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Ascendant Maoism and FBI Repression in the United States: 1968-1978¹

By Aaron J. Leonard and Conor A. Gallagher

*[T]he Revolutionary Communist Party proudly raises the banner of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tsetung Thought, and bases itself on the application of it to the revolutionary struggle in the U.S.*²—Revolutionary Communist Party founding program, 1975.

*The RCP, RSB, and its front groups, identified as the VVAW, UWOC, and USCPFA, represent a threat to the internal security of the United States of the first magnitude*³—
FBI report on the Revolutionary Communist Party, September 6, 1976

Amid the abundance of literature on the sixties era in the United States is a glaring absence of acknowledgement, let alone deeper examination, of arguably the most coherent radical political trend to emerge from that tumultuous period, revolutionary Maoism. Instead the narrative of the era's radicalism largely revolves around a discrete set of actors: The Black Panther Party, Students for a Democratic Society, the Yippies, and the Weathermen. That these

¹ This paper is based on research done by Aaron J Leonard and Conor A Gallagher for their book, *Heavy Radicals: The FBI's Secret War on America's Maoists-The Revolutionary Union/Revolutionary Communist Party 1968-1980*. United Kingdom: Zero Books, December, 2014.

² "To Defeat Imperialism and Build Socialism the Proletariat Needs a Communist Party." *RCP Programme and Constitution*, 1975.

<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-3/rcp-program/chapter3.htm>

³ FBI, Chicago Illinois, "Revolutionary Communist Party." September 6, 1976. David Sullivan U.S. Maoism Collection, TAM.527, Box 23 Folders 5-6. RCP, Acronyms refer to: Revolutionary Communist Party, Revolutionary Student Brigade, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Unemployed Workers Organizing Committee, and U.S.-China Peoples Friendship Association.

groups themselves bore their own specific relationship to the larger New Communist Movement⁴ is something largely omitted from popular and scholarly studies. As for the Maoist component, if mentioned at all it is generally dismissed, spoken of as an aside, or relegated to footnotes.⁵ This is in keeping with the bedrock anti-communism and refusal to view Marxism as a legitimate philosophy which dominates the US intellectual landscape.

In contrast the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), certain Congressional committees, and the Executive branch of the federal government were never so dismissive. For them the advent of Maoism in the United States was the focus of ongoing and relentless attention. This was most true in the case of the Revolutionary Union, later to become the Revolutionary Communist Party USA, the largest Maoist organization to arise in the United States.⁶ As the FBI with all due alarm noted in the fall of 1976:

[T]he magnitude of the threat by RCP and its front groups to accomplish its aims or [sic]

⁴ For a helpful overview of the New Communist Movement see, Max Elbaum. *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*. London, New York: Verso Books, 2002.

⁵ See for example Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS*, New York, Vintage, 1973. David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, August 2005, and Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam, 1993.

⁶ Exact numbers of the RU/RCP are not available but a reasonable estimate would be in the realm of a thousand augmented by several thousand active supporters. In 1976, the FBI reported: "The current membership of the RCP is now approximately 650; RSB, 500, VVAW, 100. The exact number of RCP members in USCPFA is unknown." FBI, Chicago Illinois, "Revolutionary Communist Party." September 6, 1976. David Sullivan U.S. Maoism Collection, TAM.527, Box 23 Folders 5-6. The Party's high point, a demonstration in Philadelphia in July 1976, produced 3,500-4,000 demonstrators. *Philadelphia Tribune*, "RCP draws 3500 to rally." July 10, 1976. *The Guardian*, "RCP draws 3500 to rally," July 14, 1976. "In the first national show of strength of the RCP, 3500 to 4000 people marched in an action of the "Rich Off Our Backs-July 4 Coalition." This demonstration did not include the full complement of cadre from the Party's strongest base in the Bay Area and other parts of the West. That said a conservative estimate of 25% cadre at the Philadelphia demonstration yields a number close to a 1,000 at that demonstration alone. The RU's closest number in the New Communist Movement was the October League/Communist Party (ML), which was significantly smaller which Elbaum does not give size estimates only reporting, "OL grew more slowly than RU...[and] remained smaller than RU." Elbaum, pp 102-103.

organizing and overthrowing the United States Government by force and violence warrants constant vigil so that we may fulfill our responsibilities for domestic security.⁷

While there was an element of exaggeration in this—in no small measure to legally justify the extraordinary attention they were giving this group—it was exaggeration rooted in real concern. Here context is of importance. While the RU/RCP never approached the organizational level of the Communist Party USA, they emerged out of a situation that saw disorder and urban insurrection unlike anything ever experienced in the United States—therein lay the peculiar concern for those tasked with protecting the power of the ruling elites in the United States.

