

History of the Red Guard Party

By "Former Members"

This article was written and submitted to Getting Together by a few former members of the Red Guard Party and is not intended to represent the entire membership. It is the first of a series of articles.

Part 1 of 5

The Red Guard Party was founded in San Francisco's Chinatown in February of 1969. Our membership was primarily composed of American-born Chinese youth. Due to the incorrectness of our political line, our organizational structure and our method of work, we disbanded in July of 1971.

Our history of participation as cadre in the Red Guard has helped to strengthen our political understanding and the practical work we are presently engaged in. Although the Red Guard made many errors, the organization was still a very positive development in the course of the mass political movement at the time in the United States.

There are positive and negative aspects to everything. When looking back at the history of the Red Guard, we must look at both its good points and bad points. In order to understand our strengths and the source of our errors and weaknesses, we are writing this history and analysis so that people can learn from the experiences of the Red Guard to advance the revolutionary movements forward.

Material Conditions

What were the material conditions that existed prior to the founding of the Red Guards? First of all, the international situation shaped our consciousness, particularly the struggle of the Indo-Chinese people. The year before the Red Guards came into existence, the National Liberation Front had launched the Tet Offensive forcing President Johnson to end the bombing of the North and begin the Peace Negotiations. Next, the force that was generated from the People's Republic of China found its way into our consciousness as our nationalism grew. No longer could the reactionaries

deny to us the existence and accomplishments of our 800 million compatriots by claiming the feeble Chiang Kai-sek government as the real China. Secondly, the political atmosphere in the San Francisco Bay Area was one of tremendous mass political upheaval -- the growing anti-war movement to stop the U.S.'s genocidal war in Vietnam; the Third World struggles on campuses for ethnic studies and an end to the institutional racism; and the development of Third World revolutionary organizations -- influenced us greatly. Thirdly, the miserable conditions which existed in Chinatown could no longer be tolerated.

Part 2 of 5

People Who Formed The Red Guard

A lot of the Red Guard members were young people who had turned to the streets of Chinatown for recreation. They faced the racism of tourists and teachers, and their inability to get -jobs pressed down hard upon them. At first, the activity of the youth confined itself to attacking tourists or else fighting the foreign-born Chinese youth. Then auto thefts and burglaries became the vogue. Soon, the burglaries became armed robberies and the police began to clamp down in earnest.

Thus, a cycle began to grow among these young people. When a youth was arrested, the reactionary Chinese newspapers would print his name in their papers in order to ostracize him from the community. Unable to get jobs, they would resort to crime to make money. At school, because of an arrest, the student would fall behind and the chances of catching up in class being very small. So what happened was arrest-probation-arrest, time and time again.

Flight

Most of these American-born youth knew that their plight was attached to Chinatown's social conditions and that in order to break their cycle, they would need to have an organization which would address these problems. So, in late 1967, they purchased a pool hall through a raffle, forming a non-profit organization called Leway, Inc. The idea behind Leway was to engage in co-operative capitalism and use the profits from the pool hall and other activities to build programs to serve the needs of the youth. Leway stood for

"Legitimate Ways"

The people from Leway were primarily concerned about ending police harassment, although they also tried to tackle other social problems such as getting jobs for youth. As a gathering place for youth, Leway was tremendously successful. Often 200 youth could be seen inside the pool hall. Otherwise, Leway encountered many problems. Police continued to harass the youth. In fact, Leway became the focus of police harassment in Chinatown. This was despite the fact that Leway was working with the Police Community Relations Dept., and other agencies like the Neighborhood Youth Council.

One thing that distinguished Leway from other similar organizations for youth was its principle of not accepting government funds. This was because the Leway organizers knew that the government was the enemy and that antipoverty money was just a means of co-optation. They opened up a soda fountain and tried to open up a garment co-op, but these ventures did not prove sustainable. The main source of funds continued to be the pool hall and often these funds were used for legal assistance and for paying the constantly rising rent.

Politics

The leadership of Leway soon came to see that they were making little headway in trying to change Chinatown's social conditions. Police harassment had in fact increased. Meanwhile, people who were engaged in mass political struggle began to make links with Leway, especially the Asians who were engaged in the Third World Liberation Front struggle at San Francisco State College and the Black Panther Party. The Asians from State College knew that they were fighting for the community and that in order to wage a successful struggle, links with the community had to be made. The program of the TWLF fitted into the needs of the people who frequented Leway. That is, all Third World people have been denied a decent education because of racism and poverty and the campus should be used to educate Third World people in order to change their conditions. Soon, people from Leway were out on the picket line.

Red Book

A nucleus of Leway organizers had begun to study the Red Book and adopt the 10 point program of the Black Panther Party, establishing the basis for the future of the Red Guard Party. Within Leway, this nucleus urged Leway to become more involved in political actions in Chinatown. Leway participated in an education struggle putting forth demands that dealt with bi-lingual education, an end to institutional racism and community control of the primary and secondary schools. For the Chinese New Years' Celebration of 1969, they took part in putting together a community street fair to replace the previous yearly commercial street fair put on by traveling business fairs. Booths were set up and some of them were political.

