

BRIEF HISTORY OF PLP

The Progressive Labor Party was formed in 1964, primarily by ex-Communist Party members and sons and daughters of CP members. Most were dissatisfied with the CP because of its increasingly moderate stance. The major group was the Progressive Labor Movement in New York and Buffalo, which split with the CP over trade union questions. They criticized the CP for supporting the AFL-CIO merger, and for depending on reform action within the AFL-CIO to revive a radical labor movement.

Besides the New York PLM, there were dissident CP members in California and the state of Washington who were expelled in the early sixties. Their differences with the CP emerged during the Smith Act trials of 1951-54, when the party leadership based the defense on the First Amendment and on denying the revolutionary nature of the party. The split also reflected disagreement with the party's growing emphasis (even before Khrushchev) on peaceful coexistence and the possibility of a peaceful transformation of the U.S. economy.

Some of the expelled California members joined the Progressive Labor Movement which then organized the Progressive Labor Party as a vanguard revolutionary party on the Leninist model at a convention in 1964. The Washington dissidents criticized the formation of a party, because they felt that there was no mass working class base for such a party, and did not join in its formation. They did join several months later. The Washington and California groups provided the major working-class membership in the Party.

Progressive Labor (Movement and then Party) was active in organizing the first trip by American radicals to Cuba and in helping to launch the May 2nd Movement, which was the first organization to oppose the Vietnam war on a political, anti-imperialist basis. The Party also prepared a trade union program (much different than the current one) and an electoral program.

Whatever defects PL may have had at the beginning, the specific turning point which led to its current state came in October of 1968 when the Central Committee prepared a draft of the strategic position paper, "Road to Revolution II." The draft included condemnation of the National Liberation Front for accepting arms from the Soviet Union.

At this time, also, the position on nationalism emerged. Though the Party had never taken the position that blacks were a people as well as members of the working class, it had, at its founding convention, recognized a distinction between revolutionary and bourgeois nationalism, and had given especially independent status to its black liberation section. In 1966, however, party chairman Milt Rosen said in a speech in New York that "all nationalism is reactionary," and this has been the position ever since.

Representatives from the West Coast criticized the Vietnam position, but it was not changed. In addition, Chairman Milt Rosen maintained that the draft of "Road to Revolution II" should have been submitted only to the State central committees, though the Washington and California committees had immediately submitted it to members because of the position on Vietnam. The national Central Committee, in violation of the party's constitution, sent out a directive for discussion and implementation of the paper, without calling for approval by the local clubs.

When the Washington central committee refused to carry out this directive, the state chairman was expelled and from then on the national committee simply refrained from contacting any of the Washington members. In addition, 15 or 20 members in California were expelled, dropped out, or were pushed out over disagreement with the Vietnam position.

The expelled members included the bulk of the members working in trade union and other non-student work. Among these were the organizers who had led the most successful labor action, a wildcat strike which shut down a West Coast paper's printing operation for 5 days.

From this point on, PL concentrated more and more on its work in SDS. May 2nd Movement had been dissolved shortly before the split over the Vietnam position. Though the party officially emphasized the importance of young people working in industry for another year or so, very few did. Within SDS, PL members ceased to support Cuba, but did not until recently push their positions on Vietnam and black liberation, or the position of students in the revolutionary movement.

PL's trade union work, from 1966 on, developed more and more in the direction of factional attacks on union leadership. Also PL did not raise anti-imperialist issues in its trade union work the way it had in student work. For instance, the PL organizer in a warehouse strike in Oakland put out a leaflet attacking the union leadership for not demanding a high enough wage increase but refrained from criticizing the fact that the strike exempted military cargoes, despite the fact that the union was on record against the war in Vietnam.

It is difficult to say much with assurance about PL's size at the moment, though it is probably in the hundreds. Starting with a small membership concentrated in New York City, Seattle, San Francisco, and Buffalo, it has expanded geographically to several more cities, primarily by the recruitment of many more members from the student movement.

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From a statement by the Washington State PLP to the National Committee of PLP.
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