

Battle of the Century

EMANUEL EISENBERG

ON August 26 the North American Conference of the New Education Fellowship (subtitled Section of the New Education Association under the Auspices of the Secretary of Public Education) innocently opened a six-day congress in Mexico City in the incredible Italian Renaissance-Roxy building called the Palace of Fine Arts.

Under the heading of "The Arts in the Mexican Schools," Diego Rivera, Mexico's most famous and most prosperous artist, delivered a lecture the second evening on "The Arts and Their Revolutionary Role in Culture" in his usual facile manner, with an erudite reference here and a well-leavened gag there. The customers, almost entirely schoolteachers, were thoroughly contented and nobody thought any more about it. The fantastic demagoguery of the Mexican government, which teaches its school children "The Internationale" and circulates the works of Marx and Lenin while crushing strikes and paying fascist bands to break up orderly Communist demonstrations, had been advanced another pace among American leaders of education.

The following afternoon David Alfaro Siqueiros, almost as famous as Rivera but with not a fraction of his prosperity, devoted a similar period to a reading of his already widely circulated analysis of the Mexican muralist movement and the part played in it by Diego Rivera. This analysis is familiar to readers of *THE NEW MASSES*, where it was published a year and a half ago. Siqueiros had just launched into his specific comments on Rivera when the door theatrically opened and the victim himself unexpectedly entered — large, hippopotamus-like, grinning. Naturally, this was a perfect cue for the actor to intensify his highly effective voice and enter upon improvisations of the printed intentions before him.

He had succeeded in developing no more than a handful of his charges when Rivera leaped up out of his seat and screamed that every one of these accusations was answerable and defensible. Here the chairman, José Muñoz Cota, acutely unpopular head of the Department of Fine Arts of the Secretary of Education, stood up to cry that this was no debate; Rivera had had his say yesterday. It was now that Diego, long distinguished as a gun-toter, pulled out his pistol and waved it in the air and announced that he demanded a chance to answer or else —

The schoolteachers were considerably relieved to hear the chairman ask the intruder whether he was ready to suggest an early date for official retort and to hear Rivera offer the following afternoon at four. The pistol was replaced in its holster. Siqueiros was permitted to complete his increasingly

fiery talk; and the schoolteachers went on to the third arduous day of their Congress.

BY THE following morning the incident was not only known to all Mexico City, having crashed the front pages of practically all the newspapers in town, but to numerous foreign capitals as well, the cables having done their part nobly. By four o'clock the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) was jammed with people in the lobby and up and down the stairways: everybody had shown up; countless painters, reporters, art dealers, government employees in the arts, a handful of teachers from the Congress, thirty or forty other Americans, practically all the members of the Section of Plastic Arts of the L.E.A.R. (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, the one authentic revolutionary cultural organization in Mexico),¹ and the usual percentage of curiosity hounds. At least a thousand people were there. Something rare was about to happen.

Mexico is probably the only country in the world where a controversial meeting of two painters, in much less than a day's notice, could be calculated to attract a thousand people. In an overwhelmingly illiterate country pictures perform the most immediate communication in the arts, and the tradition carries through to the intellectual world. Mexico is, further, the one place in the world where the bases of a popular public quarrel could be such accusations as false revolutionism, demagoguery, chauvinism, tourism and reactionism.

But there were more immediate and specific reasons for the exceptional interest stirred by the quarrel. Since Rivera's expulsion from the Communist Party of Mexico in 1929, he had attempted no public justifications or explanations about his new stand beyond a lying martyrish statement to the bourgeois press that he had been thrown out for Trotskyist convictions. It happens that he was expelled for maintaining an important government post (head of the Department of Fine Arts) while functioning as a member of the Central Committee, openly cooperating with agrarian reformist elements and refusing to sign a petition protesting the government's counter-revolutionary road and its terrorism against the Communist Party. At the John Reed Club in New York in 1932 he did attempt to restate his stand that only the revolution can inspire great art, but with small success. In February of that year, Joseph Freeman published in *THE NEW*

MASSSES an analysis of Rivera's career as painter and politician. Rivera maintained a discreet silence for a year and a half, then attacked Freeman in the liberal journals without once referring to the most important accusations which any muralist knew were true. All this happened in New York; in Mexico Rivera never explained himself. And Siqueiros had been attacking him in public since 1931. This was Rivera's first response in four years. Everyone had begun to give up hope of getting a rise out of the smug, prosperous, official national artist.