The story of the RU/RCP and its FBI *Javert* is thus a story of two contentious yet interlocking entities. More than that, it is a story that constitutes a critical missing piece needed to better understand the history of the tumultuous era of the sixties/seventies.

The Sixties Legacy

The Revolutionary Union itself came to life out of the unprecedented array of forces and events in the San Francisco Bay Area. Its leading core had weathered struggles against the repressive onslaughts of the Congressional House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 1960s, were at the core of the Free Speech Movement which sprang to life at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, and had close working relations with the Black Panther Party for Self Defense which had begun in Oakland California in 1966.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The organizational architect of the Revolutionary Union was Leibel Bergman, son of a long line of rabbinical scholars, a mathematician and former member of the North Dakota State planning board, and someone who in his youth became a member of the Communist Party USA.⁸ Along with Bergman were people such as the anti-war activist and Free Speech veteran Steve Hamilton, Black Panther supporter and Free Speech Movement veteran, Bob Avakian, Melville scholar and radicalized Stanford University professor, H. Bruce Franklin. Along with them were a dozen or so others; a mix of old Communists and newly minted student activists: including Larry Harris, Jane Franklin, Mary Lou and Barry Greenberg, Gert and Dick Alexander and others. Also among with them came an early FBI informant who was in attendance by the organization's third meeting in April 1968 and would work his way onto the leading Executive Committee later that year.⁹

While the upsurge of the sixties was the particular tumult from which this group sprang, the specific political genesis of the RU was rooted in the Sino-Soviet schism that fully matured in the same period. Specifically, Leibel Bergman, who had been a loyal Communist since 1937, broke with the CPUSA in the early 1960s and was tending toward the Maoism side of that divide. To that end he traveled to China to live in the critical years of 1965-67 and returned to the US, according to the FBI, in order to “accomplish a mission”:

[H]is reason for returning to the United States was that he had promised his friends, the Chinese, that he would do a job for them which was the selection of a youth cadre to be

⁸ Leibel Bergman, *I Cannot See Their Faces & Keep Silent*. Saint Paul: Prometheus Press, 1946. Back Cover, biographical information.

⁹ Contact with REDACTED 7/24/68. Report dated July 25, 1968. FBI File, Steve Hamilton 100-445639. Document release p. 319.

trained and held in reserve for China's future utilization. By Bergman's statements, the youth cadre must be selected from the most promising youth in the United States who recognize the correctness of the Chinese position and desire to participate in bringing true Marxism-Leninism to the United States.¹⁰

While the validity of this characterization needs to be contextualized to its source, it corresponds with the fact that Chinese Communism was in the mid-sixties in fierce contention with Soviet Communism and the Maoist PRC was attempting to erect an "anti-Revisionist" counterpoint to the Soviet model of Communism in countries throughout the world.¹¹ Building a solidly Maoist entity within the US was something the Chinese definitely favored.

Given that, the emergence of the RU began as a contention with what had been up to that point the main Maoist force in the United States, the Progressive Labor Movement, which had evolved into the Progressive Labor Party (PLP). This was a group founded by two former Communist Party members, Mort Scheer and Milt Rosen who had been expelled from the CPUSA in 1961.¹² Progressive Labor had initially embraced Maoism, but by the late sixties were on a path that would lead them to denounce Mao as a "revisionist."¹³ Bergman, who had a brief association with PLP, quickly developed an antagonistic disposition:

¹⁰ FBI Memo, November 29, 1968. Leibel Bergman, Newark File, 105-23027-16.

¹¹ For more on this see "The Great Debate: Documents of the Sino-Soviet Split."
<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sino-soviet-split/>

¹² See Robert Jackson Alexander, *Maoism in the Developed World*. Praeger, 2001. pp 11-12.

¹³ "Challenge Editorial: "Workers Will Smash Nixon-Mao/Chou Axis." [cut: First Published: Challenge. Reprinted:] Progressive Labor, Vol. 8, No 3, November 1971.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/1960-1970/pl-nixon-mao.htm>

Leibel Bergman was vehement in his condemnation of PL and argued strongly that it is necessary to attack and destroy PL as being the party in the United States, which represents the Chinese Communist line.¹⁴

The key site of confrontation between the two groups would be what was at the time the largest radical student organization in the US, Students for a Democratic Society. SDS contained within it an amorphous shell in the universe of various Left political trends all vying for levels of influence. Chief among them were the Progressive Labor Party and the National Office leadership (who would later form the Weathermen).

