

Organization of Communist Revolutionaries

OUR SUMMATION OF THE POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY, USA

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1968–72: Moving mountains: the early RU

What eventually became the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (hereafter RCP) came out of the revolutionary movement of the Sixties, so our summation necessarily begins there, with the formation of the Revolutionary Union, the precursor to the RCP. The widespread revolutionary mood in the late 1960s did not preordain that dedicated militants would seek to build a new communist vanguard party. The dominant politics within the emerging revolutionary movement of that time could best be described as *eclectics*. Sixties revolutionaries grabbed up different and even opposing ideas, representing different ideologies and world outlooks, about the possibility and necessity of revolution in the US, the role of national liberation struggles, the nature of the Soviet Union and countries in its orbit such as Cuba, and the revolutionary road offered by Mao's leadership and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. These different ideas, or, in communist parlance, different political lines, often coexisted within the same organizations, and sifting through what was correct from what was incorrect, what would serve the revolutionary transformation of society from what was a dead end, required *line struggle* and firm grounding in communist principles while creatively applying those principles to the conditions of the US at the time. In this situation, *the greatest contribution of the Revolutionary Union was to argue for communist principles and clarity on the key questions before the revolutionary movement*, so the beginning of this summation will focus on how it developed and fought for its ideological and political line.

In 1968, a small collective called the Revolutionary Union (hereafter RU) emerged in the Bay Area of California and combined the new generation of radicals with some more experienced comrades. The earliest leaders of the RU were Bruce Franklin, a Stanford University professor with connections to the student movement; Leibel Bergman, a former member of the CP who had spent time in revolutionary China; Steve Hamilton, a veteran of the student movement who had briefly been in Progressive Labor Party (hereafter PL); and Bob Avakian, who cut his teeth in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, anti-Vietnam War organizing, and building support for the Black Panther Party.



Bob Avakian at a 1969 Bay Area, California Black Panthers rally.

From the jump, the RU was more significant than many other local collectives that were emerging at the time. Its founders drew inspiration and political lessons from revolutionary China and brought in a wealth of experience, positive and negative, from the CP. Individuals in the RU had been involved in militant struggles in the Bay Area, then a center of radicalism, including violent confrontations with the police, such as the October 1967 “Stop the Draft” protests at the Oakland Army Induction Center, as well as in a radical electoral effort, the Peace and Freedom Party. Avakian distinguished himself as an early supporter of the Black Panther Party, having worked with Eldridge Cleaver at *Ramparts* magazine and befriending Huey Newton and Bobby Seale when the BPP was in its infancy. When the BPP wanted to feature a picture of a white revolutionary holding a gun in their newspaper, they turned to Avakian.

The practical experience of RU members was nothing to scoff at, but what was most significant about the RU was that they oriented themselves around the need to bring revolutionary politics to the masses. At the time the RU was founded in 1968, their practical focus was on the working class, with Avakian, Hamilton, and others moving to the proletarian manufacturing city of Richmond, California to integrate with the masses.

The other distinguishing feature of the RU was its firm delineation of communist ideological and political line. In 1968, there was no nationwide multinational communist organization in the US. There was the old CP, widely and correctly despised by Sixties radicals. There were various parasitic Trotskyite organizations, the less said about them the better. And there was PL, which had some significance in the mid-to-late 1960s for a few historical reasons: They were the first serious nationwide split from the old CP that sided with the polemics of the Chinese Communist Party against the counterrevolutionary coup in the Soviet Union. In 1963–64, PL organized delegations of students to travel to Cuba in defiance of the US blockade (this may have been the first and last political act that we could call progressive in PL’s history). Finally, in the late 1960s, PL was still often considered to be a Maoist organization, despite having politics that were in diametric opposition to Mao Zedong’s. So when a small group emerged in the Bay Area who took seriously trying to apply Maoist politics and opposed PL’s reactionary stands against the Black liberation and Vietnamese national liberation struggles,¹ it became a pole of attraction across the country and helped to clarify communist politics from the various shades of opportunism and revisionism then claiming the mantle of communism, from the CP to PL.

What brought the RU to national attentions was its 1969 publication of *Red Papers 1*. *Red Papers 1* announced its communist politics right on the cover, with pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, and

included a statement of principles, a summation of the experience of the early RU's political work in Richmond, California, and an article titled "Against the Brainwash" that defended the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat against anti-communist distortions. The RU upheld the Soviet Union's socialist period from 1917–56 while forwarding some principled criticisms of the Stalin era. It heralded the revolutionary path of socialist China, firmly siding with Mao Zedong and the ongoing Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution against Soviet revisionism. The RU saw the national liberation struggles then raging as part of the world proletarian revolution, upholding the revolutionary people's war being waged in Vietnam and the Black liberation struggle in the US, squarely opposing the line of PL and various other Trotskyites. *Red Papers* 1 argued that the responsibility of revolutionaries was to build a new vanguard party, and that the best step towards that end was, at that time, the formation of new revolutionary collectives, who could exchange experience and ideas with each other while they were bringing revolutionary politics to the masses in their localities. Sharing the RU's experiences in Richmond, integrating with the workers and building support for a strike at an oil refinery, was a first practical step in that direction.

Even read today, the first issue of *Red Papers* stands out for its firm commitment to communist principles and the seriousness with which it tries to apply those principles to the political context of the late 1960s. Putting those principles to paper caused an early split, with a group of RU members departing with the publication of *Red Papers* 1 because they did not uphold Stalin as a communist leader and did not believe that proletarian dictatorship was a necessary or desirable outcome of revolution in the US. That the RU put communist principles over unprincipled unity is a damn good lesson for anyone serious about revolution. While it lost some members for doing so, the RU quickly gained national prominence and significance for the right reasons, with some Sixties revolutionaries dropping what they were doing to link up with it. To give one example, we heard of one comrade who, after studying *Red Papers*, immediately moved across the country to Richmond to find the RU.

While the RU was building ties with the workers in Richmond, California, working in the anti-Vietnam War movement, defending the Black Panther Party, and publishing *Red Papers*, sharp debate over the way forward for the revolutionary movement broke out within Students for a Democratic Society (hereafter SDS). In the second half of the 1960s, with opposition to the Vietnam War growing increasingly militant on college campuses, SDS quickly grew quantitatively and politically well past its foundation as a social-democratic student organization. Many student radicals were openly siding with the Vietnamese national liberation struggle and against their own government,² the BPP's revolutionary politics were polarizing the student movement, and student radicals were debating out different political theories. SDS represented tens of thousands of students who wanted to join the global revolutionary upsurge against imperialism, and the sharp debate that emerged within it was over how to take up that task. A split within SDS emerged between the PL and its Worker-Student Alliance, on the one hand, and the forces expressing the need for a Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM), on the other. The PL program of barely warmed over Trotskyism probably never had much numerical traction within SDS, but PL was able to make some opportunistic gains because it could martial its forces as a nationwide organization with some level of discipline. RYM, by contrast, was not a unified organizational faction within SDS, but represented both those who wanted to go to the masses and build a new party and those who wanted to engage the enemy more immediately; the latter went on to form the Weather Underground.

A brief corrective is in order here to many summations of the end of SDS. Those who oppose and slander the revolutionary edge of the Sixties, including some who were part of it, have often bemoaned the end of SDS, either blaming the so-called Maoism of PL or the revolutionary fervor of the Weather people for destroying a significant student formation. The reality is that the practice and ideology of student radicals, in their tens of thousands, had, by the late 1960s, surpassed and left behind the anti-communist and social-democratic roots of SDS. Simply trying to keep SDS together organizationally without debating out the question of how to make revolution would have been a retreat backwards.

That final showdown in SDS took place at its infamous June 1969 national convention in Chicago, where there was intense line struggle over the role of national liberation struggles and concerning the oppression of women. The debate was between PL, the forces identified as RYM 1 who would go on to form the Weather Underground, and those identified as RYM 2. The latter consisted of those who wanted to go to the masses and build a new vanguard party, though RYM 2 was not a formal faction or organization outside of perhaps a few cities. For this reason, the RU is sometimes identified as being part of RYM 2. While RU members were not much a part of SDS organizationally, the RU was in the mix of the SDS 1969 convention owing to the strength of *Red Papers*. At the convention, RU members distributed the recently published *Red Papers 2*, which identified the strategy for revolution as the “United Front against US Imperialism” and argued for young revolutionaries to go the proletariat in an article titled “Revolutionary Youth and the Road to the Proletariat.”

In the course of the sharp line struggle at the 1969 SDS convention, future Weather Underground leader and then national secretary of SDS Bernardine Dohrn, who forcefully argued that the student movement must stand with the Black Panther Party, summarily and correctly expelled PL from SDS for racism and national chauvinism.³ Nevertheless, PL would claim the name SDS and run it as a rump organization for a few years. The interim national committee of SDS that was elected at the 1969 convention consisted of future Weather Underground members Mark Rudd, Jeff Jones, and Bernardine Dohrn, future October League founder Mike Klonsky, and Bob Avakian of the RU. While the winds were blowing in dramatically different directions (maybe a weatherman would have helped after all?), it is a testament to the impact of *Red Papers* that Avakian was elected to the SDS national leadership on the strength of the RU’s political line. SDS, however, no longer really functioned as a unified national student organization.



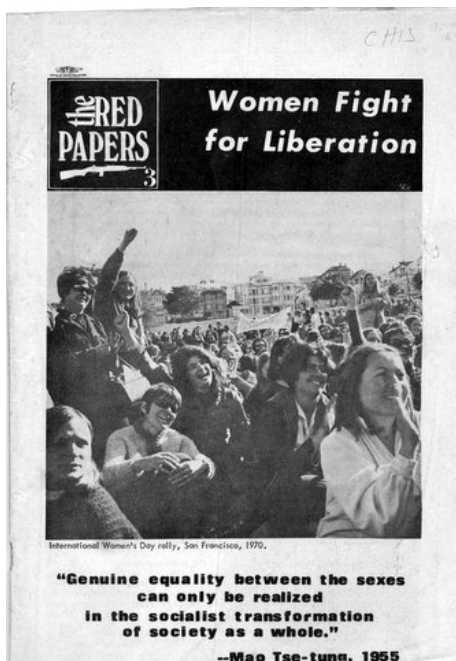
Bernardine Dohrn in 1969.

After their embarrassing performance at the SDS convention, PL went further down the long slide toward irrelevance. In 1969, they were denouncing the Vietnamese national liberation struggle and the Black Panthers; by 1971 they were denouncing Mao Zedong. Following the dissolution of SDS as a national organization, the Weather people attempted several heroic if ill-fated attempts at combativity without the masses before going underground. The Weather Underground first presented themselves as a militant rearguard to the revolutionary national liberation struggles, and then, after the disastrous 1970 Greenwich Village townhouse explosion in which three Weather people were killed while constructing explosives, became a kind of armed propaganda group. Whereas some political forces, such as the October League, made blanket condemnations of the Weather Underground and the other organizations attempting to get it on with the enemy, the RU took a principled stand of criticizing Focoism⁴ and adventurism but insisting that Weather and the other forces attempting urban guerrilla warfare were still part of the revolutionary camp, uniting with them in spirit but not in strategy.

Through the debates within SDS, the question of building a vanguard party had been put on the agenda to the tens of thousands of student radicals generated by the Sixties. The RU and its publication *Red Papers* were in the middle of this debate and beginning to attract some of the best out of the student movement.

Turn down for what? The RU goes national and takes up party-building

One of the tensions apparent in the early writings of the RU is that they believed that there needed to be a new vanguard party formed, but they were not putting themselves forward as the nucleus of that party, and instead called on people to build local collectives, go to the masses, and go through a period of struggle and debate. While they were correct that a (relatively) small regional group could not just announce itself as the vanguard party, the early apprehensions also reflect a certain naivete. The RU likely hoped that the subjective conditions would ripen in a certain way—that other advanced communist collectives would form that could then link up with the Black Panthers and other revolutionary organizations among oppressed nationalities to form a new communist vanguard party, a series of events that did not come to pass. Instead, the RU entered 1970 needing to play an increasingly *vanguard* role, if not yet setting out to immediately form a vanguard party. One way they took up this responsibility was by trying to intervene in the growing feminist movement, asserting women's liberation as a crucial part of communist revolution with the 1970 publication of *Red Papers 3: Women Fight for Liberation*.



Red Papers 3 reflects some of the workerism and economism⁵ of the RU at the time, but was overall a positive contribution. It upheld the participation of women in the contemporary revolutionary movements and argued for the need for women to join the revolutionary struggle against imperialism in opposition to tendencies, within the feminist movement of the time, towards self-cultivation by withdrawing from society. *Red Papers 3* published the text of a speech given by RU member Mary Lou Greenberg at an International Women's Day (IWD) celebration in San Francisco. The RU fought to re-establish IWD as revolutionary proletarian holiday in the US.

The other way the RU took an increasingly vanguard role was by becoming a national and democratic centralist organization through bringing revolutionary collectives around the country and individuals attracted to its politics into its organizational structure. As the RU was becoming a national organization, one of its founders, Bruce Franklin, put forward a line that it was time to get it on now by moving into an urban guerrilla

warfare posture, much like the Weather Underground or the Cleaver faction of the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army. Franklin's initial argument was that the political line of the RU was correct, but it needed to develop a military strategy. Subsequently, Franklin criticized a number of aspects of the RU's politics, including its attempt to build a base in the working class. As the RCP would later sum up,⁶ the line struggle with Franklin is instructive in understanding that line struggles often present themselves as over one issue, but actually concentrate a number of different lines that have been simmering beneath the surface, as well as the contending worldviews behind those lines. In the case of Franklin, he had come into the RU with an "independent kingdom" of students and radical connections in the Bay Area that looked up to him, and the development of the RU towards a national, democratic centralist organization threatened his fiefdom. Franklin's advocacy of revolutionary adventurism and abandoning the principle of building a party through class struggle was an expression of his opportunism.



Bruce Franklin in 1971. After the ill-fated Venceremos organization collapsed, Franklin reinvented himself as a mild-mannered leftist professor and author. His latter day writings and interviews say very little about the RU, Venceremos, or having edited a collection of Stalin's theoretical writings.

Franklin's line did not prevail, and the organization that he led people into, Venceremos, did not last more than a few years or carry out the military strategy Franklin was ostensibly arguing for. The RU, in exemplary Maoist practice, published documents from both sides of the split in *Red Papers 4* (1972), and the split and the study of the documents from both sides helped to consolidate the newly national RU and unite the whole organization around its political line. The RU was entirely correct to reject Franklin's strategy and continue to insist that building a new party was the road forward. The RU at this time (1971–72) seems to have been mainly focused on consolidating itself as a national organization, with Avakian moved to Chicago in Spring 1972 to put the national leadership in a more central geographic location. The RU continued to build ties with other revolutionaries, participated in mass struggles such as the anti-Vietnam War movement, brought revolution to the working class as they understood it at the time, and held revolutionary May Day rallies.

1972–76: Building the Party

By 1972, the RU was a national organization with the strength to launch nationwide campaigns. One of those nationwide campaigns, representing probably the most advanced of the RU's labor work, was building support for the 1972–74 strike by Farah Manufacturing Company workers. Based in the Southwest, Farah was a major manufacturer of pants and employed a heavily-exploited Chicana workforce, 4,000 of whom went on a successful two-year strike for better working conditions and union representation. Recognizing the significance of a strike that not only exposed particularly harsh exploitation but also brought Chicana women to the forefront of class struggle, the RU built nationwide Farah Strike Support Committees to build political awareness about and support for the strike.

Aside from the nationwide campaign to support the Farah strike, the RU devoted itself to sinking roots among the working class in specific localities. A number of RU members got jobs in factories, hospitals, mines, and other workplaces that concentrated large numbers of workers, where they made conscious efforts to bring revolutionary politics to the working class by producing and distributing local workers newspapers and building small organizations of workers. The latter were called intermediate workers organizations (IWO), with the conception that their level of political unity was between the RU (the leading organ) and the union (the basic organ). While the IWOs were a somewhat mechanical approach to the problem of the conservatism (if not out and out reaction) of the official unions, the IWOs were a far more advanced conception of organizing workers than simply working within the existing unions and getting positions as union hacks—an approach taken by other revolutionary organizations at the time which only led to economism and revisionism. The RU's local newspapers at the time give an interesting window into its political contradictions: militant slogans in defense of socialist China and in support of national liberation movements are next to articles about the most mundane aspects of day-to-day workplace struggles.

In the coal mines of West Virginia, the RU's deployment of cadre to working-class jobs put them in the middle of intense class struggle. Because of the harsh work conditions in the mines, the conservatism and corruption of the official union leadership, and the militancy of Black miners and Vietnam War veterans, the RU found a tinderbox. However, sharp class antagonism did not make their work easy. Not only did the RU members have to get jobs in the mines, they also had to confront the backwards and reactionary institutions, social relations, and ideas that prevailed in Appalachia, including the strength of conservative and evangelical Christianity, the oppressive treatment of women, and a fair amount of racism. The RU was able to persevere and play an important role in a series of wildcat strikes that demanded better pay and conditions, black lung benefits (disability payments and medical benefits for those with black lung disease from working in coal mines), and the right to strike itself. In fact, the RU's main organizational vehicle in the miners' struggles was called the Miners Right to Strike Committee, which organized militant wildcat strikes against injunctions and legal maneuvers by judges friendly to the mine owners.

The RU did not limit its political work to going to the working class. In 1973, the RU established a nationwide bi-monthly newspaper, *Revolution*. RU members were involved in and sometimes ran local radical bookstores across the country, where RU publications could be purchased in addition to literature from socialist China, which was not easily accessible before the internet and when the US government was hostile to China. The RU developed an anti-imperialist student formation, the Attica Brigade, which was named after the heroic 1971 Attica prison rebellion in New York that was brutally repressed on the orders of then Governor Nelson Rockefeller. In 1973, the Attica Brigade could mobilize over 200 students from 53 colleges to a regional conference.⁷ Up until the heroic final victory of the Vietnamese national liberation struggle in 1975, the RU continued to play a role in protests against the US war of aggression on Vietnam, and had significant influence within the important organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).

The national question, the NLC, dead dogmatism, and creeping economism

While likely the numerically largest revolutionary organization in the early 1970s, the RU was far from the only one. The various national and local groupings, trends, collectives, and journals and newspapers that emerged varied considerably in size, longevity, and significance. Some were organized exclusively along the lines of oppressed nationalities, while others were multinational.⁸ The new generation of Sixties revolutionaries were the main numerical force, but some ex-CPers and other older radicals were also part of the mix. There were sharp debates among these organized forces over many questions, but two issues stand out the most: (1) the Black national question—how to analyze the oppression of Black people and what was the revolutionary program for ending that oppression, and (2) the radical differences between revolutionary China and Mao Zedong's leadership, on the one hand, and the revisionism of the no-longer-socialist Soviet Union, on the other. Avakian summed up the debates on these two questions as essentially between "living socialism or dead dogmatism." As the RU embraced and fought for the former, many others sunk deeper into the latter.

The trend towards “dead dogmatism” provided a sort of escape valve for those who wanted to pose as revolutionaries (and, in some cases, even subjectively wanted to be revolutionaries) without doing the hard work of making a Marxist analysis of concrete conditions, instead trying to blindly repeat a past era of the CP or simply parrot the analysis coming from revolutionary China. For example, some decided in the early 1970s that the central aspect of the Black national question was upholding the Black Belt thesis of the 1930s, despite the fact that the Great Migration had turned the majority of Southern Black sharecroppers into urban proletarians and had rendered the agrarian question—the land question—a moot point.⁹ Other political forces put forward essentially the opposite position—that proletarianization had somehow resolved the oppression of Black people as a nation—a thin layer of Marxist lipstick on an ugly old Trotskyite pig.

The RU entered the debate over the Black national question with *Red Papers 5*. Titled *National Liberation and Proletarian Revolution in the US*, *Red Papers 5* argued that Black people in the US still constituted a nation, and one that had the right to self-determination, but that the Black nation was no longer concentrated in the agrarian South. The RU analyzed the contemporary Black nation as a “nation of a new type,” forged in the common experiences of slavery and share-cropping, but now a substantially proletarian nation, dispersed across the US and concentrated and segregated in urban areas. This new analysis of the Black national question, developed through a combination of research and practical political work among the masses, was a significant achievement both in understanding the strategic importance of the Black national question to proletarian revolution in the US and in wielding Marxism to understand changed conditions.

Back in *Red Papers 1*, the RU put forward its goal of contributing to building a new communist party in the US. It entered the 1970s believing that sinking roots in the working class was a prerequisite for founding that new party. It is likely that RU leadership also believed that the new party would come about through a process of unity and struggle with other political formations. But the RU soon recognized the need to move more decisively towards building the vanguard party. Avakian and other RU comrades spoke at forums organized by the leftist *Guardian* newspaper, arguing for their positions within the broader debate among revolutionaries and radicals.¹⁰ *Red Papers 5* put forward the slogan “Toward the Multinational Revolutionary US Communist Party.”

Toward that end, in 1973, the National Liaison Committee (NLC) was formed, bringing together the RU with representatives of the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO), which had developed out of the New York Young Lords Party; the Black Workers Congress (BWC), a national organization that had grown out of the militant struggles of Black autoworkers in Detroit; and, for a time, I Wor Kuen, a revolutionary Chinese organization centered in the Chinatowns of New York and San Francisco. While among these organizations there was general unity on the need to form a new vanguard party based on a common orientation toward Maoism and some beginnings at collective political practice, within the NLC there were major political disagreements over how to understand the relationship between national liberation struggles and proletarian revolution.

Principled line struggle over these disagreements was made impossible by the fact that the RU chose to deploy DH Wright (often called Don) as its representative to the NLC. Wright was Black, and the RU at the time felt that deploying a Black comrade, rather than the most ideologically and politically advanced comrade regardless of their nationality, would be helpful in the debate within the NLC over the national question, a rare sop to identity politics by the RU that Avakian would retrospectively criticize. Wright, however, never represented the position of the RU within the NLC, instead arguing for his “own” narrow nationalist position. Wright’s conduct helped foment a minor split in the RU and sowed divisions within the NLC, wrecking any chances of the organizations in it merging into a unified vanguard party, and the NLC came to an end in 1974 with the organizations in it going their separate ways. The reason behind Wright’s destructive conduct and political positions was that he was most likely working for the political police in some capacity; PRRWO members later discovered that he was an agent for the political police.¹¹

Even without Wright's destructive role, it is unlikely that the NLC could have resulted in its participant organizations forming a unified communist vanguard party. The PRRWO and the BWC were starting to veer sharply towards dogmatism, seeing the process of building the party as one mainly of ideological training and consolidation at the expense of mass struggle. This dogmatism was also expressed in reasserting the Black Belt thesis as the line that the new party should adopt on the Black national question, and the proposal of the slogan "Black Workers Take the Lead," with the implication that there would be nationality quotas for the new party and its leadership that would magically solve the problem of white chauvinism.¹² While the RU criticized the dogmatism of these proposals and insisted on the decisiveness of political line rather than what nationality a comrade was, it mainly viewed the debate within the NLC as a struggle against what it termed "Bundism."

Within the Russian communist movement of the early twentieth century, Lenin and the Bolsheviks waged a sharp struggle against those who insisted that communists should be organized along nationality lines, i.e., in separate organizations based on nationality. Those "Bundists" elevated the national question over and above the larger goal of communist revolution—to create a communist world that eliminates all oppressive social divisions, including the division of humanity into separate nations. Lenin and the Bolsheviks never liquidated the national question; they championed the struggle against "Great Russian" chauvinism and for the equality of nations, recognized the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, and made ending national oppression a crucial task of socialist revolution. However, they did so from a communist, not a nationalist, perspective, viewing the fight against national oppression from the prism of getting to a communist world.

RU leadership viewed the struggle within the NLC as similar in many ways to the struggle over the national question within the Russian communist movement. In *Red Papers 6*, the RU offered its summation of the problems in the NLC and the struggles against "Bundism" within it while also printing documents from the BWC and from RU members who left during the two-line struggle over "Bundism." Whereas the BWC and other forces were putting forward an increasingly dogmatic position and correspondingly becoming divorced from political practice among the masses, the RU was insisting on the primacy of correct political line and practice. The RU's polemics were marked by a tendency to see the struggle as mainly being around the national question (as it was expressed on the surface) rather than, in the final analysis, being primarily a struggle against dogmatism. The forces within and without the RU that the RU labeled Bundists were not proposing solutions that would have set a new vanguard party on the revolutionary road—both the BWC and the PRRWO ceased to function as revolutionary organizations not long after the demise of the NLC. But they were grabbing onto the fact that a correct line on national oppression, particularly the Black national question, was and is essential to developing a revolutionary political program in the US.

The RU's approach was also marred by its increasingly mechanical class analysis, which was based on baggage picked up from the CP, including by way of former CP members who joined the RU. Under that mechanical class analysis, the RU treated the (largely male) industrial workforce as the most important strata of the working class, and increasingly viewed the day-to-day economic struggles of those workers as the key battleground of the class struggle. Whatever the correctness of the RU's theoretical positions in *Red Papers 6*, the operational line of the RU was increasingly resurrecting the old CP "Black and white, unite and fight."¹³ The worst excess of this "unity of the whole working class" line was the RU's position on the Boston busing crisis.

In 1974, the city of Boston (which, as every sports fan knows, is home to some of the US's most vicious racists, North or South) began a court-ordered desegregation of its public schools, which meant busing some children to attend schools outside of their neighborhood in order to ensure that the student body at each school consisted of a mix of different nationalities. The bottom-feeding crackers of Boston's Irish neighborhoods responded with an astounding display of revanchist white-supremacist violence, pelting buses of Black school children with rocks, staging riots against any Black people in "their" neighborhoods, and refusing to allow their children to attend schools with Black students. The RU believed that the economic struggles of the workers were the center of gravity of the class struggle and the main arena in which white chauvinism could be fought.¹⁴ In regard to Boston busing, this led to the RU putting forward the position that busing (to desegregate

schools) should be opposed because it would allow the ruling class to let schools in Black neighborhoods fall into further disrepair and because the busing plan would harm the unity of the working class, essentially treating busing as a “divide and conquer” scheme by the bourgeoisie. Embarrassingly, the national RU newspaper *Revolution* ran the headline “People Must Unite To Smash Boston Busing Plan.” While, even at the time, Avakian and other RU leaders believed that the headline was wrong and the RCP subsequently criticized this error, the Boston busing episode stands out as a low point in the history of the RU. To be clear, the RU’s erroneous position on Boston busing was not driven by white chauvinism, but by economism. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate how economism leads to political lines that liquidate the national question, which, in the US, will always mean downplaying or even failing to oppose the oppression of Black people.



A white reactionary demonstrates the true meaning of the American flag at a demonstration during Boston’s busing crisis.

With the collapse of the NLC in 1974, it was clear that a new party was not going to come from a merger of several revolutionary organizations. The revolutionary movement that emerged in the Sixties had been buoyed by a sea of mass revolt, but as that sea dried up, many revolutionaries became increasingly entrenched in dogmatism, while others got off the revolutionary road in favor of reformism or outright capitulation. Dogmatism, combined with the eclectics that was pervasive among the Sixties generation, left many revolutionaries ill-equipped to deal with the twists and turns of the struggle, not just in the US but also internationally. Those organizations that upheld Mao and socialist China without ever really becoming Maoists struggled to understand the twists and turns of Chinese foreign policy and ended up uncritically parroting the international policies of the Chinese Communist Party; CPML’s politics became increasingly absurd for this reason. Some started to embrace Soviet revisionism. The RU seemed to evaluate that it would have to go at it alone in building a new Party, bringing in people beyond its ranks, but not fully merging with any other organization.¹⁵ In moving towards the formation of the Party, the RU published *Red Papers 7*, the final issue, which analyzed the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1956 and polemicized against the growing tendency to rehabilitate Soviet revisionism, thereby clarifying the socialist road in opposition to revisionism and eclectics.

The final period of the RU was marked by the tension between a serious, disciplined, and growing revolutionary organization with experience in the militant struggles of the 1960s and firm grounding in Mao’s revolutionary political line, on the one hand, and the growing economist and revisionist influence exerted by RU leaders and members who had been part of the old CP. In 1974, the RU played a key role in forming the US-China People’s Friendship Association (USCPFA), which organized trips to revolutionary China and carried out education about the Chinese revolution. The first chairperson of USCPFA was Bill Hinton, the author of the legendary account of the Chinese revolution *Fanshen* and a secret member of the RU; its founding vice

president was Clark Kissinger, the former national chair of SDS and an RU partisan. On the student front, the Attica Brigade was transformed into the Revolutionary Student Brigade, which, besides being a much lamer name, also seemed to be guided by a student syndicalist line that sought to focus students' attention on campus issues.¹⁶ Taking a cue from the CP of the 1930s, the RU built the Unemployed Workers Organizing Committees, which took up an old CP slogan, "Fight Don't Starve!" On the one hand, this effort spoke to the very real conditions of unemployment brought on by the recession of the 1970s. On the other hand, it hoped to revive a tactic from the old CP playbook, complete with no small amount of economism.

The formation of the RCP

It was in the midst of these contradictions that the RU took the bold step of deciding it was time to form a new communist vanguard party. In 1974, it issued a *Draft Programme* for the new Party, which local units of the RU discussed and debated. The RU published four issues of a journal called *Forward To The Party! Struggle For The Party!*, which solicited, from comrades within the RU and individuals outside the RU who supported the call for a new Party, summations of their political work, position papers on the content of the *Draft Programme*, and commentary on questions of propaganda and culture, the international situation, and intermediate organizations and building the workers movement. The debate over the *Draft Programme* represented a bottom-up process unprecedented in the history of the communist movement in the US.

In September 1975, the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP) was founded with Bob Avakian as its Chairman. Though membership numbers were never published, we are confident in the assertion that it was founded with over a thousand members, and likely several hundred more than that. The bulk of its membership had been steered in some of the most advanced streams of struggle of the 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to RU cadre and ex-CP members, the new RCP included former members of SDS and the Weather Underground, Vietnam War veterans, and former members of the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the Black Workers Congress, and Wei Min She, an organization of Chinese revolutionaries in San Francisco.¹⁷ At its founding, the RCP was a multinational organization whose nationality demographics for the most part mirrored US society at large, with a couple exceptions. The majority of its members were white, but (in good communist tradition) with a higher proportion of Jews than in the US more generally. In California, there was a high proportion of Chinese members. The RCP certainly had a number of Black and Latino members, some of whom played important leadership roles, though, given the importance of the national question in the US, it would have strengthened the Party to have a higher proportion of Black and Latino members. The political degeneration of the Black Panther Party and the outcome of the NLC hindered this possibility, though some individuals from the BWC and the PRRWO did join the RCP.

The RCP's 1975 Programme—finalized through the process of debate over the *Draft Programme*—reflected the tensions between the RCP's communist principles and revolutionary enthusiasm, on the one hand, and the revisionist baggage it brought in from the old CP, on the other. Revolutionary civil war was upheld as the strategy for revolution, and the dictatorship of proletariat was articulated as the immediate goal of the revolution. The industrial working class—the "workers in large-scale industries"—was presented as the "backbone of the working class," which "learns in its day to day struggle." Despite the overall revolutionary stand against imperialism, CP-style Popular-Frontism bleeds in, including by way of the nauseating assertion that the 1776 American Revolution was a "historic advance."¹⁸

Contradictions between the CP revisionist baggage and the revolutionary line soon led to two-line struggle. While the position that would later be associated with Avakian and the majority of RCP members was still learning to walk, the line that would later be associated with the revisionist headquarters of former CP

members Leibel Bergman and Micky Jarvis (who were on the early RCP's Central Committee) came into the Party more fully formed. The latter had decades of CP history to draw on and hatched schemes for sending RCP cadre into the "key industries" as if it was still the 1930s, while Avakian and the RCP had to chart the uncharted course of forging a revolutionary strategy for the US and, in the process, rupture with the dead weight of economism and the dogma of focusing on the more bourgeoisified sections of the working class.

One expression of the developing two-line struggle was the conception of the Party's youth organization. The revisionist faction wanted to move forward with the Revolutionary Student Brigade as an essentially economist student formation, avoiding the word communism at all and believing that communist theory would get in the way of the day-to-day struggles. The position that won out insisted that yes, the organization should include both students and non-student youth, and in addition to taking part in the struggles of the day, be an important training ground where youth could indeed learn about communism and study communist theory. The Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade was born in 1977, but the different conceptions of the RCP's youth organization were an important preview of the coming split in the RCP. Also in 1977, the RCP built an intermediate workers organization, the National United Workers Organization, to give a nationwide organizational expression to its labor work—this was likely more revisionist in conception, drawing from the old CP playbook, though we are unclear on its functioning and practical achievements.

In addition to the ongoing concentrations in industry, the RCP began publishing a theoretical journal, *The Communist*, alongside the monthly newspaper *Revolution* and various local publications. Radical bookstores and workers centers were staffed by RCP members, and the RCP continued to play a leading role in VVAW and USCPFA. In late 1976, after the counterrevolutionary coup in China but before the RCP had a unified analysis of it, the RCP took the lead in organizing a Conference on the International Situation, Revolution, and the Internationalist Tasks of the American People. This conference gives a sense of the early RCP's reach: it drew over 2,000 people to New York to debate the role of China and the Soviet Union alongside broader questions, with representatives of the RCP debating Bill Hinton (no longer associated with the RCP) and anti-war activist and former Chicago Seven defendant David Dellinger.

The RCP continued to play a leadership role in significant class struggles. In July 1976, in the face of a bourgeois patriotic propaganda offensive celebrating the bicentennial of the US, the RCP staged a major demonstration in Philadelphia under the slogan "We've Carried the Rich for 200 Years, Let's Get Them Off Our Backs!" Having the demonstration at all involved a significant political struggle against the city government of Philadelphia and its notoriously racist police commissioner Frank Rizzo, who tried to deny the protest a permit, called (unsuccessfully) for the National Guard to be mobilized to confront it, and deployed sharpshooters to rooftops around the demonstration. In the face of this repression, the RCP mobilized thousands, including unemployed workers and Vietnam War veterans, for the main demonstration in Philadelphia and other actions.



“The Battle of the Bicentennial”: The RCP and organizations it was playing a leading role in, including Vietnam Veterans Against the War, confronted the bourgeois patriotic offensive with bold protest, characterized by a mix of revolutionary politics and economism.

An important source of RCP cadre was the San Francisco-based Chinese revolutionary organization Wei Min She, which was deeply involved in the struggle to save the International Hotel (I-Hotel) in San Francisco. The I-Hotel was the last remaining low-income hotel for Filipino and other Asian proletarian men (single-room occupancy hotels in San Francisco were the legacy of racist immigration policies that excluded Asian women). In 1969, real estate capital set its sites on the I-Hotel, sparking an eight-year-long struggle to prevent eviction, displacement, and gentrification. In the course of the struggle, the I-Hotel became an important center of West Coast Asian radicalism, and the RCP was deeply involved. Dolly Veale, future spokesperson for the RCP in the San Francisco Bay Area, and other RCP comrades played important roles in the battle over the I-Hotel, as did Everybody’s Bookstore (located in the I-Hotel), which was run by Wei Min She and later associated with the RCP. The final evictions from the I-Hotel took place in 1977, though the militant resistance slowed down the machinations of real estate capital and made gentrification and the position of Asian immigrant proletarians questions of debate.



