the Marxist party is reduced to a confederation of more or less disciplined mini-parties. In the guise of addressing the contradiction of the Leninist party, this solution multiplies it, resulting in several strong executives, several sets of state secrets, etc. Because the experience of the revolutionary Left in the 1970's has made the idea of a "right to tendencies" appealing, a later installment in this series will look at the problem of organized groupings within Marxist parties.

Because the contradiction discussed here is a formative part of any revolutionary party, there is no avoiding it except by never founding Marxist parties. Managing that contradiction is a process that stretches over the life of a Marxist party, through to the dawn of communism, and it is presumptuous even to suggest how to approach it. But for the sake of discussion, the process would seem to lie in some of the following areas. First and most importantly, socialism requires drastic and ever-expanding changes in the organization of production and of reproduction, with the object of increasing the people's direct mastery over decision-making and narrowing the gap between mental and manual labor and the gap between domestic and productive labor. Second, socialism requires the creation of specific mass organizations of ideological and political struggle, which aim to extend working people's direct mastery throughout the superstructure and serve as broader, autonomous counterweights to the state and the socialist parties.

Third, socialism requires steps to prevent the fusion of party and state. Some degree of fusion is inevitable, particularly in the early stages of the transition from capitalism, and particularly where a socialist country faces implacable hostility from imperialism, which includes every post-revolutionary society to date. But the revolutionary state power must take steps to guard against the permanent fusion of parties and state, and to extricate the two. Failure to do that means depriving working people of the parties that have as their supreme purpose the establishment of a classless, communist society. The state must function according to a set of laws that apply to all, and the parties must help the people to build socialism through the state but also through the deconstruction of the state. Marxist parties acquire state characteristics in their struggle against the bourgeois state power; they tend to fuse with the new revolutionary state; but they remain at least in theory the guardians of the working class' interest in communism, and so remain foes of the permanent state.

Finally, and this is a separate point from the third, parties under socialism must begin

to dismantle some of their state characteristics. The organizational role of the party must begin to recede in importance in comparison to its ideological and political roles. Along with the state, the state characteristics of the parties must begin to "wither away." Under socialism, where the possibilities of state repression have been partially eliminated, those features of Marxist parties imposed by the struggle against the bourgeois state power must be deconstructed. For example, the democracy of democratic centralism resides in the principle that those who are bound by the party's policies (the membership) set the policies. That is a perfectly democratic principle for a party operating in a hostile class society. But it becomes less than a democratic principle in a socialist society, where Marxist parties constitute part of the state power. In those conditions, party policy can no longer be set simply by party activists, otherwise, socialist democracy would mean essentially democracy for the socialists.

—Charles Sarkis

Some Good News, Some Bad News in the Anti-Intervention Movement Today

Everywhere south of the Mexican border—in fact, throughout much of the world—people are waiting for the opening volley of a bloody regional war in Central America. As the Reagan administration jockeys for position, looking for its best opening, the question is "when" as much as "whether." Already under siege, U.S. progressives will be sharply tested in the coming period. Tested on what they learned from the Vietnam War. Tested on their understanding of the world situation. Most of all, tested on the depth of their solidarity with the freedom struggles in the Third World.

Given the position the U.S. government has staked out in Latin America—a position of die-hard imperialist terror—we have to ask in all seriousness why U.S. troops have not yet invaded Nicaragua, or poured into El Salvador. A major part of the answer, of course, is that Nicaraguans and Salvadorans are prepared for fierce resistance. A regional war would indeed by bloody, and much of the blood would be Yankee. World opinion also plays a large role. And there is something else—something quite significant for U.S. progressives. The Reagan administration shows signs of *fearing* the people's reaction to a Central American war.