In this contention, and unbeknownst to Bergman and the wider SDS, was that the role of an RU-FBI informant (and most likely similar informants within PLP) supplying information on the RU-PLP contention. This information was in turn seized upon by the FBI as part of its goal to destroy SDS. Through its contacts among journalists it had a story planted in the *Chicago Tribune* claiming that the RU intended to try and organizationally capture key positions of the group at its June convention.¹⁵—this with the aim of encouraging a more schismatic environment.

Even more telling were FBI instructions to its informants to specifically support the National Office (the future Weatherman) against PLP at the June 1969 SDS convention. The Bureau's cynical calculation is outlined explicitly in a follow-up memo:

¹⁴ "RU Executive Committee Meeting, San Francisco, California, 2/23/69. Report dated, March 3, 1969.

¹⁵ Ron Koziol, "Red Unit Seeks SDS Rule." *Chicago Tribune*, June 17, 1969 and Chicago, To Director, FBI, 6/30/69 Subject: COINTELPRO New Left. Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts Subject (COINTELPRO) New Left, Chicago Division. 100-449698-9, Document pp. 28-30.

The convention did result in a split of the SDS with the result that PLP was required to form its own “rump” organization; the SDS as the mainstay of the New Left Movement is now seriously divided and, to this extent weakened; and the National Office fraction is gradually being forced into a position of militant extremism which hopefully will isolate it from other elements of the libertarian community and eventuate its complete discrediting in the eyes of the American public.¹⁶

In the Bureau’s view at the time, better the organization come under control of a more adventurist leadership more readily repressed, than a more sophisticated and strategic organization. One cannot look at the history of the Weathermen group and the associated narrative of sixties radicalism gone bad quite the same after reading such things.

The *Red Papers*

The RU articulated its aims in the period between the two final meetings of SDS in the document called *Red Papers*. *Red Papers* was a clarifying and all-encompassing statement of politics and strategy that was quickly embraced by many among the most radical in the student movement including, initially at least, the national leadership of SDS, who according to an FBI informant felt it, “was an excellent paper and should be published without any changes.”¹⁷

¹⁶ SAC Cleveland, To Director, FBI. “ 8/1/1969. New Left, Cleveland Division. Bureau file, 100-449698-11. Thanks to Professor Art Eckstein for his assistance in analyzing this document.

¹⁷ RU Executive Committee Meeting, San Francisco, California, 4/6/69, submitted, April 14, 1969. Bureau File, Steve Hamilton 100-445639. Document release p. 118.

The document opened with a major statement titled, “Against the brainwash...a defense of Marxism-Leninism.” It put forward the position that “Whatever we accomplish against the monster, from inside the monster, creates favorable conditions for all the struggles of the world’s peoples.”¹⁸ This was in contrast to other trends that applauded national liberation as a certain end in itself—instead *Red Papers* suggested a mutually reinforcing relationship between national liberation worldwide and revolutionary struggle within the US proper. It also had a more sophisticated position on the struggle of Black people in the US, taking its cue from Mao Zedong:

The evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and throve with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the Black People.¹⁹

Red Papers also contained a sharp polemic against the Progressive Labor Party. According to the FBI’s RU informant:

It was felt that this [*Red Papers*] is a most important paper in that it is necessary to expose the PLP as not following the true line of the Chinese Communist. It was the

¹⁸ Revolutionary Union, *The Red Papers*. 1969

<https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/red-papers-1/against.htm>

¹⁹ Mao Tse-tung, “Statement Supporting the American Negroes In Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism.” *Peking Review*, August 8, 1963.

feeling of those preparing this paper that the PLP must be destroyed and that the RU must take a leading role in this effort.²⁰

The FBI in turn used this information to stoke the fires of animosity between the two groups. Among other things they suggested that copies be forwarded, “to one or several of the addresses listed in the PL publication,” all in furtherance of “additional disruption.”²¹

Among *Red Papers* more controversial elements was its defense of Soviet leader Josef Stalin (he is pictured on the cover along with Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao):

Stalin is the bridge between Lenin and Mao theoretically, practically, and organizationally. The successes of the world proletarian and people’s movements are a part of our history, and they are our successes, they are the successes of our class. The mistakes and errors must also be ours. We admit the mistakes of our class and its leaders, try to correct them or, failing that, try to avoid repeating them. But we will not disassociate ourselves from these errors in the opportunist manner of many bourgeois intellectuals and armchair “revolutionaries.”²²

This was mandatory for any group wanting to align itself with Maoism. The schism between the Soviet Union and China, had as one of its critical components whether or not to

²⁰ SA Bertram Worthington TO SAC, San Francisco, 3/5/69. Bureau File, Steve Hamilton 100-445639. Document release p. 177.

²¹ SAC, San Francisco (100-61281) to Director, FBI (105-184369). “Revolutionary Union.” April 30, 1969.

