

Barbara Ehrenreich

# China and the American left: Their latest move proves indifference

I was at the New American Movement convention when a friend showed me the latest issue of *Peking Review*. There, under the headlines, "Chairman Hua Meets Delegation of Central Committee of U.S. Communist Party (M-L)," was a picture of Hua Kuo-Feng chatting with Mike Klonsky, the Chairman of the miniscule U.S. Communist Party (M-L). Hua is the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, with a following of approximately 900 million.

The picture gave me a feeling of disorientation that you might get seeing a newspaper with a gag headline—"N.A.M. Sweeps Elections in Upset: Carter Resigns"—or something like that. I know who Klonsky is. He was the national secretary of S.D.S. in 1968-69, and founder of the October League (recently re-named the U.S. Communist Party (M-L)), a sectarian group distinguished by its religious adherence to the Chinese line on foreign policy.

But how many other Americans would recognize the name "Mike Klonsky"? Hua, on the other hand, must be one of the best known living men in the world, if only because he heads up a nation that accounts for a fourth or more of the earth's population. As if to emphasize the disproportion, someone quipped over my shoulder, "Who's that guy sitting next to Mike Klonsky?"

It gets worse. The article that accompanies the picture tells us that at the banquet honoring the U.S.C.P.(M-L) delegation, a member of the Chinese politburo gave a speech in which he declared: "The founding of the Communist Party (M-L) of the United States has reflected the aspirations of the proletariat and other working people of the United States and is a new victory for the Marxist-Leninist movement in the United States."

Now, frankly, although I am a great admirer of China, I would have an awfully hard time explaining this to the

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average group of American proletarians and other working people. Could it be that the Chinese were taken in by Klonsky's claims and actually believe that the U.S.C.P.(M-L) is a large and significant political force here? Unlikely. *Someone* in Peking must read everything from the *Christian Science Monitor* to the *Guardian* and *ITT*, and that someone must be able to give Hua a pretty accurate description of the state of the American left.

Or could it be self-deception—that the Chinese leadership would like to think that there is a major Marxist-Leninist party in the United States and that it just happens to be the party that is most faithful to their line on foreign policy? Any group of men who could have devised the recent charges against the "Gang of Four"—that Chiang Ching was an "ultra-rightist" who "tormented" her husband Mao on his deathbed, and that Chang Chun-chiao (a brilliant theoretical leader under Mao) is a "Kuomintang special agent"—must be capable of considerable self-deception. As we Americans learned in the past few years, men who occupy high offices can come to believe almost anything they want to.

There is a more plausible, but unfortunately, more cynical, explanation. And that is that Hua knows perfectly well what the U.S.C.P.(M-L) represents and what it does not. He singled out this tiny group simply as a *gesture* (and considering that he singled it out *in person* this must be taken as a very firm gesture.) The meaning of this gesture, as I read it, is that the current leadership of

China is not interested in supporting, or even acknowledging the existence of, any insurgent group that is not willing to offer absolutely uncritical and sycophantic support of Chinese foreign policy. In the past few years that foreign policy has included making friendly overtures to dictators like Suharto and Marcos (not to mention known criminals like Nixon), recognizing the Chilean junta with unconscionable speed, and supporting a pro-imperialist guerilla faction in Angola.

But Hua's gesture was not really necessary. The single-mindedness, and I must say, arrogance, of Chinese foreign policy—whether in relation to nations or insurgencies—has been pretty well recognized by the American left. It's something no one much likes to talk about. In the last year or so, a kind of embarrassed silence has settled over the whole subject of China.

Just a few years earlier, you couldn't go to any left conference, bookstore, study group or potluck supper without running into the subject of China: women in China, agriculture in China, health care in China, etc. etc. A three week tour in 1974 turned me into a hardcore China enthusiast. When I came back I looked for every opportunity to talk to people about China—the incredible material advances, the dedication of the people, the democratic upsurge represented by the Cultural Revolution and succeeding political campaigns. Whatever else I was talking about, I managed to bring up China: It seemed to be the most concrete and inspiring way to talk about socialism.