A 1977 protest against the destruction of the I-Hotel.

1976–78: Discarding the CP baggage

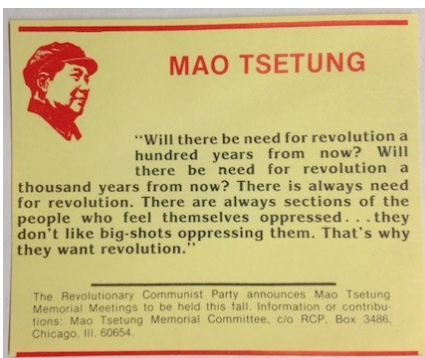
In 1976, the RCP was the largest revolutionary organization in the US. It was publishing twenty regional editions of its newspaper *The Worker* in English, with ten editions in Spanish, one in Chinese, and one in Arabic, and it had branches in cities across the US. Qualitatively, the early RCP was defined by substantial ideological and political weaknesses, mainly due the revisionist pull exerted by former CP members in its leadership. The RCP would have been just another promising formation lost to revisionism were it not for a conscious struggle waged to cast off the CP baggage and decisively take the revolutionary road. What forced the mounting ideological and political contradictions in the early RCP to the surface was the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China.

In 1966, Mao Zedong launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), a mass movement led by revolutionaries in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) whose immediate goal was to overthrow capitalist roaders within the CCP, but whose larger objective was to further revolutionize the production and social relations, culture and ideas, in the direction of communism. Mao had critically analyzed the errors and shortcomings in the Soviet Union under Stalin's leadership and the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, as well as the challenges of building socialism in China after the 1949 Revolution. His conclusion was that socialist society is driven by ongoing class struggle, not just against the overthrown bourgeoisie, but also and even more so against a newly-generated bourgeoisie within the leading levels of the communist party. Mao's analysis of the contradictions of the socialist transition to communism and the means he developed for advancing through those contradictions—especially cultural revolution—were great advances in communist philosophy and strategy, which enabled the Chinese masses to advance the furthest humanity has ever moved towards the communist future. Those great advances, as well as Mao's overall leadership, was what inspired and trained a new generation of communists around the world, including the comrades in the US who formed the RCP.

The high tide of the GPCR lasted from 1966–69, but the struggle between revolutionaries and capitalist roaders in the CCP and a series of mass mobilizations related to that struggle continued up until 1976. On September 9, 1976, Mao passed away. Mao carried tremendous authority in the CCP and among the Chinese people owing to his decisive leadership role in liberating China from feudalism and imperialism and in building socialism, and Mao's authority was used as a fortification keeping the capitalist roaders within the CCP from making moves to seize power, even as they gained in strength in the mid-1970s. But shortly after Mao's death, those capitalist roaders moved decisively to restore capitalism in China with a counterrevolutionary coup in October 1976, in which they arrested and brutally repressed revolutionary leaders and the masses—the Chinese “People's Liberation Army” (which became a misnomer) put down rebellion by revolutionary people's militias in Shanghai—and then step-by-step eliminated socialist relations of production, such as the communes.

For billions of people around the world, socialist China, Mao's leadership, and the GPCR in particular constituted a beacon of hope in a world dominated by two imperialist superpowers (the US and the Soviet Union). The loss of socialism in China was a heavy defeat for revolutionaries and the masses around the world. Among the new generation of communists, it was tremendously disorienting and made more difficult by the lack of an international communist organization, like the Comintern of the 1920s and 30s, in which to debate the meaning of events in China and their implications.

Following the death of Mao, the RCP held a series of memorial meetings and immediately began to study and debate the situation in China internally within its democratic centralist organizational structure. The evidence was growing that capitalist roaders had seized power in China, especially as the CCP rehabilitated arch-revisionist Deng Xiaoping, who had been a key target of the GPCR effort to overthrow capitalist roaders. Members of the RCP who were mired in economism and revisionist tendencies, especially former CP members, saw kindred spirits in the the revisionists who had seized power in China. Others likely had a difficult time letting go of “socialist China” even as it moved away from socialism because it had been their greatest source of inspiration—a religious view of socialism that unfortunately has been quite common among so-called communists.



A card announcing the Mao memorial meetings, shortly after Mao's death.

Note that the card makes no mention of the counterrevolutionary coup, as the issue was still being debated within the RCP.

In the RCP's Central Committee, what came to be called either the Jarvis-Bergman Headquarters or the Menshevik faction (borrowing a term from the Russian communist movement in the style of the day) insisted that capitalism was not being restored in China. They combined their thinly-veiled embrace of capitalist restoration in China with a strategic insistence that the RCP should continue on the economist road of prioritizing day-to-day struggles in the workplace above agitation and organizing for revolution. What united their line on China and their economism was American pragmatism, inherited from the old CP. Rather than base themselves on communist principles and revolutionary ideological convictions, they embraced whatever could produce some short-term results, whether it was the clout of the governing regime in China or gaining leadership over unions and labor struggles.

To his great credit, Bob Avakian argued against all the CP rot with a paper that clarified the communist position on China: “Revisionists are Revisionists and Must Not Be Supported. Revolutionaries are Revolutionaries and Must Be Supported.” After much internal debate and over the objections of the revisionist minority in the RCP’s Central Committee, Avakian’s paper was formally accepted as the position of the RCP, and the Party leadership made plans to bring the position down through channels of its democratic centralist structure. However, in classic opportunist fashion, the revisionists, knowing that they had lost the struggle in the RCP’s leadership, continued to factionalize, pretending that the line of the Party on China was still an open question and presenting themselves as the real leadership of the Party: the “Revolutionary Workers Headquarters.”

By the beginning of 1978, Avakian and the RCP leaders who united with his political line called the bluff of the revisionist faction, and insisted that those who wanted to remain in the RCP re-enroll and rededicate themselves to the Party’s principles and leadership. The revisionists were forced into the open, and, unable to seize leadership of the RCP, they split away, taking a significant chunk of the Party with them. Likely somewhere between 30–40% of the RCP’s membership sided with the revisionists and left the RCP,¹⁹ including much of the East Coast, much of the Upper Midwest, and much of the national leadership of the RCYB, who immediately reverted back to calling themselves the RSB, with none of that pesky communism. The split also affected RU/RCP-led organizations, such as Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which split along the same lines as the RCP, with those on the right side adding “Anti-Imperialist” to the organization’s name (becoming VVAW-AI) to delineate themselves from the revisionists. By all accounts, the split in the RCP was a significant organizational loss, and to our knowledge the RCP was never able to rebuild branches in some of the areas where it lost most of its members.

Nevertheless, it is a testament to the leadership, grounding in communist principle, theoretical level, and revolutionary determination of the RCP that they were able to weather the split and not fall into the revisionist swamp themselves. Moreover, the split enabled the remaining leadership and membership of the RCP to decisively rupture with economism, purge the CP revisionist influences from the Party, and more firmly take up the question of how to make revolution in the US. The RCP held its Second Party Congress in 1978 to unify its remaining membership after the split and prepare to move in a more revolutionary direction.

Where did the revisionist side of the split wind up? Organizationally, remnants of those who went along with the “Revolutionary Workers Headquarters” followed their line to its logical conclusion, submerging themselves in union bureaucracies and becoming foot soldiers for Jesse Jackson’s attempts to bring rebellious Black people back into the fold of the Democratic Party (also known as his 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns). In 1985, they merged with other flotsam from the 1970s to form the Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO), which itself would split into a social-democratic side and a dogmatic revisionist side, and is notable only for being wrong on every major political question (not only do they still uphold China as socialist today, something even the bourgeoisie knows is only window dressing, but they have gone back in time and rehabilitated the post-Stalin Soviet Union as socialist too). Their opportunism, attempts to breathe new life into long-dormant CP front organizations and politics, and overall repulsiveness make perfect sense when you know their origins. To our understanding, neither Jarvis nor Bergman played a major role in the FRSO. Bergman drank himself to death, a more principled way to spend one’s final years than sticking it out in a revisionist organization.

1978–81: “Better fewer, fewer better”: Taking a bold stand with cold revolutionary politics in command

The RCP emerged from the split over the counterrevolution in China smaller but much stronger. Its remaining members had been steeled in a bitter two-line struggle that determined whether the RCP remained communist. Party members had to study the events in China, the polemics back and forth within the RCP,²⁰ and the MLM “classics” for theoretical grounding, and they had to make a decision: which line is correct? Engaging in this two-line struggle required comrades to make leaps in their understanding of communist theory and to argue for

a correct line when the very Party was at stake. Furthermore, since revisionism is never just one wrong line but always a complete package,²¹ the struggle over “the China question” forced comrades to unravel the whole revisionist package of pragmatism, economism, and reformism wrapped up with the wrong line on China. This, in turn, laid the basis for further ruptures with all aspects of the revisionist package.

The split put the RCP in the position to go out broadly in society with revolutionary politics and to grow, organizationally, on a correct ideological and political basis. Its opening salvo, in this regard, was to present its analysis of the counterrevolutionary coup in China and uphold the legacy of Mao’s leadership and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It did so first with major public events, called the Mao Tsetung Memorial Meetings,²² in New York and San Francisco in September 1978 that were attended by 2,300 people in total, whose centerpiece was a speech by Avakian that was subsequently published as *The Loss in China and the Revolutionary Legacy of Mao Tsetung* (RCP Publications, 1978). The RCP subsequently published the book *And Mao Makes Five: Mao Tsetung’s Last Great Battle* (Banner Press, 1978), a collection of key documents from the GPCR in China with an introductory essay by Maoist political economist Raymond Lotta analyzing the twists and turns of the GPCR, as well as *Mao Tsetung’s Immortal Contributions* (RCP Publications, 1979), an exposition of Mao’s developments to communist theory, written by Avakian.

The RCP’s public analysis of the GPCR and the counterrevolutionary coup in China provided crucial and correct orientation to revolutionary-minded people on *the most important question confronting the international communist movement at that time*. Moreover, the RCP’s intervention on this question was an exemplary expression of proletarian internationalism. Revolutionaries in China had little room to speak out publicly or collectively develop an analysis—they had been imprisoned by the new bourgeoisie in power, with the so-called “gang of four,” who were some of Mao’s closest comrades-in-arms, put through a sham trial.²³ *The RCP’s intervention was the most advanced analysis on this question at the time*. In hindsight, we can discern weaknesses in this analysis of not giving enough attention to how the GPCR and the line struggles at the heart of it shaped up in mass struggles, and how the mass struggles shaped the turn of events, as well as some possible secondary errors in analysis (for example, where Zhou Enlai’s sympathies lay and the exact role he played during the GPCR remains a question mark to us, while the RCP’s analysis put him squarely in the counterrevolutionary camp). However, it was overwhelmingly correct for the RCP to emphasize the centrality of the line struggle at the top levels of the Chinese Communist Party and insist on sorting out correct from incorrect lines and understanding the practical implications of those contending lines.

Beyond providing the needed analysis of “the China question” for the revolutionary movement, the RCP also made the counterrevolutionary coup a public question through a protest on January 29, 1979 in Washington, DC condemning Deng Xiaoping during his official visit to the US. Revolutionaries in China had labeled Deng the number one capitalist-roader during the GPCR. Deng became the leader of the new bourgeois regime in China in 1978, and his US visit marked China’s capitulation to US imperialism. The RCP-led protest march of hundreds attracted national media coverage, the attention of the masses, who lined the sidewalks, and the wrath of the bourgeoisie. An army of police was dispatched to the protest and viciously attacked it. RCP comrades valiantly fought back, determined to raise the red flag to the world in the face of counterrevolution in China. Seventy-eight people were arrested, with 17 charged with felonies and facing serious prison time. Bob Avakian was specifically singled out for arrest and was one of the 17 with felony charges.²⁴

The RCP’s righteous condemnation of Deng Xiaoping and upholding the banner of Mao and the GPCR in the face of harsh repression garnered substantial media attention and sparked a political and legal battle over the charges facing the 17 “Mao Tsetung Defendants.” While building a legal defense and maneuvering within the legal arena to show political targeting and prosecutorial vindictiveness and filing motions attempting to force the government to turn over information concerning surveillance, informants, and infiltration, the RCP relied principally on building a political defense. They issued a call for volunteers to come to Washington, DC to build support for Avakian and the Mao Tsetung Defendants, especially among the Black masses in DC. Nearly 200 volunteers showed up, including RCP members and some newer to political work, with the goal of “turning DC

upside down.” The RCP also worked to build support among the middle strata and undertook a major fundraising campaign, eventually putting out a public appeal to raise a million dollars to defend Avakian.

The RCP used the public spectacle to get Avakian on the media, including a now infamous appearance on the Tom Snyder show that is captured in the RCP documentary *They Say They Will* (available on YouTube and well worth watching). Avakian went on a national speaking tour, and was hounded by the enemy and investigated by the Secret Service. As Mao said, to be attacked by the enemy is a good thing, and the repression directed at the RCP and Avakian during and after the protest denouncing Deng Xiaoping shows the serious potential of the RCP as a revolutionary force. The RCP’s political and legal defense of the Mao Tsetung Defendants and its overall revolutionary “public relations” campaign caused the government to temporarily dismiss the charges against Mao Tsetung Defendants in November 1979, although the government kept maneuvering with these charges in the years that followed, eventually leading to Avakian’s political exile in 1981 (more on that below).

Denouncing Deng and the battle over the Mao Tsetung Defendants was just one component of what became a larger push to take revolutionary communist politics boldly out in society among the masses broadly. Another component was the RCP’s unequivocal internationalist stand on the Iranian Revolution. In 1979, the Shah of Iran was overthrown in a mass uprising. US and British imperialism had long propped up the Shah’s regime, even orchestrating a coup in 1953 that overthrew the democratically elected government of social reformer Mohammad Mosaddegh. While anti-imperialism was a strong motivating factor behind the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Revolution underwent many twists and turns and involved different class forces, with Islamic fundamentalists ultimately able to win leadership and consolidate power in a reactionary regime that did not break out of capitalist relations of production but was (and still is) in antagonistic conflict with US imperialism. While not hiding its criticisms of the religious fundamentalists who came to power, the RCP stood firmly with the Iranian people and their uprising against the Shah and US imperialism, going out broadly on college campuses and among the masses and debating with people about the nature of US imperialism and the Iranian Revolution exactly when the US bourgeoisie was whipping up reactionary patriotism among the US population. When the Iranian masses in Tehran captured the US embassy and some of the people working there, the RCP boldly went out to the people in the US with the revolutionary defeatist slogan “It’s not our embassy!”

In addition to propagating an internationalist stand on the Iranian Revolution broadly throughout society, the RCP also had and further developed close comradely relations with Iranian communists. The Iranian Maoist movement was concentrated among students, many of whom studied abroad in the US and England, so the RCP had direct working relationships with Iranian Maoist students in the US. The Iranian Maoists took revolutionary theory seriously, and the RCP and the Iranian comrades developed a relationship of positive mutual reinforcement when it came to theoretical development and line struggle. Iranian Maoists also had a great fighting spirit; if you have ever wondered why it is illegal in New York City to put protest banners on wooden poles, rumor has it that this is because when New York police on horses attacked one protest during this time period, Iranian Maoist students quickly cut their banner from the wooden poles holding it up and used those poles (the ends of which had been sharpened) to joust the pigs off their horses. Fun anecdotes aside, the RCP played an important role of support to Iranian Maoists in the US who were returning to their homeland to try to influence and lead the Iranian Revolution then underway and, after the consolidation of the Iranian Islamic fundamentalist bourgeoisie in power, make attempts to launch revolutionary armed struggle in Iran.

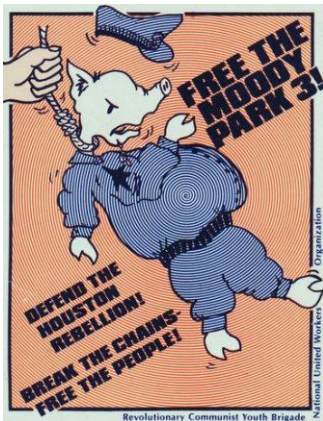
The seizure of the US embassy in Iran, and the response of the RCP.

Support for the Iranian Revolution was not the only way the RCP stood firmly with the masses. In 1978, the RCP comrades in Houston were in the middle of a rebellion against police brutality. In May of 1977, Houston police brutally beat Jose Campos Torres, a 23-year-old Chicano army veteran, and instead of taking him to a

hospital or jail, they dumped his body in a river, where he drowned to death. When the police officers who murdered Torres were put on trial, an all-white jury let them off with probation and a \$1 fine. In response to the outrageous murder and verdict, the RCP in Houston initiated an organization called People United to Fight Police Brutality, led by Travis Morales.

The police murder of Torres and the verdict left a deep hatred for the police among the masses. So when Houston police harassed a Cinco de Mayo festival in 1978, they were met with the righteous fury of Houston's Mexican and Chicano proletarians, who responded to the first few arrests with bottles thrown at police and cries that they were not going to let any more of their people wind up in the river. The initial clash with the cops spilled over into the larger Moody Park neighborhood, turning into a full-fledged rebellion, with stores looted and street fighting with the police lasting the whole night and involving more than a thousand people. The People United to Fight Police Brutality comrades and their banners were right in the middle of the uprising, and the chant "Joe Torres dead, cops go free, that's what the rich call democracy!" was taken up by the masses.

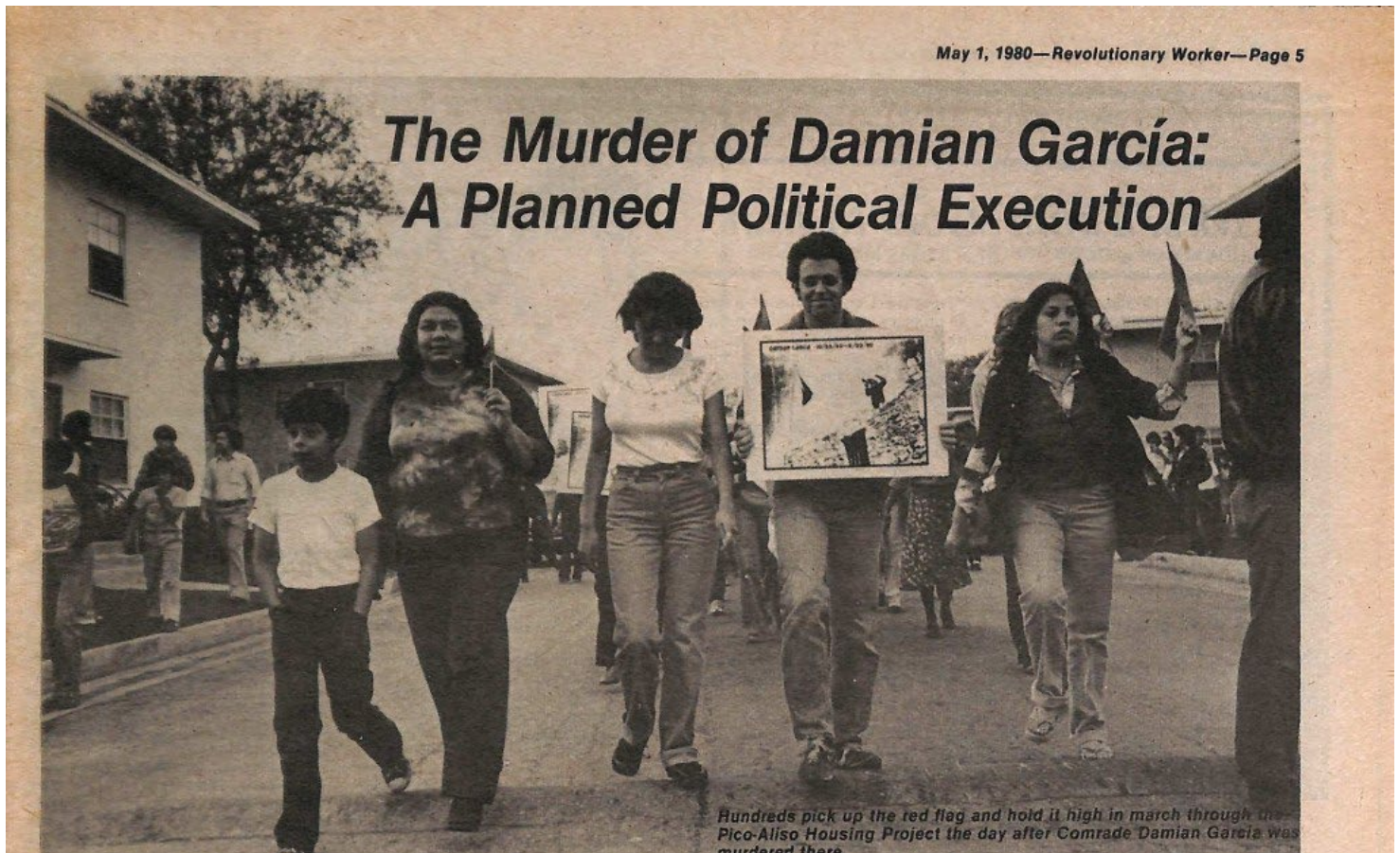
The following day, when the city government was trotting out its approved community leaders to denounce the rebellion, Morales countered these police brutality apologists by defiantly upholding the rebellion to the media and demanding freedom for the people arrested during the uprising. Subsequently, People United to Fight Police Brutality held a march and carried out political work in Moody Park, celebrating the rebellion and refusing to go along with the "police and community coming together" program of the city government. Because of this defiant stand, Travis Morales and two others were targeted with prosecution for merely being at the scene of the revolt. The RCP dubbed them the Moody Park Three, and Morales in particular was singled out by the police in a campaign of harassment—he was arrested seven times in the following months.²⁵



The RCP waged a nationwide campaign in support of the Moody Park Three, printing updates in its press, organizing letters of support from groups of workers and other people across the country, building support committees, and mobilizing 500 people in a protest before the trial began. Those 500 people were a mix of RCYB members and RCP supporters from across the country alongside Houston Chicano proletarians, some of whom came to the protest strapped to protect it from police attack. The Moody Park Three made sure to turn their court case into a political trial, explaining to the jurors their political reasons for supporting the rebellion. Even when two of the three of them were found guilty, the jury gave them no prison time because they sympathized with their political stand.

The RCP's largest nationwide push during this period was its effort in 1980 to make May Day (May 1st, International Workers Day) a revolutionary holiday in the US, wresting it back from the pathetic and ineffectual leftist routines led by revisionists that it had become. The RCP went far and wide, especially among the proletariat, to build for its militant May Day demonstrations. It took bold actions in the run-up to May Day 1980,

with three comrades, led by **Damián García**, briefly taking over the Alamo,²⁶ that grotesque symbol of settler-colonialism and reactionary American patriotism, and raising the red flag (literally) in place of the American rag. Not long after taking the Alamo, **Damián García** was assassinated in the presence of a police agent; this incident was only the most egregious among repressive attempts to quell revolutionary activity.



Damián García: second from right carrying out political work; raising the red flag over the Alamo; and being remembered by the masses in LA. ¡**Damián García**, Presente!

To give an indication of how widespread the effect of the RCP's campaign to build for May Day 1980 was, at public schools in Cleveland, Ohio, school authorities used the announcement system to say "the RCP is calling on Black students to beat up white students on May Day," lying about the RCP's politics and trying to set Black and white youth against each other while claiming it was opposing the RCP's "call." Twenty years later, Black teenagers in Cleveland still cracked jokes about beating up white kids on May Day, with the revolutionary content of the holiday unfortunately forgotten. The bourgeoisie may have partially succeeded in this instance of deflecting the revolutionary threat, but its attempt to whip up violence among proletarian youth indicates how seriously it took the RCP's actions.

The RCP's long-term aim with its May Day campaign was to bring the weekly sales of its new newspaper, the *Revolutionary Worker*, up to 100,000. While it did not succeed at this goal and the numbers attending the May Day rallies in cities across the country were not especially large, the militancy of its work to build May Day 1980 as a revolutionary holiday deserves to be commended. The fact that the campaign to build for May Day demonstrations combined bold revolutionary actions with broad propagation of communist politics, especially through the vehicle of the RCP's newspaper, resulted in revolutionary communist politics being a question of debate among probably hundreds of thousands of people, especially among the proletariat.

Further ruptures with economism and putting agitation and exposure at the heart of revolutionary strategy

The split in the RCP had meant a decisive rupture with economism—with viewing revolutionary strategy as a matter of getting to the head of the economic struggles of the masses and leading them, including through positions as union bureaucrats. The RCP's 1981 Programme explained that “especially in the imperialist countries, the communist movement historically has been infected with a single-minded infatuation with the trade unions and in particular with the erroneous view that organizational leadership of the trade unions is a prerequisite for leading the proletarian revolution.”²⁷ Lenin emphasized in *What Is To Be Done? (WITBD)* that communists need to be tribunes of the people, not trade union secretaries. The RCP would go so far as to say that “To us, the words ‘labor movement’ must be a curse.”²⁸

From 1978–81, the RCP deepened its rupture with economism, keenly studying *WITBD* and becoming firm *WITBD*ists. As a result, the RCP officially changed its Central Task from “build the struggle, class-consciousness, and revolutionary unity of the working class and develop its leadership of a broad united front against the US Imperialists, in the context of the world-wide united front against imperialism aimed at the rulers of the two superpowers”²⁹ to “Create Public Opinion, Seize Power!”, as reflected in its 1981 Programme. This new central task meant making the Party's starting point the need for proletarian revolution, not the existing present-day struggles, and conducting systematic agitation and propaganda, especially through its newspaper, to expose the rule of capital. As the RCP's 1981 Programme put it, “The masses must be won to see that the most decisive thing is not just national oppression, or police terror, or rape, or nukes, or even world war, but that every outrage is a manifestation of the capitalist system and the rule of the capitalist class, and there is only one solution to all this—mass armed proletarian revolution.”³⁰ The RCP clarified that this did not mean standing to the sidelines of present-day struggles, but relating to them from the standpoint of communist revolution and by wielding the weapon of agitation.

On the basis of this rupture on revolutionary strategy, the RCP started its national newspaper, the *Revolutionary Worker*, in 1979. RCP branches had previously published local newspapers connected by a central Workers Press Service. The *Revolutionary Worker*, published weekly in English and Spanish, provided a political and organizational glue to the RCP and revolutionary-minded people around it, trained its readers in the communist world outlook through concrete analysis of all major events, and propagated exposures of the system through consistent distribution of the newspaper among the masses in proletarian neighborhoods and workplaces. At its best, the *Revolutionary Worker* provided a model for biting exposure, revealing the life conditions and aspirations of the oppressed and exploited, and bringing broad questions from science to philosophy to art to the masses from a communist perspective. It was the opposite of narrow Leftist politics. Making the newspaper the hub and pivot of its work unified the RCP around a consistent revolutionary line on the events of the day, guided Party members and those under its leadership in how to intervene in the major political questions, and pulled the Party away from the ruts of economism and myopic focus on movement-building.

In addition to the new Central Task and the creation of its national newspaper, the RCP began to make changes in its class analysis of the US in ways that stepped away from economism. It began to emphasize the “lower and deeper” sections of the “real proletariat” who worked low-wage jobs in much less stable conditions, sometimes finding themselves unemployed for periods of time. And with this theoretical shift was a practical shift that de-emphasized political work among factory workers, instead spending more time going out to housing projects and other neighborhoods that concentrated the “real proletariat.” Furthermore, this shift helped to more firmly recognize the centrality of the oppression of Black people and national oppression in the US, as the “lower and deeper” sections of the proletariat in the US concentrate (though do not exclusively consist of) people of oppressed nationalities.

While this theoretical and practical shift was a great step in the right direction, the RCP's 1981 Programme still gives considerable emphasis to the industrial proletariat. Its instincts led it to the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat, but it did not fully elaborate, in theory and analysis, why the (more stably employed) industrial proletariat was not the main social base for revolution in the US. Its class analysis remained muddy and eclectic, a problem it would never solve.

The importance of rupturing with economism can be understood with a brief examination of what was perhaps the RCP's biggest error of this period.

What was achieved in this period

Coming out of a split, losing some members and branches, and then boldly propagating revolutionary communist politics far and wide was a great achievement of this period in its own right. Several more enduring accomplishments point to the overall correct revolutionary line that was consolidated in the RCP from 1978–81. The RCP built a strong Central Committee that was schooled in sharp line struggle, theoretically developed at a high level, and able to provide overall strategic guidance to the Party in a series of major nationwide campaigns. Within the RCP as a whole and especially at its leading levels, there was an atmosphere of theoretical discussion and debate and the production of a theoretical organ—*Revolution* magazine—which produced high-quality analysis of questions before the revolutionary movement and historical summations. The battle to uphold the GPCR and the struggle against revisionism and economism led the RCP to more deeply excavate, with an unsparingly critical attitude, the history of the international communist movement and the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which manifested especially in Avakian's theoretical work, most notably *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*.³¹ Some of this theoretical work and historical summation, which began during the 1978–81 period and continued into the 1980s, is still worth studying today, and it set a good model of being willing to critically examine our past and owning up to our historical mistakes while staying anchored in a communist perspective.

The initiation of the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper in 1979 marked the beginning of 25 years of a national, weekly, bilingual communist newspaper with a high quality of content. In addition to providing compelling exposures of all aspects of capitalist society, the *Revolutionary Worker*—or “*RW*” as it was called by those familiar with it—published impressive interviews with a variety of artists, intellectuals, and activists; took a non-sectarian approach to covering various political struggles in the world while highlighting revolutionary and communist ones; supported Black political prisoners; and encouraged broad intellectual engagement among its readers with articles on science and philosophy. All this was no small achievement, as a communist press is crucial to the political training of communists and a pivotal vehicle to connect the vanguard with the masses.

The RCP's youth organization, the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade (RCYB) was founded in 1977; with the split in the RCP, a significant chunk of the RCYB skipped down the opportunist road to student syndicalism. The RCYB was effectively re-founded during the 1978–81 period with a firm insistence that the communist world outlook be in command, even while allowing room for youth to explore what communist politics meant and, through being part of the RCYB, decide whether to fully embrace that world outlook and join the Party. Another great strength of the RCYB was its militancy, in practice being willing to go up in the face of the enemy. That militancy was also expressed through the military lingo in its name (brigade) and in the logo emblazoned on RCYB T-shirts: a silhouette, purposely made to look androgynous so as not to gender revolutionary militancy, holding up a gun in front of a red star. The RCYB would continue to be a crucial training ground for young communists, taking revolutionary politics to the masses and jumping into and sometimes leading mass struggles in society, until its dissolution in the mid-2000s.



The 1981 Programme was an advance in rupturing decisively and deeply with revisionism and simply by the fact that the RCP put out a Programme for revolution in the US. The RCP's Programme had an overall correct exposition of the need for communist revolution and for the socialist transition to communism, with concrete policies for socialist society in the US sketched out based on concrete analysis of the major social contradictions in the US. As explained above, the Central Task in the 1981 Programme represented a decisive break with economism, even as it did not lay out clearly how the RCP would bring together the subjective forces for making revolution. There are other significant weaknesses to the 1981 Programme, such as the muddy class analysis mentioned above as well as its presentation of revolution flowing out of an inevitable grand crisis that would push large sections of the people into economic ruin and into the arms of the vanguard party (we will address the RCP's obsession with impending grand crisis in more detail in the next section). Furthermore, the writing style of the 1981 Programme uses lots of exceedingly long, convoluted sentences, which is especially bad in a document intended to give the masses a basic sense of the Party's politics, and the Programme also makes a number of tautological arguments.³²

A great stain in the 1981 Programme that would bedevil the RCP for the subsequent two decades was its position on homosexuality. The RCP's 1981 Programme considered contemporary homosexuality to be an outgrowth of the "decay of capitalism," with "the ideology behind homosexuality and its material roots in exploiting society" needing to be struggled with in socialist society and homosexuals "reform[ed]," while stating that after proletarian revolution, "no one will be discriminated against in jobs, housing and the like merely on the basis of being a homosexual."³³ Even as the RCP was subjecting the history of the international communist movement to thorough critique, its leadership decided to embrace and carry forward a longstanding problem in regard to communist analysis of homosexuality. Far better positions had already been developed by other revolutionaries and organizations from the Sixties movements, and the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion and the gay liberation movement had demonstrated the revolutionary potential of the struggles of gay people. It was not until 2001, during a process intended to result in a new Party Programme, that the RCP ruptured with its erroneous position, dropping the ideas that male homosexuality was an expression of capitalist decay and female homosexuality was principally a response to women's oppression. Why it took so long to change this position in the face of widespread criticism, considerable disagreement within the Party, and the existence of far better positions outside the RCP, and in the midst of the AIDS crisis remains a mystery.³⁴

The RCP's bold propagation of communist politics and militant revolutionary actions resulted in significant repression. The RCP did not capitulate in the face of this repression, and demonstrated considerable skill in building political support when it faced attacks, charges, and (potential) prison time in addition to using the legal arena to expose the enemy. However, absent significant practical advances in the class struggle towards revolution, it was impossible to sustain activities that led to frequent arrests, charges, and other repression (as we learned in relation to the BPP). Such activity by the RCP would drop off, though not disappear, in the beginning of the 1980s. With Avakian in particular targeted for prison time and constantly hounded by the enemy as he went on national speaking tours, in 1981 the RCP decided to send Avakian to France, where he filed for political refugee status. The RCP correctly recognized that Avakian was its most precious resource, that Avakian was the focus of attacks by the bourgeoisie's repressive state apparatus, and that to diffuse those attacks, not perpetually wrap the whole Party up in defending against those attacks, and give Avakian the breathing room to continue his important theoretical work, political exile was the best option. The negative side was that Avakian, then the public face of the RCP and a captivating speaker with great skill at elucidating revolutionary politics to the masses, was no longer able to play a public role in the US.

Finally, what were the quantitative and organizational results of these years of bold propagation of revolutionary politics? What was consolidated through this period? Answers to these questions remain elusive, as the RCP never published much in the way of strategic assessments of its political work, and does not seem to have done much of that internally either (a pervasive problem we shall address in more detail later in this summation). The distribution goal of 100,000 copies of the *Revolutionary Worker* every week was not met by a long shot. The RCP tried another May Day campaign in 1981, which was not as successful as in 1980. Little in the way of mass organization was left in the wake of the RCP's efforts, despite its firm revolutionary convictions. For example, we are unclear that much in the way of organization was established among the Black proletarians in Washington, DC who were so receptive to the campaign to "turn DC upside down" around the Mao Tsetung Defendants. All this points to a secondary problem with the RCP's new Central Task: broad revolutionary agitation throughout society, if not also entrenched within specific sections of the masses and specific class struggles, does not in itself develop the consistent ties needed to generate an organized mass following. Some advanced masses might be organized through broad agitation, and some organization around the Party's newspaper can be formed, but particularly the former is unlikely to amount to much numerically.