However, the San Francisco Tac Squad came in full force, beat-up and almost arrested a member of Leway's who was working in the street fair celebration and was restraining a drunken tourist from attacking a Chinese youth. A struggle ensued and the police were briefly routed from the community. The Leway member and the Chinese youth that was being attacked became the targets of police harassment and attempted arrest rather than the drunk tourist who had initially caused the disruption. This action made some people think more seriously that they could not work within the legal channels of this society to make social change because our attempt to maintain non-violence at the street fair was met by the racist violence of the police force.

Soon after the Chinese New Year's Celebration, we were convinced that Chinatown needed an out-front political organization which could openly educate people on the problems of unemployment, bad housing, racism, etcâ€¦ are a direct result of living in a capitalist society -- an organization which would try to organize people to fight the inequities of this system. This was the beginning of the Red Guard Party. We adopted the 10 point program of the Black Panther Party, with minor changes, as our program and began to form a structure and organize programs that would relate to the needs of the community.

We first opened our office on Jackson Street, flying the Chinese five-starred flag and playing the "East is Red" out into the street. Political education classes were held and open to the public. In Leway's pool hall, reading the Red Book - Quotations from Chairman Mao - and showing films from San

Francisco Newsreel about the struggles of Third World people around the world and in the United States. In the first sessions, the whole pool room would be filled by over 60 youth, but as the police raided the place every night, intimidating the youth, people stopped coming. The police had the absolute authority to enter the place to check ID's because Leway was a public pool hall. They would come into the place four times a night with as many as twelve officers in full riot equipment. They would force everyone up against the walls and make everyone fill out field interrogation cards. The Red Guard was unable to stop this harassment by the police, so the harassment continued keeping people away from the pool hall.

In Chinatown, the Red Guards did openly advocate patriotism to the People's Republic of China. Not only patriotism, but more importantly, the politics of Socialist China - their struggles for freedom from oppression and the importance of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party were reintroduced into the community by a series of celebrations.

On October 1, 1970, the 21st anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, we held a celebration bringing people together who felt nationalism and patriotism to their motherland, which they kept silent for a long time. The first event was at Portsmouth Square Park to distribute free food and leaflets to announce the evening event at the Committee Theatre. As we entered the park, the Chinese Anti-Communist League was holding a memorial service "to the millions of compatriots killed by the Communists." We, being patriotic to the People's Republic of China, were a direct attack to their politics and even more when we unfurled the five starred flag. At this point a speaker on the stage representing the Anti-Communist League yelled "Kill Them," which led to a fight as police looked on. It was only after some of our food had been kicked over that the police decided to stop the fighting. We continued to serve the remainder of the food even after the fighting ended. Later that evening we held a dinner and movie showing of the "East is Red". It was a successful turnout of over 300 people from the community and other Third World people. The film was received with great enthusiasm and excitement, and after the showing many elderly Chinese people expressed their happiness in seeing a film from China and looked forward to receiving more news from 'home'.

The Red Guard engaged in various petition and other campaigns directed

primarily to anti-redevelopment struggles, i.e. preventing the Chinese Playground from being torn down to build a garage; picketing when the Kwong Chow Temple was destroyed; and leafleting attempts to stop big businessmen and landlords from tearing down the International Hotel. We helped to circulate a petition to oppose the Nixon Administration from ending a tuberculosis treatment center in Chinatown. And together, with other groups, succeed in maintaining this program.

All of these issues had the potential of developing into mass struggles that would raise the consciousness of the people of Chinatown. However, we had no idea of how to organize the people -- no mass meetings were ever held and hardly any investigation was done as to how the people felt and wanted to act on these issues. In fact, most of the political work that we did was to gain favor in the community and break us out of isolation without an understanding of how to struggle for our rights.

Our two serve-the-people programs were the Breakfast for Children program and the Free Lunch program for people in the Portsmouth Square Park. We were eager to do concrete things that would raise revolutionary concepts of the necessity to struggle against the government because it was not fulfilling the rights of people to live good lives here in the United States. But because we did no investigation of the community, and did not know how these programs would fit into raising the level of consciousness of the people, they were not successful in pointing out the contradictions of capitalism to community people. Organizationally, the programs were left up to rank and file members to run without participation of the leadership. Criticisms of these programs from within the rank and file of the organization were ignored by the leadership and this served to demoralize the cadre.

Part 4 of 5

Anti-Student Line

Developing within the Red Guard was a strong anti-student, anti-intellectual tendency because of members' past histories of hating and rejecting their former education. Due to the lack of struggle within the organization against this tendency, a lot of sincere people who could not read well or understand larger vocabulary let this develop into a rejection of any form of study or contact with more educated persons, which hurt the vital aspect of

developing our theoretical understanding to push the organization forward.