But gradually it got harder to talk about China. Somehow the achievements of the barefoot doctors would stick in my throat when I thought about Chile or, later, Angola. Then there were the internal developments since Mao's death: The bizarre (and often sexist) charges against the "Gang of Four" . . . Praise in the capitalist press for the new "pragmatism," which looks suspiciously like the top-down, Soviet approach to development . . . And, just last week, the formation of a new politburo that contains no representatives of mass women's, workers' or peasants' groups—but plenty of elderly men who were on the wrong side in the Cultural Revolution. . . By now, almost no one seems to want to talk about China. To judge from the left periodicals, Eurocommunism is in; China is out.

Perhaps it's just as well that we remain silent about China for awhile. There's too much we don't understand yet. And there's too much that—given our own ingrained and unconscious assumptions of affluence and national supremacy—that we probably *can't* understand.

But I hope that this awkward silence doesn't last too much longer. Pretty soon we need to get back to discussing, studying and—yes—*learning* from China. Not because China or any other country is a "model" for socialism here. And certainly not because our evaluation of China matters to the Chinese (Hua's gesture, if not the sheer arithmetic of the situation, should make that clear.) But because the achievements and theoretical contributions of the Chinese are a vital part of our heritage as socialists. Whatever sinister directions Chinese foreign policy may take, or repressive internal developments may occur, cannot erase the enormous historic significance of the Chinese liberation struggle, the Cultural Revolution, the political philosophy of Mao Tsetung. These things belong to the world.

## DIALOG

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tions within which workers and others conduct economic and social struggles, so do the *ITT* editors tend to isolate the movement for socialism from these struggles. As Editor James Weinstein has indicated elsewhere, he seems to have concluded from a one-sided interpretation of the 1930s experience that agitation for socialism is paramount in developing a socialist movement, rather than socialist participation and leadership in the struggle for current needs. This attitude tends at times to influence *ITT* editorials, giving them a "pie in the sky" tone. The legendary *Appeal to Reason*, which Weinstein properly admires, was a crusader for the immediate programs for which the people were battling before World War I, as well as for socialism, and workers and farmers identified with it for that reason.

The *ITT* response to Kinoy speaks of "abandonment" by the left in earlier decades of "a concept of socialism appropriate to American society." The left, meaning the communists, was deficient in developing such a concept of socialism. But it did agitate for socialism on the basis of the Soviet experience. The issue involved goes beyond this. I have referred to the 1936 collapse of the SP, which engaged in "socialist politics" while ignoring the

actual arena of working class struggles at the time. The Communists—to cite a distinctly anti-communist, Trotskyist source—by their dedication and "popular front" policy, penetrated deeply into the new union movement, "radicalized hundreds of thousands," and great numbers became communists or moved within the party's orbit. No one doubted the communists were for socialism, and the many who joined or were influenced by them became socialist-minded by that very fact. The essential point here is that the communists, by their leadership in united front struggles of the working class, established their credibility as working class leaders and by that process brought vastly more people to socialist consciousness than the socialists with their "socialist politics." Undoubtedly, the communists could have done better with a socialist concept "appropriate to American society," but one does not reject a highly effective tactic because of weaknesses in execution.

I would suggest that *ITT* lacks the editorial orientation, hence the crusading spirit on behalf of the issues confronting the people today, which can make it an effective and necessary spokesman of the left—of forward-looking unionists, blacks, Hispanics, women who can identify with the paper, thereby providing a receptive audience for its socialist message. Its future success, fervently to be hoped for, may depend substantially on its ability to overcome the flaw.

—Max Gordon  
New York, N. Y.

## Popular but not socialist is no better than socialist but not popular, the editor replies

Editor's reply: It is true that many people joined the Communist party in the 1930s and 1940s because of its militant activity on many fronts, and also that many others joined because the party was the official representative of the Soviet Union until 1941, when the Third International was dissolved, and the Soviets were still an inspiration to most serious socialists. There were, however, some people who did not believe that the Communists represented socialism—or, rather that the socialism the Communists were for was not actually socialism or was not appropriate for the U.S.

