CPUSA Convention

"Dump Reagan, Build a Mass Party of Action"

By Bruce Sato and Robert Sellers

CLEVELAND

Es says with confidence that it is ready to build a "mass party of action," the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) held its 23rd National Convention in this city November 10-13. The central political theme of the gathering was the need to defeat Ronald Reagan in 1984.

An air of unshaken optimism hung over the party's deliberations. The 426 delegates present—representing local party organizations in 48 states—clearly felt that theirs was an organization once again on the upswing. And there was much about the convention to reinforce this view.

The convention's class and especially its racial composition (roughly 30% of the delegates were Black and Latino) stood in marked contrast to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other major left groupings. The large number of trade unionists in attendance likewise indicated that the CPUSA is undoubtedly better positioned in the organized labor movement than most other left forces. And participation in the gatherings by representatives of a number of fraternal parties—from Canada, Hungary, China, the German Democratic Republic and Lebanon, among others—provided a cogent demonstration of the CPUSA's ties to the international communist movement and to parties holding state power. (Representatives from communist parties of the Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, Palestine and several other countries were denied visas.)

The convention's confidence was also bolstered by the knowledge that the Maoist trend, which once had commanded the majority of Marxism-Leninism from the CPUSA's left, was in near-total disarray, and that defections to left-wing social democracy over the past decade have neither reduced the party's rank-and-file nor resulted in the emergence of a coherent Eurocommunist challenge from the right.

In terms of size, influence, class and racial composition, the CPUSA clearly has the edge over all the other claimants to socialism and communism in the U.S. left.

ROSY VIEW OF POLITICS

But much of the optimism which prevailed at the convention does have one more factor—one which will not serve the CPUSA in nearly such good stead as the class struggle intensifies. This is the party's rose-colored assessment of the motion of U.S. politics, and in particular, its stubborn refusal to recognize the extent and depth of the political backwardness of the working class in the major sectors of the U.S. working class.

Thus the CPUSA roots its political strategy for the coming period in an assessment that the present moment of politics is characterized by a "many-sided popular mass upsurge [which] continues to grow in size and militancy" and which is on the threshold of "going over to the offensive." This view, typical of the CPUSA's deeply embedded tendency to exaggerate every positive development in the mass movement and refuse to look at negative trends squarely in the face, may engender enthusiasm among its cadre, but is unlikely to prepare the CPUSA to confront the obstacles that forces trying to move the U.S. working class to the left are bound to encounter, especially around the central questions of war and racism.

CONVENTION AGENDA

The conference agenda was structured around a Draft Basic Document which had been the focus of inter-party preparatory discussions in the months leading up to the convention. This document laid out the CPUSA's basic assessment of the international and domestic situation and posed the tasks facing the party in the various mass movements. This was supplemented by the main political report, presented to the convention by Gus Hal at its opening session. Workshops and plenaries to discuss the draft document and Hal's report occupied the next several days.

In addition, the party sponsored an international solidarity night featuring messages from a number of the fraternal parties. The convention ended on Sunday

struggle for peace; solidarity with existing socialism and the national liberation movements as component parts of a single world revolutionary process; constant emphasis on the struggle against racism, and the forging of a broad anti-monopoly coalition of all classes and strata who have objective contradictions with monopoly capital as the key to pushing forward the class struggle and ultimately the path to socialism in the U.S.

Another of the most positive sides of the CPUSA's politics were visible in the convention's agitation about the need to defend existing socialism and combat the anti-Sovietism used to justify Reagan's drive toward military aggression and nuclear war.

But beyond this general outlook, convention deliberations were framed by the note struck at the CPUSA's Extraordinary Conference in Milwaukee in April 1982: the class struggle is heating up and the CPUSA has to become more aggressive in interacting with it. Building off this theme, the delegates devoted their main attention to two questions: how to make the 1984 election a historic turning point by defeating Reagan; and how to transform the CPUSA into "a mass communist party of action."

The 1984 Election

Assessing the defeat of Reagan as the key political task before the working class, the CPUSA has targeted the 1984 election as the main focus of its political activity in the next year. While it plans to field its own candidates, clearly the principal thrust of its effort will be anti-Reagan front. The contest is posed as a battle between the "Reagan-corporate offensive" and a "broad, all-people's anti-Reagan coalition." At stake is whether or not the world will be plunged into "nuclear Doomsday."

