

# CPUSA Convention 'Dump Reagan, Build a Mass Party of Action'

By Bruce Sato and Robert Sellers

## CLEVELAND

Exuding 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 unabashed optimism hung over the party's deliberations. The 426 delegates present—representing local

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 had its source in another 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 the depth of the political backwardness which continues to grip 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 motion 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 negative trends squarely in the face, may engender enthusiasm among its cadre, but it 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 inner-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 Hall at its opening session. Workshops and plenaries to discuss the draft document and Hall'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 conference 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.

Many 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 to build an 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 mobilization and the issues that will bring people to the ballot box on November 8." Further, the CPUSA brings all its "official optimism" to bear when discussing the outcome. During International Soli-

which all currents and trends in the working class and popular movement are measured. Jesse Jackson's candidacy is assessed as an extremely significant development; according to the political report, "Jackson presents the most advanced positions on all important questions, including economic issues." At the same time, the decision of the AFL-CIO to endorse Walter Mondale was viewed as placing "the trade union movement squarely in the middle of the dump Reagan movement" and even as a "new level of political independence" for labor. (This dubious assessment of the AFL-CIO's role in 1984 was returned to again and again in the convention as a matter of decisive importance for the working class movement.)

Convention discussions and documents were careful never to explicitly place Mondale himself within the emerging "all-people's anti-Reagan front." However, the reports and deliberations made clear that the CPUSA was opposed to anything that might prevent the people's

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movements from enthusiastically rallying behind Mondale as carrier of the anti-Reagan banner in 1984. The political report gingerly wove the arguments this way: "The different mass movements will tend to come together and unite under the election umbrella to defeat the Reaganites . . . In pursuing the tactic of electoral unity, we must keep in mind that when the primaries are over the anti-Reagan front must continue and grow."

From the convention podium, Si Gerson, head of the CPUSA political action commission, put it more bluntly: "There must be no war between the workers supporting Jackson and those supporting Mondale—all are anti-Reagan." Interestingly, this statement, put forward as a ringing declaration, got much less applause than various statements arguing Jackson's merits. Further indicating that some delegates were not completely comfortable with obscuring the difference between the Mondale and Jackson candidacies (and, objectively, conciliating racism within the working class) was a convention resolution, introduced from the floor, which would have had party members in union locals fight to get a Jackson endorsement. The resolution was opposed by the convention leadership in the person of Afro-American Equality Commission chair Charlene Mitchell who argued: "We have no obligations to decide how the Democratic Party should handle its candidates." Nevertheless, the proposal received a significant number of votes while going down to defeat.

This difference did not affect the convention's underlying unity with the strategy mapped out in the basic document and political report. For the next year, the CPUSA's political energy will be directed toward being "a factor in a total mobilization to give all the pro-Reagan, ultra-right forces a sound beating on Election Day."

## MASS PARTY OF ACTION

To play the most effective role in this "total mobilization," as well as prepare for struggles beyond 1984, the convention dedicated itself to building the CPUSA into a "mass communist party of action." The emphasis was on both "mass" and "action"; the CPUSA set itself the twin goals of becoming more of a factor in popular actions and struggles, and of recruiting boldly from the ever-broader



CPUSA General Secretary Gus Hall

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 gathering by representatives of a number of fraternal parties—from Canada, Hungary, Greece, 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 buoyed by the knowledge that the Maoist trend, which once had contended for the mantle 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 stampeded the party's rank-and-file nor resulted in the emergence of a coherent Eurocommunist challenge from the right.

In terms of size, influence, and class and racial composition, the CPUSA



CPUSA National Chairman Henry Winston addressing the public rally held at the convention's conclusion.

afternoon, November 13, with a "Dump Reagan Rally for Peace, Jobs and Equality" held in Cleveland's Music Hall and attended by 1,200.

On the most fundamental propositions which have characterized the CPUSA's world outlook for the past two decades, the convention affirmed the party's strategic political line: the centrality of the

solidarity Night, Hall declared: "Foreign guests ask one question—can Reagan be defeated? When asked a year ago I felt, maybe. Six months ago, more than likely. Today I say without question he'll be defeated."

## ANTI-REAGANISM

Based on this assessment, commitment to anti-Reaganism is the yardstick against

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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 in the U.S. (October 14-November 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 it would be necessary to send people to do this work: first, because the solidarity movement was weak and secondly, 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 a revolutionary victory in El Salvador and reverse the Nicaraguan Revolution, the tour spotlighted the role of Guatemala in imperialism's war plans. Last August, a coup replaced the government of evangelical Christian Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt with a junta led by former minister of defense Gen. Humberto Mejía Victores. Ríos Montt had proved an unreliable agent of the U.S. in the region; his attacks on the Catholic Church and inability to cover up violations of human rights had isolated his government, and Ríos Montt was not enthusiastic about using Guatemalan troops for a regional war on behalf of the U.S. The coup is widely believed to have been CIA-engineered, designed to put in power a leader just as ruthless, but more able and willing 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



Victoria Alvarez and Leonor Barrios on a "Woman-to-Woman" tour to build solidarity with the Guatemalan people's struggle.

