

(What follows is chapter fifteen from volume one of Ernest Tate's memoir, "Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 1960s", published by Resistance Books, London. In this chapter, using archival sources, he describes in detail how a small group of Canadian revolutionary socialists in the Socialist Educational League, S.E.L., later to become the League for Socialist Action, L.S.A., of which he was a leader, organized in 1960 to defend the early Cuban Revolution against a right-wing propaganda offensive inspired by American imperialism, designed to quarantine it from the Canadian people. Their campaign in defense of Cuba, he writes, was one of the most successful of its kind in the English-speaking world.)

Verne Olson and the Cuban Revolution

The Cuban Revolution, I have to admit, took our group by surprise. Sometimes, as I've discovered, even revolutionaries can be slow in getting off the mark when it comes to recognizing the real deal. I don't remember us paying much attention to Cuba in the years before 1959, because in such matters we tended to take our lead from the S.W.P. There was not much in The Militant at first, as far as I can recall, and only an occasional item in the Toronto papers. Fidel Castro had been in Montreal in 1957 – and would return as Cuban Premier in 1959 -- but that hadn't registered with us much but our interest, of course, was piqued with the appearance of Fidel Castro on television when Herbert Mathews, an editor of the New York Times, interviewed him in the Sierra Maestra mountains and we became aware for the first time of the strength of the guerilla struggle against the Batista dictatorship. None of us that I recall had ever been to Cuba and I remember especially a couple of people who were close to our group, who had been vacationing in Havana around that time, telling us about a

general strike they had seen and that it was obvious something important was going on there. Everywhere you went in Toronto, people were talking about it and public opinion seemed to be supportive of the resistance to Batista. As Robert Wright, a keen student of Canadian-Cuban relations writes, “editorials and letters in the Canadian dailies – throughout 1958 – were overwhelmingly supportive of the guerillas.”¹ “It began as an ill-reported and ill understood revolutionary democratic movement,” Joe Hansen observed.²

Without any hard facts or not really knowing what was happening on the ground, I remember that in the discussions amongst ourselves, we would tend to dismiss Fidel Castro and the July 26 Movement as “bourgeois-nationalist”. This was also reflected in our first commentary about the overthrow of Batista in an unsigned article in our paper. Relying almost entirely on dispatches by the Globe and Mail’s Phillippe Deane, the article was very skeptical of the July 26 Movement and Fidel Castro whom it saw as a brake on the revolution. “All indications are,” we wrote, “that Castro is attempting to control the revolution and channel it into a middle-class reform programme that will leave the source of Cuba’s poverty, and misery – imperialism – basically intact. A provisional government has been set up with elections promised a long 1 1/2 to 2 years.”³ And according to the S.W.P.’s Lilian Kiezel writing in The Militant, “For the past year Castro has sought in various ways to convince the State Department and

¹ p98, “Three Nights in Havana”, by Robert Wright, quoted in Cynthia Wright’s essay, “Between Nation and Empire”, in “Our Place In The Sun: Canada and Cuba in the Castro Era”, edited by Robert Anthony Wright and Lana Wylie, University of Toronto Press, 2009.

² Review of C. Wright Mills’ “Listen Yankee”, International Socialist Review, Spring, 1960.

plantation owners that he has repudiated the aims announced in 1955 and has no intention of nationalizing industry,”⁴ and a year later the paper was maintaining that “The main danger to the Cuban Revolution is in its own leadership. The class background of the Castro forces is petit bourgeois.”

These comments by the two main Trotskyist currents in North America were understandably based upon some of the confusion about the aims of the Revolution as expressed by a few of its main leaders, including Castro, but they were nevertheless a mistake that we would have to rectify very soon. And we were not the only ones associated with the Fourth International who were on that track.