It is pretty safe to say, therefore, that the crowd had turned up to hear Rivera defend himself and not to listen to the all too familiar attacks of Siqueiros. The crowd and excitement increased. Siqueiros, with his unfailing flair for the theatrical, stood hard against the precise middle of the balcony, giving statements to the press and conferring with a dozen different people. Frightened guards scurried up and down assuring everybody that nothing was going to happen. Nobody budged. At 4:30 Rivera arrived, large and grinning, and joined Siqueiros on the balcony. There was tremendous noise and jittering and it was impossible to tell what was up.

Finally Siqueiros spoke. Not only had the teachers tried to sabotage this tremendously important discussion, said he, but the government officials were attempting the same thing. They offered a small hall that was utterly inadequate. Rivera then announced his contempt for Muñoz Cota, head of this building, and repeated the demand for the largest hall. The crowd booed and howled and insisted. There was a brief and violent flurry of activity in a side office, a confused pause — and then, suddenly, everyone was pouring into the main hall, where plays, opera and dance recitals are given.

SIQUEIRO'S spoke first. In case his arguments are not known to certain readers, they may be summed up thus: Indoor murals of government buildings are seen only by stenographers; there should be outdoor murals in workers' districts; production has been individualist and not related to the masses, the use of architecture non-functional, non-social, the composition lyrical and mechanical instead of dialectic and scientific, the technique ancient Italian and Egyptian instead of modern mechanical, the content pedagogical, archeological, esthetic, mystical, religious, static, psychologically passive, obscure, dilettantish, fetichistic, opportunistic, counter-revolutionary (the speaker's own string of adjectives). Rivera is the natural fruit of the false ideology of a petty-bourgeois revolution and of the idea that an artist can cooperate with a reaction-

¹ This group, analogous to our former John Reed Club, originated less than two years ago in opposition to the government's Federation of Proletarian Artists and Writers. Its influence has grown slowly and steadily.

ary government. He was trained in Paris; a chauvinist, never international; idealizes the Indian; his picture of the farmer is vicious; he switched from peasant idealization to worker idealization; he is a saboteur; he never treats such aspects of the current scene as the new rich and Calles but only the past, the vague bad bosses and so on. Even in the United States he used reactionary technique and demagoguery. He is an opportunist, a seller-out and a painter for tourists.

Now Rivera rose to say that, if the revolution had been a petty-bourgeois one, how could an artist avoid reflecting it? He and all other painters took orders from the Communist Party in the beginning: then how can their early work not be revolutionary? Is the Party ever wrong? As for working with the government and in bourgeois territories, didn't Lenin counsel boring from within? Religious themes were natural as part of the growth of Mexico; Siqueiros himself had done angels. If frescoes are old style, then why do we use the same materials for houses as they did in the past? Anyway, today we paint on cement. Marx said art should be the result of social conditions, and that's exactly what his and others' murals are. The possibility of effective collective work within government cooperation is amply demonstrated by the painting of the eight artists in the Rodriguez Market; their work is revolutionary. The U.S.S.R. acknowledges him, Rivera, as a real revolutionary because they asked him to do a cover for the magazine *Red Field* when he was there eight years ago and another magazine printed an article on him and *New Mexican Art*.

Suddenly, lamely, unexpectedly, the evening ended. Rivera was saying he had been able to do no more than take notes and would have a really full retort ready by tomorrow; and Siqueiros was asking everyone to show up the following day at four in this same place. Slowly and uncertainly, people began to straggle out. What has it all been about? Coming there and getting into the hall had been exciting, but now what?