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 Quiché Indian, stressed that "the struggle in Guatemala is a struggle against ethnocide and genocide. Ríos Montt was very clear on the government's objectives, saying 'We're going to kill guerrillas and if Indians are guerrillas, 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 just 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 one of great importance because the masses need something that can show the path

forward—a vanguard that defends 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 emphasized that the standards 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 "you can't separate the struggle of women from the struggle of men, children and old people. . . . The issues that women in the U.S. are addressing came as a shock to us. It seems a luxury to think of going to discussion groups or to be able to dedicate a large part 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 own particular gains—to be able to be active in the broader social picture. The participation of women in the revolution is at three levels. One level is participation in the armed struggle as part of the guerrilla movement. The second is in the mass organizations that have been built—organizations of peasants, workers, students, Christians, slumdweller. The third is those women who fight to protect themselves and the people with whom they are forced to flee, who do not know the reasons for their suffering, but who, in their struggle for survival, begin to become conscious."

The Guatemalan women stressed the role people of the U.S. can play in changing the oppressive condition of life in Guatemala, and in preventing the intervention of the U.S. in Central America. The speakers asked progressive women in the U.S. "to speak up on behalf of our people and to press their congresspeople and senators to vote against all military, economic and technical aid to Guatemala. As well, they must raise the consciousness of other women about the grave danger of direct intervention in Nicaragua and in other parts of Central America and the Caribbean." □

## CPUSA . . .

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sections of the working class that it assesses are open to the party's program.

The main obstacle to the CPUSA succeeding in these goals was identified as tendencies toward "right opportunism" in the ranks. Principally this seemed to mean a hesitation to establish a visible public presence for the party, and work among the masses that fails to raise basic political and ideological issues and therefore is "very often reformist in content."

The convention assessed that a number of gains had recently been made in overcoming these weaknesses. The leadership asserted that the nationwide party building drive conducted in the last year "put an end to the decline in party membership. . . (and produced) a continually increasing membership." (A Party official told *Frontline* the CPUSA now has a membership of roughly 10,000 and is steadily growing.) Particularly stressed was the number of youth who have joined the party and/or the recently formed Young Communist League over the past period, a fact which would appear to be confirmed by the significant proportion of delegates to the convention who were under 35 years old.

To build on these gains, the CPUSA leadership agitated for a number of further steps to be taken in strengthening the party.

A top priority is a major campaign to build the party's public presence through expanding the circulation of the CPUSA's press, the *Daily World* and the West Coast-based weekly *People's World*. The *Daily World* has just successfully completed a half-million dollar fund drive to enable the paper to go "hi-tech" and produce regional and other specially focused editions. The political report specif-

ically targeted achieving a bundle circulation of 100,000 for the *Daily World* by the presidential election. Building the subscription base of the CPUSA theoretical journal, *Political Affairs*, was also identified as a priority in party building.

Second, the convention leadership conducted a great deal of ideological agitation calling on the membership to incorporate dealing with "anti-working class concepts, anticommunism, racism and Big Lie anti-Sovietism" in the course of mass work. A major speech by CPUSA Chairman Henry Winston was devoted to preparing the CPUSA to deal more forthrightly with anticommunism, and Political Bureau member James Jackson continually emphasized the importance of the defense of

**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.**

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 numerous times this theme was returned to indicated that 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 for insuring the 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 cadre from getting jobs in industrial workplaces and/or concentrating their work in industrial working class communities. Overcoming these weaknesses was stressed as a crucial task facing the CPUSA. Industrial concentration was also pointed to as key to success in the fight against racism—a central theme in all of the conference deliberations—because the industrial workplace is seen as the most favorable place to forge Black-white unity and because Black production workers are assessed as "central in the molding of unity and coalition relation-

ships between the working class as a whole and the Afro-American community."

As a concrete step toward strengthening the policy of industrial concentration, the convention agreed to move the party's trade union department "to the industrial Midwest."

## "MASS PARTY OF ACTION"

Finally, the political report to the conference posed building a "mass party of action" specifically against the "ingrained concept that we are and must remain a cadre party." The convention assessed 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 "who are not yet communists. . . [but] who can learn more and become communists." Conditions were seen as favorable to this task, as the report argued that "the working class of today is in many ways different than it was even five years ago. It is bigger, more radical and militant, much more knowledgeable and class conscious. It has less illusions about capitalism. Our working class is today less anticommunist, less class collaborationist and less racist."

In many ways, it is the blatant misapprehension of reality embodied in such statements—and laced throughout the convention's other documents—that underlies the almost hypnotic euphoria which pervaded the convention proceedings. Not once was the influence of the New Right on workers discussed, the anti-foreign and anti-immigrant sentiments that grip sections of the working class analyzed, or the number of workers backing Reagan's war moves under his banner of jingoistic patriotism even mentioned. Here is the essential reminder showing the degree to which the CPUSA apparently believes that the power of positive thinking can make all the backward ideas influencing U.S. workers disappear.

But it will almost certainly take a more intense flow and polarization in the class struggle than is occurring today—as well as a viable alternative emerging to the CPUSA's left—before such one-sidedness becomes a serious problem affecting the party's prospects for growth or its morale. But that time is still some ways off. For the moment, the CPUSA, even if it corrects only a small portion of its self-acknowledged weaknesses, is probably in its best position in decades to take the initiative and expand its influence in the coming years. □