The F.I. initially got off to a good start by having, in early 1959, one of its leaders tour the island. She received a warm welcome and was given extensive radio time to promote the F.I., but this opportunity to establish good relations with the new government soon went off the rails and headed in a sectarian direction under the influence of Juan Posadas, a leader of the Fourth International at the time who was co-coordinating the work of the International’s Latin American sections. We now recognize that it was a golden opportunity missed, but it was probably the unfortunate by-product of an internal tendency struggle in the International between Michel Pablo and Juan Posadas on the one side and Pierre Frank, Livio Maitan and Ernest Mandel on the other.⁵ For a critical period, the views of Juan Posadas and the F.I.’s “Latin American Bureau” set the public

³ Workers Vanguard, Mid-January, 1959, Vol. 4

⁴ The Militant, “Cuba Ousts Batista Dictatorship”, January 12, 1959.

tone for the F.I.'s early attitude to the revolution. That could be seen in an appeal it issued three months after the overthrow of Batista in 1959, "on the rising revolutionary struggles in Latin America", reprinted in the Spring issue of Fourth International, the theoretical journal of the International Secretariat that referred "to the July 26 movement and similar movements as being led by 'bourgeois parties and agents of imperialism' whose anti-imperialist stance was due to 'the enormous pressure that the masses bring to bear on them.'"⁶

At best, consciousness about the new developments in Cuba was at a low level. A leaflet, for example, put out for circulation in Britain by the International Group in Nottingham, promoting the International Secretariat's "Winter, 1959-1960 Fourth International", makes no mention of Cuba whatsoever.⁷ But those were the early days. Very soon, as I've said, most of us had corrected our attitude and quickly we became enthusiastic supporters of the Cuban experiment. It was destined to have a profound effect upon socialists everywhere and defending Cuba against imperialism became a central activity for the radical left in North America, helping it to emerge from the isolation imposed upon it as a result of McCarthyism.

It was only after a discussion about Cuba opened up in the S.W.P., I remember, did we in Canada fully grasp the true significance of the change in Cuba. Farrell Dobbs and Joe Hansen, two of the main leaders of the S.W.P., had toured Cuba in early 1960 and came away convinced that fundamental

⁵"The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists", by Pierre Frank, 1979, Ink Links.

⁶ "How Sectarrians Misrepresented Trotskyism in Cuba", by Jose Perez, Intercontinental Press.

change was underway, and in a document written in July 1960, Joe declared that “the new Cuban government is a workers and farmers’ government...”, meaning that while the capitalists still dominated the economy, the workers and peasants had taken control of the government. Five months later the S.W.P. followed this up by declaring that a workers’ state now existed in Cuba, a characterization that recognized that the workers and peasants had defeated the capitalists and now controlled the state and economy.⁸ The only opposition in our ranks to this view turned out to be in the leadership of the American Y.S.A., led by Tim Wohlforth, Jim Robertson and Shane Mage. Their position was very simple: only the working class could over-throw capitalism, “led by a revolutionary party” such as Lenin’s Bolsheviks’, preferably with a “Trotskyist” programme, they said. And since such a party did not exist in Cuba what was happening in Cuba, according to them, could not be termed a “socialist revolution”. They were joined in this view by many Trotskyists of the insular variety in Britain such as those led by Gerry Healy, the Socialist Labour League and Ted Grant’s grouping, the Revolutionary Socialist League, but in hindsight, I personally shouldn’t be too critical about this.

I was initially sympathetic to some of these views myself because I was still locked into a formal way of thinking and it took me a little while to come around to supporting the majority’s views, but indirectly both Tim and Jim had helped me finally make up my mind because as the discussion unfolded, they began to disagree with each other: Jim believed Cuba had become a “deformed workers

⁷ R.D. Fonds, MG, 1V 11, Cont. 109, File19, L.A.C.

state” – a designation in our vocabulary that likened the new Cuban state to those of the authoritarian, Stalinist controlled states of Eastern Europe -- and Tim was of the opinion that there had not been a revolution at all. Both were unanimous in calling for the overthrow of the new Cuban government. The S.W.P., especially through the writings of Joe Hansen, would go on to play an exemplary role in theorizing what had taken place in Cuba and ideologically arming radical activists everywhere for its defense. I know of no other socialist organization anywhere, outside of Cuba, that expended more resources and effort, carried out more internal discussions and debates, or published more articles in its press, about Cuba.