In this context, the CPUSA assesses that the defeat of Reagan is an absolutely necessary task, and that "the challenge is to find the path of unity, the forms of struggle, and the way to get the people to the ballot box on November 8." Further, the CPUSA brings all its "of force" to prepare for the outcome. During International Solidarity movements from enthusiastically rallying behind Mondale as an carrier of the anti-Reagan banner in 1984. The political research director warned that this might be a "different kind of campaign," but that the different kind of campaign will tend to come together and unite under the broad anti-Reagan front in the coming months. In this pursuit of electoral unity, we must keep in mind that when the party is not running on an anti-Reagan front, we must continue and grow.

From the convention podium, Si Ger son, head of the CPUSA political action commission, put it more bluntly: "There must be no war between the workers involved in elections and those supporting Mondale—all are anti-Reagan. Interest ingly, this statement put forward as a rhetorical device, was panned as an inap propriate assumption by some of the delegates. (We have no obligations to decide how the Democratic Party should handle its can didate.) Nevertheless, the proposal received a significant number of votes while going down to defeat.

The difference did not affect the convention's underlying unity with the strategy or logic of the Afro-American Equality Commission chairman Michael Johnson, who argued: "We have no obligations to decide how the Democratic Party should handle its candidate. Nevertheless, the proposal received a significant number of votes while going down to defeat.

MASS PARTY OF ACTION

To play the most effective role in this "total mobilization," as well as prepare for the election, the convention dedicated itself to building the CPUSA into a "mass communist party of action." This involved the party being "both a mass and "action" the CPUSA set itself the twin goals of becoming more of a factor in the mass movements and strong "action" to recruiting boldly from the ever-broader

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Guatemalan Women Tour U.S.

By Linda Kahn

In a rare opportunity for the U.S. women's movement, two members of the Guatemalan resistance traveled to ten major cities (Oct. 14-29) and on Nov. 16 on a "Woman to Woman" tour.

Tour participants Victoria Alvarez and Leonor Barrios are presently living in exile in Mexico, working to build international solidarity with the struggles of the Guatemalan people. As Barrios explained, "At the end of 1981, as the repression was intensifying, it was decided that we would need to send people to do this work: first, because the solidarity movement was growing, and second, the repression was so severe that some people had to leave the country to make sure that they would be safe and therefore be able to continue doing revolutionary work."

At a time when the U.S. is escalating its military efforts to forestall revolutionary victory in El Salvador and reverse the Nicaraguan Revolution, the tour spotlighted the role of the Guatemalan women in imperialism's war plans. Last August, a coup replaced the government of evangelical Christian Gen. Efraín Rios Montt with a junta led by former minister of defense Gen. Humberto Mejía Víctores. Ríos Montt was an unproven and unstable agent of the U.S. in the region: his attacks on the Catholic Church and inability to cover up violent human rights had isolated his government, and Ríos Montt was not enthusiastic about using Guatemalan troops on a mission that might antagonize the U.S. The coup is widely believed to have been CIA-engineered, designed to put in place a government more willing and able to carry out plans developed in Washington.

HARSH CONDITIONS

Barrios and Alvarez's description of conditions in Guatemala underscored the interest Guatemala's dictatorship shares with the U.S. in crushing revolution in Central America. The illiteracy rate in the country is 80% in the urban areas, 90% in the rural areas. Life expectancy is 56 years in urban areas, 41 in rural areas. One million people out of a total population of 7 million are internal refugees—people driven from their homes, always on the move and in hiding from the military. These conditions make Guatemala itself ripe for revolution.

Alvarez, a Quechua Indian, stressed that "the struggle in Guatemala is a struggle against genocide and racism. ... Montt was very clear on the government's objectives, saying 'We're going to kill the guerillas and if Indians are guerillas, let's kill Indians.' They are exterminating the indigenous population. However, we should clarify that the struggle of the Guatemalan people for liberation is not a struggle of the indigenous people [one-half of the total population], but also of the poor Ladinos [people of mixed Indian and European ancestry] who share the same conditions of life.

SELF-DETERMINATION

"In Guatemala," Alvarez explained, "the people have only one alternative—to fight the oppression they face in order to obtain self-determination, to live in peace and freedom with a just government. ... At this time, there are four guerrilla organizations that are in the process of growing. Unification. This unity is of great importance because the masses need something that can show the path forward—a vanguard that defies the people.