With several major campaigns in a row that did not achieve the desired quantitative results or consolidate much organizationally, some comrades grew demoralized and attrition began to set in. When a communist organization does not meet its goals, internal struggle over what and who was to blame often follows. When the "who" part of that blame becomes the principal question and if incorrect methods of struggle take hold, the results of that internal struggle can be disastrous. While the RCP held it together in this period, internal struggle known as the "war on the right" over shortcomings in relation to May Day goals led to a significant chunk of its membership in the South leaving the Party, ultimately resulting in the loss of entire local Party branches. While new members were recruited on a firm revolutionary basis throughout this period, their numbers were not enough to offset resignations. We do not have adequate information to give more than a general estimate of several hundred members in the RCP at this point in its history

Attrition within the RCP was a microcosm of a larger trend: among many of the tens of thousands of revolutionaries that emerged out of the Sixties, as they became further separated in time from the revolutionary high tide that created them, their revolutionary convictions dimmed and they dropped out of the revolutionary movement. Some capitulated outright, while others sought out a more peaceful and less demanding existence, sometimes remaining supporters of the revolutionary movement. The RCP likely did better than other organizations at counteracting this trend due to its firm sense of revolutionary principle, advanced theoretical development, and democratic centralist organizational structure, and it also often made good use of former members who remained principled as supporters. However, the RCP's growing habit of launching campaigns intended to result in major political and organizational advances, never accomplishing those goals, never summing up the reasons for the shortcomings, and never developing coherent plans for organizational expansion had a demoralizing effect on its membership and a corrosive effect on its organization as a whole.

1982–88: “Masters of the wharf or slaves to tonnage?”: Hinging revolutionary work on a grand crisis ahead

While the high tide of pushing out with revolutionary politics that defined the RCP’s efforts from 1978–81 could not be sustained, the RCP did continue to build on its achievements and ruptures with revisionist influences during the 1980s. It continued to carry out political work, centered around distribution of its newspaper, among the lower and deeper, and disproportionately oppressed nationality, sections of the proletariat. RCP comrades regularly went out to housing projects, impoverished neighborhoods, and the barrios of Mexican and Central American immigrants, connecting revolutionary politics to the masses. To give a sense of what this looked like to those unfamiliar with Maoist conceptions of going to the masses:³⁵ teams of RCP members and supporters would go door-to-door in neighborhoods talking to the masses one (or one family) at a time, or set up somewhere with a lot of foot traffic and have one person doing agitation (i.e., loudly explaining why they were out there with a brief agitational statement) to attract people’s attention while the rest of the team talked to people one-on-one or in small groups. Besides selling copies of the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper, they would get into political conversations, learn from people what they were experiencing, get phone numbers of the more politically advanced to follow up with, and promote whatever mass campaigns, protests, or events they were organizing.

This political work was certainly based on correct revolutionary instincts, though we are unclear as to the results beyond newspaper distribution and conversations. Was there enough emphasis on social investigation and learning from the masses? Was there much in the way of organizational consolidation and leading class struggle? It seems that while strong at carrying out revolutionary agitation, the RCP did not adequately entrench itself among specific sections of the proletariat and make breakthroughs in bringing forward a class-conscious section of the proletariat in and around the vanguard party, a weakness we shall return to below.

The RCP was also involved in and played a militant role within various resistance movements of the 1980s, including protests against the apartheid regime in South Africa, US intervention in Central America, and attacks on immigrants, as well as around other social faultlines. Of particular significance were the “No Business As Usual” (NBAU) nationwide protests in 1985 (and ongoing campaign for several more years) against the US bourgeoisie’s provocations towards and preparations for nuclear world war with the Soviet Union. The NBAU campaign was a good example of the mass line in action, as it took the widespread sentiments among youth that the threat of nuclear annihilation needed to be stopped and concentrated them into a political program and plan of action that mobilized these youth, directed their sentiments into militant political activity, and raised their consciousness about the system that was behind the danger of nuclear war. The NBAU campaign also set the RCP apart from other political forces: resistance movements led by the RCP insisted on the need not just to register dissent but to *stop* the bourgeoisie from carrying out its plans, and drew forward the determination of the advanced, especially among youth, to do so while also vying for leadership of a broader united front.

The Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade played an important role within these resistance movements and more generally in connecting revolutionary politics with youth culture. On the latter, while anarchism tended to be the dominant politics within the punk scene, the RCYB did make inroads within punk culture, publishing a zine and organizing punk youth for the NBAU and other protests (another way to put it: where do you think the 1980s punk band Youth Brigade got their name from?). The RCP had a correct strategic recognition of the potential of youth as a rebellious force that could be mobilized around a revolutionary line, and the RCYB provided a form to capture this potential. As with work among the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat, there is a question of how the RCYB may have more deeply entrenched itself within youth culture: we do not know of examples of RCYB members starting and sustaining punk bands, rap groups, or b-boy and b-girl crews (though they did put out a few issues of a zine and a few mediocre rap songs).

Through its role in resistance movements, the RCYB built a strong reputation as militant fighters willing to step out of the confines of legally permitted protest and throw down against the police (seriously: ask any principled

anarchist from the 1980s and 90s who they found themselves shoulder-to-shoulder with against riot cops). Some RCYB members racked up impressive rap sheets in the process. The most concentrated example of RCYB militancy was the flag-burning trial of RCYB member Gregory “Joey” Johnson. At protests outside the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, Johnson was arrested for burning the American flag (Texas had a law against desecrating the US flag). The RCP led a legal and political battle over this arrest, and Johnson’s case made it all the way up to the US Supreme Court, which ruled in 1989 that Johnson’s actions were constitutionally protected free speech; you can thank the RCP for the legal right to burn the US flag. The RCP’s frequent flag-burning later led to a short prison sentence for Cheryl Lessin, spokesperson for its Cleveland branch, in connection with a protest in the run-up to the 1991 US War on Iraq.³⁶ In 1989, communist artist Dread Scott put on an exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago titled “What is the proper way to display the US flag?” in which participants were encouraged to step on the American flag (and *had* to in order to leave a comment, even a negative one, in the guest book). Then-President Bush Sr. condemned the exhibit, and the Senate voted 97-0 to outlaw “displaying the flag of the United States on the floor or ground.”³⁷ The RCP’s defiant desecration of the symbol of US patriotism, no matter the consequences, and its skill at making such desecration a mass political question, even forcing top government officials to enter the debate, is an excellent example of its firm internationalism and revolutionary defeatism in practice achieving results.

Another avenue through which the RCP connected its politics to the advanced in society was its bookstores, of which there were about a dozen in the mid-1980s. In cities across the country with a significant RCP branch, Revolution Books stores in the 1980s, 90s, and into the early 2000s developed a reputation as a place you could come talk to and debate with communists, get radical books you could not find many other places (this was pre-internet), and get “alternative news” from a communist perspective. Rebellious youth, radical intellectuals and artists, proletarians and oppressed people looking for revolutionary answers, punk rockers and Rastas, activists, and others visited the RCP’s bookstores. Some Revolution Books stores had grown out of radical bookstores established in the Sixties, while others were created by RCP branches. Most were strategically located in places known as centers of counterculture and radical intellectual life. Revolution Books also spread its influence and the RCP’s literature beyond its physical locations with book tables at street festivals, cultural events, concerts, and political events.

The RCP’s conception of its bookstores seems to have alternated between (1) centers of revolutionary intellectual life and culture led by the vanguard with communist politics at their core, (2) front offices of the vanguard, i.e., public locations where people could come to learn about the RCP’s politics, get its literature, and connect with it organizationally, and (3) movement organizing centers. It is unclear to us how much there was conscious leadership, on a central level, on the role of the bookstores. It seems likely, based on available information, that there may have been a clear conception of the role of Revolution Books put forward sometime in the 1980s but not subsequently revisited—an example of an ongoing problem in the RCP of establishing a political line but never revisiting it or treating it as something that needed ongoing debate and development.

Treating a political question as settled leads to ossification in practice and to the reign of spontaneity. Consequently, Revolution Books often veered away from conception #1 above, with ossification leading to conception #2 and spontaneity, especially when the RCP sunk into movementism in the 1990s, leading to conception #3. In our view, the role of communist bookstores should principally be centers of revolutionary intellectual life and culture with communist politics at their core, and making that the case in practice will involve ongoing line struggle and development.

Revolution Books served as an important outlet (pre-internet) for the RCP’s publications. After a gap of two years, *Revolution* magazine was published at least yearly from 1984 up to 1992, with one final issue coming out in 1994. In the 1980s, *Revolution* magazine published polemics against Soviet and other shades of revisionism, which continued to exert negative influence on revolutionary-minded people; historical summations; considerations on revolutionary strategy, *including the military dimension*; articles upholding the

legacy of Maoist China; and in-depth analysis of major world events and political movements, such as feminism. Of continued relevance today is an impressive and empirically rigorous 1987 article by Clyde Young with Steven Anders, "Since the '60s: Trends of Impoverishment, Oppression, and Class Polarization in the Black Nation."

Aside from *Revolution* magazine, the RCP produced several other significant publications in this period. *The Science of Revolution* by Lenny Wolff (RCP Publications, 1983) trained new generations of communists and new recruits into the RCP, who studied it individually and in collective settings, in the basics of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism for nearly two decades. *America in Decline: An Analysis of the Developments Towards War and Revolution in the US and Worldwide in the 1980s* by Raymond Lotta with Frank Shannon (Banner Press, 1984) placed the question of imperialism central to understanding political economy today and critiqued the "general crisis theory" of the Comintern era. It is mired in a notion of an inevitable grand crisis on the horizon (suggested in its title), which we shall address below.

Avakian's work of historical summation continued into the 1980s, with attempts to synthesize general principles out of the historical experience of the proletarian dictatorship and the socialist transition to communism. In "Advancing the World Revolution: Questions of Strategic Orientation," published in *Revolution* no. 51 (1984), Avakian critiqued the leadership of Stalin, the Comintern, and the Soviet Union during WWII for elevating the defense of the socialist Soviet Union over and above making advances in the world revolution, and even suggested there were tendencies in a similar direction in Maoist China. Avakian's conclusion was that the defense of socialist states, while of course important, must be subordinated to the advance of the world revolution, for otherwise, without the expansion of socialist territory on a world scale, those socialist states would eventually turn into their opposite.

Avakian's output was considerable and included articles in the *Revolutionary Worker*, lengthy talks published in *Revolution* magazine, and several books, including *A Horrible End or an End to the Horror?* and *For a Harvest of Dragons*. His best work from this period is the book *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* (Banner Press, 1986), whose excellent title draws attention to the inherent limitations and class nature of democracy. It was an important intervention against the dominance of bourgeois-democracy and well worth studying in order to make deeper ruptures with the philosophy behind bourgeois-democracy. *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* was translated into multiple languages and played an important role in the international communist movement; Iranian comrades found it especially helpful given their need to contend with the fact that opposition movements to theocratic fascism in their country were (and still are) often led by a bourgeois-democratic world outlook. The RCP put significant effort into promoting Avakian's works and leadership, even taking a cue from the GPCR and publishing a "silver book" titled *Bullets* of short quotations from Avakian's writings and speeches grouped by topic in 1985.

Avakian's theoretical work of the 1980s contains valuable insights into the historical experience of proletarian dictatorship and the challenges of making revolution in the US. However, much of it is mired by a lack of empirical rigor and data, little concrete and systematic strategic assessment of the RCP's practice, and inadequate engagement with more "heavyweight" intellectual trends (especially the work of postmodernist philosophers such as Foucault gaining popularity at this time, but also of serious Marxist intellectuals such as Alain Badiou). There is an abundance of philosophical musings, cultural commentary, and general principles in Avakian's body of work, but not enough empirically-grounded analysis and concrete strategic and tactical guidance. Avakian was constantly "wrangling with," "grappling with," and "thinking about," but not adequately dealing with empirical evidence and making a concrete synthesis. For example, while Avakian has made many brilliant insights about the historical experience of the international communist movement, he, nor anyone else in the RCP, ever wielded those insights to write a history of the Comintern.

There were two main negative consequences of weaknesses in Avakian's intellectual methods. (1) Due to the lack of synthesis and concreteness, RCP members were left with general principles and unfinished ideas without the benefit of empirically-grounded analysis and synthesis drawn from concrete examples. When they applied those general principles and unfinished ideas or discussed them with the masses, they often failed to translate them in ways that had material impact...and sometimes sounded like pseudo-intellectual jackasses. For comrades internationally, Avakian's lack of synthesis and empirically-based explanation meant they were sometimes left guessing as to what exactly he was talking about.³⁸ (2) The lack of concrete qualitative *and quantitative* assessment of the RCP's practice in Avakian's writings and speeches meant a failure to recognize shortcomings in practice and get to the root of the strategic problems behind those shortcomings and take concrete measures of rectification. Avakian's words of wisdom and firm revolutionary convictions may have helped RCP members keep on trucking, but they did not sufficiently lead to concrete solutions to the challenges of bringing forward the subjective forces for revolution.

Avakian's intellectual methods, and his propensity for giving lengthy speeches rather than writing well-researched articles and books, veer towards a conception of genius disconnected from the collectivity of the Party, the masses, scientific research and intellectual debate, and the ongoing class struggle. This conception of genius puts the wisdom of one individual over and above the sources of its wisdom. It is in contrast to how Mao's writings and speeches were worked out by dealing with the concrete problems of making revolution in China and the world, including as experienced through the organizational structure of the Chinese Communist Party. Lenin's writings drew on rigorous research and polemicized, very concretely, against incorrect lines to fight for the revolutionary road. It is the *concreteness* of Lenin and Mao in dealing with the challenges of making revolution and *their ability to find solutions to the problems at hand* that has made their theoretical contributions *universal* and lasting. Our emphasis here on being empirically grounded and concrete should not be taken as advocacy for a narrow approach, with knowledge only flowing directly out of practice, but an insistence that the loftiest theory also be the most grounded (a unity of opposites—dialectics!).

Even with all those shortcomings, Avakian's and the RCP's intellectual engagement with the problems of the socialist transition period put them in a position to make important contributions to the international communist movement, which was in shambles following the loss of socialism in China. Moving forward from this loss required, of all communists, not just revolutionary convictions or even practical advances in leading revolutionary struggle in their own countries, but a firm grasp of the nature of class struggle in socialist society and the reasons why the new bourgeoisie came to power in China and restored capitalism. The most important dividing line in the international communist movement in the late 1970s and 1980s was upholding the GPCR and Mao's immortal contributions (to borrow a book title of Avakian's) vs. embracing the counterrevolutionary coup in China for pragmatic or capitulationist reasons. Indeed, even communist parties leading revolutionary armed struggles who took a centrist position on this question sooner or later had to rectify to stay on the revolutionary road.

On the basis of its stand and analysis of "the China question" and its critical interrogation of the history of the international communist movement, the RCP was able to play not the sole, but definitely an important, leading role in regrouping communist forces internationally. Regrouping was a process involving joint communiques and meetings between communist organizations, resulting in the formation of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM) in 1984. The *Declaration of the RIM*, the document behind which parties and organizations in the RIM united, was a great achievement, offering a synthesis and summation of the international communist movement and setting clear and correct dividing lines for communists around the world. There is an obvious positive influence of Avakian's and the RCP's theoretical work on the RIM Declaration.

Beyond this important Declaration, the RIM united parties and organizations in imperialist and oppressed countries that had been steeled in the revolutionary storms of the Sixties, some of which were waging revolutionary armed struggle in the 1980s. The RIM provided a vehicle for Maoist parties and organizations to debate line questions and coordinate international campaigns. The RIM inspired the publication of an

international journal, *A World To Win*, to which Avakian and the RCP made important contributions. For a fuller summation of the RIM, see Hinton Alvarez's "Exceptionally Serious Responsibility" in *kites #4* (2021).

Besides its role in forming and continued participation in the RIM, the RCP consistently promoted and popularized revolutionary struggles around the world, especially Maoist-led people's wars. In 1985, the Committee to Support the Revolution in Peru was founded in Berkeley, California to publicize the advances being made by the people's war in Peru, which was led by RIM participant the Communist Party of Peru—Shining Path. The *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper regularly reported on developments in the revolution in Peru, along with other revolutionary struggles internationally. The RCP's consistent and unapologetic proletarian internationalism remained one of its greatest strengths.

"Revolution or World War III": Bowing to objective conditions by way of conjunctural analysis

The above summation is by no means an exhaustive account of the RCP's political work in the 1980s, and there are likely gaps in our knowledge. However, of most importance in this period of RCP history was an incorrect strategic conception of revolution that defined its overall political work. The RCP viewed the 1980s as a period shaped principally by the intensifying inter-imperialist contradiction between the US and the Soviet Union, a contradiction the RCP viewed as leading inevitably towards world war between two nuclear-armed powers. The RCP believed the 1980s was a time of motion towards a conjuncture that could only be resolved through "Revolution or World War III."

While this analysis might sound ridiculous in light of how inter-imperialist contradictions of that period were resolved with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent pillage of what was the Soviet empire by US imperialism, the RCP was not wrong about the very real motion towards world war. Like youth today living under the existential threat of climate change catastrophe, the 1980s generation lived under the cloud of potential nuclear annihilation, with US and Soviet interventions and proxy wars, from Nicaragua to Afghanistan, pushing inter-imperialist rivalry increasingly towards the brink. It was correct for the RCP to sound the alarm and seek to use the contradiction to agitate and organize for revolution; its error was treating world war as inevitable and only possible to stop through revolution.

What was behind the RCP's error in analysis? The RCP's critical interrogation of the history of the international communist movement had led it to a deeper appreciation of the role of historical conjuncture—those moments when all the contradictions of capitalism-imperialism on a world scale are concentrated up into a single knot and burst open in massive crisis, war, destruction, and opportunities for revolutionary advances. The conjunctures that took the form of World Wars I and II were seized by the Bolsheviks and the Chinese Communist Party, respectively, to establish the first socialist state and, in 1949, to complete the first successful new democratic revolution leading to socialism in what had been a semi-feudal and semi-colonial country. However, the existence of large communist parties in many countries around the world in the run-up to those two conjunctures *could and should* have resulted in many more proletarian revolutions and far more territory under proletarian rule. As the RCP summed up, "It seems that historically the biggest political retreats have been sounded by communists right when the opportunity for advance is the greatest—i.e., the Second International [in the run-up to WWI], the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern [in the run-up to WWII], etc."³⁹

Given that correct historical criticism, it makes logical sense that the RCP would emphasize the opportunities for revolutionary advance bound up with what it saw as the coming conjuncture caused by inter-imperialist rivalry and would be determined to seize on those opportunities. However, this "logical sense" was premised on a faulty analysis and on erroneous strategic thinking. On the former, the RCP presumed that because inter-imperialist contradiction had set off two world wars in the past, the 1980s increasing inter-imperialist

contradiction between the US and the Soviet Union would also inevitably lead to world war—essentially, the RCP presumed that history would repeat itself. The RCP’s analysis underestimated the weaknesses of the imperialist Soviet Union and failed to consider that it could unravel due to external and internal contradictions. Given the then recent experience of US defeat in Vietnam, the RCP should have considered that the Soviet Union getting bogged down in an occupation of Afghanistan could have forced it to back off from its larger imperial ambitions.

Furthermore, the RCP’s “Revolution or World War III” analysis was grounded in a mechanical materialism and an economic determinism that failed to account for the conscious initiative of the bourgeoisie to forestall a crisis that could prove disastrous for its rule. Crises pose danger and opportunity, freedom and necessity, not only for communists *but also for the bourgeoisie*. Just like and opposite from communists, the bourgeoisie, especially through its political representatives, makes conscious decisions about how to respond to (and stave off) crises, and they are more successful at doing so when they are not faced with a revolutionary mass movement under communist leadership. As we summed up about the 1970s, the bourgeoisie can come back from a beating with a sophisticated strategy for achieving (relative and temporary) social stability and class peace by reconfiguring its regime of preventive revolution. In relation to coming crises, there is usually struggle within the bourgeoisie over how to respond, whether to put it all on the line in a bid to expand its power or whether to make tactical retreats. This contention within the ruling class played out in the US and in the Soviet Union; in the latter, the forces advocating retreat ultimately won out due to a combination of the objective weaknesses of the Soviet bourgeoisie, especially internationally, and conscious decisions to back down from the brink of nuclear war. The unfolding of inter-imperialist contradiction in the 1980s *could* have turned out differently, including breaking out in nuclear war, but the RCP’s insistence that it would *inevitably* result in “Revolution or World War III” was a *mechanical analysis* of the contradictions that *denied agency* to the bourgeoisie, and, ultimately, *to the masses as well*. Simply put, just as the RCP was doing, the bourgeoisie could also sum up the conjunctures that led to the two world wars and make conscious decisions about how to avoid another world war, even while they do not have absolute freedom to ensure the desired outcome.

The erroneous strategic conception that the RCP developed through its study of historical conjuncture was to hinge revolution on a coming grand crisis (the moment of conjuncture). Its work of revolutionary preparation in the 1980s was overall determined by the opportunities they presumed that a specific conjuncture would create. Here we must divide one into two and arrive at a more correct synthesis than the RCP ever did. It is correct and necessary for communists to analyze coming conjunctures, big and small, national and international, and wield the subjective forces for revolution, most especially the vanguard party, to seize on the opportunities created by conjunctures. However, *hinging revolutionary possibilities entirely on the development of a particular conjuncture is ultimately bowing to, and taking a determinist attitude towards, objective conditions, even if the intent of communists is to seize on those objective conditions to make revolution*. To put it another way: while the two great communist revolutions of the twentieth century were successful in the midst or aftermath of conjunctures that caused world wars, there have not been any world wars since then and we should not count on them happening to make revolution, or, as Stalin said in a different context, we will be trying to suspend ourselves in mid-air.

What we can take as *universal* from the strategy of protracted people’s war developed by Mao to make revolution in the particular conditions of China (and generally applicable to semi-feudal countries oppressed by foreign imperialism) is *the need for communists to, step-by-step, build up the subjective forces for revolution through a process of class struggle and ideological, political, and organizational consolidation*. This process cannot be hinged on a coming conjuncture, but must take place *within the structural class contradictions* in society, with communists taking advantage of opportunities for making leaps as those contradictions sharpen and as contradictions on a global scale sharpen up into conjunctures.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the development and shape of such conjunctures will not necessarily be determined principally by the development of objective contradictions, but also by subjective actions of both the bourgeoisie and revolutionary forces. What we should aim for as communists is to get in the position, through our all-around revolutionary work, to impact the emergence, development, and outcome of conjunctures so that the revolutionary proletariat can seize power.

The history of revolutionary people's wars is precisely a *history of revolutionary forces shaping the outcome and even causing the emergence of conjunctures*: the Chinese Communist Party seizing on the invasion of China by Japan to leap to the leadership of a war of national resistance on the basis of the political and military force it had previously developed; advances in the people's war in Peru, especially as it spread to Lima, deepening the economic (debt) crisis into a national conjuncture in the early 1990s; and advances in the people's war in Nepal sparking a political crisis with the monarchy stepping in after a bizarre and likely staged palace massacre. In all those conjunctures and political crises, the advance of communist forces hinged not only on a correct reading of the conjuncture but also on those forces being entrenched within the ongoing (structural) class contradictions. In those countries, the class contradictions around which communists could generate a revolutionary force, even absent a major conjuncture, involved mainly the poor peasantry, with military actions one of the immediate forms of class struggle and the possibility of seizing some territory as revolutionary base areas (*territorial* subjective forces for revolution).⁴¹ In imperialist countries, class contradictions involving the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat, with political rather than military struggle being the principal form of class struggle, offer the most bedrock opportunities for constructing the subjective forces for revolution, but the general principle is still the same. In short, communists, in whatever countries and conditions they find themselves in, must work to build the subjective forces for revolution in order to have the material force to push crises that come our way, or that we create through our subjective actions, to the breaking point and then go all-out for the seizure of power.

The grave strategic error of the RCP in the 1980s, and throughout its history thereafter, was to hinge revolution on the emergence of a grand crisis—the coming conjuncture. That strategic orientation, while coming from a place of real revolutionary conviction, led to a whole host of errors and missed opportunities.

In imperialist countries like the US, conjunctures, big and small, tend to bring the progressive and liberal sections of the petty-bourgeoisie into motion against what they perceive to be the worst sections of the ruling class (as represented in the White House by Reagan, Bush senior and junior, and Trump). It is entirely correct for a communist party to seize on the opportunity thereby created to make advances in building the united front *under the leadership of the proletariat*. However, moving the center of gravity of the party's work to such opportunities, especially over a long period of time and before the party has established a firm base in the proletariat, inevitably winds up making communists orbit around and tail the political movements and the bourgeois-democratic prejudices of the progressive petty-bourgeoisie. The seeds of such tailism were sown in the RCP in the 1980s, and, as we shall discover below, continued to grow and even overwhelm the RCP's revolutionary convictions in subsequent decades.

Gearing political work around the coming conjuncture steered the RCP away from entrenching itself more deeply within the proletariat. While the RCP's emphasis on agitation was overall correct, when combined with its "conjunctural" obsession, it caused the Party to downplay or even negate the importance of leading concrete struggles around class antagonisms and developing the forms of mass organization among the proletariat necessary for that task (and crucial to accumulating the subjective forces for revolution). For example, through exposures in its newspaper, the RCP recognized and conducted agitation around the "War on Drugs" being waged on the masses in the 1980s and the expanded use of prison as a mechanism of social control for the more volatile sections of the proletariat, especially Black proletarians. However, the RCP did not find the forms through which to entrench itself within this sharpening class and national antagonism and bring forward masses, in mass organizations under its leadership, to wage class struggle against the "War on Drugs" and the use of prisons as social control mechanisms for surplus populations. Nor did it ever seem to consider that, given the void of drug treatment programs for the masses at the height of the crack epidemic, it may have been worth it for communists to step into the void with social programs led by revolutionary politics. The Nation of Islam did find ways of stepping into this contradiction, from its ideological and political perspective, and built a considerable following in prisons and among Black proletarians dealing with the effects of drugs and the gangs and police repression around drugs.⁴²

The RCP's conjunctural obsession also caused it to focus, somewhat myopically, on what it perceived to be the most important political questions and contradictions on a national level, a tendency which grew worse in the 2000s. That focus was justified to a certain extent, and is far better than the "localism" that characterizes would-be communists today. However, the RCP's focus on the "big national political questions" (in the 1980s, motion towards world war) caused it to downplay, ignore, and fail to experiment with and intervene in more localized contradictions and class conflicts. For example, a blind spot in the RCP's history is battles over gentrification, which manifest locally but are ultimately expressions of the contradiction between real estate capital and the proletariat. While the RCP did relate to the militant, mainly anarchist-led, battles over gentrification in New York's lower east side in the late 1980s and early 90s, it did not see this as the important class conflict that it was. It tended to fear alienating the segments of the progressive petty-bourgeoisie who were involved in the gentrification process (even as they were not the principal driving force of it). Furthermore, given that social conditions and class composition vary considerably in different regions of the US, the RCP's focus on the "big national political questions" caused it to rigidly apply more or less the same strategy and tactics in different parts of the country and miss potential opportunities that emerged out of more specific, local contradictions. To be clear, the RCP did address a wide variety of political questions in its newspaper and did find ways to intervene in important social questions, including localized ones, but it did not adequately find the organizational forms for intervening within these social questions and more localized class contradictions.

Finally, the RCP's conjunctural focus resulted in the lack of a systematic, long-term plan for step-by-step growth and organizational development—the RCP believed, in effect, that the coming conjuncture would allow it to leap over the need for such development. Of course, long-term plans cannot be static and unresponsive to developments in the objective situation. But we know of no long-term plans for waves of recruitment into the RCP throughout its history, and this lack of a systematic approach to organizational growth is surely one of the reasons for the RCP's attrition in membership. The fact that the RCP was raising the alarm about World War III but not, among its members, its decreasing numbers is indicative of attaching far too much weight to objective, rather than subjective, conditions.

In the 1980s, the RCP was a Party with firm revolutionary convictions, an advanced grasp of communist theory, considerable skill in the art of agitation, and a determination to seize on crisis to bring US imperialism down. *What it lacked was a coherent strategy for bringing forward the subjective forces for revolution.* Consequently, *the RCP bowed to objective conditions in a "left" form*—hoping to take advantage of a coming grand crisis (conjuncture) to make revolution.

Even with this serious error, the RCP remained a revolutionary party, in stark contrast to virtually all other forces who claimed the mantle of communism or Maoism in the 1980s. Those other forces, who had come out of the revolutionary movement of the Sixties, capitulated left and right, becoming union hacks and tying their sails to the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign. *The greatest achievement of the RCP in the 1980s was that it did not capitulate.*

1989–91: "The end of a stage, the beginning of a new stage"

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its bloc from 1989–91 proved the RCP's "Revolution or World War III" analysis wrong. The world situation dramatically changed in those years: US imperialism, the dominant world power after WWII, now had no significant immediate threats to its hegemony, which was strengthened through the economic pillage of the former Soviet Union and Soviet empire and the incorporation of several former Soviet-bloc countries into the US-led imperialist bloc. The inter-imperialist contradiction receded, no longer a driving force in world events. The US bourgeoisie was not only able to claim victory, but also to use the collapse of the Soviet Union to mount an anti-communist ideological offensive.

For the RCP, the coming grand crisis around which its revolutionary work in the 1980s hinged was no more. Worse yet, the RCP failed to ever adequately sum up the roots of its erroneous analysis. It was not until 1998, with the publication of *Notes on Political Economy*, that the RCP put out a substantive public self-criticism of its view of world war (or/and revolution) as the inevitable outcome of the principal 1980s inter-imperialist contradiction. Even in that self-criticism, *Notes on Political Economy* made a rearguard defense of the RCP's obsession with conjuncture, patting itself on the back for analyzing the workings of capitalism as developing through spiral-like motion (leading to conjunctures with each new orbit around the spiral), substituting a geometric metaphor for the work of concrete analysis.

In the long term, the failure to sum up the determinist thinking behind its conjunctural analysis and the erroneous strategic thinking that guided its work in the 1980s doomed the RCP to later repeat its mistake of hinging revolution on a coming grand crisis and never coming up with an adequate strategy for developing the subjective forces for revolution. In the short term, the RCP was able to maintain and make more of a material force out of its revolutionary convictions in the period from 1989 (or earlier) to 1991 through its own strategic shifts and because of advances in the revolution in Peru and, in the US, a resurgent revolutionary mood among Black people, intensifying contradictions between oppressed nationality proletarians and the bourgeoisie, and social faultlines opening up and sparking resistance movements.

In the late 1980s, the sounds of Public Enemy and NWA, with their abrasive beats made from layers on top of layers and their more hard-edged vocal delivery, blasted out of boomboxes a message of defiance against bourgeois authorities, especially the police, and a lyrical analysis of the oppression of Black people. The resonance of these rap groups with Black youth, along with the "X" (for Malcolm X) logo emblazoned on hats and T-shirts and the Africa medallions that became popular Black fashion, were indicative of a resurgence of rebellion and revolutionary Black nationalism. Black college students were studying revolutionary texts and Black proletarian youth were getting increasingly defiant, with Miami breaking out in rebellion in 1989 after a police killing. To anyone paying attention (and the RCP was), South Central Los Angeles was a powder keg ready to explode—the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion might not have been inevitable, but it certainly was probable and predictable. The growing mood of defiance among Black youth was fueled by the intensifying poverty and immiseration of Black proletarians in the 1980s and the Reagan-era policies of prisons, police brutality, and criminalization as mechanisms to contain a segment of the population increasingly left out of formal employment. The rebellious mood among Black people in the late 1980s and early 90s never reached the level of the Sixties, but it certainly created more ripe conditions for communist work among Black proletarians, even as Black nationalism of various stripes was also bolstered by the sharpening contradictions.

One way in which the RCP tapped into the late-1980s mood among Black proletarians was by organizing, together with others, a Biko Lives! Festival, named after the martyred South African revolutionary Steve Biko. Held at a church in the South Bronx in 1989, the festival's main slogan—"Free South Africa! Free the South Bronx!"—connected the anti-apartheid struggle then raging in South Africa and attracting worldwide support with the conditions of Black proletarians in the US. The Biko Lives! Festival brought together homeless people from Tompkins Square Park, Puerto Rican musicians, rappers, reggae performers, poets, and comrades from the revolutionary Black nationalist organizations New Afrikan People's Organization and the December 12th Movement. The December 12th Movement is a revolutionary Black nationalist organization in New York whose founders courageously fought RICO charges in the 1980s. It organized a "Day of Outrage" in 1987 that shut down New York subway lines and the Brooklyn Bridge in protest of police brutality and murders of Black people by racist thugs. The RCP had a strong working relationship with the December 12th Movement and other principled revolutionary Black nationalists for many years.⁴³

Also in 1989, the RCP published a pamphlet titled *Cold Truth, Liberating Truth: How This System Has Always Oppressed Black People, and How All Oppression Can Finally Be Ended*. This well-timed pamphlet was an accessible form of propaganda on one of the central questions that communist revolution in the US must address, and highlights the RCP's overall exemplary record of exposing and fighting the oppression of Black

people and arguing for a communist, rather than a nationalist, approach to the Black national question (without being sectarian towards Black nationalism).

In addition to the sharpening conflict between Black proletarians (especially youth) and the motions of capital was the anti-immigrant hysteria and deportation program directed against the growing immigrant proletarian population. Civil Wars in Central America (where the US supported the reactionary side and sponsored vicious brutalities), economic crises in Mexico, and changes in US immigration law⁴⁴ led to a more permanent and growing immigrant population, especially in the Southwest, that became a crucial low-wage labor force, no longer just in agriculture but also in the manufacturing and service sectors in “global cities” where finance capital was centered, beginning with Los Angeles. As a population of viciously exploited proletarians, many of whom lived under the threat of deportation and were hunted by La Migra,⁴⁵ whose children were often slotted into the same bleak future of unemployment, gangs, and prisons as Black proletarian youth, immigrant proletarians were a ripe social base for communist politics and organizing in this time period.⁴⁶

At the same time, in US imperialism’s “back yard,” the revolutionary people’s war in Peru was making substantial advances and posed a real threat to bourgeois power by the early 1990s, becoming a wider political question within the US in the process. Revolutionary graffiti and posters had been common sights in the 1980s on walls in proletarian neighborhoods in cities where there were RCP branches, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, those public displays often heralded the revolution in Peru, for example: “Proletarians and oppressed of Richmond [California], adopt Ayacucho as our sister city!”⁴⁷ Beyond painting the town, the RCP promoted the revolution in Peru broadly among the masses, especially through its newspaper, as an inspiring example of what was possible when the masses rose up under communist leadership.

During this time of revolutionary advances in Peru, defiance among Black youth, and intensifying class and national contradictions in the US, the RCP stepped up its revolutionary activity under an informal slogan: “mass combativity now, mass armed combat in the future.” The best example of this slogan in action, and the fruits of the RCP’s political work among the proletariat in the 1980s, is what transpired on May Day 1990 in Pico Union, a Los Angeles neighborhood with a heavy concentration of Central American immigrants, especially from El Salvador. In that neighborhood was an immigrant detention center with a reputation for especially horrid conditions run by the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service; this was before the creation of ICE). In addition, the police barricaded some streets to corral traffic and set up checkpoints in one part of Pico Union, supposedly as part of “community policing” efforts to help deal with drugs, but in reality a repressive measure aimed at proletarian youth and undocumented immigrants.

The RCP had been carrying out political work in Pico Union throughout the 1980s, and had established a Spanish-speaking section of the Party in LA, which functioned as a “quiet” section. This “quiet” section did not carry out open, public political work but found ways to distribute the Party’s newspaper and build ties among the masses that were outside the eyes and ears of the enemy, which was of obvious tactical importance among undocumented immigrants. In addition to this quiet work was the rather loud work of the RCYB, which established a youth house⁴⁸ in Pico Union in the early 1990s, publicly distributed the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper in the neighborhood, painted the town (with graffiti), and sought to generate “mass combativity” through its actions. The RCYB chapter in Pico Union developed a more hardcore proletarian character in the early 1990s, and included an ex-member of a Salvadoran gang and street kids from Mexico City. Residents of the RCYB youth house in Pico Union became well-known to the police—the notorious Rampart Division⁴⁹—but were able to achieve friendly neutrality with the neighborhood gangs.