As the Cuban Revolution became more and more anti-capitalist and with the new government nationalizing key sectors of the economy and implementing a deep agrarian reform, the United States redoubled its efforts to destroy the revolution by imposing a brutal blockade against the country – that lasts to this day – and by resorting to a combination of clandestine and open military intervention against it. Amidst press speculation about such threats, the S.W.P. moved at full speed to attempt to mobilize support for Cuba in the United States, not only through the party’s press and public forums, but by trying to build as large a united front as possible of all those who supported the right of the Cubans to self-determination and independence. These were the circumstances under which the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (F.P.C.C.) was born. Initiated by Robert Taber, it became for a couple of years, the main instrument for spreading

⁸ “Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution”, Pathfinder Press, 1978.

the truth about Cuba in North America. Taber, a CBS journalist who had broken the Cuban story to the world when he interviewed Castro in the mountains in 1957, had run a full-page ad in the New York Times in April 1960, defending Cuba, which was signed by many of the world's leading intellectuals and personalities of that time, among them Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Truman Capote and Robert F. Williams, a militant, black ex-marine from North Carolina who later would create a sensation in the Black civil rights movement because of his book, "Negroes With Guns"⁹, an account of his organizing along with others in his community, armed self-defense squads to protect his community from marauding white racists. Over a thousand letters of support flowed in as a result of the advertisement and Taber quickly moved to bring into being the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (F.P.C.C.).

The C.P. and the S.W.P threw their support behind the new project, with the S.W.P taking the most active role. "Within six months, the F.P.C.C. had 7000 members – 27 'adult' chapters and 40 student councils" and Berta Green of the S.W.P. became one of its main organizers, writes Bill Simpich in a well documented article, summarizing the Committee's work in building solidarity in the critical early years when the revolution was under severe external threat. The F.P.C.C. promptly set up a functioning headquarters in New York under the leadership of Richard Gibson, a black journalist. Although Simpich does not

⁹ "Negroes With Guns", by Robert Williams, Wayne State University Press, 1962.

mention the internal tensions between the C.P. and the S.W.P. within the Committee,¹⁰ he nevertheless provides an excellent account of its successes.¹¹

The American F.P.C.C. lasted barely two years, winding itself up ultimately because of the intense pressure placed upon it by the American government to compel it to register as “a foreign agent” and hand over its membership lists. The vicious right-wing smearing of the Committee (think of the “shock jocks” on today’s American radio stations) that associated Lee Harvey Oswald with the Committee at the time of John Kennedy’s assassination -- was the final straw. But in its brief life, because of its hard work and through its publications, press-releases, demonstrations and protests – some with many thousands outside the U.N. headquarters in New York -- it was able to have a critical influence on many people’s understanding of the illegal activity of their government and at the same time win breathing space for the revolution. The decision by the S.W.P. and the radical left – especially the youth -- in the early part of the decade, in making the defense of Cuba their highest priority and through the tactic of building the broadest possible united front around a single issue, on the demand for self-determination– would provide the template for later successful organizing against the Vietnam war, a war that was then in its early stages. And it was an initial entry point for many young people into radical politics. As the Canadian academic, Cynthia Wright notes: “In both the United States and Canada, the

¹⁰ The C.P. “form clubs but do not affiliate to the Committee...they are not sending money”, wrote Cliff Cotton who was attending the SWP’s study camp that year and was frequently in New York talking to party activists. Letter to Ross Dowson from Cliff Cotton, November 22, 1960, MG28, 1V11, Container 105, File 16, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

¹¹ Fair Play for Cuba and the Cuban Revolution: How American Antiwar and Solidarity

committees were part of the difficult process of opening up political dissent within the stifling context of McCarthyism and the Cold War consensus; they were also fundamentally linked to the early phases of the civil rights movement, Black Power and the student movement.”¹²