ALTHOUGH the next development was an inevitable one, it was nonetheless startling. Rivera and Siqueiros saw the absurdity of an argument on revolutionary or mass art without the backing of a revolutionary or mass organization. And here colors came clear with strange brilliance. Rivera, with his usual flair for duplicity, had been playing both with the Lovestoneites and the Trotskyites. Now he decided that a series of small meetings working toward the final large meeting should be held in the Casa del Pueblo (Town Hall), the meeting hall of a bakers' union currently relishing a common-law involvement with the Fourth International. Siqueiros, who has been a steady target of criticism for his insistently solitary and non-revolutionary painting for the last few years, suddenly



RIVERA AND SIQUEIROS

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decided that he was a long-standing member of the L.E.A.R. and that this was the organization which should be behind him throughout the remainder of the controversy. It happened that he had visited the L.E.A.R. exactly once in its and his existence. Emotions there were divided between stunned pleasure that he had finally arrived and sharp indignation that he was turning to a group he had practically ignored until then. Still, the majority decision was that the L.E.A.R. had a great deal to gain by sponsoring his stand—and on September 3, a Tuesday evening, enough Trotskyites on one side and enough members of the L.E.A.R. on the other (about 75 altogether) arrived to form a public for the first private discussion of the embattled opponents.

Rivera was entirely on the defensive. He was ready to get to work immediately in trade-union headquarters, said he: but what organization could he ever have joined? what good were Siqueiros' outdoor murals in Los Angeles when the elements had already destroyed them in greater part? Whose fault was it if the Mexican revolution had been a petty-bourgeois one and if imperialism had a strangle-hold over all native culture? Did not Lenin say it took many years to change the masses? Wasn't history mostly to blame? Shouldn't the atmospheric conditions of

Mexico be more seriously studied before any new methods were attempted? Through all of this Rivera revealed himself as without the remotest concept of architectural or revolutionary functionalism, a venal opportunist, a shameless panderer to fancy and a general wriggling money-grubber.

On Saturday evening of that week drama reared its head to stir the do. At that session Siqueiros, playing the game he has regularly refused to acknowledge, sought to trick Rivera into signing a group of affirmations or "confessions" which would invalidate any justifications of his past or lingering deviations from the true revolutionary line. A mild consternation was caused when Marion Greenwood, a young American painting murals in Mexico City, asked Siqueiros why he never did any revolutionary work and he answered that penetration of imperialist influence in arts made it impossible for him to live in any other way than by turning out commercial products for the bourgeoisie. This was a pretty weird kind of resignation from one who had functioned so long as a professional revolutionary. Another high point when the opponents were impaled on the mathematical problem of what percent Rivera's work is sold to tourists and what percentage of Siqueiros', the latter trying

make a cultural-symptomatic point of it, the former a financial-jealous one. With the discussion sunk to such infantile levels, your correspondent, along with half a dozen other impatient people, began to manifest his disgust and boredom by sighs and snorts of incredulity, note-passing and general attitudes of exhaustion. Rivera's wife kept turning to glare, but this seemed in the order of things and went unretorted.

The evening ended and the tiny audience straggled out. I was discussing her question with Marion Greenwood in the entrance-way when Rivera's wife's sister stepped up and said sharply, "What the hell do you want to talk to that mule for? Why don't you come along with us?" Marion was startled and possibly a little worried and moved away. I turned, puzzled. There stood Frida, Mrs. Rivera, her eyes violent. I looked at her in turn, expecting a question. "See a crowd?" she suddenly cried in a high shrill voice—and the back of her hand shot out hard against my mouth. Before I could even react to this extraordinary move she had begun to scream to the group at the bottom of the stairs, so that almost everyone was convinced that the lady had been attacked.