Gordon's "essential point" seems incorrect to us. Certainly many Communists established their credibility as working class leaders in the 1930s. But they did not, with rare exceptions,

do so as Communists, much less as socialists. When these people were later accused of being Communists the workers generally turned against them, and many of the Communists themselves reacted to the accusations as "slander." This is true of Matles himself, and it indicates an embarrassment about public identification with some of the party's principles.

Furthermore, the Communists lost a majority of the tens of thousands of workers that they recruited each year precisely because their conception of socialism was so inappropriate to American political culture and society that it drove away most of those closest to it.

We do not rely on socialist exhortation as the "primary means of influencing consciousness," because we do not believe in the separation of education and agitation for socialism from activity around issues confronting working people. But because we do not believe in such a separation, we must believe that a socialist politics and socialist principles that are appropriate to American society, to our own political culture and democratic tradition and unrealized ideals, is an indispensable part of a potentially successful socialist politics. Without such politics and principles no popular movement for socialism is possible. The Communist party did not have such politics or principles in the 1930s, and it did not create a popular movement for socialism, either on a local level or nationally.



# SDS reunion Lions and Lambs

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but not nearly the last, were evident around the room. One sensed that a purgative process had washed the meeting.

From then on everything was possible; unity could be constructed. The problems caused by this or that error by members of the organizing committee seemed to disappear as the group took hold of the possibilities the committee had created.

Helen Garvey, a former SDS staff member and a member of the organizing committee, and Ken McEldowney, another, took care to calm (or try to) ruffled feathers. Barbara Haber insisted that women's concerns be kept up front. Terry Roberts also on the committee turned out to be an unsung but excellent group leader. Jane Addams, once a national secretary, proved to have a contagious sense of humor.

As the week progressed themes of consensus and division clarified: yes, we had had no proper definition of structure or leadership, so we devoured both, deserting a reasonable notion of democracy in the process. Yes, we had burned each other up too much, and should have conserved energy for longer hauls. (Former SDS President Todd Gitlin's late '60s poem has it: we need to be "long distance runners on sandy soil in the thinnest air.") Yes, we had never solved the paradox of being middle strata socialists unaffiliated with a working class movement.

And there were continuing differences: the larger or smaller differences among those who worked within the vision of marxism, and those who think of that tradition as too limited. Tom Hayden spoke of his appreciation of religion, and heads nodded sympathetically. There were differences between those

oriented to small community projects and those who thought in national terms. And there were still, despite the gladness of the meeting, those who do the day-to-day heroic work of the movement as organizers and rank and filers who remained all too quiet, and not recognized for their valor: Jeff Segal, returned from 27 months in prison for draft resistance; Jenny Roper, still organizing in poor communities in New Jersey after a dozen years; Steve Johnson, a cab driver and organizer.

## Remembering the fallen.

In the middle of the week Alan Haber, who originally conceived of SDS, and who had helped organize the meeting, once more proved prophetic. He announced an evening memorial for dead friends and comrades. Those of us, respectful of Alan, but out of tune with his recent mysticism (can two Ginsbergs happen twice at the same time?) came apprehensive that we might feel awkward or embarrassed, trapped in a mad drama.

Participants had been asked, the day before, to set down the names of those to be remembered. Geri Tree played vibraphone and cymbal while Haber called "Remember . . ." and said each name. People would speak a line about each fallen comrade.

Gold, Oughton, Robbins in the Weatherman Town House; Goodman, Chaney, Schwerner, in Mississippi; Kent State; Jackson State; Ralph Featherstone, blown up in his car during Rap Brown's trial; Phil Ochs, by his own hand—one of Phil's songs was sung by a comrade from Oklahoma, Jody Bate-man.

Now everyone crying; holding on to each other. The list goes on: King, Mal-

colm, A.J., Norman Morrison, Alice Hertz who burned themselves that the War in Vietnam might end. More suicides of former comrades; more beatings and torture of prisoners known to us; gay men attacked on dark streets; Native Americans shot down on their own land; my grandmother, remembered for her support while the movement was under attack. More names coming faster now; Haber having trouble, couldn't end it.