²² *Red Papers*. op. cit.

uphold Stalin. The RU's position on Stalin came with its own internal controversy, however by the time of the publication of *Red Papers*, their position had been set. In this the RU defense was big on assertion, but thin on substance. They protested that, "we are still being bombarded with bourgeois propaganda about how ruthless Stalin was in suppressing opposition"²³—as if such ruthlessness, leaving aside anticommunist exaggeration, was a fabrication.²⁴ Such defensiveness would characterize the group's approach on this matter going forward. That taken into account, to the rare degree *Red Papers* and the RU are mentioned in SDS's history it is usually in relation to the defense of Stalin, full stop. A telling example is Kirkpatrick Sale's seminal book, *SDS*. That book's acknowledgement of the *Red Papers* comes in a footnote; "SDS leaders and publications quoted Mao and Lenin and Ho Chi Minh more regularly than *Jenminh Jih Pao* [*China's People's Daily*], and a few of them even sought to say a few good words for Stalin."²⁵ Such an account overlooked that the RU was an ascendant force. As the academic David Barber, who sharply disagreed with the RU's position wrote, "*The Red Papers* nevertheless represented the future of where most of RYM II were headed."²⁶

It also failed to grasp that the RU and others in the new communist movement were upholding Stalin in the way the Chinese Communists were; that is, critically. This comes through in Mao's own off-the record statements, which reveal, in their own problematic way an acknowledgement and rejection of the violently repressive methods of Stalin. For example:

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ For a good accounting see, J. Arch Getty's and Oleg V. Naumov's *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-39*, Yale University Press, 2002. 590-91.

²⁵ Sale [cut; Kirkpatrick. *SDS: The Rise and Development of Students for a Democratic Society*. New York: Vintage, 1974.] p. 522.

²⁶ Barber, David. *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why it Failed*. Jackson. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 219-220.

[Stalin] didn't deal with this matter well at all. He had two aspects. On the one hand, he eliminated genuine counter-revolutionaries; this aspect was correct. On the other hand, he wrongly killed a large number of people, important people, such as delegates to the Party Congress.²⁷

Mao and the Chinese Communist Party had a highly contentious relationship with Stalin and the Soviet Union that only grew more complex when Stalin's Soviet successors— with their own agenda—attacked Stalin.²⁸ The Chinese position on Stalin was highly problematic, but it was not a simple-minded embrace. This was true for China, and was also true for the emerging Revolutionary Union

Among the Working Class

While the ashes of SDS created the brief ascent of the Weatherman and the increased isolation of groups like PLP, the RU and few other New Communist entities moved forward and grew. The RU was pre-eminent here. Amid the shifting terrain of the crisis-wracked seventies these newly minted Maoists sent cadre to factories to immerse themselves in major US industry. Nationally they established a presence in the steel plants across the US, auto plants in Detroit, the meatpacking centers of Milwaukee, and were at the heart of militant labor struggles, particularly in the wildcat strike movement in the West Virginia coalfields.

To get sense of the level of penetration they attained, an examination of the situation in Tacoma-Seattle area is exemplary. RU/RCP cadre were present in the US Post Office, Kaiser

²⁷ Stuart Schram, *The Thoughts of Mao Tse-tung*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 151.

²⁸ See for example Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2008.

Aluminum, Bethlehem Steel, Hygrade Meat Packing, Nalley's food processing, the American Smelting and Refining Company, Boeing, and other industrial entities.²⁹ While in most cases this was little more than token representation, actual caucuses and smaller circles in specific industries did exist. Looked at from a restricted quantitative measure this does not seem like much. What is remarkable however is that after two decades of relentless anti-communism and the general template of the beer drinking, racist, patriotic, caricature of the US working class that such a circumstance existed at all.

The RU/RCP, however was not limited to industry. They also inspired and lead dozens of chapters of the university-based Attica Brigade/Revolutionary Student Brigade created in an attempt to fill the void left by the collapsed Student for a Democratic Society. By the mid-seventies the RSB was represented on nearly every major campus in the US. The RU/RCP also politically lead—controversially—Vietnam Veterans Against the War—a matter of particular concern for the ruling elites. They were also a catalyst for the influential U.S.-China Peoples Friendship Association an organization that by 1978 number just short of 10,000.³⁰ This was a group that anyone interested in visiting China in this period, and there were many such people, needed to be a associated with.

The Peoples Republic

The genesis of the U.S.-China Peoples Friendship Association was based directly on the work of the Revolutionary Union in the wake of its tours of that country. The first tour the RU

²⁹ The author lived in Tacoma and Seattle in the mid-seventies.