The RCP and the RCYB, along with La Resistencia, an organization initiated by the RCP that focused on resisting the anti-immigrant political hysteria, deportations, and repressive measures of the time, carried out public exposure and protests against the immigrant detention center and police barricades and checkpoints in Pico Union all throughout the Spring of 1990. This wider activity was punctuated with a May Day rally that

started in MacArthur Park and marched on the detention center, getting into conflicts with the police along the way and culminating in significant combativity outside the detention center with RCYB members at the forefront. The doors to the detention center were chained shut and a pile of tires was thrown in the street in front them, with the intention of setting them ablaze. RCYB members climbed the walls of and poles around the detention center and fought back against fierce attacks by the police. The determination to damage and shut down the detention center was exemplary. As Captain James McMurray of the LAPD Rampart Division put it, "No other group uses cayenne pepper and marbles against our horses."⁵⁰

What followed makes a good case study in police repression and legal maneuvers to combat it. Twenty-one people were charged with substantial and sometimes multiple misdemeanors, with one of them also charged with a felony. They went to trial facing years in prison but remained politically defiant throughout the process. Legal motions revealed that a member of the LAPD's Anti-Terrorist Division (ATD) had been present during the protest. The LAPD's ATD was not legally allowed to spy on political activity, but was doing just that at the May Day protest. Defense lawyers filed motions to reveal the nature of this police spying, but the police refused to hand over their intelligence files or admit the extent of their political spying even after the trial judge insisted, so the trial judge threw out the charges (the one person charged with a felony was tried separately, but never did prison time). Just like in 1979, the RCP used the existence of police spying to fight criminal charges, forcing the bourgeoisie to either expose its spying or back off from charges that could have sent revolutionaries to prison—*exposure is a real weapon in our arsenal*. Occasionally, you get a judge, often a Black woman, who is concerned enough about *blatant* illegal activity by the police to rule in your favor, and divisions within the bourgeoisie in LA leading up to and after the 1992 Rebellion there provided favorable conditions for the RCP to win victories in court against legal charges.

The 1990 May Day action and the RCP's overall political work in Pico Union highlight the best achievements of its recognition of key class antagonisms in the US (in this case as expressed in the contradiction between immigrant proletarians and the repressive state apparatus), political work and ties among the proletariat especially through distribution of and building organization around its newspaper, and the new turn to foster "mass combativity" with the RCYB in the forefront. It is also indicative of an erroneous tendency, which the RCP would never fully correct, towards what we might call *unarmed focoism*. The militant actions outside the immigrant detention center were taken by a few dozen revolutionaries and did not successfully mobilize the masses. The RCP did involve the masses in other ways and in other protests, but it did not bridge the gap between the heroic actions of committed revolutionaries and the broader masses; it did not find the appropriate forms to move the masses (many of whom were undocumented immigrants) to take militant actions *with a mass character* (which would have likely had to be at a lower level of combativity). It is necessary to criticize the RCP's tendency towards unarmed focoism, but we must do so while celebrating the militant revolutionary actions taken and recognizing that *the revolutionary process will involve an ongoing tension between where the masses are at and what they are willing to do, on the one hand, and how the actions of conscious revolutionaries, stepping out ahead of where the masses are at, can push the masses forward and inflict blows on the enemy, on the other hand*. Resolving that tension in favor of conservatism, justified as not overstepping "where the masses are at," is by far the main danger and the more common error, especially in imperialist countries.⁵¹

We would be remiss in this discussion of the RCP's attempts at "mass combativity" if we did not also mention that the RCP played a militant role in protests against the US War on Iraq in 1991, attempting to throw a wrench in the gears that were constructing the "new world order" as the Soviet empire was collapsing. The RCP took a firm anti-imperialist stand at the first sign of US moves towards war and sought to push the broader protest movement in more confrontational directions, such as burning US flags and, in San Francisco, joining with others in taking over the Bay Bridge and in shutting down and occupying a military recruitment center for several hours. RCP members and supporters took many arrests in the course of anti-war protests. The RCP's Hawai'i Branch carried out political agitation among active-duty soldiers, and supported US marine Jeff Patterson when he refused orders to be deployed to the War on Iraq by sitting down on the tarmac. Patterson subsequently became a voice of anti-imperialism encouraging active-duty soldiers to refuse to fight

in US wars of aggression, and frequently mentioned communist-led revolutionary people's wars in his speeches.



Jeff Patterson refusing deployment to the first Iraq war.

Pivoting towards mobilizing the progressive petty-bourgeoisie in resistance movements

In addition to the sharpening class antagonisms between Black and immigrant proletarians versus the bourgeoisie, during the 1980s, progressive and liberal sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, along with other sections of the people, were brought into conflict with the reactionary political and cultural turn represented by the Reagan administration. This scenario is often labeled the “culture wars,” a term that divorces political machinations from material relations.

In the US, more overt, “traditional” forms of white supremacy and patriarchy remain crucial pillars to enforcing the rule of the bourgeoisie as well as to maintaining the allegiance of and wielding as a reactionary social base certain sections of the people, especially the labor aristocracy, bourgeoisified white workers, and lower sections of the the white petty-bourgeoisie (in addition to other specific, and more privileged, sections of the petty-bourgeoisie). Some sections of the bourgeoisie place greater value on these “traditional” forms for maintaining the social order. Others promote “liberal” forms of white supremacy and patriarchy, with greater “diversity” and more women occupying upper-tier positions in the class structure while the same fundamental oppressive social relations and class structure remain intact. What can be broadly referred to as the liberal bourgeoisie finds its support among the “enlightened” petty-bourgeoisie (especially the intelligentsia) and the petty-bourgeoisie of oppressed nationalities. The lower and deeper sections of the proletariat are, to a significant degree but not completely, absent from this game of class allegiance, having no substantial material stake in either side of the basic split within the bourgeoisie. The divide between the liberal bourgeoisie and the “conservative” and fascistic sections of the bourgeoisie, and the corresponding divide between the different sections of the people that each side of the bourgeoisie appeals to, is popularly experienced as the routine electoral contest between Democrats and Republicans.

The Sixties movements, together with changes in the economic base of society (such as the decline in manufacturing within the US), strengthened the liberal side of the bourgeoisie and caused the bourgeoisie as a whole (especially via the “conservative” Nixon administration) to grant concessions not only to the masses but also in relation to the social and cultural concerns of those sections of the people who are under the wing of

the liberal bourgeoisie.⁵² But when facing the necessity of preparing for a potential war with the Soviet Union and in seeking to prevent class and social antagonisms from exploding as they had in the Sixties, the bourgeoisie as a whole needed to increasingly rely on more traditional forms of white supremacy and patriarchy in the 1980s, with some sections of the bourgeoisie consciously pushing for this shift and the Reagan administration serving this purpose.

Consequently, social faultlines opened up that presented communists with opportunities to make political interventions and to lead sections of the petty-bourgeoisie in resistance, and thereby make advances in building the united front under the leadership of the proletariat. The RCP developed a political and organizational vehicle to serve those purposes by initiating, together with non-communist political allies and collaborators it had developed relationships with, an organization called Refuse and Resist in 1987.

The Refuse and Resist logo, designed by Keith Haring, who frequently put his art in service of the people and tragically passed away from AIDS-related complications in 1990 at the age of 31.

Especially in its early years, Refuse and Resist (hereafter R&R) was a genuine united front formation rather than just an extension (or, as the anti-communist interpretation would have it, “front group”) of the RCP.⁵³ Signatories of R&R’s founding included Sonia Sanchez, William Kunstler, Abbie Hoffman, and Dennis Brutus; artist Keith Haring designed R&R’s logo; and R&R’s national secretary was Robert Rockwell, a doctor and gay activist whose politics were not the same as the RCP’s. The RCP certainly played an overall leadership role within R&R, with Clark Kissinger as an initiator and a national leader of R&R. Clark Kissinger’s distinguished history includes being National Secretary of Students for a Democratic Society from 1964–65 and Vice-Chair of the US-China People’s Friendship Association when it was founded in 1974. The RCP assigned cadre to build and anchor local chapters of R&R in each city where there was a Party branch. Though at times the RCP relied too much on organizational control to carry out its political objectives within R&R, the leadership and organizational role of the RCP was decisive in bringing together allies from the petty-bourgeoisie in resistance movements that were objectively favorable to the interests of the proletariat and to repolarizing society towards revolution.

One social faultline that R&R immediately stepped into was the battle over the right to abortion. The right to abortion was won through the actions of the women’s movement and enshrined in US law by the 1973 Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision. As part of reinforcing more traditional forms of patriarchy in the 1980s (and down to today), “conservative” bourgeois political representatives, aided by the acquiescence and even collaboration of their liberal counterparts, worked to chip away at the legal right to abortion while a reactionary social base, ideologically united by various shades of Christian fundamentalism, was mobilized to wage an all-out political assault on abortion rights. What this amounted to was a vicious attempt to force women back into the “traditional” role of mothers and housewives under the patriarchal control of fathers and husbands.

The Christian fascist organization Operation Rescue was the spearhead of the patriarchal assault, beginning with militant anti-choice (meaning against women’s right to choose to terminate a pregnancy) protests outside the 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. From there, Operation Rescue mounted well-organized campaigns to physically shut down abortion clinics in one city after another: Los Angeles in 1989; Wichita, Kansas in 1991; Buffalo, New York in 1992; and Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1993.⁵⁴

While various political forces mobilized to prevent Operation Rescue from shutting down abortion clinics, R&R played a prominent role, and the RCP’s track record of militant action certainly strengthened the pro-choice side’s ability to go up against hardcore Christian fascists in physical confrontations.⁵⁵ Clinic defense formed an important part of R&R’s activities, but it also waged an all-around *ideological and political* defense of the right

to abortion, raising the slogan “Abortion on demand and without apology.” That slogan was and remains a correct and defiant dividing line within the larger “pro-choice” movement. Through its political stand and actions in relation to the battle over abortion rights, R&R mobilized some of the most rebellious young women of that era, some of whom joined the RCP.

An important aside: The RCP’s role in the struggle over abortion rights points to its overall strength on (in communist parlance) the woman question. The RCP maintained a firm, principled stand and high standards for its members in combating patriarchy, and women played leadership roles on all levels of the Party. Moreover, the RCP correctly recognized that the struggle to eliminate the oppression of women is a driving force for communist revolution both before and after the seizure of power, and that mobilizing women (and not just proletarian women) to fight against their oppression would greatly strengthen the revolutionary process. All this is concentrated in an RCP slogan that is well worth keeping: “Break the chains! Unleash the fury of women as a mighty force for revolution!”

Back to R&R: In addition to the struggle over abortion rights, R&R also stepped into battles over censorship of art. The “conservative” wing of the bourgeoisie and their reactionary social base was trying to rebuff the explosion of culture and artistic expression that the Sixties had opened up, seeking to stuff it back in the box of an idealized 1950s “Leave It To Beaver” stilted culture. Heavy metal music with “satanic” messages and rap with “obscene” words and sexual lyrical content became scapegoats in Congressional hearings and for the Parents Music Resource Center,⁵⁶ resulting in “parental advisory” stickers being placed on album covers. In 1989, Republican Senator Jesse Helms sponsored an amendment to prevent the National Endowment for the Arts from funding “obscene or indecent” art. R&R responded by organizing the “Jesse Helms Degenerate Art Show.”

More broadly, R&R built ties with musicians and developed the Refuse and Resist Artists Network. Throughout its existence, R&R organized resistance-themed art shows and concerts; Resist in Concert! in 1988 featured De La Soul, Sinéad O’Connor, and Afrika Bambaataa as performers. What is significant here is that the RCP recognized the role that artists could play in challenging the injustices and nature of bourgeois rule and developed an organizational form to bringing artists together in unified political action and connected them with resistance movements more broadly. The R&R Artists Network was a way of intervening amid the bourgeoisie’s attempts to clamp down on and censor radical art and music.

R&R intervened around other faultlines, such as exposing the “War on Drugs” as a guise for criminalizing Black youth. In the 1990s, it played a key role in the movement to stop the execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal and demand his freedom, which we will address in the next section. Owing to the RCP’s erroneous position on homosexuality, R&R did not play a substantial or leading role within the struggle against the government’s anti-gay, genocidal handling of the AIDS epidemic. The RCP did oppose the government’s handling of AIDS, and R&R was involved in the militant protest movement that was led by ACT UP. But the RCP’s position that homosexuality was an ideological outgrowth of the decay of capitalism meant that a movement based among gay men was justifiably not going to accept the Party’s political leadership, thus preventing the RCP from making a meaningful intervention in what was an important social faultline at the time.

Beyond each particular social faultline, R&R’s mission statement and political practice connected the various attacks on different sections of the people—from women to gays to Black youth—as part of a coherent reactionary program, with the slogan “It’s all one attack.” In other words, the RCP developed a united-front-level program that addressed the key social faultlines of the time and could unite, in a broad resistance movement, all those in political motion who were objectively on the proletariat’s side of those social faultlines. That broad resistance movement could in turn fight for real victories through the struggles of the people, not electoral means, and affect a repolarization of society more favorable to proletarian revolution. However successful R&R was in its efforts, there is much to learn from the method behind it.⁵⁷

There is also a negative lesson to be learned from the RCP's initiation and leadership of R&R, as it represented a significant turn, by the RCP, towards political work among the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie and movement-building that started in the late 1980s, continued in the 1990s, and really went downhill in the 2000s. The particular activities that resulted from this turn, and political work among the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie in general, were not wrong for a communist party to take up and lead, and could make real contributions to building the subjective forces for revolution. The question is *how much weight should they be given* and, specifically, what proportion of party members should be devoted to them.

During and after this 1989–91 period, precisely when it was devoting more of its attention and cadre to leading resistance movements that principally mobilized the petty-bourgeoisie, the RCP scaled back its work of all-around revolutionary agitation among the proletariat. Large mobilizations of Party members and supporters to go door-to-door in housing projects, distributing the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper and connecting with proletarian masses, became more sporadic rather than being the regular, routine political work of the RCP. Political work among the proletariat became more specialized, with only a minority of Party members carrying it out as their principal task.

This turn away from the proletariat was likely an unconscious decision. As previously noted, the RCP's work of systematic agitation among the proletariat throughout the 1980s does not appear to have accomplished much in the way of class struggle and organizational consolidation. Leading resistance movements based among the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, by contrast, was generating significant mass struggles with considerable impact, forging ties with progressive petty-bourgeois activists and artists, and leading to the recruitment of some rebellious petty-bourgeois youth. In imperialist countries, because the proletariat is often a minority of the population and somewhat politically contained by a combination of concessions and repression (a regime of preventive counterrevolution), progressive and liberal sections of the petty-bourgeoisie are more likely to be in political motion than the proletariat, except in explosions of rebellion. A communist party can bow to spontaneity and go where the political motion is (which will mainly take it to the petty-bourgeoisie), or rise to the challenges of bringing forward the proletariat in class struggle and mass organizations, with the most advanced among them recruited as communists. The RCP seems to never have summed up the (reasons behind) shortcomings in its work among the proletariat in the 1980s, making it vulnerable to bowing to spontaneity and veering towards "greener pastures" (political work among the progressive petty-bourgeoisie) where short-term gains were possible.

In addition to the failure to sum up was the RCP's failure to treat quantity, in particular the proportion of Party members assigned to different tasks, as an expression of political line. Regardless of what a communist organization states its political priorities to be (its formal line), how it assigns its cadre (operational line) will ultimately determine what those priorities are. With bookstores to staff and Refuse and Resist's national office and local chapters to run, the RCP had less cadre to devote to political work among the proletariat. A communist party with adequate membership can far more easily solve the question of how to assign cadre, but with only a few hundred members by the early 1990s, the RCP needed to pay more conscious attention to the effects of how it assigned its members. RCP leadership's ongoing aversion to numbers—to the quantitative aspect of summation and strategic planning—was likely an unconscious avoidance of confronting failures head on, and made it even more vulnerable to bowing to spontaneity. The only way to expand its political work among the petty-bourgeoisie on a correct basis would have been to *recruit more members*, especially from the proletariat, but there is no evidence the RCP ever embarked on a systematic recruitment campaign after 1978.⁵⁸

Broad ideological work

In addition to mass combativity and broad resistance movements, the RCP also carried out ideological work intended to reach the masses broadly with revolutionary communist answers to the burning questions of the

day. Carl Dix, the national spokesperson of the RCP, who had spent two years in a military prison at Leavenworth, Kansas in the early 1970s for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War as one of the “Fort Lewis Six,” embarked on an “Urgent Message to the Youth 1990 National Speaking Tour – There Must Be a Revolution in Amerikkka: Fear Nothing, Be Down for the Whole Thing.” Dix’s speeches polemicized against political programs that stopped short of all-the-way revolution. He contrasted the South African ANC’s use of armed struggle as a tactic for bringing the ruling class to the negotiating table in order to “get a place at the table” with the revolutionary people’s war in Peru, where the masses were mobilized in armed struggle to overthrow the ruling class and put the masses in power. Dix also aimed polemical fire at those Black nationalist forces who tried to divert the struggle against police brutality and the oppression of Black people more generally towards boycotts of Korean- and Arab-owned stores in Black neighborhoods. He explained that those calls for boycotts were an expression of a petty-bourgeois outlook—the desire to own stores—that might fulfill Black petty-bourgeois aspirations but would not end the oppression of the masses of Black people. In Dix’s words, that petty-bourgeois outlook boiled down to “Shopkeepers of the world, cut each other’s throats, you have nothing to gain but each other’s markets”—a stark contrast from the communist call of “Proletarians of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!”⁵⁹ Whatever their shortcomings, the RCP made real efforts to connect with the rebellious mood among Black proletarian youth at the time and clearly had a sense of the questions among the masses.



Carl Dix, flanked by RCYB members, on the 1990 “Fear Nothing, Be Down For the Whole Thing” tour.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, an intensifying and largely asymmetric ideological struggle of this time period was over the possibility and desirability of communism. While what collapsed in the Soviet Union was not socialism but a state-ownership form of capitalism, and the 1989 murderous repression of student protests in China was carried out by a new bourgeoisie in power rather than a socialist government, the US bourgeoisie seized on these events to proclaim the bankruptcy of communism and the permanence of free market capitalism. Bourgeois ideologues wrote books, gave speeches, waxed endlessly on the media, and used every outlet available to tell the masses that revolution, socialism, and communism were not only impossible but would only lead to horrible evils. Capitalism was human nature, bourgeois-democracy was freedom, and the US empire was the grand triumph of capitalist democracy...

The RCP sought to wage a counter-offensive to the bourgeoisie's anti-communist ideological assault. Avakian wrote a book in 1991 brilliantly titled *Phony Communism Is Dead... Long Live Real Communism!* that took on the arguments of the bourgeois ideologues and upheld the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The RCP continued to promote the revolutionary people's war in Peru as a practical refutation of the death of communism and, in 1993, the centenary of Mao's birth, carried out a "Mao More Than Ever" campaign to uphold the legacy of Mao and revolutionary China.

Whatever weaknesses there were in the RCP's efforts, the main problem was that the balance of forces was stacked against it—the bourgeoisie devoted considerable resources to inculcating the US population in anti-communism and false historical understandings of the Soviet Union and Maoist China. The RCP would have needed a far larger membership to mount a more successful counter-offensive. Moreover, it would have needed to have a substantial number of members entrenched within the bourgeoisie's ideological state apparatuses—media, universities, schools, cultural and art institutions, etc.—to reach wider audiences and address the specific ways in which anti-communism was articulated, not just around the collapse of the Soviet Union, but as the anti-communist ideological assault was mounting throughout the 1980s.

To cite one example: beginning in 1979, the US bourgeoisie backed a propaganda campaign to posthumously turn the Soviet composer Dimitri Shostakovich into a "secret" anti-communist dissident. A fraudulent and false "memoir" by Shostakovich was published by a Soviet defector to the US, and it became a bestseller. In the process, one of the greatest artistic achievements of the Soviet Union's socialist years, Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, was appropriated by the US bourgeoisie and given an anti-communist spin. Refuting the US bourgeoisie's propaganda campaign on Shostakovich would have required a communist with the requisite expertise and a platform (taking advantages of openings within the bourgeoisie's ideological state apparatuses) from which to address the particular audience to which this propaganda campaign was directed. Obviously a communist party, even a large one, would not have been able to address each particular anti-communist propaganda campaign, but the overall point here is that a communist party needs to develop experts in a variety of fields, including intellectual and cultural arenas, who can make dents in the ideological struggle in its particular manifestations. The RCP's approach was a more unitary focus on Avakian's writings, which, no matter how well they might have addressed the overall anti-communist assault, could not hit its myriad particular forms or seep through the cracks of bourgeois ideological state apparatuses (the latter point is not a criticism of Avakian, just a statement of fact about the position of a chairperson of a communist party).

The RCP must be credited with arguing for all-the-way revolution and communism in contention with reformist (including radical-sounding reformist) programs and in antagonistic conflict with the bourgeoisie's anti-communist ideological assault. But its inability—mainly because the balance of forces was stacked against it—to gain significant ground in its ideological counter-offensive would have damaging negative consequences in the decade to come. The combination of pervasive anti-communism in society and the RCP's pivot towards leading resistance movements that mobilized the progressive petty-bourgeoisie made hiding revolutionary communist convictions under the practice of movement-building a temptation many RCP members could not resist.

1992–2001: Proletarian islands in a petty-bourgeois sea; severing political work from revolutionary objectives

Los Angeles is what's happening

On April 29, 1992, Los Angeles erupted in rebellion in response to a 75% white jury in suburban Simi Valley handing down a not guilty verdict to the cops who were videotaped mercilessly beating Rodney King. Rampant police brutality, especially against Black proletarians like Rodney King but also against immigrant proletarian

youth and even rebellious white youth (the LAPD had a long history of raiding and cracking heads at punk concerts), had filled up a reservoir of righteous hatred toward the police. The Rodney King verdict burst the dam. The 1992 LA Rebellion sparked protests and mini-rebellions in other cities, especially among Black people, but a few factors made LA the perfect place for such a high-level of proletarian struggle.

LA was hit especially hard by crack-cocaine, being a key destination and transit point for the drug trade, with drug routes going from South America and Central America through Mexico and on to California, sometimes with the direct involvement of the CIA. That made LA a concentration point of gangs and the “War on Drugs,” with the latter unleashing police brutality and prison sentences on Black proletarian youth. While battles over drug turf created significant violence among the people, in the run-up to the LA Rebellion, a gang truce was negotiated with the assistance of the Nation of Islam, which temporarily halted conflicts between gangs and helped the masses to unite against the real enemy. Gangs meant that some sections of proletarian youth had arms and experience wielding arms, which were used against the enemy during and after the Rebellion.

LA’s large and growing immigrant proletarian population, consisting mainly of people from Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia, added another class antagonism to the mix with its own particularities. The youth among and US-born children of immigrant proletarians were corralled into similar conditions as Black proletarian youth: criminalization, police brutality, prisons, and gangs. Immigrant proletarians working low-wage jobs faced not only exploitation but were also harassed and hunted by La Migra (immigration police), with the undocumented at risk of deportation. The exploitation and oppression of immigrant proletarians added further fuel to the fire smoldering in LA, and many of them had experience “back home” in rebellion and even revolutionary struggle.

LA was changed after the outbreak of Spring Thunder on April 29; to quote Mao, the masses created favorable new conditions through struggle. For months or more after the Rebellion, the police could not enter some housing projects without an all-out military-style mobilization, because if one or a few squad cars dared to enter, they would be shot at by the masses. The police could not mess with outdoor social gatherings of the masses without facing collective resistance. And an atmosphere of considerable unity persisted among gangs and among proletarians of different nationalities—as Tupac put it in his song “To Live and Die in LA,” “Would it be LA without Mexicans? Black love, Brown pride in the sets again.” The masses had stood up and forced all of society to respond; they now knew their potential power (as Tupac put it in his song “California Love,” “in Cali where we riot not rally”).⁶⁰

The Rebellion also brought out tensions between Black proletarians and Korean store owners. The latter were often targets during the rebellion. As a class, they were caught between the lower and deeper proletariat and the bourgeoisie, not allowed to enter the ranks of businesses outside the ghetto so put face-to-face with the masses as petty exploiters, even as they themselves could only keep their businesses afloat through “self-exploitation” (with the entire family that owned a store working countless hours, in effect for below minimum wage). In the run-up to the Rebellion, a Korean store owner had shot and killed a 15-year-old Black girl, Latasha Harlins, and the “justice” system let the store owner out on probation instead of sending them to prison. Following the Rebellion, tensions between Black proletarians and Koreans were by no means resolved, but some sections of Koreans and other East Asian immigrants sought to find ways to stand in solidarity with the Black masses against their oppression.

The RCP correctly recognized that the LA Rebellion was an important event to seize on for advances in the class-consciousness, fighting capacity, and organization of the masses. The LA Branch of the RCP had already shown some particular strength in integrating with the masses and in exemplifying “mass combativity.” The great thing about a communist party based on democratic centralism is that it can concentrate forces and redeploy cadre to make breakthroughs in particular areas. The main form this took after the LA Rebellion was a call for youth volunteers to spend the summer in LA.

Dozens of members of the RCYB came to LA in the summer of 1992, with several staying there in the years that followed. Going out to the masses in post-Rebellion LA provided these volunteers with the most rich experience possible for young revolutionaries at the time. Some made great advances in their ideological development and political capacities through the process, while those who came from the petty-bourgeoisie and could not break with a petty-bourgeois outlook packed up and went home (events and experiences like these tend to have a way of sorting people out).

The LA Rebellion and the RCP's work in relation to it inspired and trained a generation of RCYB members in chapters around the country that, although small, caught a fervor for integrating with the masses. In addition to the work of the youth volunteers and the RCP's overall stepped-up efforts in LA, revolutionary journalist Michael Slate wrote two series for the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper—"Shockwaves" and "Aftershocks"—which brought the voices of the masses to a nationwide audience, and the RCP waged a *political* campaign to defend those arrested during the Rebellion.

The RCP's initiative in relation to the LA Rebellion is to be commended. However, it seems that RCP leadership failed to develop a coherent plan for making breakthroughs in organization among the masses. Youth volunteers went out broadly among the masses with the Party's newspaper, getting into discussion and debate with the masses; painted the town (with graffiti); and initiated and joined with the masses in outbreaks of struggle with the enemy. Yet it seems there was no systematic plan for how to build organization among the masses in the wake of Rebellion.

Fortunately, after that summer plans did emerge and cadre were developed to make the LA Branch of the RCP carry out, in the 1990s, *the most advanced experience of communist organizing among the masses in the US in the last five decades*. That advanced experience encompassed: making the Nickerson Gardens housing project a stronghold of revolutionary activity and the Watts section of LA more generally a place of political ferment and struggle; political work and an RCYB house in South Central; developing broader struggle and organization against police brutality in LA more generally and tied to a nationwide movement; recruiting dozens of Latino, usually first- and second-generation Mexican immigrant, proletarian youth into the organized work of the RCP (including into the Party itself); playing a strong role in various mass struggles in LA, such as protests against anti-immigrant legislation; carrying out ongoing political work among immigrant proletarians working in the sweatshops of the garment district of downtown LA and living in the Pico Union neighborhood; and also making connections with rebellion and mass struggle in Mexico.

Probably through a combination of observing its role during the LA Rebellion and through the broad work among the masses before and especially after the Rebellion, the RCP identified the Nickerson Gardens housing project in Watts as a neighborhood to focus on and turn into a stronghold of revolutionary activity. Several young comrades who had proven their mettle as 1992 summer volunteers moved into a house down the street from Nickerson Gardens so that they could deeply integrate with the masses. They were joined in their political work by comrades of the Sixties generation, including Joe Veale, a former Black Panther and then the spokesperson for the LA Branch of the RCP, and Will Reese (real name Bobby Hill, 1950–2016). Their political work addressed the more immediate problems of the masses, especially police brutality, and also brought the masses to understand and take action around questions outside of their immediate experience, such as opposing imperialist wars or taking an internationalist stand to support the revolutionary people's wars.

The comrades doing this political work clearly developed deep ties among the masses, became well-known in Nickerson Gardens as principled revolutionaries ("the revolutions," as the masses called them), and recruited people into mass organizations and, to a lesser extent, the RCYB and the Party. An indication of their success was the political and legal battle to defend the "Nickersons Seven." RCP and RCYB members involved in the Nickerson Gardens work had faced considerable police repression throughout the 1990s—the police broke

one young woman's leg, and played Russian roulette with a gun to one young comrade's head. On April 20, 1996, the LAPD viciously attacked a protest against police brutality at Nickerson Gardens. The first cop on the scene, Christopher Hadjuk, was literally one of the cops involved in beating Rodney King. Over 125 police were mobilized to attack the protest, with a police helicopter hovering overhead, while the masses responded to this quasi-military assault by throwing bottles and rocks at the police—a great example of mass combativity. RCP comrades and supporters were singled out for arrest, and seven people—some communists, some Nickerson Gardens residents—were brought up on serious criminal charges, with one of them facing three felonies which, under California's "Three Strikes" law, could result in life in prison.

The RCP mounted a successful legal and political defense, mobilizing the masses in Nickerson Gardens as well as much broader support through publicizing the case, holding a benefit concert, and going out broadly with leaflets explaining in concrete detail how and why the LAPD and prosecutors were trying to lock up the Nickersons Seven. Lawyers for the Nickersons Seven uncovered damning details about the police assault on the protest in the projects, including blatant contradictions in police accounts and the involvement of Officer Hadjuk (which prosecutors had tried to keep secret), as well as a file on one of the Nickersons Seven by the LAPD's Anti-Terrorist Division (yes, the same one caught spying on the RCP by lawyers for the Pico Union May Day defendants) that stretched back five years, indicating that the political police were taking the RCP's work in Nickerson Gardens quite seriously. Thanks to the RCP's skillful legal maneuvering, sophistication at applying the united front, concrete exposure of the police and "justice" system, and, most importantly, mobilization of the masses, all charges against the Nickersons Seven were dropped—an inspiring victory for the people which there is much to learn from.

More broadly in Watts, a heavily Black proletarian part of LA that had risen up in rebellion in 1965 and was an epicenter of the 1992 rebellion, the RCP carried out systematic political work. The *Revolutionary Newspaper* newspaper was distributed on the streets, at cultural events, and at community colleges. The RCP established a mass organization called the Watts Committee Against Police Brutality. The RCP also worked with some musicians to develop the Watts Drum Corps, which involved mostly pre-teen proletarian kids, giving them a fulfilling cultural outlet and an alternative to gangs as well as some political experience and education through marching and drumming, as a collective unit, at protests.

Protests against police brutality remained a crucial form of mass struggle in post-Rebellion LA. The RCP played a leading role in this struggle not only through its work in Nickerson Gardens and Watts, but also by way of initiating and leading the October 22nd Coalition (hereafter O22) and National Day of Protest Against Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation (hereafter O22 NDP). October 22nd will be addressed in more detail and as a nationwide movement below; here, let us specifically address O22 in LA. From 1996 to 2000, the yearly O22 NDP in LA went from several hundred to over 2,000 people, a significant number for a protest at that time that was not a response to a recent major political event. In addition to proletarians who had directly experienced police brutality and/or had a loved one killed by police, a wide array of cultural, social, and political organizations participated in the O22 NDP; the involvement of dozens of Aztec dancers and a large contingent from Pico Union are telling examples of O22's breadth. On the O22 NDP in LA, protesters defiantly marched right on Parker Center, which was then the downtown headquarters of the LAPD. Despite legal permits to protest, the LAPD viciously attacked the O22 NDP multiple times, including people who had loved ones killed by the police, and people courageously fought back against the police barrage of rubber bullets and concussion grenades and refused to let the LAPD shut down the protests. Leading up to the NDP, O22 organizers spoke in high schools throughout LA to proletarian youth and in some middle-class schools about police brutality and the upcoming NDP. Given the widespread criminalization of Black and proletarian youth, O22 proved popular with high school students, and organizers built an O22 Youth Network in LA that became an important training ground for youth to organize based on the mass line and get exposed to revolutionary politics.

As mentioned previously, the RCP's failure to bring forward numerically significant new waves of recruits would hold it back from advancing and even had a corrosive effect. While the 1992 LA Rebellion was an inspiration for existing members and new recruits, the setback in the revolution in Peru following the capture of its leader, Chairman Gonzalo, in September 1992 was a demoralizing blow—without the existence of a revolutionary people's war making serious advances, some RCP members could not maintain their revolutionary convictions and quit the Party.

The one great exception to this overall trend of attrition was when, through the course of the 1990s, dozens of Latino youth got organized under the RCP's leadership, with some joining the Party.²¹ The bulk of these dozens were first- or second-generation Mexican immigrants who attended, and often were the first in their family to attend, college, sometimes starting in LA's network of community colleges that served mainly proletarian students. There is a lesson here in how changes in class position, even within the proletariat, often create a stronger basis for revolutionary ideology to take hold. These youth came from families who experienced migration and all the social and cultural changes bound up with it. Their parents knew the hardships of living in an oppressed country and being exploited as proletarians in the US. The youth grew up with their parents' culture, US culture, and the experience of being an oppressed nationality proletarian in the US. Attending college, they got exposed to broader intellectual life and sometimes to radical ideas, which enabled them to come to a deeper understanding of how their life experience fit into the workings of the larger world.

The RCP reached these youth in several ways. (1) LA's incarnation of Revolution Books was called *Libros Revolución* and, as the name suggests, was geared towards a Spanish-speaking audience while also carrying books in English and other languages. *Libros Revolución* connected with college students, including at the community colleges, through book tables on campuses and building relationships with professors and student organizations. Many Latino immigrant proletarian youth got to know the RCP through *Libros Revolución*, and some joined its staff, acting as levers to more youth like themselves. (2) MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), a student organization with roots in the militant Chicano uprisings of the Sixties, attracted many Mexican immigrant students from proletarian backgrounds in the 1990s. Participating in MEChA chapters at LA colleges was often their first experience in a political organization. Some students involved in MEChA got attracted to the RCP's politics and wound up working under its leadership. (3) The mass struggles that the RCP was involved in or playing a leading role in, such as protests against California's Prop 187 (legislation aimed at further criminalizing undocumented immigrants) in 1994 and the O22 NDP, brought many Latino youth into contact with the RCP, and some began working under its leadership through these mass struggles.

With its wave of recruitment principally of Latino youth in the 1990s, the RCP's LA Branch became a formidable numerical force, with probably somewhere between 50–75 Party members and more than that number in the Party's organized orbit. The RCYB in particular could roll deep (or, as LA RCYB members would say, "mob up"), with dozens of members by the late 1990s, and thereby have a big impact on mass struggles.