The Canadian F.P.C.C. was established not long after the founding of the American Committee and was equally as successful, if not more so, and it turned out, had a much longer life and a more lasting effect. In getting it off the ground, we had benefited very much from our close relationship with the S.W.P. We in the S.E.L. had been following the S.W.P.’s initiative on Cuba, with great interest, wondering how we could replicate it. Events were moving very fast and all of us believed that our solidarity work should embrace broad forces to persuade working people that Canada should not back up the U.S. Reports were already appearing in the press that the U.S., ominously, had begun threatening military maneuvers from its base at Guantanamo; we were expecting an invasion any day. By then I was on the Political Committee¹³ and we began discussing what possible actions we could take to carry out solidarity activity. One of our first moves – a modest one -- was to issue a leaflet in the name of the S.E.L, “Hands off Cuba!” which we circulated as widely as possible, but that was clearly insufficient. We had to do more, we were convinced, if we were to have a more positive effect. Our first impulse was to organize a picket outside the U.S.

Movements in 60’s Impeded an Effective Invasion of Cuba”, by Bill Simpich, Counterpunch
¹² op.cit., Cynthia Wright, p.98.

¹³ Toronto resident members of the National Committee and the leading body of the group between N.C. meetings.

Consulate¹⁴, but we concluded this might be premature and would probably have resulted in something small and ineffectual, and more than anything else a sign of our weakness. The S.E.L. was a tiny organization at that time with at most thirty members in Toronto. Although U.E. and the L.P.P., many times larger than us, had set up “Aid to Cuba Committees”, we noted to ourselves how very passive they had been on the issue and not very active, confining their efforts to mainly raising support within their own ranks, perhaps an expression of Moscow’s hesitation about what was going on in Havana where the C.P., literally, had been pushed aside by the July 26 Movement. We decided that the best approach for us would be to circumvent the C.P. and set up a “defense committee”, similar to that in the U.S. where they had appealed for prominent public figures to become sponsors. We figured we might be even able to do a better job in Canada because of our broad contacts in the labour movement and the C.C.F. We were also beginning to see that there was some awakening in the labour movement about the issue. At its Fall convention that year, in 1960, the B.C. Federation of Labour, to overwhelming and thunderous support from its delegates, and to the discomfort of the Canadian Labour Congress, especially its vice-president, Joe Morris, agreed to send all of its top officers to Cuba for a special visit and at the same time urged all of its local unions to elect representatives to accompany them there to make sure it would be a mass delegation to find out the truth of what was going on.¹⁵ As a first step in getting something going on Cuba, we immediately requested our Toronto and

¹⁴ R.D. Fonds, Container 109, File 18, L.A.C.

¹⁵ Workers Vanguard, Mid-October, 1960, Vol.8, No.10.

Vancouver branches and our supporters in Montreal to begin the preparatory work for the setting up of a defense committee by contacting wherever they could, sympathetic prominent individuals on the campuses and in the C.C.F. and unions to see if they would be interested in such a project.¹⁶ At the conclusion of the P.C. discussion, Ross agreed he would approach Verne Olson to see if he would head up the new project and at the same time we assigned one of our most experienced leaders in Toronto, Pat Mitchell -- in the event that Verne agreed -- to give him full assistance.

Verne and his wife Ann had recruited me to the S.E.L. a few years earlier and I had always remained in touch with them, visiting them in their home in Swansea, from time to time. They were always warm and generous to me and Ann was an excellent cook. I had many suppers there. Verne, who had suffered from polio when a child, making it impossible for him to walk without crutches, came from a poor family in rural Saskatchewan and had remained unschooled in his childhood until a social worker intervened to have him educated. He and Ann became politically conscious in their youth and became active in the F.I. group in Toronto, with Verne becoming one of its leaders. Through single-minded concentration, he had worked hard at overcoming a lack of formal education, and when I knew him, he was employed at Ontario Hydro as a certified technologist in hydrology. It was by no means certain Verne would agree to head up the Cuba project. He suffered periodically from severe depressions – a

¹⁶ Letter to Branch #1 and #2, December 29, 1960 from Ross Dowson, R.D. Internet Archives. "Within the next three weeks we anticipate we will have done sufficient preparatory work to establish such a committee here in Toronto."