"He's been laughing at me all evening!" she shrieked, "every time I turned my head! These bastard gringos come down from that country for nothing else than to make fun of us here! I'll show him! I'll show him!" Diego (over 250 pounds of him) now came dashing up the stairs to deliver two pudgy blows at my jaw and to cry to his guards for aid. Ten little followers of Trotsky made a prompt circle around us and then decided it was best to cause a separation. They did. Diego was gently forced down the stairs again, along with his wife. There was a moment's general shouting; then Rivera's voice rose firmly above the rest. "Well, I know who he is!" he trumpeted.

a son-of-a-bitch Stalinist! He was down here by THE NEW MASSES to notes and make fun of me. That's new!" The band of ten looked up in great curiosity to see what a genuine son-of-a-bitch American Stalinist looked like and then created a path for my exit, holding Diego dramatically back. I left, ingloriously. The members of the L.E.A.R., who swear they would have attempted an immediate defense and counter-attack if they hadn't been too scared, inform me that they did so later.

Y NOW it was pretty obvious that the final discussion would never take place, it must be confessed that almost everyone was relieved. When the Trotsky organ, *Libre*, appeared with a further reprint of "a's arguments in the University lecture, he paid any attention. On October 17 L.E.A.R., in the face of pooh-poohs and slings, opened its studio-school of revolutionary art with eighteen gifted painters and artists as collaborator-instructors, seventy teachers and students enrolled for free courses,

and an active program of experimentation in all forms and materials and day-by-day supply of art to all manner of organizations militating in the united front. A highly deplorable but intensely typical article by Siqueiros appeared the day before in the Mexican Review of Reviews, describing "our" venture and talking in elaborate terms of all the plans of "our" school. It happens that only by indirect speech-making irritation is Siqueiros responsible in any wise for the important move of the L.E.A.R.; his direct contribution was absolutely nil. "Nil" covers even the speech he made at the inaugural session of the studio-school, where, after being asked to say "two words," he devoted about an hour and a half almost exclusively to a continuation of his battle with Rivera, infuriating many of the auditors to pained protest. Siqueiros is listed as one of the instructors in the studio-school, but his announced plans were to leave for New York early in November (two weeks after the

school's opening) and stay away from Mexico for about two years.

The latest, and probably last, echo of the dying if not dead controversy is an article called Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Art, appearing on October 22 in *Todo*, a popular weekly. The author is Siqueiros. After pointing out that the controversy released all the waiting forces of reaction in print and speech, he lists seven of the ten confessions signed (before witnesses) by Rivera: 1. that the Mexican muralist movement was utopian in character in its misguided beginnings; 2. that we must revise this radically and find a more powerful way of reaching the masses; 3. that mural painting, far from being the leading means of expression in revolutionary art, is really the exceptional one; 4. that we were misguided in seeking out beautiful but inaccessible interior murals to paint; 5. that we never painted a single agrarian building or a trade-union headquarters or an exterior mural in a workers' district; 6. that we seriously neglected the development of multi-reproducible and easily portable forms of art; 7. that, because of all these errors, the muralist movement has served the interests of official demagoguery far more than it served the masses.

The controversy is over. If the whole impetus of the controversy can be attributed (as many here do) to the powerful movement toward a united front among all progressive elements, then it is right to say that Rivera's emergence from the arrogant shell of non-retort constitutes a tribute to this movement—although his actual conduct, and vicious unyielding attacks on the Communist Party and the U.S.S.R., equally demonstrate the hopelessness of winning over any long-standing squatters on the Trotsky soil. The lesson is an important one, for Diego's refusal to cooperate with anybody but his own little gang is now clear to many of the workers he has cried he loves. Then, the L.E.A.R. was precipitated into establishing its long-projected studio-school sooner and more firmly, thus making it the most important and best known organization in Mexico and winning numberless new elements from liberal and humanitarian and hitherto non-revolutionary fields. Finally, Siqueiros has reminded people with fresh intensity that he represents the peak of *caudillaje*² of the petty-bourgeois revolution, that his unquestionably brilliant talent has been wasted to *épater le bourgeois* for too many years now, that he has indulged in his own brand of opportunism (mostly through the L.E.A.R.) and is almost completely incapable of joining in any solidly collective work with any continuity. If David Alfaro Siqueiros takes any of these widely accepted revelations to heart and soberly attempts the reform he has counseled to Diego Rivera, the interminable controversy will have helped to gain him, at least, for Mexico's impressive revolution in art.