The fear is manifested in feverish attempts to intimidate the anti-intervention movement and to manipulate public opinion. On the one hand, FBI agents openly harass anti-intervention activists and infiltrate their organizations. A secret probe of the anti-intervention groups is planned by the Senate Sub-Committee on Security and Terrorism. Legislation is proposed to imprison (for up to ten years) anyone who gives support to countries or organizations declared "terrorist" by the Secretary of State. Suspicious bombings in the U.S. are blamed, improbably, on the FMLN (the Salvadoran guerrillas). On the other hand, the State Department opens phony "negotiations" with Nicaragua to try to look more reasonable. Using CIA funds, a sanitized Napolean Duarte is installed as President of El Salvador, solely for the purpose of influencing Northamerican public opinion. (Real power remains in the hands of the oligarchy and the neo-fascist Arena Party, who control everything from the Army to the Department of Agriculture to the Attorney General's office to the legislature.)

What, specifically, are the U.S. warmongers afraid of? The answer is important to U.S. progressives.

First of all, it must be recognized that the movement against intervention in Central America is, in important respects, more advanced than the early movement against the Vietnam War. It is less fractured by sectarian politics, for one thing. Although its

base is mainly among progressive activists right now, many of these activists are relatively experienced and well-rooted in communities, workplaces and popular struggles. Sentiment against intervention has already penetrated deeply into the churches and, to a lesser extent, into the labor movement. Public opinion polls consistently show widespread disapproval of the U.S. military involvement in the region.

The comparative breadth of the movement has not meant the complete dominance of watered-down liberal politics. Mainstream anti-intervention forces openly support the Sandinistas and the FMLN-FDR, campaign for material aid to the anti-imperialist forces, and organize solidarity tours, for example. The level of political analysis has been raised substantially by the presence of large, politically-active Central American refugee communities in the U.S. (There are some 300,000 Salvadoran refugees in L.A. alone.)

Drawing on the strengths mentioned above, the anti-intervention forces have made significant gains. For instance, The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the largest of the anti-intervention organizations, now has over 300 chapters. They brought 70,000 people out into the streets of Washington, D.C. in 1982. Protests led by anti-intervention groups forced Western and Mexicana Airlines to stop the "Death Flights" of Salvadoran refugees back to El Salvador as INS deportees. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical supplies have been sent to Salvadoran areas of popular control and to Nicaragua.

Yet for all the evident strengths of the existing organizations, what is most likely to cause trouble for the ruling class is just coming over the horizon. The ruling class can not afford to forget the Black Panthers or the Chicano Moratorium or the fraggings of racist officers in Vietnamese jungles. Unlike some progressives, they remember that there was a lot more to the "Anti-War Movement" than white college students. The greatest threat to the Reagan Administration would surely be if a combination of economic crisis plus oppression and racist war triggered a resurgence of rebellions and revolutionary organization among oppressed nationalities, with all its implications throughout U.S. politics. As it has time and time again, a sharp upturn in the Afro-American, Chicano and Puerto Rican movements would have a galvanizing effect on the labor, women's and other progressive struggles, not to mention on the course of the war itself.

And there *are* new signs of vitality in the oppressed nationality movements. Latino activists are taking new initiatives in the electoral arena and on the immigration issue. If U.S. Latinos are sent to fight Central American Latinos, there are bound to be serious repercussions. The momentum generated in local races like those of Harold Washington, Wilson Goode and Mel King has evolved into a national trend with the help of the Rainbow Coalition. Jesse Jackson turned his attention to Central America. He led major multinational demonstrations in L.A. and at the Mexican border. His diplomacy in Central America materially strengthened the anti-intervention forces. In fact, Jackson has made himself a leading spokesperson against U.S. policy in Central America. In doing so, he has also struck a hard blow for Black-Brown unity.

Unfortunately, the organized anti-intervention movement, with the prominent exception of the Central American emigres, is mainly white. It is here—not in terms of the level of militancy—that liberalism poses the greatest threat to the movement. It is true that Central Americans and Chicanos are represented in the leadership of the major anti-intervention organizations. But even a large groups like CISPES has proportionally few Latino members, and even fewer Black members. This reflects perhaps the central problem facing the anti-intervention movement today. As it stands, the movement as a whole is not set up to address the sectors in the U.S. who will suffer the most from a Central American war: the people who will be drafted and die in proportionally higher numbers; the people who will be hurt most by a war economy; the people who will be most affected by the inevitable chauvinist hysteria and domestic repression.