The RCP LA Branch also carried out regular political work in Latino immigrant neighborhoods and workplaces. There continued to be an RCYB house in Pico Union and regular political work in that neighborhood. *Libros Revolución* was located in downtown LA near the garment district, and comrades carried out newspaper distribution and other political work among the immigrant sweatshop workers there. We were unable to learn more about this political work, though we do know that occasionally, banners with revolutionary slogans or in support of RCP-led mass struggles appeared in the garment district. In addition, *Libros Revolución* took outsiders on tours of the garment district to show them the reality of the sweatshop-exploited immigrant proletariat in the US, revealing to them how clothes are made under capitalism-imperialism; these tours are a good example of giving people attracted to revolutionary ideas a living sense of the proletariat.

Finally, the comrades in and under the leadership of the RCP in LA made connections south of the border, culminating in teams of *Revolutionary Worker* reporters going to Mexico and connecting with masses involved in important struggles and writing stories about them. Of particular note is a series of articles that appeared in the *Revolutionary Worker* in 2002 on a peasant rebellion in Atenco against the Mexican ruling class's attempt to expropriate their land to construct an airport. Those articles, penned by Luciente Zamora, were based on interviews with the peasant rebels, telling their stories and highlighting the role of women in the struggle; one article was wonderfully titled "Real Women Have Machetes." Through the reporting teams sent to Mexico and the articles they produced, comrades made a practical reality out of proletarian internationalism and developed concrete links with revolutionaries and the masses in Mexico, particularly important given the potential for revolutionary struggle in Mexico to spill over into the US.

A fuller summation of the work of the RCP LA Branch and/or summations of specific spheres of that work in the 1990s would be a great contribution to the history of communist politics and practice in the US. We were only able to give a broad outline, and we are no doubt missing some important specifics, as well as the internal dynamics of the Party that made these achievements possible. We do know that, especially in relation to the work focused among the proletariat, there was a higher level of political discussion and line struggle within the RCP LA Branch than there was in other organizational units of the Party—higher practical stakes generally results in more productive internal political struggle. We hope that ex-RCP comrades who were involved in this experience will write their own summations, or get in touch with us so that we can interview them or work with them on writing summations. It is a stain on RCP leadership that it never bothered to produce a public or internal summation of these important achievements.

Bringing forward the proletariat ideologically, politically, and in struggle

While the RCP LA Branch carried out the most impressive revolutionary work among the proletariat in the 1990s, the RCP also initiated and led other important efforts among the proletariat during that decade. In Chicago, the RCP correctly recognized the class antagonism intensifying as real estate capital transformed the areas around downtown and targeted Chicago's high-rise housing projects for destruction. Constructed between the 1930s and 1960s, the high-rise projects, including Robert Taylor, Stateway Gardens, the Ida B Wells Homes, the Henry Horner Homes, and Cabrini-Green, were almost entirely occupied by Black proletarians, whose families had migrated to Chicago from the South to work in the great steel mills and stockyards, and performed domestic and service work, and were increasingly rendered a surplus population by deindustrialization.

Chicago's project residents were subject to all of the poverty, unemployment, and police brutality that Black proletarians faced across the US. By the 1980s and 90s the Chicago high-rise projects had become notorious as sites of the drug trade and violent crime, with Cabrini-Green, then the largest housing project in the country, entering the national consciousness by way of the 1992 film *Candyman*. When the city government under Mayor Richard M. Daley started moving to vacate residents from these housing projects and demolish the buildings to make way for "urban development," a class struggle was brewing between housing project residents, on one side, and municipal government and real estate capital, on the other. And because of its notoriety, size, and location on the north side of Chicago, Cabrini-Green made for a key location of that class struggle.

The first time the Chicago RCYB went to Cabrini-Green as a crew, they were met with warning shots because of the five-pointed star on their T-shirts, which was a symbol of a rival gang. They were not deterred, and turned their shirts inside out to respect the neighborhood gang's authority, over time gaining their friendly neutrality and permission to carry out political work. Over the latter half of the 1990s, RCYB and RCP comrades led the masses in Cabrini-Green and, secondarily, Robert Taylor in a struggle to stop the demolition of public housing. Taking the "L" train to downtown Chicago back then, you could see banners about the

struggle hanging from buildings in Cabrini-Green, including one reading “Stop Urban Cleansing.” Organizing the masses involved convincing people to put the struggle above their own survival mechanisms. For example, comrades had to convince homeless people and others to stop ripping the copper wiring out of vacant apartments, which they did so they could sell it and feed themselves, because the city government could then point to the ripped up walls and use them as an excuse to leave the apartment vacant.

The RCYB eventually moved into an apartment in the Cabrini-Green projects, and were deeply respected by Cabrini-Green residents as revolutionary fighters. They were equally hated by the police; one RCYB member, “AK,” was arrested about once a month, and RCYB members showed up in the Chicago police’s notorious gang database with “communist” as their gang affiliation. By moving into an apartment in the projects, the RCYB could get more deeply involved in the masses’ lives. For example, they hosted parties for young kids (preteens), giving mothers, who trusted the RCYB with their kids, some much-needed time off from parental duties and setting an example for the youth of what a different culture than dog-eat-dog capitalism might look like (screwdrivers were confiscated at the door).

The RCP led the masses in a valiant fight against the destruction of public housing in Chicago. Ultimately, the bourgeoisie succeeded in demolishing Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor in the early 2000s, displacing tens of thousands of residents away from the city center and often into homelessness. The consequent destruction of social networks among the masses built through generations of living in the projects and the existence of stable neighborhood gangs has most certainly been one factor in the rise in violence and gang shootings among the masses in Chicago. The bourgeoisie owes a considerable blood debt for the situation they created when they destroyed Chicago’s high-rise housing projects.

The RCP’s fighting spirit in Cabrini-Green was exemplary, and it did also involve housing project residents in political struggles other than the fight over public housing. People from the projects participated in the movement to free Mumia Abu-Jamal and in the O22 NDP, despite the fact that the police harassed and tried to intimidate them as they waited for buses to go to the protest. The RCP also brought a broader revolutionary consciousness to the masses, mainly through distribution of its newspaper and lots of political discussions. However, a weakness in the RCP’s work in the Chicago housing projects was not developing enough proletarian class-consciousness or, to our knowledge, recruiting any of the masses into the Party. In the RCP’s work in the Chicago housing projects, it veered towards what we can call *movementism*—the political practice that flows from treating specific political movements as things-in-themselves, disconnected from larger revolutionary objectives⁶²—to a significant degree. Consequently, when project residents were displaced, in addition to the moral blow of losing the practical struggle, the RCP was left with little in the way of organization to show for it. If the dispersal of housing project residents had also meant the dispersal of class-conscious proletarians with (political) fighting experience and organizational ties to the vanguard party, the defeat at Cabrini-Green and Robert Taylor could have sown the seeds of future mass struggle and revolutionary organization.

A wider problem was that the RCP never generalized the Cabrini-Green experience for the entire Party and the masses. It never put out an external or internal summation of the the struggle over public housing in Chicago. As a result, the positive lessons were not assimilated by others, and the moral defeat of losing the practical struggle—after that struggle had been amply reported on in the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper and was a deep inspiration for RCP members and followers across the country—was even worse than it needed to be. Furthermore, it did not reproduce its efforts in the Chicago projects elsewhere.

Chicago turned out to be the beach head in the bourgeoisie’s wider and ongoing war against public housing across the country in the decades that followed. Large tracts of public housing have been gutted and demolished in cities everywhere, transforming the social geography of the proletariat, with many Black proletarians moving to proletarian suburbs (Ferguson, Missouri for example), to the South, and to

homelessness. Greg Russ, the bourgeois operative who oversaw the destruction of Chicago's high-rise projects, has become the bourgeoisie's greatest general in real estate capital's quest to transform urban landscapes by demolishing public housing and displacing its proletarian residents, putting Russ high on the list of the proletariat's class enemies. After Chicago, Russ went on to preside over the destruction of public housing in Detroit, Minneapolis, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, in 2019, was made the head of NYCHA, the government authority over public housing in New York City, the last bastion of public housing in the US.

The RCP correctly got ahead of the struggle over public housing in Chicago, but that correct impulse should have led it to wage a wider, nationwide mass struggle over public housing across the country, assigning cadre to entrench themselves among the masses in housing projects facing destruction and leading mass struggles to prevent that destruction. The reasons for this failure are threefold: (1) A lack of RCP members to carry out such a struggle, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the latter in terms of members capable of really integrating with proletarian masses and leading mass struggle. (2) An increasing pivot by the RCP towards political work among the progressive petty-bourgeoisie (discussed below). (3) RCP leadership's failure to produce sufficient analysis of the machinations of capital and the attendant government policy that was behind the destruction of public housing; issues bound up with "gentrification" have been a significant blind spot for the RCP.⁶³

Another specialized effort among the proletariat was the Prisoners Revolutionary Literature Fund (hereafter PRLF). The PRLF solicited donations in order to send prisoners subscriptions to the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper as well as RCP literature, MLM classics, and *A World To Win* magazine. Through the ties made with prisoners, the PRLF encouraged prisoners to set up discussion groups with their fellow inmates, conducted written correspondence with prisoners on their political questions, some of which was published in the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper, and occasionally called on prisoners to take collective action in relation to mass struggles it was leading on the outside, generally in the form of collective gatherings of prisoners with visual displays of political slogans. The RCP was correct to recognize the growing prison population as a segment of the proletariat in the US and a concentration of national oppression, and thus an important section of the masses to reach with revolutionary literature.

The PRLF was an excellent initiative particularly for developing the proletarian class-consciousness of prisoners and some organizational ties among them. But the RCP should have recognized the class and national contradiction around the bourgeoisie's use of prisons as a growing mechanism of social control for surplus populations amid deindustrialization and as one of the main forms of the oppression of Black people as an antagonism ripe for mass struggle. Seizing on that antagonism would have required broader work among the families of prisoners on the outside and drawing on its prior practice of turning legal cases into political struggles and applying it beyond court battles stemming from political struggles. The RCP certainly exposed the prison system in its newspaper, and it did get involved, to some degree, in campaigns to free Black and other political prisoners, such as the 1998 Jericho movement, but it did not develop any mass struggle among prisoners and their personal and potential supporters on the outside.

Finally, the most well-known aspect of the RCP's work among the proletariat in the 1990s is the October 22nd National Day of Protest Against Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation (O22 NDP). The RCP had long involved itself in struggles against police brutality, and it ramped up this activity following the 1992 LA Rebellion. Through this work, it developed strong ties with a number of families of police murder victims. The RCP also had relationships with a number of radical activists, such as Keith McHenry of Food Not Bombs, who had faced police repression for their political activities, and with Black revolutionary nationalist individuals and organizations, such as December 12th Movement, who had faced police repression and were involved in the wider struggle against police brutality.

The RCP correctly summed up that police brutality against Black proletarians in particular, but also against proletarians and oppressed nationalities more generally, was a class and national antagonism that had already led to significant mass struggle, and that a political program and national organization was necessary to strengthen and broaden that struggle. In 1996, the RCP united its existing ties among families of police murder victims, radical activists and Black nationalists, and others into the October 22nd Coalition (O22). RCP national spokesperson Carl Dix played a leadership role in O22, making clear the RCP's commitment to this initiative and putting Dix's skills at proletarian diplomacy to good use. The Coalition's mission statement identified the epidemic of police brutality and murder facing the masses, its connection to the oppression of Black people, the use of the police to repress protest and dissent, and the criminalization of Black and proletarian youth.

The words "the Criminalization of a Generation" in O22's name point to a problem by the RCP of effectively de-classing youth, as a whole generation was not being criminalized—Black proletarian youth were the main targets of the bourgeoisie's criminalization efforts, with other oppressed nationality proletarian youth and proletarian youth more generally also targeted. White petty-bourgeois youth were not the targets of criminalization unless they became rebellious against the social order. Perhaps "Criminalization of Black Youth" would have been a better phrase, though overall O22's politics made clear that police brutality and criminalization were bound up with the oppression of Black people.

O22's main activity was the National Day of Protest (NDP)—October 22nd does not have any symbolic significance in relation to police brutality other than what it took on as a day of protest, but was picked because it was close before US elections in early November, and thus demonstrated a way to take mass political action outside the electoral arena and expose how official politics in the US never really addressed the epidemic of police brutality. From its first occurrence in 1996, the NDP was by no means a typical protest for the late 1990s. Families of individuals killed by the police, who were almost all proletarians and mostly Black, took center stage and spoke openly and defiantly about their pain and their determination to get justice, with no politicians, nonprofit activists, or other grifters able to use them for their own opportunist purposes. Youth, including many proletarian youth, took part in the protests and brought a defiant edge. Some, but not much, of the typical protest-attending activist crowd came out to the NDP, but the activists O22 tended to mobilize fell outside the typical Left, and included Black nationalists, Black community activists, progressive lawyers, and religious leaders committed to justice. Making a unified statement all across the country every year on O22 was a powerful message exposing the epidemic of police brutality, and gave the people under the gun of the police the strength of knowing they were not in the fight alone. The agitation in proletarian neighborhoods that O22 carried out in the run-up to the NDP was also an important way to politicize the atmosphere, generate widespread support among the masses, and get some people to attend the NDP.

Beyond the NDP itself, O22 worked year-round to protest police brutality and document the epidemic of police murder through the Stolen Lives Project; the latter was the first documentation project of its kind, before any mass media outlets or other activist organizations were bothering to systematically track and publicize cases of police murder, and before the internet made it much easier to do so. Reading the names of those killed by the police on the NDP became a powerful moment of exposure and of honoring and remembering those whose lives were stolen.

O22 brought the question of police brutality to other protests and reached out to youth through organizing in high schools and cultural events. But the center of gravity of its ongoing work was responding to each instance of police murder by reaching out to the family of the victim and offering support, canvassing neighborhoods where the incidents happened and where the victims lived, and organizing protests against each police murder. This work built up strong ties with the family members of police murder victims based on trust through seeing that O22 was for real.

O22 was organizationally anchored and politically led by the RCP assigning members in each city where there was a Party branch to specialize in O22. These RCP members were usually the ones who built the ties with family members and others. Carl Dix continued to play a leading role in O22 at the national level, and RCP leadership obviously paid significant attention to O22, but individuals and organizations outside of the RCP did also play leadership roles within O22. It is important to emphasize that the nationwide movement against police brutality under a unified political program that was O22 would not have been possible without the democratic centralist structure and unified strategy of a communist vanguard party.

The most significant thing about O22 was that it brought forward proletarians, especially the families of police murder victims and the youth who were harassed and brutalized by the police, as a political force waging a determined, organized, nationwide mass struggle and refusing to be channeled into electoral politics, relying on lawsuits, or the reformist schemes of nonprofit activism. Secondly, O22 was consciously designed by the RCP as a way to generate allies among the middle strata for the proletariat in mass struggle, and the participation of activists, lawyers, religious leaders, and other petty-bourgeois elements was a great strength of O22. It is also worth mentioning that O22 often involved Black community activists with deep ties among the proletariat in leadership roles. From 1996–2000, October 22nd grew in strength, with increasing publicity, including public service announcements aired on BET (Black Entertainment Television). The NDP in 2000 mobilized the largest numbers, demonstrating that the RCP's leadership of O22 was achieving real results.

The principal error in the RCP's leadership of O22 was *movementism*—few masses were recruited into the Party through O22, RCP comrades assigned to O22 work often buried their communist convictions under the work of building the practical movement,⁶⁴ and the practical movement became more of a thing-into-itself rather than being connected to a larger emerging revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, there are many rich lessons to be learned from O22; for a more detailed summation, you can read “From the Masses, to the Masses: A Summation of the October 22nd Coalition's Resistance to Police Violence in the Late 1990s” by Kilmor and John Albert in *kites* #1 (2020).

The RCP's work among the proletariat in the 1990s was a qualitative advance, over its practice in the 1980s, in forging organization and initiating and leading class struggle among the proletariat in several specific arenas. However, in many cases it was not a qualitative advance in bringing forward the *class-consciousness* of the proletariat by virtue of falling into movementism and downplaying ideological work and systematic agitation for revolution, evident by the lack of many proletarians recruited into the Party (with LA as an important exception). It was also not necessarily a quantitative advance. Proletarian work became more specialized, and thus more sophisticated, with specific comrades assigned to particular spheres of work among the proletariat. These were often among the best of RCP lower- and mid-level cadre. However, with the exception of the yearly O22 NDP, in which most of the Party in some way threw in, work among the proletariat was not generalized among the whole Party membership, and a majority of members were mainly carrying out movement-building or other work mainly centered on the progressive petty-bourgeoisie. There was a general decline in broad newspaper distribution among the proletariat in the 1990s, meaning far less RCP members were in regular political contact with the proletariat. With the majority of RCP members coming from petty-bourgeois class backgrounds and many not having forged (or having lost) deep social bonds and cultural ties with proletarian masses, the specialization of proletarian work as the practice of only a minority of Party members (even a sizeable minority) was a recipe for the petty-bourgeoisification of the Party.

Movement building and a further pivot towards the progressive petty-bourgeoisie

Where that majority of Party members were assigned was to the RCP's bookstores, to movement building mostly focused among the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, and to developing organized ties principally among the progressive petty-bourgeoisie. The latter was carried out mainly by “quiet” units of the RCP, who followed up with contacts met through various spheres of the Party's work. They developed the partisanship of those

contacts through subscriptions to the RCP's newspaper and ongoing discussion of RCP literature, sometimes in the form of Party-led discussion circles, and by getting them to play support roles for the RCP's work: contributing funds and meeting places, spreading the RCP's literature, taking up mass campaigns and mass struggles led by the RCP, etc. The RCP's work to develop organized ties "so wisely and so well" that the enemy would not know the shape and specifics of its network of supporters was a good indication of the RCP's sophistication and seriousness about making revolution. The fact that most of these organized ties were among the petty-bourgeoisie provided important support and breadth to the Party's work, but also buttressed an overall pivot away from the proletariat.

Refuse and Resist (R&R) continued to be the primary vehicle for the RCP's mass movement building efforts in the 1990s. The battle over abortion rights remained an important struggle in society, and R&R developed an Abortion Rights Task Force, with Mary Lou Greenberg, the spokesperson for the RCP's New York Branch, functioning as a national leader within it. Greenberg had spent time in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and authored the RCP's pamphlet on the GPCR, and had also played a spokesperson role for the RCP on the oppression of women.⁶⁵ The R&R Abortion Rights Task Force continued the work of clinic defense, held and joined with abortion rights protests in the face of the organized forces of Christian fascism, and also co-initiated a National Day of Appreciation for Abortion Providers in 1996. Most importantly, by making mass struggle the center of its efforts, R&R distinguished itself from pro-choice organizations tied to the Democratic Party, who channeled the women's movement into the electoral arena. Both R&R and the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper continued to wage an unapologetic ideological defense of the right to abortion and expose the patriarchal Christian fascist politics behind the anti-choice movement.

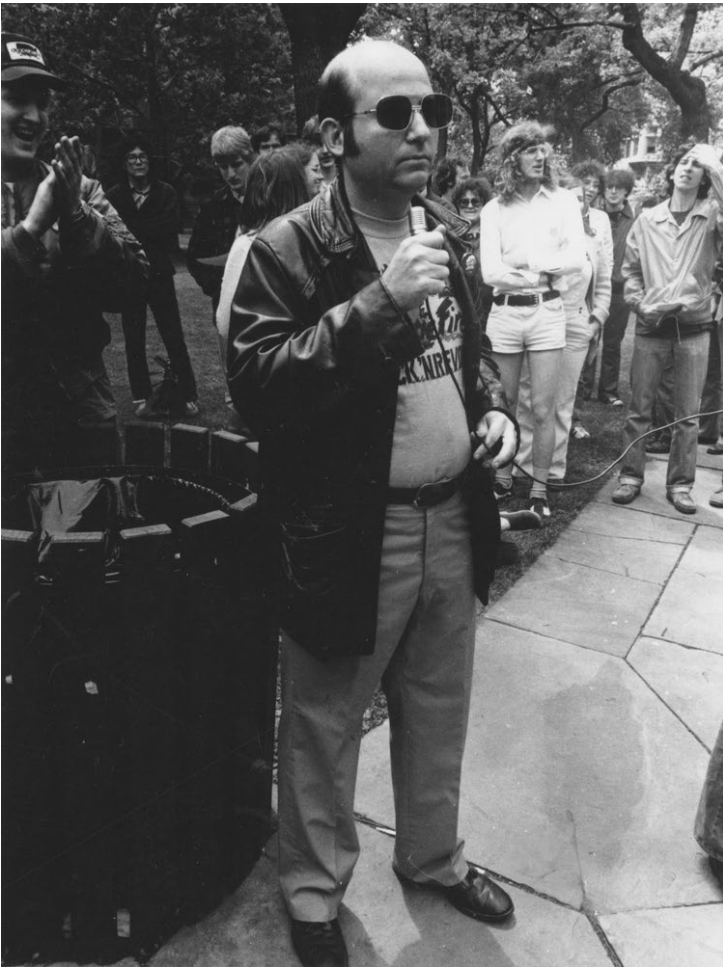
R&R's main focus shifted in the mid-1990s to organizing mass resistance to prevent the execution of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and demand his freedom. Mumia had been framed for the 1981 killing of a police officer in Philadelphia. Mumia was targeted by police and prosecutors for his revolutionary stand and actions: he joined the Black Panthers when he was a teenager and went on to become a journalist exposing injustice and giving voice to the masses, as well as a supporter of MOVE, a group of uncompromising Black revolutionaries subjected to vicious attacks by Philadelphia police. He was one of many Black political prisoners in the US, but the only one facing the death penalty. In 1995, the bourgeois state made serious moves towards executing Mumia. The RCP had joined with MOVE in defending Mumia since the 1980s (early protests for Mumia were jokingly referred to as the "reds and the dreads"), but in 1995 a mass movement developed that forced the bourgeois state to back off from their plans to execute Mumia. The RCP and R&R played pivotal roles within this mass movement, going broadly among the masses and mobilizing support for Mumia, distributing Mumia's 1995 book *Live From Death Row* (a top seller at Revolution Books stores), and being at the forefront of mass protests.

Following the high tide of struggle in the summer of 1995, R&R spearheaded ongoing efforts across the country and concentrations in Philadelphia to broaden the movement for Mumia. It worked to make Mumia a household name through a variety of activities, from broad flyering to concerts to getting media coverage of Mumia's case. Beginning in 1996, R&R organized "Philly Freedom Summer," taking the Mississippi Freedom Summers of the early 1960s as an inspiration. During Philly Freedom Summers, dozens of youth from across the country converged in Philadelphia for two weeks of going door-to-door in Black proletarian neighborhoods, engaging the masses in political discussion and getting them to put up Mumia posters in their windows. These efforts were transformative for the youth volunteers and ensured that support for Mumia in Philadelphia remained visual. Philly Freedom Summers were also punctuated by protests and strengthened by political education, including interaction with Pam Africa and Ramona Africa, MOVE comrades playing leadership roles within the movement for Mumia.

The RCP correctly recognized that the movement to free Mumia was a concentration point in the wider struggle against the oppression of Black people and against political repression. Mumia's case highlighted both the general treatment of Black people by the justice system, with the prison population dramatically expanded

to over two million during the 1990s under the liberal Clinton administration, and the murderous repression the bourgeois state directed against Black revolutionaries. Giving substantial weight and devoting significant cadre to the Mumia movement was a means to expose the system's oppression of Black people and mobilize masses in concrete struggle, as well as to promote the voice of a principled and courageous Black revolutionary. However, in combination with the tendency toward *movementism*, it also meant that the RCP was devoting less resources and cadre to promoting its full communist politics.

The Mumia movement also shows that the RCP, through the vehicle of R&R and with Clark Kissinger as a national leader, was playing a (not necessarily the) leading role within a wider mass movement that involved a variety of political forces, most prominently International Concerned Friends and Family of Mumia Abu-Jamal, which MOVE members played a leading role within, but also a variety of Black nationalists, student organizations such as Student Liberation Action Movement at City University of New York campuses, and, on the negative end, assorted revisionist organizations. Besides political organizations, the Mumia movement also involved a broad array of religious people of conscience, (some) government officials, intellectuals, and artists, with the band Rage Against The Machine probably the greatest vehicle by which youth found out about Mumia and got involved in the movement. The breadth of the Mumia movement enabled the RCP to develop ties and working relations with a wide array of political, social, and cultural forces, although too often these ties were developed on the basis of movementism, with the RCP's communist convictions buried beneath the mass movement. In any event, from 1995 to the early 2000s, the RCP was in the mix of and playing a leadership role within a broad united front mass movement, with a Fall 2000 conference in New York City bringing together hundreds of people from around the country and indicating the breadth, strategic sophistication, and fighting spirit of the movement. Unfortunately, rifts within the Mumia movement and shifts in legal strategy (mainly by the bourgeois state to deflate the movement) contributed to a decline in what, in the latter half of the 1990s, was the most powerful mass movement in the US.



C. Clark Kissinger, left, in some funky 80s clothes, and right, during a three-month prison term for his role defending Mumia Abu-Jamal. Clark had an impeccable resume as a 60s radical (national secretary of SDS, testified at the Chicago 8 trial, visited Maoist China). He went on to write for the *Revolutionary Worker* and played a leading role in No Business As Usual and Refuse and Resist,

R&R maintained chapters in every city where there was an RCP branch, but its most impressive organizational achievement was the R&R Youth Network in New York City.⁶⁶ By the end of the 1990s, the NYC R&R Youth Network involved probably around a hundred youth, with a few among them emerging as skilled resistance leaders and dozens of others deeply committed to R&R's mission and politics. The NYC R&R Youth Network was built not only through mass movement organizing but also by way of a cultural component. Youth under 21 in 1990s NYC had a hard time finding physical spaces to congregate and socialize, especially if they were proletarian and confronting harassment by the police and criminalization. Spoken-word poetry, with roots in the Black and Puerto Rican liberation movements of the Sixties, experienced a revival and renaissance in the late 1990s. The NYC R&R Youth Network organized "Act Your Rage," a regular open mic night, that provided youth with a physical space to hang out, gave them a forum for self-expression that was so often denied in the stultifying schools and repressive culture of the US, grabbed onto a popular cultural form (spoken-word poetry) with a radical political edge, and used all this to foster a culture of resistance tied to mass political movements. The NYC R&R Youth Network made considerable quantitative achievements in bringing forwards dozens of youth and providing them with a training ground in organizing political resistance. The RCP's politics remained controversial within it, with some gravitating towards them and others rejecting them with no small amount of anti-communism. As has become a repeated theme in this document, the RCP's greatest mistake was burying its communist convictions within the mass movement; while the NYC R&R Youth Network became a substantial mass organization of youth, the RCYB chapter in NYC at the time was minuscule.

As a whole, R&R made important contributions to fostering mass political resistance in relation to several social faultlines in the 1990s. It did so when many forces of political opposition had tethered their sails to the Democratic Party, channeling alienated and radicalized sections of the petty-bourgeoisie towards the dead-ends of reformism and bourgeois electoral politics. During the 1996 electoral season, R&R even waged a “Resist 96” campaign to “make October a national month of resistance,” directly going against the tide of relying on bourgeois elections while also not making voting a dividing line (meaning welcoming the participation of people who also decided to vote in bourgeois elections while not allowing the mass movement to get diverted into bourgeois electoral politics). Furthermore, R&R stood out from typical Leftist organizations by the breadth of people it sought to involve and by its use of culture as an important form for fostering resistance.

With a significant number of RCP cadres assigned to anchor R&R’s work and with less involvement of non-RCP activists in leadership positions in R&R as the 1990s went on, R&R took on more the character of an “RCP-lite” rather than a united front organization. To solve this problem, the RCP would have had to rely less on its organizational role within R&R and principally play a *political* role while bringing forward activists who did not fully agree with the RCP’s politics to play leadership roles. The “RCP-lite” character of R&R, the disproportionate organizational role of RCP cadre within it, and the petty-bourgeois social base of R&R had the consequences of burying communist convictions, making mass movements ends-in-themselves, and focusing RCP cadres’ attention narrowly on resistance movements rather than revolution.

The 1990s saw the RCP develop greater sophistication and capacity for initiating and leading united front mass movements. On three fronts of struggle—defending abortion rights, resisting police brutality, and fighting to free Mumia Abu-Jamal—the RCP played an integral role in raising the fighting capacity and organization of the people and had a real material impact (the bourgeoisie did not carry out their intention to execute Mumia). Those three particular fronts of struggle demonstrate the RCP’s overarching strategic and moral commitment to fighting against and ending the oppression of Black people and the oppression of women as central components of the revolutionary process. In addition, mass struggles on these three fronts led by the RCP in collaboration with others presented an alternative to the electoral arena without making voting a dividing line at a time when the Democratic Party was succeeding in co-opting many political forces of opposition.

While October 22nd did bring forward many proletarians, including as mass leaders, and the Mumia movement reached and involved proletarians, the RCP’s movement-building efforts principally relied on the progressive and radicalized petty-bourgeoisie (with the exception of October 22nd). On the positive side, this resulted in radicalized petty-bourgeois youth working under the leadership of the Party and sometimes joining it, building working relations with individuals in the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, and enlisting “prominents”—people who had public recognition such as actors, artists, musicians, authors, public intellectuals, etc.—to lend their support to resistance and align with the masses. Moreover, these fronts of struggle had a national effect on key social faultlines, drawing people into debate on terms more favorable to the interests of the proletariat. On the negative, it turned the RCP’s work among the proletariat into islands surrounded by a petty-bourgeois sea and buttressed petty-bourgeois ideology within the Party itself.

An additional criticism must be made of the RCP’s approach to mass movements in the 1990s: it had a difficult time relating to mass movements that it did not initiate or have an organizational form for ensuring its leadership within. At the end of the 1990s, several mass movements were emerging as powerful fronts of struggle: the militant protests against imperialist globalization beginning with the one that shut down of the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle in late 1999; unionization efforts and labor struggles among low-wage workers, including immigrants; and a student movement against sweatshops which sometimes made links with low-wage worker struggles in the US. Furthermore, various localized mass movements came and went throughout the 1990s, and other battles drew nationwide attention, such as human-rights oriented protests against the death penalty. The RCP certainly found ways to relate to these struggles, at minimum by publishing articles in its newspaper about them and by distributing its newspaper

within these mass movements. But it did not find ways to relate to them on a deeper level, let alone to play a *political* leadership role within them.

The RCP failed to anticipate the “Battle in Seattle” that erupted outside the WTO meeting, as it did not deploy significant numbers to the protest. It did deploy the RCYB and newspaper distribution teams to subsequent large protests against imperialist globalization, with the RCYB joining, alongside anarchists, the militant leading edge of the protests and attempting to debate out ideological and political questions within the movement. A pamphlet by Raymond Lotta, *Imperialist Globalization and the Fight for a Different Future*, was published in 1998 to provide communist analysis to the economic and political questions that “globalization” had brought to the forefront. But the RCP remained a relatively marginal voice within the wave of protests against imperialist globalization. To be fair, anarchism and social-democracy were the dominant ideological trends in the movement from the beginning, and it would have been difficult to transform that dynamic, but the RCP was unprepared to enter the fray and never really mounted a systematic effort to do so—it is unlikely that even a single comrade was assigned to devote their main focus to it.

The RCP’s correct rejection of economism in the late 1970s and early 1980s had the negative side effect of treating union and economic struggles almost as if they were infectious diseases, and the RCP never developed a strategic approach for relating to them on a revolutionary basis other than sporadic newspaper distribution. Consequently, besides sending a *Revolutionary Worker* reporter here or there to interview immigrant and other proletarian workers on their exploitation and struggles for better working conditions, it never found ways to make deep ties within the union battles among low-wage workers, including many immigrants, that were bubbling up in the late 1990s (for example: Justice for Janitors in LA and the Florida tomato pickers organized into the Coalition of Immokalee Workers). The RCP never considered how it might deploy cadre to build communist-led unions or lead mass struggles among these workers.

Among college students in the late 1990s and early 2000s, protests against the sweatshop conditions in which many workers in the oppressed nations toiled started to confront, albeit from a reformist outlook, the workings of imperialism. These college students also sometimes linked up with unionization efforts among low-wage workers on their campuses, making connections with the proletarians who staffed their cafeterias and cleaned their dorms. Though the RCP did stretch a line to college campuses through the work of Revolution Books, newspaper distribution, and the mass movements it led, it did not have a systematic plan for how to relate to and bring forward radicalized college students. Consequently, it failed to relate much to emerging student movements and missed opportunities to sharpen and strengthen those student movements and recruit the best individuals among them as communists.

Finally, the RCP failed to take enough notice of local conditions that were giving rise to localized mass struggles or presented possibilities for intervention. For example, despite having branches in Cleveland and Detroit, the RCP did not see the opportunity created by, or make plans for political work, mass struggle, and organization in relation to, the ongoing process of deindustrialization that changed the urban landscape of the rust belt, with auto and steel factories closed, increased unemployment, and wider sections of the masses pushed into deeper poverty.

Why did the RCP have such a difficult time relating to mass struggles that it did not initiate or have an organizational apparatus for leading? (1) Strategic rigidity and over-centralization made the RCP unable to quickly adjust to new developments and carry out a more diverse and flexible array of interventions and ongoing practice. (2) As a consequence of movementism, the RCP relied far too much on playing an organizational rather than a political role within mass movements, so it had a hard time figuring out how to relate to a mass movement when it did not have some measure of organizational control over them. (3) Numbers, in the quantitative and qualitative sense: without adequate new recruits to offset attrition and without the development of cadre who could get their bearings independently and come up with political line and

tactics for particular spheres of political work, the RCP was numerically and politically unable to lead more than a few specific spheres of mass struggle that received considerable attention and guidance from central leadership.

You can't harvest dragons if you don't have dragon's teeth to sow

Alongside movementism and the pivot towards the petty-bourgeoisie was a decline, quantitatively and qualitatively, in the RCP's theoretical output and in the theoretical level of RCP membership. The most palpable indication of this decline was the cessation of *Revolution* magazine, which had published a number of impressive pieces of analysis and theory throughout the 1980s. The last issue of *Revolution* magazine was published in 1994, and that issue itself was a late afterthought coming after the previously published issue in 1992. To our knowledge, RCP leadership never offered any announcement or explanation, internally or publicly, as to why it decided (perhaps more unconsciously than consciously, a problem in its own right) to stop publishing *Revolution* magazine.

Without a regular propaganda and theory organ, the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper took on the task of including more in-depth analysis and theoretical pieces. On the positive, the RCP's newspaper was not narrowly focused on exposure, but also gave readers in-depth analysis and introduced them to questions concerning science, art, culture, revolutionary strategy and history, and philosophy as well as polemics on the practical resistance movements of the day. On the negative, the RCP's newspaper tended to blur the lines between agitation, propaganda, and theory, effectively lowering the level of the cadre and confusing the masses with articles that likely came off as an internal discussion that they would have trouble engaging, especially as Avakian's writings increasingly relied on quoting and referencing his previous works. What different types of agitation, propaganda, and theory publications and media a communist party should produce to serve different needs and audiences will have to be figured out based on a party's capabilities and what best serves the revolutionary process. The RCP resolved this issue in the 1990s mostly by flattening everything into the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper without any public rationalization (or, to our knowledge, internal explanation).