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² Independent leadership.

Correspondence

Minimum Budgets

TO THE NEW MASSES:

Somewhere in New York City there is a mother and daughter in distress. Both women, Blanche and Muriel Marquis, complained before a Supreme Court referee that they could not keep body and soul together for less than \$41,800 a year. The Wall Street broker-husband was apparently trying to chisel on alimony by making his family live within twenty or thirty thousand. In court, Mrs. Marquis, a tenant of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel-slums, submitted a minimum budget which I contrast with a "fair" minimum budget estimate by the National Industrial Conference Board for a worker's family of three:

	Mrs. Marquis' Budget	N. I. C. B. Budget for an American worker
Rent	\$9,600	\$306.00
Food	4,800	529.36
Clothes	5,000	178.86
Medical care.....	1,900	30.00
Entertainment	900	4.50
Summer home	3,000	—
Winter in Florida...	2,500	—
Miscellaneous	14,100	346.82
	\$41,800	\$1,395.54

The contrast becomes all the more biting when it is pointed out that the average income of workers has never reached the figure estimated by the N.I.C.B. The unemployed, of course, earn nothing; and those on relief or work projects receive sums which wouldn't keep Mrs. Marquis' dog in comfort.
HARRIET M. WRIGHT.

A Round Table on War

TO THE NEW MASSES:

On the night of Friday, December 13, the Henri Barbusse Memorial Committee will stage an event of vital significance at the Pythian Temple, 135 West 70th Street.

Sir Norman Angell, distinguished recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and an honorary member of the Presidium of the World Committee Against War and Fascism, will be featured in a public round-table discussion of the subject; "The New Line-Up of Forces for War." Sir Norman will discuss the subject before the audience following his lecture, with leading members of the press, including Charles Angoff, Joseph North, Varian Fry, William F. Dunne, Alfred Bingham and representatives of important newspapers and periodicals, as well as educators, economists, directors of peace organizations and political writers. Dr. Harry F. Ward will serve as chairman.

Sir Norman is of the opinion that the editorial position generally assumed in this country with reference particularly to sanctions misinterprets considerably the true facts. The following letter, quoted in part, addressed by Sir Norman to the Barbusse Committee, is illuminating:

I wish I could have been in New York for the Anti-War Dinner. Had I been able to confer with the American Committee, I would have urged upon them the advisability of lining up with the forces for peace in Britain and France in active support of measures in restraint of Italy—even if the measures are taken by the League of Nations.

The press here has not quite correctly described the line-up of forces in Europe. It is the imperialists in Britain and the fascists in France who wish to restrain the League in its action against Italy.

Sir Norman will expound this position for his audience at the Pythian Temple. The Henri Barbusse

an authority of an issue uppermost in the thought of all opponents of war.

ROGER BALDWIN, Chairman,
Henri Barbusse Memorial Committee.

The Strike at May's

TO THE NEW MASSES:

The strike in the May's Department Store in Brooklyn, entering its fifth week, is agitating the New York Labor movement. Over 100 strikers came out in answer to a strike call when May's began to fire members of Local 1250. The working conditions in May's are absolutely intolerable. We are fighting against the starvation wage of \$10.00 and \$12.00 for a 50 and 60-hour week. This wage is lower than that received by most workers on relief projects. We have been compelled to work on Sundays or suffer the loss of a day's pay, or worse, the loss of our jobs. We have been terrorized and intimidated by the ruthless policy of this employer. The May's strike must be won.

The militancy and courage of the strikers has won the widespread admiration of labor for the struggle we are making. Wholesale arrests, reaching a total of 102 have been made, the "conspiracy to interfere with business" charge made against two union organizers and three strikers have hardened us and we are more determined than ever to win this fight. The threat of a conviction on these false charges must arouse organized labor to come to our defense. If this charge is sustained, it will mean the outlawing of all strikes.

We will win this strike if you give us your support. We appeal to you for assistance. Through your Executive Board, through your membership, through your affiliations we appeal for immediate financial aid.