Too often the anti-intervention movement makes an appeal to abstract morality, sympathy and alleged U.S. "democratic ideals" rather than to the material interests of oppressed people in the U.S. This sort of approach does well among peace activists and some religious organizations. But it runs counter to the realism and cynicism of most oppressed nationality and working class people. Nor has the movement clearly labelled U.S. intervention for what it is—racist aggression against the Third World. Some anti-intervention forces are afraid that speaking openly about racism would be divisive or too "left"—although they may be willing to openly support the Sandinistas

and the FMLN. (The question of the Miskito Indians in Nicaragua is relevant here. Some solidarity activists discount reports of repression by the Sandinista government. They claim the Miskitos were tricked into fighting the regime by counterrevolutionaries. Yet the Sandinistas themselves admit to having made serious errors in their treatment of the Miskitos. What kind of message are we sending to oppressed nationalities in the U.S. if we don't take the rights of indigenous peoples in Central America seriously?)

At issue is not just whether Blacks, Chicanos and other people of color will "support" the present anti-intervention movement. Oppressed nationalities are increasingly taking up the question of Central America. If the situation continues to intensify, oppressed nationality activity will probably grow quickly. In fact, the question really is how oppressed nationality activity and leadership will *transform* the anti-intervention movement—and how white activists will respond.

It seems likely that the present movement will either change its appeal and base fairly quickly or it will be rearranged into two or more parts—one mainly white, the other(s) made up of oppressed nationalities. There is no consensus on the subject. Some feel that the presence of Latinos in the mainstream organizations makes it possible to build strong multinational organization. But given the generally bleak track record of such attempts in the U.S. recently, a segmented movement is a real possibility. One Latina CISPES activist puts it this way: "CISPES is basically a white, middle-class organization, and it's going to stay a white, middle-class organization. We should figure out what kind of work an organization like that can do." Clearly implied is the existence of other, oppressed nationality organizations within the movement.

Whichever way the anti-intervention movement develops, some autonomy for oppressed nationalities seems necessary and desirable. The Central Americans who work in the movement have naturally grouped themselves together in organizations like the Casas El Salvador, Casa Nicaragua, the Committee of Central American Refugees, The Committee of Salvadoran Trade Unionists in Exile, etc. These often work closely with the mainly North American organizations. Within CISPES, oppressed nationality activists exercise considerable independent initiative, while also participating in the mainstream of the organization. Latino caucuses may soon be formed. CISPES and other activists are attempting to form an Hispanic "National Committee for Peace in Central America," starting in Texas.

White activists face the responsibility of struggling for unity by following the leadership of oppressed nationality sectors and helping to give the anti-intervention movement a consistently anti-racist character. Perhaps the organizational and political elements of this unity can be hashed out in the context of a united front such as the "anti-interventionist front" now under discussion in the movement.

Even if they don't always see it as the *central* problem facing the movement, some leaders of the anti-intervention forces recognize that the social base and appeal of the current organizations is a problem. CISPES' 1984 Strategy and Program stresses "alliances with Central Americans, North Americans of color, poor and working people and the church." Although CISPES did not officially endorse the Jackson campaign

nationally, local committees and individual CISPES activists worked closely with the Rainbow Coalition. In the Southwest, serious outreach is being done among Chicanos. Paralleling developments in the women's movement, white anti-intervention activists appear to have a higher consciousness about racism than their '60s counterparts.

Obviously, it's not enough. All of us in the anti-intervention movement are determined to stop U.S. aggression in Central America. As the struggle sharpens, many lives hang in the balance. Reagan continues preparations for invasion and promises new repression at home. In response, our tactics will probably become more militant and we will make many sacrifices. We don't have the luxury of ignoring basic strategic considerations.

Put simply, we can't stop a racist war in Central America without thoroughly exposing its racist features. And we won't achieve effective solidarity with the struggle of Third World peoples in Central America if our movement isn't rooted in Third World communities in the U.S.

NO MORE RACIST WARS!
!NO PASARAN!

—D.S. (Fall 1984)
Los Angeles