One of the only significant theoretical works produced by the RCP from 1992–99 was the paper *Notes on Political Economy*, published in 1998.⁹⁷ In a previous section of this summation, we made criticism of the shortcomings of its self-criticism on the inevitability of "Revolution or World War III" and its obsession with the spiral/conjuncture geometric metaphor. Let us add here that while *Notes on Political Economy* has some important points about the purgative function of war and some interesting analysis of contemporary economic trends and crises, it has significant blind spots—for example, the decline in manufacturing in the US is mentioned, but the word "deindustrialization" is never used and the depth of the shift in the world economy is not adequately appreciated. Moreover, it suffers, even in its analysis on the 1990s, from the persistence of viewing crisis as inevitably headed towards problems (and not also opportunities) for the bourgeoisie and openings for revolution. This line of thinking downplays the decisive role of the subjective factor in the revolutionary process (as if the prospects for launching revolutionary people's wars in oppressed countries were dependent on conjunctural crisis rather than ongoing structural conditions). Exemplifying the conjunctural crisis obsession was a phrase from Avakian to describe the 1990s that *Notes on Political Economy* praises: "period of transition with potential for great upheaval." The problem with this phrase is that it is as true as it is obvious and banal. What the phrase really meant is that the RCP did not have a concrete analysis of how the contradictions of capitalism-imperialism were unfolding in the 1990s, and reality was not neatly conforming to their spiral/conjuncture geometric metaphor, so they came up with a vague label ("period of transition") and put a positive spin on the potential for crisis ("potential for great upheaval").

Avakian's own output in this period continued forward and magnified the weaknesses we spoke of in relation to his 1980s output and further declined in quality. Avakian did not write any books (in the sense of a substantial

monograph) from 1992 well into the 2000s,⁶⁸ instead publishing a few lengthy essays. Avakian contributed individual articles to the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper on strategic and philosophical questions, but his main output came in the form of talks, which were transcribed and distributed first internally to Party members and then published as a series of articles in the RCP's newspaper.

Avakian's talks from this period certainly offer words of wisdom, expositions of communist principles, and some discussion of the challenges that the RCP was running into. The problem is that they offer little in the way of synthesis, systematic strategic assessment, or rigorous, empirically-grounded analysis. Instead, Avakian's talks provide some general principles concerning methods of leadership, some historical materialist anecdotes, some anecdotes from the RCP's practice, some philosophical musings, some commentary on a *New York Times* bestseller, and some mostly speculative strategic ideas. They blur the line between agitation, propaganda, and theory and began to recycle the same ideas.⁶⁹ Consequently, Avakian's talks did not train RCP members, supporters, and youth recruits in the level of intellectual rigor and systematic approach required of communists, nor did they provide them with the richness of practical examples and historical depth that are necessary for internalizing general principles. The weaknesses in Avakian's method contributed to divorcing ideas and general principles from reality and the struggle to change reality, which in turn created a Party culture of speculative "interesting" discussion separated from the "real" political work and a Party of pseudo-intellectuals and narrow-minded movement organizers (with both characteristics often present in the same individual).

While the RCP made significant advances in recruiting youth during the 1990s, especially in LA, it did not adequately train these youth recruits in communist theory or create a culture among them of reading and debating theory at a high level. There were exceptions of individuals who took initiative and of Party units, especially in LA, that made greater use of theory as they were engaged in practice with much higher stakes. But overall, the generation of communists brought forward in the 1990s was of a lower theoretical caliber than the generations of the 1960s and 70s. Nevertheless, within the 1990s wave of youth recruitment, probably around a dozen youth leaders emerged who were steered in mass struggle and integrating with the proletariat, and showed strong potential as all-around communist leaders.

The RCP did make concentrated efforts to train the youth under its leadership in theory at the end of the 1990s, with three successive youth retreats that brought together perhaps over a hundred youth for several days of theoretical discussion and political education. It says something about the greatness of democratic centralism and the seriousness of the RCP that they could organize by-invite youth retreats hidden from the eyes and ears of the enemy. However, these youth retreats also revealed tremendous unevenness in theoretical engagement among the youth around the RCP—for many attendees, who had been working under the RCP's leadership for at least a year, and often more, the youth retreats marked their first time reading any of the MLM classics.

A low theoretical level was not restricted to the youth. Many seasoned comrades, who had been schooled in the MLM classics in the 1970s and early 80s, seem to have stopped studying communist theory in the 1990s. Like muscles without physical labor or exercise, their theoretical capacities atrophied, and the communist theory they had learned became more a dogma than a living and transformative philosophy and science.

In addition to fewer and lower-in-quality theoretical publications, another contributing factor to the low theoretical level was a change in the RCP's internal culture. In the 1980s, there were specialists in propaganda in the RCP who raised the theoretical level of Party members and used communist theory to address practical challenges by conducting "prop sessions" (propaganda sessions), consisting of a prepared presentation following by collective discussion. The deployment of propaganda specialists largely ceased in the 1990s, and the frequency of prop sessions diminished. We do not know whether this was a conscious decision or the result of attrition of Party members, but either way it had a damaging effect.

When you combine a low theoretical level, movementism, tailing the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, lack of attention to quantitative achievements, and low-stakes political work without the prospect of revolutionary advances, you wind up with an internal Party life devoid of line struggle. Since line struggle is the lifeblood of a true communist party, without it, errors are not rectified, ideological rot sets in, and it is only a matter of time before the Party gives up on revolution as a real goal.

If there was one overarching *theoretical* problem behind all the RCP's work in the 1990s, it was its *failure to conceive of a revolutionary strategy that did not hinge on a coming grand crisis*. In the 1990s, Party leadership did not see a grand crisis on the horizon, so it had no real strategy for revolution. It had elements of a strategy, including more sophisticated elements that it had in the 1980s, which achieved important results, especially in bringing forward proletarians in mass struggle and organization. But it had little practical sense of how to move those elements towards launching a revolutionary civil war. Avakian could (and did, repeatedly) talk about making links between the Party's work "now" and the future insurrection, but those links remained principally in the realm of ideas.

Giving those links the "dignity of immediate actuality" (to borrow Lenin's phrase) would have had to come not principally through mass movements based among the progressive and radicalized petty-bourgeoisie, but through *entrenchment* within the *structural* (not merely conjunctural) class antagonisms that the bourgeoisie could not resolve except with deeper immiseration, violence, and repression: displacing public housing residents, police brutality, prisons, vicious exploitation of immigrants and low-wage workers, etc. To push those class antagonisms to the breaking point, intensify the class struggle towards revolutionary violence, and develop the hardcore subjective forces for revolution necessary, the RCP would have needed to *theoretically* develop a deeper strategic recognition of those class antagonisms and *practically* entrench its members within them, deeply integrating with the masses, organizing and leading them in struggle, and developing their proletarian class-consciousness through the process. It did some of this, but as islands of proletarian struggle within a petty-bourgeois sea. Without solving this theoretical and strategic question and then leading practice on a correct theoretical basis, the problems of theoretical decline, lack of line struggle, pivoting increasingly towards the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, and pervasive movementism were a recipe for slow-cooking revisionism.

Compounding this failure was that RCP leadership tended to treat theoretical questions as *settled* questions without need for further elaboration or rethinking. They had undoubtedly made considerable theoretical headway in the late 1970s and early 80s, but in the 1990s they succumbed to the temptation of resting on prior achievements. No substantially new critical analysis—or even elaboration of previous analysis—of the history of the international communist movement was forthcoming from Avakian or other Party leaders in this period. There was no campaign within the RCP to revisit any of the MLM classics and renew the Party's understanding of them. The result was significant rigidity setting in, a lack and even some suppression⁷⁰ of creative new ideas, and a membership that increasingly lost the ability to think critically.

"Feel the critical mass approach horizon"

Throughout this section on the RCP's work from 1992–2001, we have been advancing a critique of what were growing revisionist tendencies within the Party. Even with those tendencies, at the end of this period there was a palpable sense that something new, something with a real revolutionary quality at its core, was on the horizon. Mass protests in the summer of 2000 outside the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia and the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles brought together the militant "shut it down" edge of the movement against imperialist globalization with the spirit and politics of other contemporary mass movements, went up against riot police and repressive measures, and posed the question (in the words of an R&R Youth Network banner at the Philadelphia protests): "What future will you fight for?"

Revolutionary communism was presenting an answer. The RCP was playing a leading role in mass movements against police brutality and to free Mumia Abu-Jamal and bringing forward proletarians within those movements and in strongholds of revolutionary activity in housing projects in LA and Chicago. There was a growing contingent of youth embracing and practicing revolutionary communist politics, able to make a strong show of force in LA, with a few among them developing significant communist leadership capabilities. All this was good reason for proletarian optimism, and it seems no coincidence that Rage Against The Machine's album *The Battle of Los Angeles*, with its spirit of revolutionary conquest, dropped in 1999.⁷¹

The revolutionary people's war in Nepal, initiated in 1996 and led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), a member of the RIM, was by then inflicting serious blows on the enemy and gaining a mass following, providing international onlookers, including in the US, with an inspiring example of what a revolutionary people under communist leadership could accomplish. The RCP continued its strong tradition of proletarian internationalism, giving reports on the people's war in Nepal a prominent place in its newspaper. A reporter for the *Revolutionary Worker*, Li Onesto, traveled to Nepal in 1999, spending time with guerrilla fighters, villagers in communist base areas, and other members and supporters of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), and even conducted and published a lengthy interview with its leader, comrade Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal). Onesto's inspiring firsthand accounts of the people's war were published in the *Revolutionary Worker* and turned into a book—*Dispatches from the People's War in Nepal* (Pluto Press, 2005)—and her photographs of the rebel masses of Nepal were displayed in exhibits.

On May Day 2001, the RCP published its *Draft Programme*—the draft for a new Party Programme—which laid out a powerful indictment of US imperialism, a strategy for revolution in the US, and an outline of the socialist transition to communism that would follow the revolutionary seizure of power and establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This *Draft Programme* and the process that created it was a significant counterweight to the tendencies towards revisionism within the RCP criticized above.

To develop the *Draft Programme*, RCP members and supporters engaged in a process of social investigation and book research, speaking to immigrant agricultural workers in California and Black farmers in the South, housing project residents and middle-class professionals, and researching statistics on income disparities and types of occupations. The contemporary reality of the Black and Chicano national questions were investigated, including through dialogue with nationalist forces, and the Chicano national question was the subject of a position paper. The oppression of women, the education system, the urban/rural divide, and other facets of US society were all subject to renewed scrutiny. The programme process involved Party members and youth around the Party in applying communist theory to the contemporary conditions of the US.

The result—the 2001 RCP *Draft Programme*—is one of the greatest documents produced in the history of the communist movement in the US. It boldly puts forward the need for all-the-way revolution and the real possibility of initiating and winning a revolutionary civil war in the most powerful imperialist country that has ever existed. The sections on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist transition to communism incorporate the theoretical and practical breakthroughs of Mao and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the work of critical summation of historical experience carried out by Avakian, the RCP, and the RIM to present an advanced and sophisticated conception of the socialist transition period emphasizing the role of class struggle and bringing forward the masses in radically transforming society in the direction of communism. Moreover, these conceptions are applied to the concrete conditions of the US, with an outline of the specific transformations to be made after the seizure of power. Sections on the national question and the woman question are worlds apart from economist and class-reductionist approaches while also not tailing revolutionary nationalism or feminism, and offer concrete policies for a new socialist government to implement in order to move towards ending the oppression of women and Black people and other oppressed nationalities.

The 2001 RCP *Draft Programme* also makes a slight change to the RCP's central task, now encapsulated as "Create public opinion, seize power! Prepare minds and organize forces for revolution." The added phrase gives specific emphasis to the development of proletarian class-consciousness and to building various forms of organization among the masses with the vanguard party at the core. The central task section of the *Draft Programme* incorporates the greater degree of sophistication in the RCP's practice and strategic thinking over the course of the 1990s, theorizing the role of the newspaper as the hub and pivot of the Party's work, building proletarian neighborhood strongholds of revolutionary activity, the role of mass resistance and social movements in the revolutionary process, the importance of developing tens of thousands of organized ties of the vanguard party, and other elements of revolutionary strategy. While the central task section makes clear the orientation of viewing all the Party's work "from revolution back" and emphasizes the need to "hasten while awaiting" favorable conditions for the launching of an insurrection, it carries forward the RCP's emphasis on revolution via a grand crisis and does not give enough weight to structural class antagonisms and to the accumulation of the subjective forces for revolution and wielding them to *create* (not just hasten) favorable new conditions through struggle.

The class analysis of the US presented in the 2001 RCP *Draft Programme* is certainly an advance beyond its 1981 *Programme*. There is far more clarity in identifying, including quantitatively, different sections of and stratification within the working class and emphasizing the lower and deeper sections, including those with one foot in semi-legal economic activity, as the main social base for revolution. A helpful approach in its class analysis is the principle of combining the different strengths of different sections of the proletariat for revolution, from the volatility and "nothing to lose" spirit of the less stably employed sections to the sense of discipline and collective organization among the more stably employed in conditions of socialized production. A weakness in the 2001 RCP *Draft Programme's* class analysis is that it proceeds too much from categories rather than contradictions, consequently not providing a living sense of the class antagonisms that propel the proletariat into motion against capitalist rule.

With the publication of the *Draft Programme*, the RCP embarked on a campaign to distribute it broadly and discuss and debate its content among the RCP's existing ties, revolutionary-minded people met through its broad work, and political forces who were not communists but were committed to radical change. The RCP envisioned a process by which thousands of people were brought into discussion of the *Draft Programme*, debating communist principles, revolutionary strategies, and the policies of a future socialist society. Towards that end, it held meetings with its supporters and contacts, events at its bookstores, and set up an online discussion forum. This campaign revealed substantial weaknesses in the RCP's ranks, with the low theoretical level making it difficult for many Party members to discuss and argue for the content of the *Draft Programme*. Furthermore, tailing the progressive petty-bourgeoisie and practicing movementism meant that a majority of Party members were objectively in disagreement with the line of the *Draft Programme*. As a result, when they discussed it outside (and even inside) the Party's ranks, they often used its conception of proletarian dictatorship to tail anti-communist prejudices and used the emphasis in the Central Task section on "organizing forces," building resistance, and relating to social movements to argue for movementism.

The *operational line*—the practice and thinking of most RCP members—was *out of sync* with the RCP's *formal line* as it was articulated in the 2001 *Draft Programme*. *This contradiction demanded resolution one way or another, in favor of revolutionary communism or revisionism.*

2001–2003: Gaining a mass following, but at what cost?

As fate would have it, a crisis-provoking event came along that put the mounting internal contradictions of the RCP on the back burner for a couple years, though it ultimately intensified them. The September 11, 2001 attacks by Islamic fundamentalist forces on targets in the US, which killed thousands in New York City, precipitated a dramatic change in the political landscape inside the US and around the world. Muslims and

anyone who “looked Arab” in the US became targets of a reactionary pogrom mentality. In the White House, so-called “neocons” (neoconservatives) seized on the September 11 attacks as an opportunity to barrel through their long-held intention to “free” US imperial power from any geopolitical barriers to expansion. They aimed to reshape the oil-rich Middle East into a region under unbridled US domination through war and occupation. Politically, they advocated unchecked power for the executive branch, which led to the widespread and legalized use of torture by the CIA, the military, and US lackeys under the Bush administration. Afghanistan was the first target on their list, with a US invasion kicking the Taliban out of power in Kabul, but never able to eliminate them from the country.⁷²

The RCP recognized the gravity of these events. Its immediate response was to issue a statement a few days after September 11, “The Horrors That Come from This Horrible System,” which skillfully united with the grief people felt at the loss of life on September 11 while directing them to look at US imperialism’s responsibility for creating the world situation that led to that loss of life. Probably hundreds of thousands of copies of this statement were distributed nationwide, and in New York City, teams distributing the RCP statement gathered crowds in impromptu discussions and debates on the streets. Artists with ties to the RCP organized dozens of people to dress in black and hold up “Our Grief Is Not A Cry For War” signs in silence in formation at New York’s Times Square. When the US launched war on Afghanistan October 7, 2001, the RCP was among the few inside the US to oppose it, holding and joining street protests and going out broadly to the people explaining that the bourgeoisie’s motivations for war were not to liberate women in Afghanistan or even to “stop terrorism,” but to extend US imperial power. Not only did the RCP take a firm internationalist stand when doing so was going against the tide (to understate the matter); it worked patiently and persistently to explain its stand to the people. While some other political organizations did organize anti-war protests, *no other political force of opposition attempted to reach, and challenge, the people broadly like the RCP did.*

As the US bourgeoisie cohered around a plan to invade and occupy Iraq, extend the reach of the US military and the CIA around the world, and institute new repressive measures within the US, enshrined in the Patriot Act and resulting in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and round-ups and detentions of Muslims, Arabs, and immigrants, RCP leadership developed a plan for leading widespread resistance. The RCP correctly recognized that the bourgeoisie’s moves posed not only great danger for the people of the world but also opportunity to swing large sections of people in the US into a mass movement against the “juggernaut of war and repression” (to quote Avakian’s analysis⁷³). The RCP’s main vehicle for seizing on this opportunity was the united front organization Not In Our Name (hereafter NION), whose very moniker reveals the united-front-level internationalism behind it. NION’s politics were predicated on drawing a line between the people of the US and the rulers of the US, and getting the former to take a principled stand against the latter. The moral and political glue of NION was a “Pledge of Resistance,” penned by a poet and read collectively at protests around the country, and a “Statement of Conscience” signed by many “prominents” (the RCP’s term for people with name recognition and/or a public platform, such as famous actors) and published as a newspaper ad by way of significant fundraising efforts. NION used flags of the earth as a way for people to make visual their commitment to the people of the world and to contend with the sharp rise in reactionary US patriotism. In addition to NION, the RCP initiated the Blue Triangle Network to organize against the legal and extra-legal attacks on Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, and immigrants.

NION brought together a breadth of activists, new and experienced, mainly from the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, who did not agree with the RCP’s full politics but did unite with its united-front-level program in opposition to the Bush administration’s ambitions and actions. NION was ahead of the curve in mobilizing public opposition to the Iraq War when few other political forces were willing to; it organized protests of tens of thousands in New York and San Francisco in October 6, 2002. As Fall turned into Winter, opposition to the Iraq War grew, drawing in the liberal petty-bourgeoisie, with some Democratic Party politicians in Congress regularly speaking at protests rallies. Democrat Party-aligned protest organizations and revisionist forces stepped to the forefront, symbolically coming together in the CP operatives who led the coalition United for Peace and Justice. To some degree, the RCP’s leadership role was pushed to the side during this groundswell of liberal opposition to the Iraq War, with an anti-communist “hit piece” by Michelle Goldberg published in *Salon*

Magazine “exposing” the RCP’s role in NION (the revisionist CP’s role in United for Peace and Justice was perfectly fine with the liberal bourgeoisie).⁷⁴ Nevertheless, NION remained a strong force within the broader mass movement, and mounting public opinion against the Iraq War found palpable expression in the millions of people who came out to protest on February 15, 2003, in what was likely the largest worldwide protest in human history up to that point.

A crucial difference between NION and other opposition forces in the run-up to the Iraq War was NION’s orientation to mobilize to *stop* the war, in contrast to resting content with registering opposition in tame protests.⁷⁵ The latter approach was taken by the United for Peace and Justice coalition and other organizations operating under the delusion that the Democratic Party might stop the war. In addition, the ANSWER coalition, led by the Trotskyite organization Workers World Party,⁷⁶ also held ineffectual protests that attracted some numbers but never ventured beyond police barricades or did anything that might disrupt business as usual. The politics of ANSWER protests were blunted by their laundry list of leftist slogans, and, owing to their deliberate lack of conflict with the police and plethora of boring speeches, they were the laughing stock of anyone with a radical bone in their body. To this day, ANSWER still uses the same font and style (or lack thereof) on its protest signs and many of the same old cliched slogans, in this and other ways reeking with the stale stench of revisionism.

NION’s orientation to stop the war found expression in organizing several mass high school walkouts, with youth converging in protests intended to *disrupt* business as usual. Perhaps tens of thousands of youth took part in these protests during the Spring of 2003. High school students, newly confronting the horrors of imperialist war and recognizing the inability to prevent those horrors through the channels of bourgeois-democracy, and not yet pacified by the routine of ineffectual protests, were a potential force for determined, militant resistance and, through NION, became the leading edge of the anti-war movement. The RCP must be credited with recognizing the role of youth as a force of political resistance and rebellion and having strategic confidence in their ability to break out of the confines of bourgeois-democracy, not just in this instance but overall in the revolutionary process. Even anarchists of the time, steeled in the protests against imperialist globalization and showing great courage in street battles against riot cops, could not see the potential for militant resistance with a mass character, i.e., that involved far greater numbers than were in their “affinity groups”—the consequence of not having the magic weapons of the mass line, the united front, and the vanguard party.

Mass protests with a militant character erupted when the US started its war on Iraq March 20, 2003, but quickly subsided thereafter. NION did carry on, and in some cities generated anti-war activists determined to continue the struggle as the brutal realities of US occupation, including torture of Iraqis under military detention, unfolded. But the liberal petty-bourgeoisie, a class distinguished by its utter spinelessness, largely receded from protest activities, convinced there was nothing they could really do outside the framework of bourgeois-democracy. For a militant, sustained anti-war movement to have persisted beyond the war’s beginnings, a section of people would have had to have given up their faith in bourgeois-democracy and developed an anti-imperialist consciousness. NION’s politics could be too easily assimilated by the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie without challenging their class outlook (picture globe flags waving on suburban homes in liberal petty-bourgeois enclaves). The RCP did not adequately expose the limitations of bourgeois-democracy and develop a conscious anti-imperialist section within the broader anti-war movement, with its cadre often afraid to rock the boat.

Even with the ebb in the anti-war movement, through initiating and leading NION and owing to its principled internationalism, in 2003 the RCP had generated the largest mass following, albeit mostly at the level of united-front politics, it had perhaps ever had. *But at what cost?* The redeployment of cadre to NION pulled many RCP members from work among the proletariat. To cite one telling example, a comrade who had been instrumental to the RCP’s efforts in Nickerson Gardens and to bringing proletarian youth around and into the LA Branch of the RCP was transferred to help lead NION in San Francisco, integrating with hippies and leftists instead of the

masses. As a matter of formal line, RCP leadership stated that work among the proletariat was even more important in the post-September 11 political atmosphere, with a major internal bulletin arguing for the heightened importance of the October 22nd National Day of Protest Against Police Brutality and the need to bringing forward a class-conscious section of the proletariat to impact the broader mass movement. But the operational line, including by RCP leadership, was to weaken and to some extent abandon much of the Party's work among the proletariat, with O22 and political work in proletarian neighborhoods suffering from a lack of cadre assigned to them as RCP members were shifted to focus on NION and the progressive petty-bourgeoisie.

The objective effect of the operational line of the RCP during this period was to strengthen the tendencies towards movementism and tailing the progressive petty-bourgeoisie that had grown quite strong within the Party during the 1990s. Consequently, even as the RCP found itself at the head, politically and organizationally, of a large mass movement in the form of NION, there was little communist ideological work carried out within the mass movement and little organizational consolidation from the mass movement into and around the *Party*. With a few exceptions, RCYB chapters, Party-led circles, and the number of individuals being recruited into the Party did not grow at the level they should have given the size of the mass movement and the RCP's leadership role within it, and even what organizational growth did occur tended to reproduce more movementism rather than create a new wave of revolutionary communists integrated with the masses. *Partisanship towards the RCP and its full communist politics did not increase in proper proportion to the respect NION gained.*

There was one significant counter to this negative dynamic: in September 2003, the RCP held by-invite events on the east and west coasts, each attended by hundreds, perhaps a thousand, people, at which Bob Avakian gave a speech titled "Revolution: Why It's Necessary, Why It's Possible, and What It's All About."^{ZZ} It is a testament to democratic centralism, to the RCP, and to the following it had built that it could hold these events relatively securely and without the enemy necessarily aware of the nature of what was going on inside. These events were Avakian's first publicly known appearances since he left the US and applied for political refugee status in France in 1981. The RCP saw an opportunity to put forward its communist convictions in the best way it knew how, wielding Avakian's skill as an orator at explaining communist principles and politics, to the following it had built up over decades and via the recent anti-war movement.

The by-invite Avakian events also highlight a growing problem in the RCP's modus operandi: a period of movementism is followed by an attempt to put forward its communist convictions, after it had buried them in a mass movement, and a shift of focus to ideological consolidation. To some extent, the natural rhythm of the revolutionary process will consist of waves of mass struggle followed by ideological and organizational consolidation as the mass struggle ebbs, and this is not a bad thing. However, for communists to succeed in making ideological and organizational gains in the wake of a high tide of mass struggle, they cannot just ride the wave, but must try and shape it and even, to some extent, surf against the current. Communists must find ways to put forward their communist convictions while the mass movement is in ascendance, even if that causes friction, and must work to prevent the mass movement from coming back under the wing of bourgeois-democracy. Failing to do so will set a vanguard party up for being incapable of making advances in recruitment and partisanship when the mass movement ebbs. There must be a dialectical unity between our involvement in and leadership of mass movements and our work to develop proletarian class-consciousness and recruit communists during and in the wake of those mass movements. What the RCP increasingly started to practice was a dualism of movementism followed by dogmatism (specifically, dogmatic attempts to project communist politics and develop partisanship towards the Party).

2004–5: A “cultural revolution” without the masses

The political transformations and anti-war mass movement that followed September 11, 2001 may have interrupted the mounting internal contradictions in the RCP, but those internal contradictions were bound to reassert themselves. The RCP’s success at attracting a mass following through NION brought the pervasive movementism that had been building up inside the Party into clear focus for anyone capable of recognizing it (not many RCP members could). The by-invite Avakian speeches were part of a wider campaign to promote and popularize Chairman Avakian and his body of work amid a political situation in which millions of people had been drawn into political life in a situation of crisis, repression, and imperialist aggression. Launching that campaign showed that most RCP members were incapable of intelligently talking about Avakian’s works (and communist theory more generally) and defensive and tailist in the face of widespread anti-communism. Finally, when the process of turning the RCP’s 2001 *Draft Programme* into a final Party Programme was resumed, in summer 2003, with an internal process of debate and discussion from Party units to regional conferences to a Party Congress, it revealed not only an embarrassingly low theoretical level but also widespread disagreement with the RCP’s Central Task and with proletarian dictatorship.

After over two decades of no serious line struggle within the Party—itsself indicative of a deep problem and bolstered by the lack of a Party Congress in 25 years—most RCP members were incapable of expressing disagreements as coherent lines or writing position papers articulating those lines. Consequently, internal disagreements with the line of the *Draft Programme* were expressed largely by way of eclectics, making it difficult to have a open, honest, and transformative line struggle.

Even with all that eclectics, two main lines of disagreement with the *Draft Programme* emerged, concerning the Party’s Central Task and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Many RCP members treated the Central Task section of the *Draft Programme* as a buffet of different strategies and tactics, and expressed an obvious taste for movement-building and working within existing social movements, downplaying ideological work, the pivotal role of the Party’s press, and work among the proletariat (unless it was movement-building work). The phrase “prepare minds and organize forces” was eclecticized to emphasize the latter half of it in a movementist way, and the RCP’s movement-building efforts of the prior decade and a half were taken as the model of revolutionary strategy.

Many RCP members also expressed clear discomfort with the dictatorship of the proletariat, treating sections of the *Draft Programme* that addressed it as a buffet and choosing to emphasize the “democratic” aspects of a future socialist government rather than its role in exercising dictatorship over the bourgeoisie. Years of defensiveness in the face of pervasive anti-communism had whittled away at many Party members’ communist convictions when it came to the desire to seize state power and exercise it to radically transform society.

One attempt to push back against this reneging on the dictatorship of the proletariat by way of eclectics was made during a regional *Draft Programme* Party conference. There, RCP Central Committee member Clyde Young ((real name Wayne Webb, 1949–2014), who was chairing the meeting, rebuked the eclectics by passionately declaring “we’re gonna incinerate the Klan!” He could have chosen a number of different verbs (annihilate, destroy, repress), but evidently Young chose to define quite specifically what he thought was in store for the Klan after the revolution (such specifics, of course, cannot usually be made in public documents, hence the use of terminology such as “the ultimate punishment”). Young’s ardent and enthusiastic defense of the dictatorship of the proletariat ought to be a hallmark of all communists (maybe without his specific verb choice), but it was not characteristic of RCP members in the early 2000s.

When the RCP’s 3rd Party Congress (hereafter 3PC) came around in Winter 2003–4, most attendees likely expected a smooth process of finalizing the Party Programme with some mild line struggle, convinced that the

Party was on the right track based on its work in NION and made numb and even oblivious to the internal contradictions of the Party by years of theoretical decline and no significant internal line struggle. When they got to the Congress, they received a shock: Avakian delivered a lengthy speech laying bare that the Party was at a crossroads, revisionism had set in to a significant degree, and an all-out internal struggle was needed to repudiate revisionism and get firmly back on the revolutionary road. Avakian identified a revisionist package within the Party that included what we are calling movementism (Avakian called it economism); the cultivation of (petty-bourgeois) “alternative lifestyles” in place of living like a communist; tailing after petty-bourgeois ideology, including anti-communism, postmodernism, and reformism; the dumbing down of Party members; and a pervasive eclectics used to justify reneging on communist principles. For Avakian, what tied all these questions together was the question of the Chair of the Party (Avakian) and his body of work, which the revisionist line downplayed, disagreed with, and failed to promote outside the Party, and which Avakian viewed as the embodiment of the revolutionary line of the Party. In Avakian’s view, his leadership and his theoretical contributions, especially his critical analysis of the history of the international communist movement and the new principles emerging from that critical analysis, were not understood or appreciated in the Party, and consequently the Party was failing to wield them in its political work, as revealed by difficulties taking up the campaign to promote and popularize Avakian and his body of work. To prevent the RCP from becoming fully revisionist, Avakian called for “a cultural revolution within a long march,” with the former meaning internal line struggle and the latter referring to the high-stakes political struggle in society the Party was engaged in after September 11, 2001.

Avakian’s assessment that revisionism had, to a significant degree, set in within the RCP was correct, and he correctly diagnosed many of the symptoms. However, his diagnosis left out important aspects, especially the Party’s move away from political work among the proletariat to focus more on the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, and a central root cause: RCP leadership’s lack of a strategy for revolution that did not hinge on a coming grand crisis. Avakian’s diagnosis also failed to quantify the qualitative problems within the Party: nowhere in his 3PC speech did Avakian address the low recruitment numbers, low newspaper distribution, or any other numerical shortcomings in the RCP’s strategic and practical objectives.

A thornier problem is Avakian’s insistence that the question of the Party Chair (himself) and his body of work was the central question concerning revolution vs. revisionism within the RCP. Undoubtedly, Avakian was the greatest embodiment of communist convictions within the RCP, and had played the decisive role in building and leading the RCP for its entire existence—there simply would not have been an RCP without him. Moreover, Avakian’s body of work was the most advanced line and theory within the RCP, and Avakian’s critical analysis of the history of the international communist movement, made in the late 1970s through the mid 1980s, was an important contribution to the international communist movement and played a pivotal role within the RCP in rupturing with economism and reformism. Avakian’s body of work had also been consistently contending with anti-communism and the narrow horizons of bourgeois-democracy, while the majority of RCP members had adopted a tailist and defensive approach to them. However, Avakian had not brought forward any substantially new theoretical insights since the mid 1980s, and the theoretical rigor and strategic value of his work had been in decline since then. Furthermore, as explained in previous sections of this summation, Avakian was largely responsible for the RCP hinging revolutionary advance on a coming grand crisis, and had failed to synthesize a clear strategy for revolution in the US that was not, in effect, waiting for the favorable objective conditions of a grand crisis. In Avakian’s 3PC speech, Party leadership was mostly let off the hook for the revisionism that had seeped into the RCP, as though decisions to deploy so many comrades to movement-building and work among the progressive petty-bourgeoisie and the cessation of *Revolution* magazine were not also in part to blame for the state of affairs within the Party.

What followed the 3PC was a process of internal line struggle, with the entire Party focused on studying Avakian’s 3PC speech and other subsequent internal documents and debating them out within their organizational units. The RCP was principally focused on this internal line struggle from January 2004 to August 2005, spending countless hours in meetings. Unfortunately, the quality of internal meetings was by and large quite low—most RCP members were incapable of understanding and debating line and communist

theory, and were held back by a moral desire to be “on the right side” but an inability to come to terms with adopting revisionist lines and ideologically remold themselves. The petty-bourgeoisification of the RCP—in the ideological, political, and material (class position) sense—led to grudges built up over decades exploding and line struggle used as an excuse for petty recriminations.

Comrades who played lower-level leadership roles, such as chairing units or being members of local leading committees in small cities, or mid-level leadership roles, such as being the public face of national initiatives, were often knocked down in the course of the internal line struggle—not thrown out of the Party, but losing authority within it. While these comrades were partially responsible for the growth of revisionism, they also tended to retain a basic revolutionary stand and love for the masses, so knocking them down had the effect of emboldening petty-bourgeois elements within the Party, who unleashed a barrage of petty resentments with no small degree of vitriol and hostility. The fact that lower- and mid-level leadership, who had, after all, reliably carried out the RCP’s strategy and their assignments within it, were to a substantial degree made the target of the struggle ultimately weakened the RCP’s ability to function. By Summer 2004, petty-bourgeois methods of struggle—such as browbeating, criticizing slightly incorrect phraseology used at meetings, jumping on and inflating minor errors, and dragging up and using every petty gripe available against targets of criticism—on the part of those religiously out to prove they were “with” Avakian and the “correct line” became so damaging that RCP leadership issued an internal polemic against what they dubbed the “lunacy line” taking hold within the Party. RCP leadership forcefully intervened to prevent the “lunacy line” from tearing the Party apart, especially in New York, where petty-bourgeois tendencies within the RCP were strongest.

Missing entirely from the “cultural revolution” that Avakian initiated was any call for or insistence on integrating with the masses. In fact, much (perhaps all) of the RCP’s work among the proletariat was criticized for economism and tailing the masses⁷⁸—no doubt a correct criticism, but rather than rectifying those real problems, RCP leadership pulled comrades out of that political work over the next several years, losing the mass base they had built up through O22 and the work in LA and Chicago. To be clear, integrating with the masses would not, in its own right, have defeated revisionist lines. But in a Party with a membership drawn mostly from the petty-bourgeoisie and that had increasingly tailed after the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, re-integrating with the masses would have been a necessary component to ideological remolding. To put it bluntly, why did Avakian call the internal struggle a “cultural revolution” when there was no effort to involve the masses or to force Party members to (metaphorically) “go to the countryside”?⁷⁹

The RNC protests debacle

The “long march” aspect of the RCP’s “cultural revolution within a long march” was also a bombastic misnomer. The political situation in the early 2000s US was certainly a ripe opportunity for communist intervention and building the subjective forces for revolution, including the united front under the leadership of the proletariat. The RCP’s movementism and failure to establish a firm mass base in the proletariat meant that it had let this opportunity slip through its grasp. By summer 2003, the anti-war mass movement had died down, and it remained to be seen how the future international maneuvers of the Bush administration would impact US society, but US imperialism was becoming bogged down in an occupation that tied their hands internationally while also failing to generate significant resistance within the US. The RCP overestimated the strength and freedom of the US bourgeoisie because it lacked an analysis of US imperialism’s coming economic decline, and it overestimated the potential of the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie for resistance without the existence of a class-conscious section of the proletariat (and the RCP reneged on its responsibility to generate the latter).

