

SO IF A FIRE MAKE IT BURN

Report on the 1st PFOC National Conference
Boston, July 11-13

Background

On the occasion of the anniversary of the assault on the Moncada Barracks, July 26, 1974, the Weather Underground distributed copies of their political statement: Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism. The book was left where it would be found, given to select organizations and individuals for their "work against the Empire."

Within a few months, activists in 4 cities---the Bay Area, Boston, NYC, and Philadelphia had coalesced into collectives (called PF Distributing Committees) who saw their task as threefold: widest possible distribution of the book, broadening the class base of the collectives, deepening their understanding of the politics of the book.

The publication of PF is a factor of internal significance which contributed to the momentum felt on the Left in July of 1975, relative to the stagnation felt a year ago previous to its publication.

Six months after the publication of PF, collectives existed in the aforementioned 4 cities as well as a "National Traveling Collective" trying to make contacts in other cities, particularly in the South and Mid-west. The work of the PFDC in the Bay Area was reprinting the book, distributing it at bookstores throughout the area, setting up tables at community colleges and even at flea markets. ~~and trapping politics with people there. People~~ that dug the book were organized into study groups and later joined the committee. As a result of this outreach, many members of PFOC are relative newcomers to the Left. In some collectives, as many as half would not have considered themselves organizers one year ago. Contrary to popular conception, probably not more than half of PFOC members have pre-1970 movement experience. The point --- the group's strength has been developing the practice, not being afraid to make mistakes. In the Bay Area, the committee began leafletting unemployment offices talking about deportations and Indochina. At this point the name was changed to Prairie Fire Organizing Committee. As practice developed further, a PF drop-in center was opened across the street from the main unemployment office in San Francisco. It will probably be necessary to create some sort of mass form to absorb the contacts made from this project.

The ideological leadership of PFOC originates from the left tendency of SDS in the 60's --- the Revolutionary Youth Movement Strategy. Leadership people were typically members of SDS, of Weatherman (before it went underground) or the Youth International Party or more than one of those. Current PFOC activists have deep roots also in the Feminist and Gay movements. Most members come from relatively privileged sectors of the working class and most have jobs now. PF is a white organization at this point, and while it sees working with Third World groups as critical for fighting against white racism it does not feel compelled to become multi-national. There is certainly no line against that, and in fact, mostly Black unemployed workers have gotten politically tight with Bay Area PF organizers around that work... and the process remains dynamic.

Never make a politician grant you a favor
They will always want to control you forever
So if a fire make it burn
And if a blood make it run

-Bob Marley and the Wailers

In NYC practice has been related to a community control of the schools struggle on the Lower East Side led by the Puerto Rican and Black community there. Also, against budget cuts at City University and around the firing of a professor there who is a PFOC member. In Boston, practice has focused on showing public white opposition to the racism of the school committee, city council and ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights -- Louise Day Hicks' organization). In the process, a mass (not to be confused with massive) organization has been created and mostly clerical workers have joined. Another Boston PFOC project is called Hand-to-Mouth. It is a comprehensive attempt to deal with problems of hunger by turning working class communities on to "people's" structures such as food co-ops, nutritional-economic educational propaganda, and struggle within schools around the quality of food and aspects of racism such as denial of free lunch and breakfast programs to students (mainly Third World) who qualify, as well as against the callousness of administrators that feed milk to black and brown students with lactose digestive intolerance, causing them to have upset stomachs for the whole day.

Them Belly Full but we hungry
~~A hungry mob is a angry mob.~~

-Bob Marley and the Wailers

The Phila. PFOC has done mainly coalition work around specific projects and demonstrations and has distributed the book.

The conference seemed like a way to consolidate organizationally what was really three and a half separate collectives in four different cities and hopefully grow by inviting interested participants from other cities. It was organized largely by the National Travelling Collective (who had made many of the external contacts) to take place on a weekend so that people would not miss work time. Participants were PFOC members as well as specifically invited observers from various areas including student organizers, GI organizers, union members, prison support workers, and writers from alternative papers. PFOC invited a variety of people, some very sympathetic, some not -- but all who would come to struggle. As a concrete result, PFOC chapters were created in Chicago and Vermont. PFOC became a single organization with an elected leadership, a unity statement and a more defined strategic focus.

Report on the Conference

The first national meeting of the PFOC was opened with a rejoiceful speech by a woman from the Union of Vietnamese in the US and Canada, lauding the liberation of Cambodia and Vietnam and the contribution of the people of the US to those victories. She encouraged Americans to follow through in the world's struggle to combat US imperialism. The opening address called for the formation of a national communist cadre organization.

During the course of the conference there was a prolonged struggle over the purpose and points of unity. Of the following list, the initial three points were explicitly resolved and agreement on the other four points was implied:

- 1) acceptance of guidance of Marxism-Leninism
- 2) necessity of armed struggle against the bourgeoisie
- 3) goal of building a communist cadre party
- 4) commitment to revolutionary anti-imperialism as defined by the WUO
- 5) necessity of politicizing the white working class, particularly regarding racism
- 6) mass work is essential to party building
- 7) the white movement must accept Third World leadership in revolutionary struggle

Four programs were suggested for immediate implementation:

- 1) Organize the unemployed and learn to move into work-place organizing;
- 2) Begin a campaign to organize women workers under a program developed by the PFOC Women's Caucus, to co-incide with a political campaign against the oppression of women by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare;
- 3) Initiate the call for a fall "Hard Times Unity Conference" of local organizers, with a special emphasis on Southern black organizers who have been leading the community struggles for years and on white ~~working-class organizers; and~~
- 4) Begin a national campaign against the incarceration of political prisoners.