³⁰ "Membership Report for National Conference, September 1978." U.S.-China Peoples Friendship Association Records 1974-2000. Mss Col 6176. The New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library Manuscripts and Archives Division.

undertook occurred in the fall of 1971 when a half dozen members traveled to China “on invitation” of the Chinese government for six weeks. The tour came in the wake of what came to be called the “Lin Biao Affair”—Lin Biao being the head of the People Liberation Army and Mao’s chosen successor who was accused of plotting a coup against Mao and failing at that fleeing the country on September 13, 1971, resulting in his plane crashing killing all aboard.

This was a critical time in China and the RU delegation waded into the room with all these disparate factors in play—while those among it were not oblivious to the complexity of things they were incapable of understanding the situation fully. Put another way, the RU visited and deepened its relations with Mao’s China at a point when China itself was on the cusp of a fundamental transformation. This would have extremely important implications for both.

Regardless, what they and later visitors saw in China had a profound effect. A vivid account of the RU’s sense of conditions in Maoist China comes through in a piece written a couple years later by the former SDS National Secretary and RU partisan, C. Clark Kissinger. Kissinger visited China in late 1972 and on his return submitted an article to the *Chicago Tribune*.

The piece opens by explaining that his hosts “bent over backwards to take me to see anything I requested and opened the doors of factories, schools, and people’s homes for my inspection.” Visiting China at a point when the US domestically was undergoing the twin hydra of stagnation and inflation Kissinger noted that in China there is no inflation and that “there have been no price increases in China’s state-controlled economy for years, and the prices of some important consumer goods have even gone down.” Admittedly, he explained that most of those goods were for the basics such as food, household implements, ready-made clothing, and dry goods. He did, however, see what he called, “an impressive array of simple ‘luxuries’ like radios,

bicycles, electric fans, sewing machines, cameras, musical instruments, children's toys, and books, books, and more books," but that "[h]igher end luxury items however, were more or less out of reach."³¹

Also, making an impression on Kissinger was the day-to-day life for women. He describes the breaking with the notion of women as appendages to their husbands—which in the early seventies was only beginning to be shattered in the US. He tells of how, "[t]here is no way to tell whether a woman is married except by asking her. There is no form of address like 'Mrs.'. There are no wedding rings." Women as a matter of course kept their own family name and "[f]or all practical purposes, there are no 'housewives' among the younger generation." Along with this was the ready availability of divorce where a woman "is free to walk out at any time." At the same time the sexual mores seem to have been steeped in a kind of socialist puritanism, for example, birth control was not available for unmarried women the justification being that the [unrealistic] social standard was there was to be no pre-marital sex. He also noted the absence of crime due to what he said was due to "the elimination of poverty and drug addiction and to the new social values."³²

Kissinger's and other RU accounts were constrained by their role as English speaking guests of Chinese authorities, in this respect such accounts are pointedly one-sided and fail to critically explore opposite elements of what they discovered. Regardless, the experience was of keen interest to a section of the US population that had just come out of the turmoil of the sixties. What it seemed to offer was a living alternate model of a society of hundreds of millions that seemed to have tackled some of the most pressing problems humanity faced. In this respect, the

³¹ "Kissinger, Clark, C. "A Working Man's China: Adultery is rare and frowned upon. So is premarital sex." *Chicago Tribune*, Jul 29, 1973."

³² *Ibid.*

RU's visits to China, with their element of seeing things first hand, gave them a legitimacy, platform, and an audience. It would be hard to underestimate its effect in allowing the RU for a time, thrive.

Two Line Struggle

As discussed the RU came into being amid an effort to assert the correctness of its political line and consequent legitimacy in opposition to the Progressive Labor Party – in Marxist terms it was forged amid two-line struggle. The RU/RCP was site of a number of two-lines struggles over the course of its existence and they are gone into detail more fully in *Heavy Radicals*. For our purpose here we point to two engagements that were particularly pivotal.

The first occurred as the group was just beginning to expand into a national organization. At issue was whether to undertake more or less immediately a form of urban guerrilla warfare, albeit one coupled with more conventional radical political organizing, or to build a base in the working class and strategically plan for a moment – that might be years into the future – when a revolutionary situation could be seized on to make a go for state power. In this Bruce Franklin and others argued the former and Bob Avakian and others in the RU the latter. This contention – which surely would have destroyed the organization as a whole if it had been adopted—lead to a schism where half the group split off and formed the Venceremos organization, an entity which existed only a few short years before more or less self-destructing.³³

³³ Franklin, H. Bruce. *From the Movement Toward the Revolution*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Internal Security. *America's Maoists-The Revolutionary Union, The Venceremos Organization*. Report by the Committee on Internal Security, House of Representatives, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session. U.S.A. Congress. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1972. Revolutionary Union. *Red Papers 4: Proletarian Revolution vs. Revolutionary Adventurism*, 1972.