The onset of the internal line struggle within the RCP left its external practice in disarray. Party members tried to extricate themselves from movementism while Party leadership failed to develop a correct strategic approach for leading the mass movement—essentially, the RCP tried to absolve itself of sin rather than rectify

its practice. In place of movementism, Party members took up the campaign to promote and popularize Avakian and his body of work as well as renewed attempts at newspaper distribution, but both were carried out with considerable dogmatism, further cementing a dualism between movementism and dogmatism and failing to link revolutionary objectives with concrete practical efforts at building the subjective forces for revolution.

The most significant effort to lead the mass movement during this period was the RCP's work around the August 2004 protests against the Republican National Convention (RNC) in New York City. The RCP's efforts proved to be a debacle. The 2004 RNC protests were essentially an expression of the liberal and progressive petty-bourgeoisie, as well as the institutionalized labor unions and movement forces, registering their dissent in a ritual street protest (literally a Sunday stroll) before going to the ballot box in November with the intention of electing a Democrat instead of a Republican. Many in the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie felt that the Bush administration's international agenda and the Patriot Act were alarming and vowed that they must be stopped, but as a vacillating class whose lives were relatively unaffected by political transformations under Bush, they were not willing to break out of the bounds of bourgeois-democracy to change the course of history. Getting them to do so would have required deeper missteps by the US bourgeoisie, a class-conscious section of the proletariat with enough numerical force to have a national impact on political events, and a section of rebellious youth willing to throw down in defiant resistance. The latter two ingredients and to some degree the first one are the responsibility of communists to bring into being, and the RCP had largely failed to rise to that responsibility by tailing after the progressive petty-bourgeoisie for years and by not wrenching a strong anti-imperialist student and youth movement out of the NION experience.

Instead, the RCP imagined it could pull a rabbit out of a hat at the RNC protests. It brought dozens of youth volunteers to NYC in the couple months leading up to the RNC, dispatching them to conduct agitation and newspaper distribution throughout the city without a plan for organizing mass struggle under its leadership. These efforts alternated between dogmatism—agitating for revolution and promoting Avakian divorced from the upcoming protests—and movementism. On the latter, the RCP's intervention in the mass movement was twofold: (1) It tried to insist that the main protest should rally in Central Park, which the city government had denied a permit for, as if people congregating in Central Park for a rally was some radical act of defiance (protesters wound up doing so anyway, but without any conflict with the police). It never promoted the orientation of *shutting down* the RNC through militant resistance. (2) It promoted the slogan "No to the Bush Agenda,"⁸⁰ imagining that this slogan, because of the word "agenda" at the end, could help move the liberal petty-bourgeoisie away from relying on electoral means and into a determined resistance not bound by bourgeois-democracy. In reality, the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie could easily agree with the slogan "No to the Bush Agenda" while still viewing voting as the best way to issue that "no" and without ever challenging their allegiance to bourgeois-democracy. The "No to the Bush Agenda" slogan was simply the RCP's flip to movementism and tailing the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie, with the youth volunteers sent out onto the streets selling "No" T-shirts (in the process de-emphasizing Avakian promotion and newspaper distribution).

The 2004 RNC protests revealed the RCP's inability to divert the mass movement away from the electoral arena toward militant resistance that could throw a wrench in the empire. Its tactical misleadership of its own forces on the ground rested on years of movementism and a failure to bring forward a class-conscious section of the proletariat. The RNC protests were by and large a routine registering of dissent, with some scattered militant actions by anarchists and others representing the dying breaths of the movement against imperialist globalization.

In the months that followed the RNC, the RCP was a presence at many large, electorally-focused events in the run-up to the 2004 election, conducting agitation and distributing an Avakian talk on elections and bourgeois-democracy. It was certainly correct for the RCP to be in the fray of all the political ferment of the time, but it failed to generate much in the way of recruits and mass resistance. After Bush's re-election, the RCP issued a bombastic statement contrasting the Bush regime's plans with the revolutionary future represented by the

leadership of Bob Avakian. Mass distribution of this statement had no real effect on the political atmosphere, but that did not deter the RCP from issuing additional out-of-touch bombastic statements thereafter.

What were the results of the RCP's "cultural revolution within a long march" by summer 2005? Within the RCP, there was little in the way of ideological remolding as communists; instead, there was a growth of dogmatism, lots of bombastic declarations, and no solid revolutionary strategic thinking for how to lead the masses—movementism was never effectively replaced with something better. An exodus from the RCP began, with Party members leaving in substantial numbers, unfortunately not on the basis of revolutionary principle, but into petty-bourgeois lifestyles. The internal struggle had taken a considerable personal toll on Party members, and none of them had the theoretical tools to chart a better path. Due to the focus on internal line struggle, the dogmatic Avakian promotion in the face of pervasive anti-communism,⁸¹ and blunders around the RNC protests, the RCP lost much of the following it had built in recent years. Its ability to mount meaningful political interventions with national impact significantly diminished.

A speculative fiction

Through the course of the internal line struggle, Avakian and RCP leadership increasingly promoted Avakian's body of work as a "new synthesis" of communism and Avakian as a revolutionary leader on the level of Lenin and Mao whose theoretical work was an advance beyond Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. While the RCP has done a poor job offering coherent explanation, what they mean by Avakian's "new synthesis"—later called the "new communism"—is more or less Avakian's conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist transition to communism, resting on his critical analysis of the history of the international communist movement, and the supposed philosophical ruptures and "method and approach" that went alongside this conception. On the former, there are certainly worthwhile theoretical insights to take from Avakian's work of the late 1970s through the mid 1980s: a deepened critique of bourgeois-democracy and its class basis; the strategic orientation of putting the advance of the world revolution above the defense of particular socialist states; the positive role of unresolved contradictions in bringing forward social forces for the further revolutionization of socialist society; and the importance of dissent within socialist society (even if the RCP's own practice makes it hard to imagine them being capable of putting this principle into practice). However, given the lack of synthesis and development of these insights since the mid-1980s, and instead the theoretical decline of Avakian's work (as described in previous sections of this summation), it is difficult to justify the label "new synthesis" and especially to see how it is a leap beyond Mao's conception of socialist society.

On the supposed philosophical breakthroughs, the main one the RCP touts is Avakian's "epistemological break" with "class truth."⁸² Here, we must divide one into two. Under Stalin's leadership in the Soviet Union and in the Comintern, there was a pervasive tendency of instrumentalism and "political truth," wherein history was rewritten and facts and science distorted to serve political objectives. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this tendency was how, when Communist Party members turned revisionist, they were either retroactively written out of history or history was revised to paint them as a conniving counterrevolutionary well before their betrayal. This problem arose, to a significant degree, because Stalin lacked a clear understanding of the continuing class struggle and the generation of a new bourgeoisie within the Party under socialism. The Chinese Communist Party did far better, but still at times fell into this tendency to rewrite history when it came to Party leaders who turned revisionist. The narrative of pure revolutionaries vs. the evil intentions of those who were always bound to betray the revolution has not helped enable the masses to distinguish revolutionary from revisionist lines, and should be repudiated any time it crops up among communists.⁸³ Moreover, it has gone hand in hand with a refusal, by many so-called communists, to acknowledge the mistakes our tradition has made and to interrogate how we might do better next time around. Avakian and the RCP were entirely correct to take a critical attitude toward the history of the international communist movement and to theorize how the next wave of socialist states can do better than the last one.

However, recognizing the *class character of truth* (sometimes called “class truth”), as Mao did, is not the same thing as twisting history, facts, and science to serve political objectives. Mao consistently distinguished between facts, which he insisted must be accurate, and truth, by which he meant the interpretation of facts. By Mao’s logic, proletarian truth is the interpretation of facts using the philosophy and ideological standpoint of the proletariat, materialist dialectics and the communist world outlook. For Avakian, there is no class truth in Mao’s sense, but only *objective truth*, meaning an accurate reflection of the material world (objective reality), not an interpretation of the facts gathered about that material world. Avakian might imagine that to be an “epistemological break,” but in reality it is a step backward to Lenin’s defense of “reflection theory” in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909). In his 1914 Philosophical Notebooks on Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*, Lenin made important ruptures with reflection theory, stating “Man’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it.”⁸⁴ Those ruptures, and Lenin’s study of Hegel’s dialectics, would prove decisive in preparing Lenin to lead the great subjective intervention of 1917—the Russian Revolution—that resulted in the creation of a new objective world, one with the world’s first socialist state. Mao advanced a deepened understanding of the dynamic and decisive role of the subjective factor and consciousness in the revolutionary process, developing a strategy for building up the subjective forces for revolution in the particular conditions of semi-feudal, semi-colonial China (protracted people’s war and new-democratic revolution) and, under socialism, placing primacy on class struggle, transforming the relations of production, and the conscious initiative of the masses. Mao’s strategic advances rested on his own move beyond reflection theory; as he put it in *On Contradiction* (1937),

...while we recognize that in the general development of history the material determines the mental and social being determines consciousness, we also—and indeed must—recognize the reaction of mental on material things, of social consciousness on social being and of the superstructure on the economic base. This does not go against materialism; on the contrary, it avoids mechanical materialism and firmly upholds dialectical materialism.

Avakian’s “epistemological break” is not an advance beyond Mao’s “class truth,” but a step backward into a mechanical materialism that insists on an objective reality independent of its observers and dualistically divorced from the subjective factor’s role in transforming reality. Furthermore, much as Avakian talks about science and being scientific, his “epistemological work” has not engaged with developments in science, such as quantum physics and epigenetics, that challenge reflection theory epistemology.⁸⁵ It seems that Avakian never read Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which emphasizes the role of paradigm shifts in providing new interpretations of scientific facts (i.e., not an objective truth that correctly reflects objective reality).

There is more to be said about these philosophical questions concerning the nature of truth and the role of consciousness and the subjective factor in the revolutionary process. For the purpose of this summation, what matters most here is that Avakian’s epistemology (reflection theory) is the philosophical underpinning for hinging revolution on a coming grand crisis. If you believe objective reality to be independent of its observer, and your goal is to make revolution, then it logically follows that the vanguard party’s role is to discover, in objective reality, the developments that will lead to a grand crisis and believe that its act of recognition of these developments will enable it to seize on them to make revolution. The development of the subjective forces for revolution, including a numerically significant vanguard party and a class-conscious section of the proletariat, and the ongoing structural contradictions that allow for the creation of those subjective forces *independent* of a grand conjunctural crisis, *become secondary to correctly predicting how conjunctural contradictions will lead to a revolutionary crisis, and strategy is constructed based on that prediction.*

And that epistemological error of Avakian’s leads us to the greatest shortcoming of his “new synthesis.” It has not led to a strategy for revolution in the US, but instead to bowing to objective conditions in a “left form” by hoping for the right crisis to come along (and distorting “objective reality” in the process). Avakian certainly deserves great credit for leading the RCP in important endeavors that can form components, even crucial

components, within a strategy for revolution in the US, and *these contributions must not be lost to communists* because of the RCP's degeneration. However, *Avakian never developed the right synthesis of these components into a strategy for developing the subjective forces for revolution, putting them on a collision course with bourgeois rule, and pushing the class struggle towards revolutionary civil war—the principal task of a communist vanguard party in the US.* Not coincidentally, the RCP never turned its 2001 *Draft Programme* into a final Party Programme, so it is anyone's guess what the operative program of the RCP is since that time (seemingly whatever Avakian's latest talk is)...

2005–8: Fewer, but not better

In the course of the RCP's "cultural revolution," Avakian put forward a "coming civil war" thesis,⁸⁶ arguing that Christian fascists were increasingly playing the driving role within the Bush administration, displacing the neocons. That analysis took aspects of reality—there is a widespread Christian fundamentalist movement in the US that stretches from Operation Rescue to evangelical congregations to top government officials to members of the bourgeoisie, and the neocons were suffering setbacks in their international ambitions—and turned it into a coming grand crisis. Avakian's analysis was that moves towards turning the US into a full-blown theocracy, as a key pillar within the larger "Bush program," were close around the corner, and could potentially set off a civil war within the US. While Avakian's "coming civil war" thesis pointed out, in an alarmist way, real political dynamics at work, it failed to address the balance of forces within the bourgeoisie, the material basis for splits within the bourgeoisie, regional variation in bourgeois rule (liberal tolerance in cosmopolitan cities and Christian fundamentalism in command in large swaths of the South and Midwest), and the way that the dynamic of liberals vs. conservatives in government had long served to stabilize bourgeois rule and forge hegemony among different sections of subaltern classes. Undoubtedly, contention within the bourgeoisie was growing (and has continued to grow) sharper and drawing various sections of people into political conflict, but was the progressive petty-bourgeoisie going to fight a civil war against evangelical church congregations?

The "coming civil war" thesis, in many ways a remake of the "Revolution or World War III" analysis of the 1980s, was the basis on which the RCP launched its next mass initiative in the summer of 2005: *The World Can't Wait – Drive Out the Bush Regime!* (hereafter WCW). With WCW, the RCP envisioned a mass resistance movement spreading across society that would create a political crisis so great that the Bush government would be forced from office. The initial thinking behind this plan envisioned that political crisis setting the stage for a revolutionary situation, though that revolutionary objective receded from the thinking and practice of the RCP as WCW went on.

In Fall 2005, the RCP deployed many, perhaps a majority, of its cadre as the political and organizational glue of this new attempt at leading united-front mass struggle. It tried to unite the ties it had built up through involvement in previous mass movements, especially the activists in NION, behind WCW, but came up considerably short in these efforts owing in part to a commandist approach, and had to launch WCW without much breadth. WCW was announced with an agitational "call" that had some considerable political strengths: identifying the main pillars of the Bush regime's international and domestic political program; expressing righteous indignation at the normalization of torture; and challenging people to break out of the bounds of the electoral arena, refuse to accept the horrors being perpetrated on the people of the world by their government, and mount mass resistance. WCW's first major action was high school walkouts and protests across the country that involved thousands of people on November 2, 2005, channeling a little bit of the old-school RCP militant spirit but tempering it with permitted rallies..

The major problem with the launch of WCW was that the RCP imagined it could pull it off largely by widespread distribution of the "call" spurring people to take it up and organize protests without much pre-existing structure and without a breadth of firm political allies united around it. RCP leadership had seen the online Democratic Party-adjacent organization MoveOn's success at mobilizing people and thought it could

transfer their tactics into a mass resistance movement outside the electoral arena. RCP leadership correctly recognized that there were millions of people who despised the Bush administration, constituting a reservoir of potential for resistance. What RCP leadership underestimated was the degree to which the progressive petty-bourgeoisie was wedded to bourgeois-democracy as the solution to the Bush administration's policies, as dramatically expressed in 2008 in the groundswell of support for Barack Obama. Future RCP efforts would continue to fail to grasp the degree to which the petty-bourgeoisie, *even when it is in motion against the bourgeois political program in power*, is still ideologically wedded to the big bourgeoisie in the absence of a revolutionary proletariat pushing it in another direction.

Over the course of WCW's history, it did not succeed in substantially chipping away at the bourgeois-democratic illusions of the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, often tailing them in the course of aligning with progressive Democratic Party-aligned organizations and activists. It did manage to organize some high school walkouts and protests, involve some college students, generate some new activists, involve some prominent voices of dissent against the Bush administration's policies (Chris Hedges, Cynthia McKinney, Cindy Sheehan, Gore Vidal, etc.), and carry out street actions and public forums to expose the legalized use of torture by the US military and the CIA. But it never garnered the numbers or the militancy necessary to pose a substantial political threat to the US government's dominant political program at the time, let alone to drive the Bush regime from power. Morally, it was the right thing to strive for, but politically and organizationally, it was always on shaky ground.

More than prior mass initiatives led by the RCP, WCW relied far too much on Party members as its organizational glue, in effect substituting the Party for the masses. With the exception of high school walkouts, WCW only deepened, to the point of no return, the RCP's pivot towards the progressive petty-bourgeoisie; all of the RCP's sustained, intensive efforts among the proletariat were effectively dropped during this period (if they had not already been). With WCW, the RCP did try to rectify its previous lack of attention to college students, but that attempt mostly revealed how clueless the RCP was about the growth of postmodernism within academia (to our knowledge, there is no mention of Foucault in any RCP literature) and its failure to contend with negative cultural trends among youth at the time, namely the hipster phenomenon. Egregiously, WCW adopted tactics from the revisionist-led ANSWER Coalition, keeping protests behind police barricades but claiming their political slogans made them "radical," and printing up lots of the same signs and passing them out at broader protests in an attempt to make its name and message appear dominant, no longer relying on the conscious initiative of the masses.

Besides WCW, the RCP's other main effort in this period was the campaign to promote and popularize Avakian and his body of work. It failed in its goal to make Avakian a household name and his works a reference point among radical and progressive people broadly, with a rather clumsy effort to create a publishing house, Insight Press, without understanding how the world of book publishing worked. The RCP's Avakian promotion has only gone from bad to worse since then, and has resulted in turning more people off than attracting engagement with Avakian's works. From poorly designed Avakian T-shirts, to filling every RCP article and speech with seemingly obligatory Avakian quotes, to putting out a new book of Avakian quotes called *BASics* that is *modeled on the Bible* (!),⁸⁷ to saturating its website and social media with Avakian's writings and speeches as those writings only diminish in quality, the RCP's promotion of Avakian comes off as a pathetic attempt to build a cult of personality. While we must reject the anti-communist and petty-bourgeois prejudice against promoting revolutionary leaders, we must also insist that such promotion be based on reality, not elevate individuals above the vanguard party, the masses, or critical scrutiny—and have some style.

A secondary RCP effort in this period was the Setting the Record Straight project, in which Raymond Lotta spearheaded a campaign to contend with anti-communist distortions of the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Setting the Record Straight held a few forums on college campuses, produced some decent historical fact sheets, and made connections and conducted interviews with Chinese scholars who were pushing back against anti-communist summations of the GPCR; it did not produce any substantially

new analysis of the history of the Soviet Union and Maoist China. The main problem with Setting the Record Straight is that it should have been started years earlier.

Overall, the RCP's efforts in this period fell far short of their intended goals, and the RCP only made this worse by never offering any public summation (and probably no substantive internal summation) on the reasons for these failures. The Party was put on a political war footing around WCW, and constantly imagined that breakthroughs could be made by all-out mobilizations of Party members around whatever political mini-crisis was brewing in society. The end result was a further loss of membership and demoralization, and a political culture of get-rich-quick schemes with no long-term plan for how to recruit Party members and build up an organized mass base, let alone deeply entrench the Party among the masses.

In addition to practical failures were organizational changes that set the RCP on a further downward spiral. The Party was re-organized, with Party units no longer based on common practice, instead devoted almost exclusively to discussion of internal documents and, mostly, Avakian's latest speeches and writings. Theory was organizationally severed from practice, and the new unit structure diminished political accountability. Moreover, internally, the Party was bifurcated between units made up of individuals considered to be "with" the correct line (Avakian's "new synthesis") and units made up of members who were deemed not to have ruptured with the revisionist package. Leaving aside for a moment the fact that being "with" the correct line was often more about mastery of phraseology than ideological and political content, the new, bifurcated structure of the RCP was *an opportunist resolution to the internal struggle within the Party*. Cadre who were considered to be mired in revisionism and incapable of carrying out the correct line were kept around in order to bolster numbers and funds and carry out organizational tasks. *Separation between thinkers and doers*, long a growing problem in the RCP, was enshrined in its organizational structure.

The RCYB, the Party's youth organization which, for nearly thirty years, had been the militant edge of the RCP, was disbanded with no coherent explanation to its members or public announcement. In its place, Revolution Clubs were organized as a form to involve and organize revolutionary-minded activists under the leadership of the Party. The name Revolution Club lacks the militancy and gravitas of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade by a long shot, and their lame T-shirts convey nothing of the revolutionary spirit of the RCYB. Moreover, politically, the Revolution Clubs effectively promote social pacifism by emphasizing, in their points of unity, that they do not initiate violence or promote revenge, as if there was a widespread problem among the masses in the US of seeking to take revenge against their oppressors. This social-pacifism masquerading as an anti-revenge line has subsequently been promoted as a key aspect of Avakian's "New Communism," and the spokesperson of Revolution Books in NYC even had the audacity to denounce Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* for supposedly promoting revenge.⁸⁸

Finally, by 2008, the RCP moved from asserting that Avakian's body of work needed to be debated out within the international communist movement to insisting on Avakian's "new synthesis" as a dividing line within the international communist movement. Arrogance towards comrades internationally had already been a problem; in Avakian's 3PC speech, he complained that comrades in oppressed countries had not been paying adequate attention to the growth of slums and their implications for revolutionary strategy, as if the Communist Party of Peru, under the leadership of Chairman Gonzalo, had not developed base areas in the slums of Lima. Enshrining Avakian's "new synthesis" as an international dividing was a qualitative leap, with the RCP effectively claiming it had answers for the problems before communists around the world without being able to deliver on that promise. For example, while the RCP's 2005–2009 letters criticizing the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)'s turn towards revisionism and bourgeois-democracy were correct on the level of communist principle, they did not substantively address the specific challenges the revolution in Nepal was facing, repeating a problem with how the RIM, in the mid-1990s, dealt with the call for peace accords by some in the Communist Party of Peru.⁸⁹ The RCP's insistence on Avakian's "new synthesis" as an international dividing line contributed to the collapse of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, a great loss for the international proletariat.

Exodus but no split

We estimate that in the early 2000s, there was somewhere around 300 people in the RCP; by 2008, a sizeable minority of that membership had left the Party. The exodus did not fall out along the lines of who was “with” the correct line vs. who was “stuck in the revisionist package” by the standards of the RCP’s “cultural revolution,” with members from both “sides” leaving in relatively equal proportion. Moreover, RCP leadership never carried out a proper purge even of members who were clearly unfit to be part of a vanguard party (by any appropriate standard).

Why was there not a split in the RCP? Avakian continued to carry great authority in the RCP for very understandable reasons considering how crucial his leadership was to building the Party and to advancing in the face of the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China, so few Party members were likely to cross him. The RCP had developed a high degree of internal discipline, which divides in two: it made it a highly capable political machine at waging national campaigns and punching well above its weight, but it also erred in the direction of over-centralization in a way that could hamper the creative capacities of its membership and the development of new ideas. No one in the RCP’s central committee seems to have ever challenged Avakian in any fundamental way—indeed, reading Avakian’s writings, it is clear no one bothered to tell him “these long convoluted sentences might work in German, but not in English.” And the exodus from the RCP happened individual by individual—no branch, unit, or RCP chapter collectively decided to leave the Party together, so there was no organizational collectivity through which to figure out a path forward.

Finally and most importantly, *no one in the RCP came up with an alternative, more revolutionary line than Avakian’s*. Owing to an internal culture that lacked sufficient theoretical training or rigorous (not petty-bourgeois brow-beating) line struggle, RCP members lacked the capacity for the theoretical work needed to criticize erroneous tendencies in the RCP and develop a revolutionary road forward. Furthermore, on the level of ideological stand, when Party members left the RCP, they by and large embraced petty-bourgeois lifestyles and class outlooks, stepping away from their commitment to revolution and the masses.

While it does not truly merit attention, because many people nowadays believe what they find on the internet to be true, a few words are in order about the so-called Kasama Project. Around 2008, no more than a handful of ex-RCP members, led by Mike Ely, started the Kasama Project with a public criticism of the RCP. They attempted to recruit current and ex-RCP members using opportunist methods, including embracing and puffing up whatever petty gripes and grievances people had with the RCP and even promising RCP members positions in leadership in the Kasama Project if they jumped ship (to the RCP’s credit, no one took the careerist bait). A few ex-RCP members briefly flirted with the Kasama Project but were quickly repulsed by the stench of opportunism. Those drawn into the Kasama Project were almost exclusively disaffected Leftists from various organizations and ideological persuasions and some people who had been in the RCP’s orbit who spent far too much time on the internet (the RCP, to its credit, did not recruit internet nerds unless they remolded themselves ideologically and carried out political work among and interacted with the masses in real life). This assortment of political hacks and internet nerds had no ability to mount any serious political intervention and made a principle of refusing to go the masses.

The Kasama Project took all the worst aspects of the RCP and carried them further down the toilet while adding in blatant levels of opportunism. On the Kasama Project’s website, it promoted a culture of pseudo-intellectualism, where anyone with a keyboard could offer “theoretical insights” completely divorced from any real practice or rigorous study. Mike Ely’s own writings could only offer anything halfway decent when they plagiarized from Avakian without attribution. The Kasama Project constantly imagined some political crisis internationally (in Greece, Nepal) to be on the verge of a successful communist revolution and, in the US, whatever mass movement sprung up (Occupy Wall Street, “Black Lives Matter”) to be spontaneously moving towards a revolutionary movement, and never made any self-criticism of its blatant misjudgments or its inability

to impact mass movements in the US. It took the tailism, movementism, and “conjunctural analysis” of the RCP even further downhill while, unlike the RCP, being incapable of acting on those (erroneous) lines in the real world.

Worse yet, the Kasama Project embraced and promoted the culture of opportunism and intrigue that had been part of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, obsessing about potential splits among existing Leftist organizations and trying, unsuccessfully, to opportunistically approach them, an especially egregious approach considering that the organized Left in the US is nothing but an impediment to revolution. Mike Ely came up with a series of empty sayings that Kasama Project members uncritically repeated ad nauseum, all of which were simply ways of reneging on communist principles through eclectics (“21st-century socialism will be different” as a justification for reneging on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the need to violently overthrow bourgeois rule; “the Bolsheviks were part of the RSDLP” and “all communist parties have a left, a center, and a right” as ways to justify factionalism, dispensing with democratic centralism, and inviting in revisionists; etc.). Ironically, the Kasama Project was overwhelmed by its opportunist practices and disbanded a few years after it started, managing to magnify a bad RCP practice in its act of dissolution by failing to offer any summation or even make a public announcement of its end. Whereas the RCP was once a real communist vanguard party that took revolutionary politics to the masses and led substantial mass struggles with national impact that, by 2008, was thoroughly degenerating, the Kasama Project was, from its beginnings, a pathetic band of Leftists founded on revisionism and opportunism that presaged all the worst characteristics of present-day online Leftists in the US. The two simply do not compare, and our apologies to the RCP’s legacy for having to make a comparison for the purpose of explaining to people who do not know any better.

2009–15: The “new communism” in practice

From this point on, there are no positive lessons to be learned from the RCP that cannot already be learned, and learned better, from its prior history. Consequently, we shall no longer concern ourselves with offering much of a historical summation of the RCP’s practice. Instead, we will use a few examples to highlight its degeneration, in the process demonstrating the consequences of pursuing the erroneous tendencies we have identified throughout this summation to their logical conclusion.

With Obama in the White House for eight years, the RCP did not have a (real or imagined) looming fascist theocracy on the horizon on which to base its strategy. The 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath did not qualify as a potential grand crisis, because by RCP logic, that would be economism. RCP leadership failed to ever substantively analyze why the neocons were not able to push ahead with their international ambitions and suffered setbacks in the face of rising imperial rivals (Russia and China) and several Latin American governments challenging US imperialist hegemony. This analytical failure had much to do with a growing weakness in attention to matters of political economy on the part of the RCP—it had little to say about the slow *economic* decline of US imperialism and what that had to do with political conflict in the US bourgeoisie.

Even without a grand crisis on the horizon, the RCP continued to operate in crisis mode, leaping from one get-rich-quick scheme to another. These schemes almost always revolved around appealing to the progressive petty-bourgeoisie. For example, when the progressive petty-bourgeoisie’s attention was focused on the injustices of the prison system following the release of Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow* (2010), the RCP initiated the Stop Mass Incarceration Network (SMIN) in 2011. This attempt at generating mass struggle was on the heels of the protest movement against the racist stop-and-frisk program of the NYPD, and the SMIN carried out a bit of civil disobedience and other protest actions and brought forward a few activists. While carrying out some agitation among the proletariat, in sharp contrast to the work of O22, the SMIN never made a serious effort at organizing the masses of proletarians directly affected by the prison system, such as the many people with family members locked up whose lives revolve, to a significant degree, around visiting

and supporting the incarcerated. Moreover, the RCP's mass initiatives suffered from an increasingly mechanical approach, essentially repeating the same old playbook over and over.

The RCP moved even further away from any long-term efforts of entrenchment among any specific section of the people (not just the proletariat). For years, the New York Branch of the RCP and the NYC-located national offices of the RCP's movement-building efforts relied on a tribute system, with many youth in the RCP's orbit and Party members who displayed skill in movement-building relocated to New York. This dynamic went from bad to worse during this period, with most of the youth in the RCP's orbit across the country moved to New York for "big pushes" (campaigns) or permanently, but failing to result in a substantial impact on the political landscape in New York or generate substantial numbers of new recruits.

Aside from bringing people to New York, the RCP also sent members and supporters to respond hot on the heels wherever the latest mini-crisis cropped up, from Texas when the state government passed laws restricting abortion access to the proletarian rebellion in Ferguson. Here we must divide one into two. It is correct for a vanguard party in the US to divide its forces between a "stationary" force, entrenched among specific sections of the people with a long-term political and organizational plan, and a "mobile" force that can mount interventions whenever and wherever class and social antagonisms sharpen and develop into mini-crisis (urban rebellions, political struggles over fascistic laws, strikes and labor struggles, major protests, etc.). The stationary force must be the principal force, though there should not be a brick wall separating the stationary from the mobile force and Party leadership must be able to apply the principle of concentrating forces to make breakthroughs, something that only a democratic centralist organizational structure makes possible. Done right, the stationary force can step-by-step advance the level of class struggle and build the mass base of the Party and the Party itself, while the mobile force can seize opportunities to have a national political impact and for making leaps in building organization and sharpening the class struggle. Since at least 2008, if not 2005 or even earlier, *the RCP has become not just principally but overwhelmingly a mobile force* (politically and to some extent geographically), even doing a series of seemingly never-ending tours around the country promoting its politics or latest campaign that never seem to leave organization in their wake, using many of its best cadre and the youth it has attracted in the process. The result of becoming principally a mobile force is a failure to develop an organized mass base, little recruitment into the Party, and wave after wave of demoralization when striking out in one direction and then another does not deliver the desired results.

Speaking of stationary forces, during this period the RCP closed all of its bookstores except for the ones in New York City and Berkeley, California. Its bizarre public justification for this move was that doing so would help it focus on promoting Avakian and his body of work, as if Revolution Books was not the main outlet through which people encountered Avakian's books and pamphlets.⁹⁰



Bob Avakian's only public appearance since the early 1980s, a dialogue on revolution and religion with Cornel West, at the historic Riverside Church in New York City in 2014. The RCP went all out to fill the church, busing in supporters and activists from around the country and doing mass promotion in New York. While the RCP summed up the event as a success and even as historic, some of the attendees, there to hear West, booed Avakian and left early, not prepared for the length of Avakian's presentation. Avakian has made no public appearances since, but a number of videos and recordings have been made of him speaking to supporters since 2003.

Returning to the question of grand crisis, the greatest indication of the RCP's degeneration is its inability to seize on mounting political crises that generated substantial mass movements during this period—mass movements which the RCP failed to play any leading or even substantial role within. Given that the Occupy Wall Street movement, was, from the beginning, led mostly by postmodernist graduates of small liberal arts colleges along with some leftovers from the movement against imperialist globalization (and not the most advanced from that movement) and quickly degenerated into a festival of direct democracy fetishization and postmodernist identity politics, the RCP can be forgiven for not being able to vie for a leading role within it. But when it comes to the rebellions of Black proletarians against police brutality in Ferguson and Baltimore and the widespread protests they sparked, and the mounting resistance to the oppression of Black people in the preceding and subsequent years, the RCP has no excuse for failing to vie for leadership over the mass movement. The RCP has a long and distinguished history of leading mass struggle against the oppression of Black people in general and police brutality in particular, which should have positioned it to mount a strong intervention as the mass movement exploded, but its actions over the previous decade prevented it from doing so.



The old heads in Ferguson: Carl Dix, Joey Johnson, and Travis Morales in Ferguson, Missouri during the 2014 rebellion. All three were arrested and targeted as “outside agitators.” Unfortunately, Carl just doesn’t have the same revolutionary swagger after trading in that funky Mao shirt, keffiyeh, and MLM hat for a shirt with the title of a film of a Bob Avakian speech.

By the 2010s, the October 22nd Coalition to Stop Police Brutality (O22) only existed as a skeleton of its prior self, kept in existence by a few dedicated family members of victims of police murder, a few activists, and the occasional minimal involvement of RCP members. Various revisionist organizations, recognizing what O22 had accomplished and seeing the RCP abandon it, established their own third-rate O22 knockoffs. As a mass movement coalesced against the police killing of Black people, with proletarian rebellions at the center but drawing in broad layers of society, from the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie to professional athletes, in mass protests and public debate, postmodernist nonprofit activist grifters and other opportunists managed to seize the initiative. Fueled by funding and media coverage bestowed upon them by the liberal bourgeoisie, these opportunists were able to dominate the political messaging of the mass movement (“Black Lives Matter”) and divert it towards reformism, often in the “left in form right in essence” form of “abolitionism,” and straight-up self-serving grifts.

If there is one thing that proves the RCP to be no longer a vanguard, it is its miserable failure to seize on the wave of rebellion and protest against police brutality over the last decade. The RCP’s liquidation of the October 22nd Coalition to Stop Police Brutality and its decision not to revive it in the 2010s, even after massive rebellions, *deprived* the masses of what should have been the principal political and organizational vehicle for the mass movement. Moreover, the RCP was unable to wage substantive polemics against the opportunists and grifters seizing the spotlight, as it was theoretically and politically unequipped to contend with postmodernism. The RCP’s lack of capable revolutionary mass leaders in its ranks and its lack of a numerically significant organized mass base meant that the RCP did not have the material force to mount a serious intervention in the mass movement and vie for leadership. The RCP had long imagined that a wave of urban rebellions could be the crisis providing the basis for launching an armed insurrection aimed at the seizure of power. When that scenario came along in Summer 2020, the RCP was caught with its pants down, unable to decisively move in any way even remotely approaching the possibility of launching an insurrection.

2016–20: “First time as tragedy, second time as farce”

When Donald Trump entered the political fray and won the presidency on the basis of whipping up fascistic resentment, RCP leadership saw a new grand crisis on the horizon. Their analysis, never grounded in any

class analysis of the contention within the US bourgeoisie dealing with an empire in decline, was that the “Trump/Pence regime,” as they called it, was moving decisively to institute a qualitative transformation of the US into fascism. Undoubtedly, several key operatives in the Trump administration were outright fascists, Trump enacted a Muslim ban (on new immigrants) upon entering office and whipped up a wave of fascist violence, organized fascists were emboldened to openly march with Nazi imagery, and Trump played on and articulated open white supremacy and patriarchy in a way that no one that high up in US government had done in a while. Trump’s presidency showed that there is a social base for fascism in the US numbering in the tens of millions, and there are some within the US bourgeoisie who believe the current international order no longer serves the interests of US imperialism.