Then, reeling from the sudden realization of the death and carnage, of the cost in life and soul of a decade so glibly romanticized, we needed a way out. Mickey Flacks, now an activist in Santa Barbara, forcefully cutting through the turmoil: "We should say the names of our children." And the names were said, with tears, hope, commitment: Berry, Brook, and Blossom; Charles Wright and A.J.; Gabriel and Rachel; Lucero; Tony and Carlos, and more. We link arms and sing. Corny, a little afraid, everyone hugging and crying, "We Shall Overcome." A decade laid to rest only now, years later, with the respect its martyrs merit.

One participant called it "voodoo and love tyranny." At the end of the conference, in another ceremony invented by Geri Tree and Jerry Badanes, folk stepped from a hand-holding circle into the center and one by one said where they were coming from and where they were headed. Done by candlelight, the imagery of religious gatherings came naturally to mind. As a group we went out to see a full moon.

## Love and conflict.

This is pretty heady stuff for serious people in their mid and late 30s: community organizers, therapists, professors, journalists, doctors, lawyers. There were

moments when we all thought the atmosphere was "unreal." But is the discovery of meaning in one's own history unreal; is the recognition, finally, of the beauty of another comrade such a frill? Don't we need ritual to embody those real aspirations that, day to day, we can barely stand to speak, for they hurt so much by their lack of fulfillment. Don't we want to build not just a structure of justice, but also one of love?

One morning I spoke with Greg Calvert, a former SDS officer who had succeeded my founding cohorts. We had been antagonists. We learned how we had assumed the others' views by the company we had kept. We had been ignorant of each others' so-called "politics."

It may be realistic to say that conflict and battle over "principle" are necessary to the socialist movement, but it is folly to assume that all of the blood-letting on the left is necessary. The meeting in Michigan was about finding that dimension of politics that is built on both necessary love and necessary conflict.

There can't be a new New Left. But the Conference ended with some concrete resolve: a group of members will begin legal action to discover the extent of harassment and surveillance over SDS, and to see if the group has grounds to sue. The conference participants will keep in touch through mimeographed correspondence. Already, on their own, pairs and groups of people had arranged to be in touch about this and that.

Whatever the fate of this particular aggregation, the rest of us now know this: it is possible for serious politics to come back together; for female grievance and gay wounds to be bound; for leaders to rejoin the community; for marxists to talk to their idealist former comrades.

In knowing that, and in knowing that the way it was accomplished was by making room for profound though not often honored emotional needs, we know enough to begin again.

Bring on the factions and theories: if our unity is deep, our fights will strengthen not divide us.

**Bob Ross joined what was to become SDS in 1960 and remained a member till the final days. He served as national vice president in 1962 and occupied a leadership role for many years. He now teaches sociology at Clark University.**

# The future belongs to those who work for it

There are some people in this country working very hard these days. They are the corporate elite who run GM, ITT, EXXON, and much more. They have a lot to do just keeping their own profit margins up. But they don't rest with record profits. They work a lot of overtime for even bigger stakes—the future of capitalism. Through groups like the Business Roundtable and the Trilateral Commission, they are making plans to insure the continued stability of the capitalist system in the face of changing conditions.

Many of us at the grass roots are also working hard. We're working for racial and sexual equality, better housing, decent health care, and other improvements in our lives. But what about **our** future? If we really want to get at the root of our country's problems, then we too need a longer-range vision. As the corporate elite makes plans to preserve capitalism, we need to make plans to end it.

The **New American Movement** is a socialist organization that works for a better life in the present and a better world in the future. We're organizing on issues like energy, unemployment, affirmative action, job safety, and foreign policy. And we're developing a democratic socialist perspective that can offer a real alternative to the corporate plan for America.

We are an organization that seeks to build on tradition without being bound by dogma. To develop a

coherent political approach without relying on imposed discipline. To build an active and involved membership, as well as a strong leadership. And we see ourselves as part of an international community of all those struggling for freedom around the world.

We're still a young and small organization—with a long way to grow. But we believe that we can make a difference. And that you can too! Join us—as part of a chapter, as an active member, or as an associate who supports our work. The future will be what all of us together make it.

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