The other pivotal line struggle we will mention here was not a schism, but rather a failure to merge several groups into one, which would have changed the Revolutionary Union into a far more multi-national organization than the mainly white-middle class (former) student group that it was. In 1973 the RU initiated something called the National Liaison Committee, a grouping that consisted of the Black Workers Congress, the Young Lords Party (that had been renamed the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization), I Work Kuen (an Asian American group) and the RU. I Wor Kuen group fell away from the committee rather quickly, but the other three were on the brink of consolidating into a single entity when a struggle broke out over the role of non-white people in the soon-to-be Revolutionary Communist party. The RU argued all cadre should be more or less equal in stature—in a single multi-national party -- with the other groups arguing that Black workers in particular, should take the lead. Problematizing this whole undertaking was the RU's Central Committee member, and leading Black cadre, Donald H Wright, who was tasked with representing the RU position on this NLC. Wright in fact secretly argued *against* the RU position on the NLC and played a generally disruptive role. Evidence continues to mount that Wright himself may not just have been an, 'opportunist,' but had a more conscious disruptive predicate. Significantly Wright is said to have come to the RU from the Ad Hoc Committee for a Marxist Leninist Line. Research now shows that entity to be a whole cloth construct of the FBI--specifically Special Agent Herbert K. Stallings--developed by circulating newsletters within the old CPUSA promoting a pro-Chinese line within that pro-Soviet Organization.³⁴ The Matter of DH Wright, the Ad Hoc Committee and the destruction of the National Liaison Committee is a matter for which research continues—however the above

³⁴ Chicago SAC to Director, FBI "Recommendation for Incentive Increase" 1/22/1964, 2-3. Ernie Lazar FOIA Collection: FBI Employee Requests. FBI Employees: Freyman, Carl N.-4.

example underscores that in such incidence of “line-struggle” there was more going on than met the eye.

Heavy Radicals and Secret Police

It is the case, therefore, that a full understanding of the RU/RCP is not possible without a proper appreciation of the role of the FBI in relation to them. Here context is of importance. It was the RU’s juxtaposition to China that set it apart from other radicals emerging at the time. And it was this relationship that set it on a course for dramatic expansion—in contrast to groups such as the Black Panthers and Weathermen who were by the early seventies in various states of disarray or disintegration. This is exemplified in a *Los Angeles Times* article written in 1975, which highlighted that there were an “estimated 2500 ‘heavy’ radicals, many from the old antiwar movement, who meet in secret cadre groups like the Revolutionary Union (RU) and October League (OL).”³⁵ The article makes clear that it was not groups such as the Weathermen who had the major radical initiative in the seventies but rather, “[t]he intellectual cadre [who] plant ideas not bombs” and that among those people terrorists were considered least important to cause.

The FBI’s doctrine, and its emphasis on placing informant in high and influential positions, coincided with this assessment. Specifically the Bureau had developed a method wherein:

³⁵ Ellen Hume, “The ‘Heavy’ Radicals’: The intellectual cadres plant ideas—not bombs; terrorists considered less important to the cause.” *Boston Globe*, September 27, 1975. According to Bryan Burrough, “for much of its life, Weatherman’s attacks were the work not of a hundred or more underground radicals, as was widely assumed, but of a core group of barely a dozen people.” *Days of Rage*, New York: Penguin, 2015.

HQ experience has determined that the best possible time to target sources and informants for penetration of the RU is during the initial stage of development of new study groups and collectives. An effort should be made by WFO [Washington Field Office] to capitalize upon any logical means to place sources in contact with these groups.³⁶

In fact by 1971 the FBI had no less *than two informants* sitting on the group's recently constituted National Central Committee.³⁷ This however, was not something they were resting content with. FBI Director J Edgar Hoover's successor, L. Patrick Gray, noted in 1972 that "[t]here has been good informant penetration of the RU, but coverage is not by any means sufficient in either quality or quantity."³⁸ Such attention would continue in varying degrees of intensity until 1978 when the Bureau at the command of the Attorney General reordered the way it justified investigations. In the words of the Bureau:

[T]he full domestic security investigation of the RCP is being discontinued because the activities of the organization no longer fall within the current Attorney General's Guidelines governing domestic security investigations.³⁹

While it appears a good deal of the attention was shut down, there were caveats:

³⁶ Letter to WFO et al, Re: Revolutionary Union, 2/3/1974. National Lawyers Guild Records, NYU-TAM.191, Box 205, folders 11-14."