WOMEN TO WOMEN

The main focus of the tour was to build ties of solidarity between women in the U.S. and women in Guatemala. Barrios and Alvarez explained that the standard applied to women's liberation in the U.S. cannot be used to understand women's liberation in Guatemala. The slogan "Women's rights are a matter of life and death," they explained, captures the fact that Guatemala's struggle for women is often at the heart of the struggle for men, children and old people. The symbols of Guatemalan people's suffering came as a shock to us. It seems a luxury to think of going to discussion groups and being open to other parts of our time to social relationships with other women."

"It is our participation in our people's struggle for liberation that wins us the right to fight for our particular gains—to be able to become active in a broader social picture. The participation of women in the revolution is at three levels. One level is participation in an armed struggle as part of the guerrilla struggle, the other in the mass organizations that have been built in the U.S., such as the organizations of peasants, workers, students, Chicanos and Cubans. The third is those women who fight to protect themselves and the people with whom they are fighting. We have to show the women for their suffering, but who, in their struggle for survival, begin to become more active."

The Guatemalan women stressed the role of the people of the U.S. in changing the oppressive conditions in Guatemala, and in preventing the intervention of the U.S. in Central America. "Through speakers and progressive women in the U.S. to speak up on behalf of our people and to press their congresspeople, the U.S. must know that we have more radical and militant, much more knowledgable and class conscious. It has less ability to direct intervention in Nicaragua and in other parts of Central America and the Caribbean.""

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sections of the working class that it assesses are open to the party's program. "A section of the working class that is open to the party is the key to our success in this strategy," she said. "The driving force of the party is the working class."

In order to address these concerns, the CPUSA has prepared a document entitled "A Venerable Tradition: The CPUSA's Venerable Tradition of Racial Solidarity." The document analyzes the CPUSA's historical role in the struggle against racism and its current role in the struggle against the apartheid in South Africa. The document calls on the CPUSA to continue its fight for a socialist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist society.

A tendency toward right opportunism was identified as the main obstacle to the party meeting its political goals. The call was for more extensive use of the party press and a more aggressive political posture. The party was still "not close enough to the basic section of our class and that a number of serious ideological problems were still present in the party that prevented us from getting jobs in industrial workplaces and/or concentrating their work in industrial working class communities." Overcoming these weaknesses was described as "crucial to success in the fight against racism." One of the goals of the convention was to increase the CPUSA's work in the industrial workplace, and to develop the party's role in organizing workers and their struggles.

The CPUSA's vanguard character was already in place, and the time had come to recruit large numbers of people into the CPUSA. The CPUSA's role in the struggle against racism and imperialism is a key to the success of the party. However, the CPUSA must be more active in recruiting workers into the party, and must continue to develop its role in the struggle against racism and imperialism.

Socialism to the struggle for peace. The leadership acknowledged that there was much to be done before such an approach would thoroughly take root at the base level of the party, but the discussions at the convention reflected the effort to get the organization consolidated around a more aggressive political posture was not conducted simply for show.

Third, the reports and documents stressed the centrality of a policy of industrial concentration, the organizing of working class composition of the CPUSA and strengthening its ideological fiber. The Political Bureau explicitly stated that the party was still not "close enough to the basic section of our class and that a number of serious ideological problems were still present in the party that prevented us from getting jobs in industrial workplaces and/or concentrating their work in industrial working class communities." The CPUSA is concerned about the growing number of workers who are alienated from the political movement, and is determined to address this issue in future reports and discussions. The CPUSA is committed to building a socialist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist society.

"MASS PARTY OF ACTION"

Finally, the political report to the convention posed building a "mass party of action" specifically the "ingrained concept that we are and must remain a cadre party." The convention asserted that the cadre core which would assure the CPUSA's vanguard character was already in place, and the time had come to recruit large numbers of people into the CPUSA. The CPUSA's role in the struggle against racism and imperialism is a key to the success of the party. However, the CPUSA must be more active in recruiting workers into the party, and must continue to develop its role in the struggle against racism and imperialism.

But it will almost certainly take a more aggressive political posture to truly make a mass struggle against that is occurring today—as well as a viable alternative emerging to the CPUSA's left wing, which is becoming a serious problem affecting the party's prospects for growth or its ability to remain a viable political force. But this trend is beginning to slow. For the moment, the CPUSA, even if it corrects only a small portion of its self-acknowledged weaknesses, is probably its best position in decades to take the initiative and expand its influence in the coming years.