Send all contributions to Leonard Levy, Chairman of Finance Committee, Department Store Employees Union, Local 1250, 265 West 14th Street, New York City. Tel.: CHelsea 2-9652.

DEPARTMENT STORE EMPLOYEES UNION.
New York City.

Arizona's Chain Gangs

TO THE NEW MASSES:

It seems that Georgia is not alone in maintaining its barbarian chain gang system. The Hearst-con-

trolled Arizona Republic has taken to publicizing Arizona's fascist tactics. The following boast appeared in the November 17 issue which was devoted to Arizona resources. The article was printed as an assurance that tourists visiting Phoenix would not be molested by panhandlers, pickpockets, Communists or other undesirables!

"In Phoenix all prisoners who are physically fit have to work their FULL SENTENCE on the CHAIN GANG! And do the 'Professional Bums' hate THAT? To them work is worse than hangin'!"

I am writing this letter to ask other Arizonians what can be done about it. There is one thing at least that your readers and indeed anyone who believes in freedom and justice can do. And that is to boycott The Arizona Republic and its brother paper The Republic and Gazette.

Pima, Arizona.

HEROLD LILLYWHITE.

"Shoot to Kill"

TO THE NEW MASSES:

You may be interested to know that there is a magazine, National Republic which is circulated in school libraries and which reprints your title page of a July issue of NEW MASSES, "Shoot to Kill." Underneath is the title page of a pamphlet issued by the Civil Liberties Union, both put together in such a manner that the idea is very strikingly conveyed that the article "Shoot to Kill" was a call by you for terror on the west coast—in other words that you advocated "shooting to kill" to your readers.

New York.

A. R.

A Correction

TO THE NEW MASSES:

My review of Isidor Schneider's *From the Kingdom of Necessity* in this week's issue of THE NEW MASSES credits Dreiser as the author of *Dvoe's Pilgrimage*. As this may surprise some people I should like to comment that *Dvoe* should read *Love* and that a line dropped by the proofreader makes the following sense: "Dreiser in *The Genius* and Upton Sinclair in a badly written but curiously powerful novel, *Love's Pilgrimage* developed the personal conflict of a writer's life."

JOSEPHINE HERBSY.

Letters in Brief

A member of the Vermont Marble Strike Committee asks NEW MASSES readers for financial assistance in their fight. There are a thousand families to feed and clothe. The strike has helped give birth to the Vermont Farmer Labor Party and has activated the political "atmosphere from somnolence to militancy." Food, clothes, soap and tobacco should go to Edward Brenard, Danby, Vermont; and checks to Gene Pedersen, Rutland, Vermont.

The League of American Writers announces through its chairman, Waldo Frank, that John Chamberlain of The New York Times; Dale Curran, author of *A House on a Street*; and Raymond Guthrie, author and critic, have just been admitted to membership.

In response to the letter by Tessie Tennelle of the League for Southern Labor, appealing for a typewriter, Charles Eskstat has come forth to offer one.

Dr. William Rado thinks Stephen Alexander's article on Van Gogh is the finest analysis of the

Nine leading educators, representing most of the institutions of higher learning in New York City will give their impressions of the Soviet Union as they saw it during the past year in a meeting at the Washington Irving High School on Monday, December 9. The affair is being sponsored by a committee of students and teachers together with the Friends of the Soviet Union.

Lester Anderson, whose open letter to Consumers Research we published October 15, reports that he has received a post-card from C.R., "bemoaning the delay in getting out their bulletins on account of the strike," and that around the edge of the card was written the following: "There is nothing funnier than a Marxist who believes what he reads in THE NEW MASSES, advising liberal democracy. . . . R your charge of absurdity, haven't you heard of Le? Russia's defensive affiliation with imperialist France? Don't hesitate to cancel on C.R.'s account."

The New Film Alliance asks us to state that it urgently needs part time assistants. The secretary is Edward Kern, 110 West 40th Street, telephone Pennsylvania 6-3239.