An activity in which this anti-student, anti-intellectual tendency took its form in practice was a rally held to celebrate the May 4 Movement in China where students left the campuses to learn from the masses. This tendency was aggravated by the fact that these particular students were backward in their approach of presenting politics to the community. Through this rally we wanted to present more openly the politics of Socialist China, which had been silenced for so long. But in trying to do this, we met objection from the Asian students. The majority of these students were very fearful of advocating sympathy with the people's Republic of China and were out of touch with the realities of the community, underestimating the people's feelings of nationalism and patriotism. So, we went ahead anyway, and proceeded in presenting our politics in the rally. Although we found that the gathering in the park was very receptive to the out-front politics, it fostered and built up the harmful tendency of negating the importance of educating ourselves and uniting with students as an important part of our work

Political Line

The Red Guard was subject to make many errors in our practice and in developing our political line. Two main reasons for this were 1) due to us being a very young organization lacking experience and participation in the mass movement, and 2) because we did not actively study or understand the importance of grasping Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought to guide our overall political work. This weakness showed up in our ultra-military line - our incorrect analysis of the role of armed struggle. Armed struggle is the organized violence of the bourgeoisie - the State. In order to wage successful armed struggle, the support and participation of the masses has to be built step by step. However, the Red Guard leadership made their analysis based only on the street youth and not the broader masses of people and especially the working class. Also, the incorrect "theory" of Regis Debray of a foco (a small guerrilla band) which could subjectively create material conditions for a revolutionary war had its effect on the Red Guard leadership.

Because of this, the Red guard Party viewed themselves primarily as an army, rather than a political and ideological vanguard. Mass work was viewed only as a necessary attachment for building a military organization.

Revolution was always armed struggle and hardly ever mass political struggle and ideological struggle. The gun, as a tool for liberation, was blown out of proportion to the point of building up a mystique around it. Violence was seen as the only worthwhile form of struggle. This was aggravated by the fact that we tried, through Leway, to do things within this society's channels and had never gotten the results in terms of improving the lives of people. Also, almost every step of the way in doing our work we were met by the violence of the police force against us. Thus, we felt that the only way was to arm ourselves and "off the pig", which ended up to be a very narrow and incorrect way of approaching socialist revolution.

One of the main weaknesses in the political line of the Red Guard was the failure to grasp the importance of organizing the working class. They are the class which is in sharpest contradiction with the monopoly capitalist class. They work to produce everything in this society but are denied the true benefits of their labor, and precisely because they are the major force in sustaining society, they are in the most powerful position to freeze capitalist society. In the American socialist revolution, the working class will be the most powerful, strategic class which will strike the death blow to U.S. Imperialism.

Due to the fact that we placed our primary emphasis on organizing the military aspects of preparing for revolution, we saw uniting with the workers as hoping to win their support for our military actions. In the future, without recognizing the importance of developing call-conscious revolutionary forces rooted deeply within the working class (i.e. union caucuses, workers' organizations, etc.).

Part 5 of 5

Dissolution of the Red Guard

Building a revolutionary organization requires a continuing study of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought to develop clear overall guidance to the political practice and doing dedicated day-to-day mass work. The primary task of the Red Guard was to build a political army focused on all the technical aspects of military preparation, we neglected to do mass work to deepen our roots among the various sectors of the people and win their respect and confidence to the revolutionary cause. Therefore, the Red Guard

Party did not develop and expand to incorporate the many ideas and active support of the Chinatown community. The masses of the people are the makers of world history and correct ideas only come from social practice, participation in the mass movement and interaction with society. Lacking this, there was no understanding of how to correctly move ahead.

Due to the lack of political clarity as a guide to work, we didn't know how to approach the task of building a strong, revolutionary political organization. Struggle within the organization as to the direction and political line did not occur, and many times the leadership would make decisions and rank and file members were left to carry out the task. We did not benefit from collective struggle and discussion which is vital in forging greater unity and understanding within the entire Red Guard to strengthen the organization.

These internal contradictions within the organization coupled with our incorrect political line, our way of approaching socialist revolution, stifled the organization's growth and development. With mounting contradictions that were not resolved, the Red Guard began to disintegrate. Concluding

Concluding Remarks

After 20 years of silence in our community, an outcry was heard across the country of the need for revolutionary change in our community -- political force which attacked the exploitation of our labor, degradation, racism and wretched living conditions that the Chinese people have been forced to endure since we've set foot in this country. It called out to Chinese people to look towards the homeland:

1. to learn from China's struggle to overthrow oppression and exploitation of the people by imperialists and the corrupt KMT regime led by Chiang Kai-sek.
2. to understand and be proud of the accomplishments of 800 million Chinese people living in a Socialist Society under the leadership of Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.

The Red Guard put forth an image of Asians in revolutionary struggle, which smashed the passive and submissive stereotype which most Americans had. This image spread across the nation inspiring Asian Americans to struggle

for revolutionary change, or replaced previous feelings of isolation with feelings of solidarity among Asian Americans who were doing political work in their own areas throughout the country.

In the history of the Red guard's existence we made many serious errors which led to its dissolution, but we also feel it contributed to the overall development of the American revolutionary movement.