debilitating affliction that lasted most of his life – and had been on a leave of absence from the S.E.L. at the time, for health reasons and to also spend time upgrading his technical qualifications to gain a technologist certification. We were pleasantly surprised when we heard from Ross that not only had he agreed with our proposal, but he was enthusiastic about the idea. He and Ann had been following events in Cuba very closely with the same great excitement as the rest of us and were also wondering about how we should respond. With his courage, intelligence, and profound sense of moral integrity, he turned out to be ideal for the task, and much of the eventual success of the Committee in Canada was due to his and Ann's, single-minded dedication to leading it through its many trials and tribulations. They were central to our campaign in Canada to get the truth out about Cuba, and without them, I doubt it would have had the effect it had.

Towards the end of 1960 through our connections to the S.W.P., we managed to have Verne and Ann included in a large delegation of over 300 visitors to Cuba, organized by the American F.P.C.C. The U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba while the American tour was there, the last to come from the U.S. The U.S. government placed a complete ban on their citizens visiting the island. But Verne and Ann's visit was the breakthrough we needed in Canada, and we quickly proceeded to set up the F.P.C.C across the country, but independent of the U.S. operation that had been in existence for about a year. This Cuba solidarity work that lasted from 1960 to 1970 is well described by Cynthia Wright. It's not my purpose here to give the full story of the Canadian

F.P.C.C here -- Wright does that very well – but to try to tell how it looked from inside the S.E.L and its successor organization, the League for Socialist Action (L.S.A.). I will add to Wright's account, however, additional information about some of the difficulties we encountered due to the hostility of Canadian security forces towards us and some of the problems we encountered in the Committee's dealing with those in Cuba who were under the influence of the Popular Socialist Party (P.S.P.), the Cuban version of the C.P., and especially about the problems we ran into in dealing with the Cuban governmental organization, the Cuban Institute for Friendship with Peoples (I.C.A.P.) that was headed up by Leon Mazzola, whom we came to believe was a P.S.P. member, or sympathizer.

The S.E.L.'s urgency in defending Cuba arose from the high importance it gave to internationalism, expressed by its membership in the Fourth International whose programme called for the workers in the advanced countries to resist their own capitalist rulers and placed a high priority in defending the struggles for self-determination and independence in the colonial world. With our limited resources – at that time, as I recall it, we could not have had more than fifty members in the whole country -- we believed that the best way to help the Cuban people would be to create a broad single-issue defense campaign to let all Canadians know the truth about the revolution and its accomplishments, to counter the barrage of hostile propaganda that was regularly appearing in the Canadian media, as it swung behind American policy objectives. For us, it was the first opportunity since the Russian Revolution to publicize and promote

democratic socialism through a concrete example that was unfolding before our eyes. The vehicle for this would be the F.P.C.C.

While Ann and Verne were in Cuba, we busied ourselves with lining-up speaking engagements across the country so that Verne could address Canadians about his experiences and observations. The response turned out to be greater than we could have ever imagined. Verne even got himself on television and in Toronto we kicked off his cross-country tour with a packed enthusiastic meeting of approximately four hundred supporters in the First Unitarian Church on St Clair Avenue West where we managed to sell approximately 250 memberships for the new committee, such was the excitement in the hall. Alongside Verne on the platform were Professor Leslie Dewart, a Catholic theologian from the U of T, whose family came from Cuba, Farley Mowat, one of Canada's best-known Canadian writers on the Canadian north, along with key-note speaker, Sam Shapiro, from the New York office of the F.P.C.C. We also had Richard Gibson, the black journalist and one of the main initiators of the American Committee, on the platform. Verne announced to the meeting a list of prominent sponsors who had quickly rallied to the Canadian Committee. Among them were Kenneth McNaught, a much-respected historian at the University of Toronto and the biographer of J.S. Woodsworth¹⁷, William Irvine, Honourary Chairman of the Alberta C.C.F., Frank Hanson, editor of the party's Saskatchewan weekly, The Commonwealth, Orville Braaten, a leader of the Pulp and Sulphite Union in B.C. and the Reverend John Morgan, a minister