But an inexorable march to fascism under Trump distorts reality in several ways. (1) Unlike Prime Minister Modi in India, Trump did not stand at the head of a coherent, centrally organized fascist movement. Trump himself has always been part fascist, part self-serving grifter, and the latter aspect is why many in the bourgeoisie turned their back on him by the end of his presidency. (2) Fascism need not be an all-or-nothing proposition; the bourgeoisie can institute fascist measures against some sections of the population while practicing or permitting liberal tolerance towards others. In the four years of Trump’s presidency, little to nothing changed for most of the liberal petty-bourgeoisie, especially in “blue” regions of the country. Bourgeois rule in the US has in some respects been strengthened by an ongoing, never resolved political conflict between Democrats and increasingly reactionary Republicans. (3) The RCP never seemed to be able to distinguish between Trump’s skillful use of political theater—the man is a genius at playing to his social base in a way unparalleled by any other US politician in recent history⁹¹—and actual transformations in the government structure of the US. None of that is to argue against the facts that fascist forces inside and outside of government have grown considerably in strength in recent years and a deeper crisis for US imperialism could push the bourgeoisie towards a more fascistic form of rule. But a communist analysis must look at the class forces and class interests behind moves towards fascism, something the RCP never did.

The RCP’s use of the moniker “the Trump/Pence regime,” when it had always used “the Bush regime” and never “the Bush/Cheney regime,” is itself a telling example of instrumentalism and political truth. Pence played a minor, largely symbolic, role in the Trump administration, and at the end of it refused to rip up established bourgeois-democratic norms to prevent Biden from becoming president (something a hardcore fascist would have done). But Pence is a Christian fascist (and yes, Trump chose him to shore up support from Christian fundamentalists), so the RCP erroneously elevated his status to serve their analysis of the Christian fascism threat. Cheney, by contrast, played a greater role than Bush in dictating policy, but he was a neocon, not a Christian fascist, so the RCP downplayed his role. Considering Avakian’s constant talk about “objective truth,” the RCP’s instrumentalist analysis reveals a tortured attempt to make the foot fit the shoe.

Even worse than the RCP’s erroneous analysis was its political stand and strategic approach to the Trump years. Rather than seeing the growth of fascism as a potential *opportunity* to swing large sections of the population over to communist leadership in a united front under the leadership of the proletariat *aimed at overthrowing the US bourgeoisie as a whole*, the RCP treated the struggle against the “Trump/Pence regime” as a stage unto itself and defeating fascism as a goal divorced from making revolution (*operationally*, if not also in phraseology). Despite all the critical analysis Avakian and the RCP had made of the Comintern’s “Popular Front” in the 1930s, which subordinated proletarian revolution to the fight against fascism and subordinated communist parties and the proletariat to the liberal bourgeoisie, they insisted on repeating the very error they had so ardently criticized.

Tactically, the RCP’s attempt to lead a mass movement against impending (real or imagined) fascism recycled many of the same problems of WCW. The RCP’s “Refuse Fascism” initiative was launched without much real breadth, owing to diminished working relations with potential political allies, and depended far too much on Party members and close supporters as its organizational glue. Refuse Fascism brought back the “No” slogan of the 2004 RNC protests, and again sunk themselves to the tactics of the revisionist-led ANSWER Coalition

(passing out lots of its signs so its message would be prominent). The RCP tailed after the progressive and liberal petty-bourgeoisie without ever really challenging their class outlook, allegiance to bourgeois-democracy, and vacillating nature. Just like WCW, Refuse Fascism held a series of nationwide protests intended to spark a wave of ongoing defiant mass resistance, but each new “beginning” only brought diminishing returns. Towards the end of Trump’s presidency, Refuse Fascism issued a call for millions of people to come out into the streets and “stay,” without any solid reasoning behind how that would happen and why it would force Trump out of office. Despite a more favorable objective situation, Refuse Fascism managed to fare far worse than WCW, leaving the RCP with two failed attempts to drive a Republican presidential administration out of office through a mass movement and looking more and more like the boy who cried wolf.

The RCP was able to generate some new recruits and dedicated activists from its Refuse Fascism efforts. Refuse Fascism carried out some civil disobedience actions, mainly geared towards getting the attention of the progressive petty-bourgeoisie and the media rather than at striking political blows against the enemy (for example, it blocked a highway or two but never sought to put a wrench in the gears of the immigrant deportation apparatus). The lesson here is that the established Left and Democratic Party-aligned reformist organizations will repeatedly fail to tap into the energy and desires of those who want to fight injustice all the way, and a political force that articulates some determination to stop a particular bourgeois political program can step into that vacuum, even when it makes as many errors as the RCP did. But overall, the shaky ground, analytically, politically, and organizationally, on which Refuse Fascism stood and its recycling of the worst of RCP tactics meant it was doomed to fail in its objective of throwing Trump out of office through mass resistance. In that failure, it further degenerated the RCP.

Operational line becomes formal line

One of the difficulties in understanding the RCP’s degeneration is that, for years, its formal line remained overall revolutionary even as its operational line became increasingly movementist and tailing the progressive petty-bourgeoisie. RCP documents continued to insist on the need for violent revolution to overthrow US imperialism and uphold, even while critically analyzing, the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Since the mid-2000s, however, the RCP gradually began renegeing on matters of revolutionary principle in its published documents.

One telling example is that it dropped the mass line in the name of Avakian’s “epistemological break.”⁹² Avakian and the RCP painted the mass line, which it previously trained its members in, as an opinion poll rather than a method of leadership, and argued that since the opinions of the masses are not accurate reflections of objective reality, the mass line is not a scientific method for arriving at objective truth. This blatant distortion of Mao’s teachings by people who know better obfuscates the fact that Mao insisted on synthesizing the most *advanced* ideas of the masses rather than tailing the backward, and did not advocate some insistence on communist strategy flowing mechanically from some narrow application of the mass line. It downplays the importance of consciousness in the revolutionary process and sets up the vanguard as a commandist entity that can properly arrive at objective truth *without* the masses, presumably because its members can apply Avakian’s epistemology.

The social pacifism that results from constantly polemicizing against revenge and insisting that the mass movement must be non-violent has already been criticized above. The RCP also dropped virtually any method of class analysis, seeming to imagine a revolution led by some vague, almost postmodernist, concept of various oppressed people without the proletariat as the leading force. It has no answer for what the social base for proletarian revolution in the US is, or what the key class antagonisms are around which revolutionary struggle and organization might be generated. Avakian’s writings increasingly and oddly obsessed over some de-classed notion of intellectuals altruistically pursuing truth, oblivious to the rampant petty-bourgeois

careerism that defines professional intellectuals in the US and shapes their research agendas as well as the dominant ideological trends within academia.

During the Trump years, the RCP increasingly analyzed all the injustices perpetrated by the US bourgeoisie, domestically and internationally, as flowing from moves towards fascism. Exposing police brutality, drone strikes by the US military, the deportation of immigrants, etc. was increasingly subordinated to showing how these injustices fit into Trump's drive towards fascism rather than how they flow from the nature of capitalism-imperialism. When tactics eat up strategy and opposing a particular bourgeois political program replaces overthrowing bourgeois rule in general, the road to reformism is sure to follow.

The ultimate nail in the coffin of the RCP as a communist vanguard party—what moved it from a zombie to a cadaver—was a statement from Avakian issued in August 2020 and kept at the top of revcom.us for months. In that statement, “On the Immediate Situation, the Urgent Need to Drive Out the Fascist Trump/Pence Regime, Voting in This Election, and the Fundamental Need for Revolution,” Avakian proclaimed that because of the grave danger of fascist rule being consolidated in the US if Trump won a second presidential term, voting against Trump (by literally voting for Biden) was a necessary if secondary tactic to use to prevent fascism. Avakian's statement had all sorts of caveats about how mass resistance in the streets must be the principal form of struggle, but those caveats do not make up for sinking into the mud. Here was the person who had written a thoroughgoing critique of bourgeois-democracy in the 1980s (*Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*) and critically analyzed the failures of the Comintern in the 1930s when it reneged on revolution by using the danger of fascism as an excuse for reformism and subordination to the liberal bourgeoisie now openly betraying his revolutionary principles. Worse yet, this betrayal of revolutionary principle had absolutely no practical effect on the outcome of the election, and only served to further tarnish the RCP. A reformist operational line became a reformist formal line.

The Party's over

The outward appearance of the RCP since sometime in the mid-2000s has justifiably repulsed many revolutionary-minded people away from it. The dogmatic phrase-mongering, desperate ploys for attention, empty elevation of Bob Avakian to the status of world's greatest communist leader and alienating attempts to promote him as such, repeated bombastic projections of political goals that are never met, tailing after the liberal petty-bourgeoisie, and lack of style (from ugly T-shirts to an uninviting website to a bad YouTube show) lead many today to write the RCP off as quacks, hacks, and cult-like. But if we are to understand how the RCP went from a political force full of revolutionary convictions, taking communist politics to the masses, and boldly going up in the face of the enemy to an unhinged ugly shadow of its past, we have to look beneath the surface. The RCP became unhinged because it hinged revolution on a coming grand crisis rather than developing a solid strategy for revolution in the US.

Moreover, we cannot allow the RCP's current state of degeneration to prevent us from extracting every lesson we can, positive and negative, from the roughly thirty years in which it was a communist vanguard party, albeit one with plenty of erroneous tendencies. Ourselves and future generations need those lessons, or we will be doomed to repeat its mistakes, or, more likely, never get to the point of forming a new vanguard in the US. Convincing ourselves that we know better because we have witnessed the worst aspects of what a prior generation became is a state of arrogance that will only get in the way of truly coming to know better.

Furthermore, if we hope to stay on the revolutionary road, we must understand the reasons why past communist parties veered off of it so that we do not do the same. Often the RCP's degeneration is simply blamed on its obsession with promoting Avakian, but as our summation of the RCP shows, this is more a symptom of deeper problems within the RCP that built up over decades and the outward expression, not inner

essence, of the RCP's degeneration. Within the international communist movement, the RCP's elevation of Avakian's "new synthesis" as a higher stage of communist thought is often criticized as a departure from the principles Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM), and that departure is in turn viewed as the reason the RCP degenerated. That portrayal suggests a sequence of betraying MLM principles and consequently becoming revisionist, putting formal line principal over operational line. It is understandable why comrades outside the US, lacking the opportunity to observe and analyze the RCP's operational line, would focus on its formal line. People inside the US who claim the mantle of MLM (and spend far too much time on the internet) have no excuse.

What matters most about a real vanguard party is how it meets the challenges of making revolution. The synthesis that has come down to us as MLM is the foundation we have for figuring out how to meet those challenges, but fidelity to MLM, in and of itself, will not enable us to make revolution. To fulfill its responsibility, a vanguard party must apply MLM to the circumstances and conditions in which it must lead revolution, and in doing so it will have to develop new strategies, tactics, and methods and discard some inherited wisdom that no longer applies or is inadequate to meeting new challenges that have arisen.⁹³ This contradiction is especially acute today in the imperialist countries, where a revolution has not occurred in over a hundred years and conditions are quite different than the situation in 1917 Russia.

The RCP degenerated because it failed to meet the challenges of making revolution in the US, instead inventing a spiral/conjuncture schematic that guided its practice with the promise of a conjunctural crisis on the horizon that would provide the opportunity for launching an insurrection. Without a revolutionary strategy with a foundation in reality, it inevitably veered towards movementism and tailing the progressive petty-bourgeoisie, and reneged on some important MLM principles in the process. It could not rectify these errors because it refused to be scientific about its own practice, dropping Mao's four-step method and never summing up its many failed campaigns.

Trying to understand the RCP's degeneration through the prism of "here is where its formal line departed from MLM" is not a materialist approach. Instead, we have examined the RCP's operational line, in the context of the concrete conditions in which it operated. Correcting an error, even a serious one, in a formal line document is far easier but has far less impact than rectifying the thinking, practice, and subjective force of a vanguard party, which, after all, is made up of human beings full of contradiction. Paper will put up with anything, but people are the decisive factor, and this principle applies, perhaps most of all, to the vanguard party. The formal and operational line of a Party should form a dialectical unity, though there will always be contradiction between them. If that contradiction becomes antagonistic, eventually it will have to be resolved in favor of revolution or revisionism.

The RCP will likely continue to putter along for years to come. It still has a few old hit songs in its repertoire that will occasionally strike a chord with people when the mood is right. For example, as Christian fascists and politicians trying to emulate Trump have moved to ban abortion in the "red states" and the Supreme Court is sanctifying these moves, and with postmodernist activists, Leftists, and Democratic Party-aligned forces of opposition incapable of and uninterested in acting to *stop* abortion bans, the RCP has been able to lead significant protests. They have stepped into a vacuum, shown a spirit of determination no one else has, used their longstanding tactic of mobilizing high school walkouts to bring youth out as a radical edge of the mass movement, and attracted irate young women into their orbit who have not yet acquiesced to ritualized ineffectual protest. However, the RCP has no coherent plan for how to take this mass movement forward, avoiding decisively bringing the struggle to the South and Midwest where abortion is being banned, instead keeping its center of gravity safely in large cosmopolitan cities where it can tail after the progressive petty-bourgeoisie. Furthermore, it is doubtful the RCP will be able to recruit many new Party members through this effort, and those it does manage to consolidate will be trained in dogmatism. The point here is that some of the RCP's old hit songs might occasionally gain traction for a bit, but with a stale repertoire, having reneged on

revolutionary principles, and with no internal culture of rigorous line struggle and the generation of new ideas, it will never be a truly revolutionary force again.

To comrades outside the US, especially those who were part of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, we hope that this summation of the RCP helps to clarify what has been a confusing train wreck to watch from afar. The proletariat in the US has suffered a great loss with the degeneration of the RCP, and we humbly ask comrades around the world to provide comrades in the US with internationalist assistance in forging a new vanguard party, including by way of critical feedback on this summation. For we in the US must perform our internationalist duty and chart the uncharted course of making revolution right here in the belly of the beast.

ENDNOTES

1PL's justification for condemning the Black and Vietnamese liberation struggles was that it was opposing nationalism with communism—with this, PL became an essentially Trotskyite organization.

2A popular chant at anti-war protests of the time was “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win.”

3See Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (AK Press, 2006), 85–86.

4For an explanation of Focoism, see our summation of the Sixties.

5Workerism means being narrowly fixated on workers in specific (large-scale) industries, and the related trend of economism means focusing on the narrow economic interests and immediate concerns of the workers rather than the larger political struggle to overthrow the capitalist system and build a socialist society.

6Bill Klingel and Joanne Psihountas, *Important Struggles in Building the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (RCP Publications, 1978).

7*Columbia Daily Spectator*, June 14, 1973. Available on Marxists.org

8In the early Bay Area days, the RU encouraged Black people it worked with to join the Black Panther Party, but soon changed its policy and recruited people of any nationality.

9See the section of this document on “The Sixties” for a deeper analysis of the changing conditions and class position of Black people in the mid-twentieth century, and the section “The CP” for an explanation of the Black Belt thesis. Among those who clung to the Black Belt thesis was the October League, led by Mike Klonsky, which became the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) (CPML). They recruited CP veteran Harry Haywood, who had contributed to the development of the Black Belt thesis. Haywood, a Black comrade who played a positive role within the CP in the late 1920s by arguing for the centrality of the Black national question to revolution in the US (a position supported by Lenin and Stalin), is a useful example of a communist who failed to keep developing ideologically and politically. As the Great Migration radically changed the position of Black people in society, Haywood held onto the Black Belt thesis as a kind of totem against revisionism until it turned into its opposite: a religious dogma unable to deal with the changing world.

10The *Guardian* was edited and politically led by Irwin Silber, an odd historical footnote of this period. Silber was born to New York Jews and was a member of the CP. He edited *Sing Out!*, a folk music magazine, in which he denounced Bob Dylan for “going electric” (apparently dead dogmatism applied to culture as well as politics). In the early 1970s, Silber became the executive editor of the left-wing newspaper *The Guardian*, which hosted forums where representatives from different radical organizations spoke and debated with each other. Under Silber’s leadership, *The Guardian* pursued a line of rapprochement with Soviet revisionism under the guise of “building unity”; Silber never did get the CP revisionism out of his system.

11Wright married PRRWO leader Gloria Fontanez, and he abused Fontanez and used their marriage to wreck the PRRWO. It is most likely that Wright was a government agent, or at least working for the political police in some capacity, the whole time that he was in the RU. Wright was working as a sheriff when he died. Wright’s destructive activities in the PRRWO are documented in Johanna Fernández’s *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), which draws its information and conclusions from substantial interviews with participants in the events, rather than relying on easily fabricated, or in any event unreliable, government documents.

12As today’s postmodernists have demonstrated (though they would never admit this), doling out formal leadership positions to oppressed nationality people has failed to uproot white supremacy in people’s thinking or in their material relationships.

13It is likely that the RU had a more flexible approach to the working class in its early years, not necessarily based on a thought-out political line, but by instinct, experimentation, and the experience of being involved in the struggles against the oppression of Black people and other oppressed nationalities. The Farah Strike support campaign represented more advanced strategic thinking than the RU’s increasingly-CP-influenced conceptions and practices in the mid-1970s.

14To the RU’s credit, they did actually struggle against white chauvinism among white workers in the course of their political work.

15It has become a bit of a parlor game for contemporary Leftists to find documents from obscure 1970s organizations to share online—the more obscure the better—without ever considering the actual role those organizations played or the (lack of) impact they had. While a handful of those organizations, most notably the Sojourner Truth Organization, produced some interesting writings, they were almost all short-lived, and many of them eventually reconciled with imperialism because they were simply wrong on cardinal questions. All of them pale in comparison to the RU/RCP.

16The reduction of individuals to a single identity with single interests now en vogue among postmodernists has a long history among revisionists, who assume that all of humanity is as narrow and dour as they are: women only care about women’s issues, workers only care about their immediate workplace, students only about their college campus, etc.

17We use the transliteration Wei Min She because it is the only way the organization’s name has been spelled in English-language publications. For more on Wei Min She, see the essays by Steve Yip and Dolly Veale in *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (AK Press, 2000), edited by Fred Ho.

18For a compelling account of how the 1776 American Revolution fortified slavery and the power of slave owners, see Gerald Horne's *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (NYU Press, 2016).

19This number comes from the revisionists' document "China Advances Along the Socialist Road: The Gang of Four Were Counterrevolutionaries and Revolutionaries Cannot Support Them" (the most vomit-inducing article title ever), which they published in their opportunisticly named *Red Papers* 8 in 1978. Given the available corroborating evidence and the fact that the RCP never disputed it, this number is likely relatively accurate.

20These polemics were subsequently published in the volume *Revolution and Counter-Revolution: The Revisionist Coup in China and the Struggle in the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (RCP Publications, 1978).

21Credit goes to Avakian for the concept that revisionism develops as and becomes a package.

22The Pinyin transliteration system, with the spelling "Mao Zedong," had not yet been firmly established at the time, so it is only natural that the RCP used the old Wade-Giles transliteration. The RCP, and much of the international communist movement, stuck with the Wade-Giles system a little too long...

23The "gang of four" consisted of Jiang Qing (who was Mao's wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hungwen, and Yao Wenyuan. They all played leadership roles during the GPCR, and were arrested as part of the counterrevolutionary coup of 1976. Wang Hungwen and Yao Wenyuan capitulated after their arrest, unable to withstand the repression they faced. During the sham trial, Jiang Qing remained defiant, condemning the capitalist roaders who had taken power, while Zhang Chunqiao gave them the meanest mean mug anyone has ever seen. The revolutionary legacy of these two comrades remains a model and inspiration.

24RCP comrades made serious physical efforts to prevent the police from arresting Avakian. Apparently, some comrades in the international movement raised the question of whether the RCP chairman should have been physically at the protest; the RCP felt it was important for its leader to be there to make a bold statement condemning Deng Xiaoping.

25Travis Morales continued to rack up arrests in subsequent decades, proving himself to be a communist exemplar of boldly going up in the face of the enemy. For example, if you watch news coverage of the night the State of Texas executed Shaka Sankofa, a Black proletarian who became a revolutionary in prison, when protesters broke through police lines outside the prison in an attempt to stop the execution, you can see Morales at the forefront.

26In present-day Texas, the Alamo was a site of a battle in 1836 between the Mexican military and US settlers trying to steal Mexican land. Because the Mexican military won the battle, "Remember the Alamo" has long been a reactionary rallying cry.

27*New Programme and New Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (RCP Publications, 1981), 44.

28From *Charting the Uncharted Course: Proletarian Revolution in the US!*, a document coming out of the RCP's 1980 Central Committee meeting and published as a pamphlet in 1981.

29*Programme and Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party USA* (1975), 101–2.

30*New Programme*, 44.

31Published in *Revolution* #50 (1981). *Revolution* #49 (1981) also contains important critical analysis of the history of the international communist movement, particularly in the Comintern period; see “Outline of Views on the Historical Experience of the International Communist Movement and the Lessons for Today” and “The Line of the Comintern on the Civil War in Spain.”

32See, for example, its tautological argument on why there cannot be socialism in one factory on p. 15 of the 1981 *New Programme*.

33*New Programme*, 77. The RCP's position on homosexuality was further elaborated in “On the Question of Homosexuality and the Emancipation of Women,” *Revolution* no. 56 (1988).

34Since it seems that the majority of RCP members disagreed with this position, obviously the democratic part of democratic centralism was not being properly practiced. A plausible explanation we heard for this state of affairs was that Party leadership clung on to the erroneous position on homosexuality because they perceived it as a bulwark against petty-bourgeois ideological tendencies within the Party. If true, this indicates an opportunist resolution to the very real problem of petty-bourgeois ideological tendencies within the RCP: rather than openly and directly struggling against such tendencies, Party leadership forced a specific (and in this case wrong) position on Party members to cover over and avoid the real problem, and in the process Party leadership dodged making self-criticism for its erroneous position on homosexuality.

35A maddening problem in the present-day US is that many so-called communists and revolutionaries, including those who call themselves Maoists, do not have any practical conception of what it means to go to the masses with revolutionary politics.

36The protest took place in August 1990—the RCP was in the forefront of opposing US war moves well before the war took place. Lessin was sentenced to a year in prison without the possibility to parole—the latter stipulation given by the judge because of Lessin's unrepentant political stand and refusal to treat the bourgeoisie's courts as legitimate (according to local news reports). She was released early after the Ohio Supreme Court ruled in her favor.

37Press coverage of Dread Scott's exhibit and the government response can be found on the artist's website, <http://www.dreadscott.net>.

38See comrade Ajith's comments on this problem in his polemic *Against Avakianism*, published by the European Foreign Languages Press in 2017.

39From *Charting the Uncharted Course: Proletarian Revolution in the US!* See our summation of the CP and the *RIM Declaration* for some explanation on what erroneous political lines led to these retreats.

40For an elaboration of this point and an important complement to our analysis in this section, read Kenny Lake's four-part series "*The Specter That Still Haunts: Locating a Revolutionary Class within Contemporary Capitalism-Imperialism*," published in *kites* #1–4.

41In Peru, the newly proletarianized slum populations of Lima were also a crucial mass base for building the subjective forces for revolution.

42Some comic relief: Farrakhan and Avakian are equals when it comes to giving lengthy speeches, though unlike Farrakhan, Avakian has not taken up the violin in old age and performed a Beethoven concerto.

43To those who learn their politics and historical knowledge from the internet, you have a large blind spot when it comes to revolutionary Black nationalist organizations, as little information about many of the best of them is available online.

44Mexican migration to the US had changed from a mostly circular pattern to increased permanent settlement after the end of the Bracero guest worker program in the 1960s. With the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, over two million Mexican immigrants applied for legal status.

45La Migra is a term the masses use for the immigration police.

46Mike Davis's *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (Verso, 1990) offers a helpful account of the changing social and class dynamics at work in Los Angeles during this time period.

47Ayacucho was the city in the main area from which the Communist Party of Peru launched the revolutionary people's war.

48RCYB "youth houses" were places where several RCYB members, usually involved in the same political work, lived together, giving them a deeper collectivity and a place to struggle out the ways that ideological transformation plays out in daily life (for example, struggling with young men to do the dishes). Some RCYB youth houses were publicly known to the masses in the neighborhood on purpose.

49The LAPD Rampart Division had a particular reputation for brutality and has been rocked by several scandals; investigations into the rapper Tupac Shakur's murder suggested that two cops from Rampart Division may have been involved in Tupac's murder (the 2018 TV series *Unsolved* gives a decent account of this possibility).

50As quoted in Marita Hernandez, "Protesters Accuse Police of Brutality in Clash at INS Detention Facility," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1990. Whether or not the RCYB actually used cayenne pepper and marbles against police horses (or jousted cops off of horses like Iranian comrades were rumored to do) is not the point: a police official publicly recognized the combativity of the RCYB, in contrast to tame protest-as-usual.

51For an example of a correct resolution to this tension in opposition to conservatism, as well as an inspiring model of communists stepping out ahead at great personal risk, read “Turkey’s Prisons: Shining Trenches of Combat” in *A World To Win* #27 (2001).

52See our summation of the Sixties, in particular the last section of it on the regime of preventive counterrevolution, for an outline of these concessions.

53The RCP’s term for organizational vehicles for mass resistance that it initiated and led, but that had a broader basis of unity than its own full politics, was “mass initiatives.”

54This list is by no means comprehensive of all of Operation Rescue’s activities.

55A shout out to the anarchists who, one night, plastered the inside of the church that Operation Rescue was using as its staging ground in Minneapolis with posters that depicted a Molotov cocktail with a church in the background and read “Operation Rescue come to our town, we’ll lock you in a church and burn the fucker down,” shocking and scaring the Christian fascists when they arrived at the church the following morning.

56The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) was a reactionary organization with strong connections to government officials (Tipper Gore, the wife of Al Gore, was one of its leaders). The PMRC’s objective was to censor “obscene” and rebellious music, and for that it earned the rightful and righteous ire of many musicians.

57A historical summation of R&R in its own right would be a valuable contribution, especially since there is little easily accessible information about it online and the anti-communism that pervades accounts of resistance movements in the US has led to a marginalization of R&R’s role. We hope that people who were deeply involved with R&R or an academic who wants to write a dissertation far more interesting than all the postmodernist drivel out there on political movements will take up this project.

58There was an announced “Mao Tsetung Enrollment” following the split in the RCP in 1978, but we were unable to ascertain any details about it.

59The quote from and characterization of Carl Dix’s speeches are drawn from the printed excerpt of those speeches, “All-The-Way Revolution vs. Other Strategies,” in *Revolution* #61 (1991).

60As a matter of revolutionary principle and good musical taste, Tupac’s music was on blast while this section was written.

61We do not have a good way of estimating how many joined the Party, though we feel fairly certain that it was a significant portion among those dozens.

62Lenin criticized the economism of his day, a trend similar to what we are calling movementism, as the view that “the movement is everything, the final aim is nothing.”

63Notably, when the New York Revolution Books changed locations to Harlem in 2015, neither the RCP nor Revolution Books made any mention of the gentrification of Harlem. It is not wrong, and can even make

strategic sense, for a communist bookstore to be located in a neighborhood with significant gentrification, but to never mention, let alone offer analysis of, this gentrification is downright odd.

64There are subjective and organizational reasons for this problem. The subjective reasons can potentially be fixed through line struggle and rectification. The organizational reason—a comrade having to fight for a specific program around a particular mass struggle that requires a wide basis of unity while also putting forward their communist convictions but not making them a dividing line—will be an ongoing tension that cannot be resolved *per se* but requires mastering the ability to “wear different hats.” Assigning Carl Dix—who sometimes literally wore a hat with MLM embroidered on it during the 1990s—to play a leadership role in O22 meant that the national spokesperson of the RCP had less freedom to be polemical about the need for revolution and the communist world outlook, as he had to, at times, play a more diplomatic role and fight for O22’s program as the basis to unite a broad array of political forces and individuals in the practical struggle. There were plenty of good reasons to assign Carl Dix this role—his skill at diplomacy, his connections to the Black masses and to Black nationalist forces, and the significance of involving the RCP’s national spokesperson in the struggle against police brutality. Furthermore, the RCP may not have had another comrade who could play this role well. We cannot say one way or another what would have been the correct decision, but we must call attention to the contradictions generated by having the RCP national spokesperson play a national leadership role in O22, as it meant Carl Dix was not doing the kind of speaking tours, projecting revolutionary communist politics with a polemical edge, he did back in 1990.

65The pamphlet on the GPCR in question, authored by Greenberg using the pen name Iris Hunter, was *They Made Revolution within the Revolution: The Story of China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (RCP Publications, 1986). An example of Greenberg’s writing on abortion and the oppression of women can be found in the *Revolutionary Worker* #550 (1989): “Women Are Not Incubators! The Assault on Abortion Rights: Where It’s Coming From, What Has To Be Done About It, and Why All Who Hate Oppression Must Fight for Women’s Liberation.”

66The second half of this sentence should prove, to anyone “in the know,” that our summation of the RCP is a balanced, fair account not based on instrumentalism or political truth (if you know what we mean, you know what we mean).

67The RCP would likely protest this statement by pointing to the Avakian talks serialized in the *Revolutionary Worker* and Avakian’s essays *Could We Really Win?* (1992), *Preaching from a Pulpit of Bones: We Need Morality but not Traditional Morality* (1999), and *Democracy: More than Ever, We Can and Must Do Better than That!* (published in *A World To Win* #17 (1992). We only consider the latter of the three essays a significant theoretical work, and our review of Avakian’s talks in the 1990s and down to today shows them to be increasingly recycling the same political points while declining in intellectual and empirical rigor (more on this below).

68It is questionable whether we can call anything Avakian has produced after 2000 a book in the proper, intellectual sense of the term.

69Unfortunately, these weaknesses have become the operative method and approach guiding most of Avakian’s output since that time.

70Not in the deliberate or even conscious sense, but in the sense that suggestions for new strategic approaches were unlikely to get a serious hearing from leadership because they did not fit in with the pre-existing strategic approach.

71That is not to suggest that Rage Against The Machine shared all of the RCP's politics, although Zack de la Rocha had been known to shop at Libros Revolución, and the band did invite Refuse & Resist to table at concerts on its 1997 tour with the Wu-Tang Clan.

72See "Kick 'Em While They're Down" in *kites #3* (2021) for a fuller analysis of US imperial misadventures after 2000 and their consequences.

73Avakian, "The New Situation and the Great Challenges," published in the *Revolutionary Worker* in 2001.

74Michelle Goldberg, "Peace Kooks," *Salon Magazine*, October 16, 2002 (Salon.com/2002/10/16/protest_14/).

75As the NION chant went, "We won't be silent, we won't be tame; this war on the world is not in our name!"

76After a split within Workers World Party, the ANSWER coalition is now led by one side of the split, the Party for Socialism and Liberation (the other side of the split retained the name Workers World Party). This organizational split had little, if anything, to do with political differences (both sides carry forward the same dogmatic Trotskyism and a bizarre "any country that is aligned against US imperialism, no matter how reactionary, must be progressive and anti-imperialist" logic), and ANSWER plays more or less the same opportunist political role today as it did in the early 2000s, with cosmetic adjustments to appeal to the new generation of Leftists.

77This speech, which lasted nearly ten hours, was subsequently released and popularized as a DVD set.

78In Avakian's words, "reifying" the proletariat.

79Furthermore, as Avakian knows, "cultural revolution" refers to a mass struggle, led by the Party, during the socialist transition to communism, aimed at overthrowing capitalist roaders within the Party and further revolutionizing socialist society in the direction of communism. It is understandable that he wanted to point to the high stakes of the line struggle within the RCP, but using "cultural revolution" without any call for Party members to integrate with the masses does not make sense, especially when we have terms (two-line struggle, rectification movement) for what Avakian was calling for.

80Or, alternately, "No to Bush and All He Represents."

81In case it is not clear, we are suggesting that both the way the RCP went about promoting Avakian *and* the popular response among the petty-bourgeoisie to this promotion, grounded in anti-communism, were wrong (one subjective, one objective), not that the RCP was inherently wrong to promote its leadership.

82Explained in "Bob Avakian in a Discussion with Comrades on Epistemology: On Knowing and Changing the World," published in Bob Avakian, *Observations on Art and Culture, Science and Philosophy* (Insight Press, 2005).

83Our own act of writing a dialectical summation of the RCP is in part an effort to understand it not solely through the prism of its current state of degeneration.

84For more on Lenin's philosophical rupture, see Stathis Kouvelakis, "Lenin as a Reader of Hegel," in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, edited by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Zizek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

85By this, we are not taking a position on what these developments in science mean for a materialist understanding of reality, just saying that the RCP's claim that Avakian has made a great breakthrough in the realm of epistemology when he has not engaged these scientific theories raise is dubious at best. Lenin's defense of "reflection theory" in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* does far better at engaging with the latest scientific theories than Avakian does.

86Titled "The Coming Civil War and Repolarization for Revolution in the Present Era," this analysis was initially circulated and discussed within the RCP and then published in April 2005.

87*Basics* gives Avakian quotes like Bible verses (BASics 4:12), and RCP members and supporters quote them like religious nuts quote the Bible. In all his polemics against religion, Avakians seems to have forgotten that while content is decisive, form also matters.

88By contrast with the RCP's current social pacifist line on "revenge," back in 1969, the RU's *Red Papers 1* had included *Wretched of the Earth* as one of its recommended readings. As to why the NYC Revolution Books has a "spokesperson" when bookstores, by their nature, do not have spokespersons, that is anyone's guess. As to why a pretentious hipster dufus was chosen as its spokesperson...

89Read *A World To Win #21* (1995), titled *Rally to the Defense of Our Red Flag Flying in Peru!*, to understand and evaluate how the RIM dealt with and polemicized against the call for peace accords.

90It is likely that the real reason the RCP closed most of its bookstores was its inability to sustain and staff them due to the exodus of Party members. Moreover, it seems that RCP branches in smaller cities have been increasingly neglected by RCP leadership over the last decade and a half, left to their own devices to distribute literature and build miniature versions of the latest mass initiative without much guidance or leadership. This is the logical conclusion of RCP leadership's longstanding tendency towards big-city chauvinism, justified with the belief that political advances in large cities that were centers of culture, namely New York, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area, would radiate outwards, and consequently ignoring the strategic possibilities for making breakthroughs in smaller cities, to say nothing of suburbs and rural areas. Neglecting or abandoning its branch in Houston, a populous, heavily proletarian city where class antagonisms and the oppression of Black and Latino people are particularly sharp, which is located in Texas, a state on the frontlines of several key social faultlines owing to the crackers and Christian fundamentalists that govern it, seems a glaring strategic blunder on the RCP's part.

91Just to cite one example: at the end of his term, Trump allowed Congressional Democrats and Republicans to fight over the amount of a pandemic stimulus check and then, without warning, refused to sign the compromise legislation and insisted that the checks be for a higher amount, making the Democrats look like the ones who do not care about the well-being of the American people.

92The RCP had effectively dropped the mass line in practice since at least the mid-2000s, but it was with Avakian's 2014 talk, "The Material Basis and the Methods for Making Revolution," that it formally dropped the mass line on the level of theory. It is worth pointing out here that the false caricature of the mass line that Avakian paints in this talk is, in fact, the false interpretation of the mass line invented by the new crop of so-

called “Maoists” in the US of the last decade, though Avakian and the RCP seem completely unaware of that fact.

93To cite two examples: (1) Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism* is a valuable part of the MLM canon, but many of the particular tactics it puts forward would lead vanguard parties in the imperialist countries today down the road of reformism and tailing the liberal bourgeoisie—that is why a lot of Trotskyites like it so much. (2) Chairman Gonzalo and the Communist Party of Peru, confronting post-WWII urbanization, substantially modified the strategy of protracted people’s war from Mao’s time by turning the slums of Lima into red base areas and making the Peruvian capital a central military theater of the people’s war.