³⁷ FBI Memo. March 25, 1971. File 105-184369

³⁸ Airtel, from Acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray to SACs in Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Newark, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle (July 3, 1972) (on file at *Cornell Law Review*). Cited in Theoharis. — 69 *Cornell L. Rev.* 886 1983-84.

³⁹ To: SAC Albany, From Director, FBI. Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) Domestic Security, 4/5/1978.

[R]ecipients should close their investigation of the RCP and investigations of individuals, where the investigation is based *solely* [emphasis added] on the individual's membership in the RCP. Informants reporting on the activities of the RCP should be redirected to report on the activities of organizations and individuals who are of investigatory interest to this Bureau.⁴⁰

The implication being that open ended targeting was at an end, but where the Bureau suspected the threat of violence they would continue. This was 1978, and as we will see, by then the RU/RCP had been shattered in a major schism.

A Vision of Socialism

Before that though, in 1975, the Revolutionary Union had transformed itself into the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). With this came a program and constitution that presented a picture of socialism in the United States; one that combined elements of what they had learned from Mao's China, with their specific focus of the US working class. The program had at its core the Marxist dictate of seizing the means of production, including taking control of "credit and trade, stripping the capitalist bankers and corporation heads of the economic basis of their power." It would then set about undoing what capitalism had wrought. Unemployment would be ended to make "use of the labor of everyone in society." The socialist society would take on such things as homelessness and bad housing through "the building of well-constructed housing for the masses of people." Similarly healthcare would be transformed from a means of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

making profit, to one serving “the working class to prevent disease and to preserve the health of the people.” At the same time education would, “put reality back on its feet and expose” bourgeois propaganda and religion would not be allowed to “exploit and oppress the people” and the Party would lead the masses of people to understanding that they are the true force that changes the world and that they can conquer nature.⁴¹

As for culture, again modeling themselves on Maoist China, “[c]ultural workers will join in productive labor together with the masses of people” so that “culture will truly become the weapon of the working class.” There was also a disturbing doctrine on sexuality that held “homosexuality” was an aberration a product of the “decadence” of capitalism and something to work toward eliminating. This outlook — steeped in old left ideology and strikingly backward looking—would haunt the group for years to come.⁴² Regardless, that there was an articulated vision of an alternative to capitalism coming off the sixties, with a proclamation of the need for revolution to attain it, was no small matter for the radically inclined in the US. And this was no small part of why the RU/RCP was able to go forward for a time in ways many others were unable to. Unfortunately larger events would intervene to dramatically change the fortunes of this group.

Fallout In the Wake of Mao’s Death

The RU/RCP’s rising fortunes came to an abrupt end at the end of 1977. In the aftermath of the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 a flood of confusion and disorientation among the New

⁴¹ “Programme of the Revolutionary Communist Party USA. All quote on socialism taken from “Life Under Socialism” section.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-3/rcp-program/chapter2.htm>”

⁴² *Ibid.*

Communist Movement was set loose, leading once vibrant organizations to disappear, implode, or disband. The RCP as the largest entity in that universe was especially hard hit.

At issue was the direction of the new leaders of China who were renouncing the Cultural Revolution—the progeny of Mao himself—and striking a path toward unchecked commodity production and the race to accumulate surplus value as an end in itself. All this foreshadowed the ultimate dismantling of huge parts of the socialist state apparatus such as it was in China. At issue for US Maoists in 1976-1977 was the matter of endorsing China’s new leader, Hua Guofeng, Mao’s sanctioned successor, or siding with the four leading Politburo members including Mao’s widow Jiang Qing, soon tagged “The Gang of Four,” who had been arrested a month after Mao’s funeral.⁴³

The leading core of the RCP, which by 1976 was concentrated in a group of four people, pivotally with Leibel Bergman on one side and Bob Avakian on another. Bergman argued for supporting Hua as a practical — if not principled — matter. Notes of a meeting Bergman held with former RCP leaders soon after a schism in the Party took place, give a tenor of his thoughts:

B[ergman] failed to convince A[vakian]. He tried to point out that while in essence the Cultural Revolution was good, it was not uniformly good. Till ’[19]66 good, but a failure to consolidate led to increasing opportunism. Further that Lin Piao incident was a great shock to the Chinese people—led to G4 [Gang of Four] attacks on Chou [Enlai], dogmatism, invoking the name of Mao to bring shame on Mao rather than the development of Mao thought.⁴⁴

⁴³ James Streak, “Successor of Mao Replaced in Peking as Party Chairman.” *New York Times*. June 30, 1981.

⁴⁴ Presentation by Leibel Bergman, notes. Leibel Bergman’s papers.