This political mass work is to be carried out in four work committees on the chapter level. All PFOC members are to be involved in Marxist-Leninist study groups. In choosing these programs, the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee demonstrates concurrence with the Weather Underground's position that mass work is not in contradiction with but essential to party building. The conference was notably led by Third World participants and women throughout.

Together we struggle by our will
to survive,
and together we fight just
to stay alive.

- Jimmy Cliff, Struggling Man

A panel of speakers addressed the problem of "Directions for Our Movement" by giving prepared statements and responding to discussion from the floor. Wilbur Haddock, a community organizer and a leader of United Black Workers, emphasized the need to be ever-conscious of the on-going war within our country exemplified most recently by the incident on Pine Ridge. Haddock supported community organizing as well as work-place organizing because it recognizes the social context of workers' lives. He declared that racism is the primary division within the working class and hence the fundamental problem to overcome. Annie Stein of People Against Racism in Education and a community organizer (NYC), called for a united, multi-national women's movement, explaining that the white women's movement has historically

decayed when it allowed itself to become isolated from the leading (most oppressed) forces. She emphasized that Third World women have been leading the struggle for welfare and tenant rights. Mirta Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican activist, spoke in favor of Marxism-Leninism being translated into common language in order to make its principles part of everyone's daily lives. She warned activists against being trapped by defending the correctness of slogans, urging instead that we catalyze unity on the left through practice and scientific analysis of our present society. The fourth panelist was Walter Collins, current director of SCEF and one of the original founders of SNCC. He claimed that Prairie Fire is the only work of white origin that has been widely welcomed by blacks. He criticized the white movement for failing to look to the Third World for political guidance and called upon the white movement to open a second front in the war against imperialism—to fight racism in the white working class. He insisted that the women's movement address itself to the historical importance of the charge of rape made by white women against black men. Collins further noted that the left has traditionally neglected the South, emphasizing that the South is the key to revolution as the historical homeland of the blacks and as the entrenched area of the white fascist base.

The PFOC Women's Caucus made a report emphasizing the need to address the racial distance within the women's movement in order to relate to poor women, noting that 43% of the poor families are headed by women, with more than 60% of these being black women. As a white sector of the women's movement, PFOC women are committed to raising white consciousness to the reality of the economic oppression of women, recognizing that Third World women have a greater consciousness of this reality.

~~Several tasks for developing the organization were clearly indicated:~~

- 1) to develop points of unity and to identify the nature of internal contradictions; 2) to broaden the working class base within the organization; 3) to choose and practice local united front strategy through national coordination; and 4) to develop cadre through disciplined organization, criticism and self-criticism, collective struggle, and the study of Marxism-Leninism.

ANALYSIS OF CONFERENCE

The Prairie Fire Organizing Committees Conference indicated recognition of the crucial contribution of past and current mass work by involving movement organizers from various areas as observers, and by welcoming the struggle these people injected into the conference. The conference further indicated that the PFOC has successfully involved Third World people in the struggle to define the direction of the PFOC itself. Women are major leaders in the organization. The PFOC gave specific recognition to the right of self-determination of the national movements within the US, and further recognized the critical role of revolutionary culture in building a people's movement.

The Conference's primary weaknesses were its failure to adequately stress the use of class analysis as the basis for determining practice and to translate the seven general Points of Unity into specific chapter functions, indicative of the general lack of familiarity with Marxist-Leninist practice.

Below we list five areas of importance to chapter work. The vital role of developing a critical, scientific analysis of the local movement and class history (points 3 and 4) was omitted entirely from the conference. This will need to be corrected to guarantee effective and efficient political work.

- 1) participate in mass work based on national programs
- 2) conduct internal Marxist-Leninist study groups
- 3) develop an historical and strategic analysis of the local movement in order to engage in party building debates
- 4) develop a local class analysis indicating priority sectors
- 5) develop and/or participate in United Front Strategy

The PFOC offers little evidence of the capability for organizing the industrial sector of the white working class in the near future, but other revolutionary organizations have strong potentials in this area. There seems to be a good potential for organizing local organizers because of its emphasis on mass work which integrates an anti-imperialist analysis with local conditions. The PFOC appears to have the potential for organizing the masses into cadre, as its political form and style will reach non-political people (the unemployed, housewives, students, women, clerical and service workers, community people, GI's, lumpens, etc.). The organization is in a good position to further formation of a united front within the left, judgement based upon their current practice in several cities, and Third World groups will see the PFOC as a white group to deal with. The main advantage of the PFOC over the other pre-party national organizations is its potential to draw large numbers of working people from the masses into a communist party.

Let's seize the time now, Let's seize the time
Let's make the sytem pay for its crime.

-G. Bright-Plummer

THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED COLLECTIVELY
BY SAN DIEGANS THAT WERE INVITED TO THE
CONFERENCE AS OBSERVERS BY THE P.F.O.C.