Bergman effectively argued it was wrong to denounce the new leaders. In contrast Bob Avakian issued a lengthy paper arguing that both Mao and the so-called “Gang of Four” were the true revolutionaries who had been overthrown in a revisionist coup. His argument, largely a contrasting of the editorial content of *Peking Review* before and after the arrest of the four Politburo members, can be seen in his assessment of Lin Biao:

[B]oth the genuine left and ‘ultra-leftists’ were temporarily united in fighting the main enemy at that time—the right (during this period, many of Lin Piao’s actions and much of his line was “left” in form; as he reached the pinnacle of his power, however, his line became more and more openly right in form as well as essence). Therefore, naturally the genuine left, including the Four as leaders of it—and certainly including Mao—were linked with Lin Piao at that time.⁴⁵

Leaving aside Bergman’s equivocation and Avakian’s certitude, things in China were changing drastically. In that respect the polemical arguments passing back and forth by the two sides within the RCP—and they were not alone in this, the entire new communist movement was likewise engaged—had a ring of desperation. China was set on a dramatically different course, one that would move it far away from Mao’s vision of revolutionary socialism. In that respect the contending polemics aiming to stake out salvageable positions on Chinese socialism come across today as an effort to hold on to a piece of something that was quickly melting away.

⁴⁵ “Avakian, Bob. in *Revolution and Counter Revolution in China*. RCP Publications 1978. p. 95.”

For the RCP the debate led to a major schism, with the group breaking into two pieces; one upholding the new leadership in China and going on for a time before reconstituting within other groupings—or seeing members drift away from radical politics entirely. The other fragment, which upheld the “Gang of Four” as the true inheritors of Mao’s legacy continued on retaining the name RCP, but was smaller by a third with more leaving in the ensuing years.⁴⁶ As for the organizations the Party had built and led during the years of ascent, they would be jolted by events and either transform drastically or disappear entirely in the ensuing years.

The story of the Revolutionary Union/Revolutionary Communist Party is a critical piece of US sixties/seventies history. It establishes not only the presence of Maoists within the United States, but that this presence was consequential. For a time, albeit brief, they thrived; sinking roots in major US industry, influencing the prestigious anti-war group Vietnam Veterans Against the War, building the US China Peoples Friendship Association, and dozens of chapters of the Revolutionary Student Brigade. That all this occurred in the wake of the relentless Cold War anti-communism that permeated US society makes it all the more remarkable. And this is true despite how fraught this strain of Maoism itself was and it is our view that at its core it did not present anywhere near the idealized alternative it proclaimed to.

This grouping also constituted one of the largest projects of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—an agency too often dismissed as over reactive or inflated as overly determinative, rather than the sophisticated yet problematic entity that it was. The story of the RU/RCP vs. the FBI has till now been disregarded by historians and other writers. In that regard

⁴⁶ The RCP still exists today as small fraction, with Bob Avakian remaining as its singular leader and markedly different than the group it was in the seventies.

the following exchange in the 1980 Felt-Miller trial, this between US Attorney John Fields and the FBI's David Ryan is highly instructive:

Q. You were in charge of the Leibel Bergman investigation?

A. Yes, Sir.

Q. And just to give the jury an idea, would you indicate, if you took the Leibel Bergman files and piled them one on top of the other, all the pieces of paper in the files, how high would it stack.

A. I have no idea. I think that you probably could tell me better.

Q. About, four, five, six feet high. Something like that.⁴⁷

Ryan did not answer the question, instead saying the “FBI never judges the validity of its investigation by the size of its files.”⁴⁸ Such dissembling aside there is an abundance of evidence showing this effort was massive. Yet Bergman—one of the most significant radicals of the 60s/70s era—for all intents and purposes is absent from the history books. And here it need be noted that the myriad attention given the RU — open investigations in 22 cities were carried out in the context of the RU/RCP not openly breaking any existing US laws. The strategy being that the Bureau would round up the group's key leaders and members when the necessary time came.

⁴⁷ “Felt-Miller trial, 1980. Record Group 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, District of Columbia, Criminal Case File 78-00179, United States v. W Mark Felt and Edward S. Miller. Location in NARA Stacks: 16W3/15/05/05-06. Box 30, p. 3993, pp. 4050-4051.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

This then is a capsule of a largely missing aspect of radicalism in the USA in the sixties and seventies. Whether in the end this group actually represented a viable alternative to the dominant capitalism of the United States—to say nothing of the conceivability of it assuming such a position—is a matter left for debate. However, that the group was there and represented a strain of radicalism with a certain vibrancy — and a corresponding keen attention from the secret police — is undeniable. Understanding this presents a richer and more nuanced picture of a highly fractious period in history.

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