¹⁷ "A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth, Kenneth McNaught, University of

of the First Unitarian Church to which Verne and Ann belonged. It was the first of many large meetings across the country about Cuba and an impressive beginning for the campaign¹⁸. Until reading Cynthia Wright's essay, I had forgotten the importance of McNaught in helping to get the F.P.C.C. up and running. The same month that the U.S. ended its diplomatic relations with Cuba and while Verne and Ann were in Cuba, an important article by McNaught had appeared in the weekly, Saturday Night, deeply critical of U.S. policy towards the island and urging Canada to reject it and to formulate its own independent position. McNaught urged readers to contact the New York office of the F.P.C.C. and give it support, which hundreds of Canadian did. Those names and addresses were turned over to those working to establish a Canadian Committee. With the successful Toronto event under his belt, Verne crossed the country speaking to all kinds of gatherings, with hundreds turning out to hear him.

We were riding a wave of enthusiasm. Committee chapters sprung up in Montreal, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver. Activists in the C.C.F. and the unions were hungry for any reliable news they could get, not trusting what they were reading and hearing in the media. By then we had managed to line up an impressive list of endorsers. On the West Coast, Bob Horne a leading member of our group, a student, moved quickly to get a B.C. wing of the Committee up and running. Soon we had the active support of some key C.C.F. people like

Toronto Press, 1959, 339p

¹⁸ Report to the 1961, (S.E.L., Toronto) Branch Conference about the F.P.C.C., MG 28, 1V 11, Cont. 109, File 6, R.D.Fonds, L.A.C.

Cedric Cox, a C.C.F.-M.L.A. and Dorothy Steeves, a founder of the Party, along with a few prominent trade-unionists such as Orville Braaten and Jerry LeBourdais of the Oil and Chemical Workers Union and. On the prairies, a young Howard Pawley -- who would later become the Province's N.D.P. Premier – became a key member of the Winnipeg Committee. Other active supporters on the prairies were prominent left-wingers in the C.C.F. of course, such as Bill Irving, an early sponsor and Tony Mardiros in Edmonton. Hugh Garner, an important Canadian novelist also publicly backed the Committee. But the biggest boost to our efforts came from Cuba itself. Invariably those who visited the country came back bursting with enthusiasm and wanting to talk about their experiences, underlining the old adage that revolutions often turn ordinary people into the best of revolutionaries.

The Canadian F.P.C.C., as Cynthia Wright notes, became one of the most successful solidarity committees in the English-speaking world and during the course of its ten-year history for many activists in North America it was the main source of information about Cuba, as it went through its many achievements and various crises. Right from the beginning the Committee engaged in a vigorous publishing programme, printing many speeches by Cuban leaders, especially those by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, and numerous pamphlets and reprints of articles and speeches by Cuba's supporters around the world. Very successful was a pamphlet by Jack Scott (not to be confused with Jack Scott, the Vancouver Maoist), a very popular columnist for the Vancouver Sun, comprised of eight of his columns, "Jack Scott Takes a Second Look at Cuba".

He had been to Cuba a couple of times before the revolution and his pamphlet about his most recent trip there, sold many thousands of copies. Another successful little publication was Leslie Dewar's, "A Catholic Looks at Cuba", which also sold many thousands and was distributed widely throughout the country. Eventually, the F.P.C.C. would become one of the main suppliers of English-language literature about Cuba to the Cuban Embassy in Ottawa.

It wasn't long before a major activity of the Committee became that of organizing tours to the island so that Canadians could hear first-hand personal accounts about what was going on, and to also persuade prominent intellectuals and artists to go and see for themselves what was happening, especially on important anniversary dates, all to help counter the growing pressure from the U.S. on the Diefenbaker government to line up behind its anti-Cuba offensive that was intensifying by the day. Dorothy Steeves, a leader of the B.C. C.C.F. until the early Fifties and an important B.C. poet, went to Cuba for the first time along with Al Purdy, even then one of Canada's major poets. They were part of a delegation of Canadians from the cultural community in the spring of 1964 who attended May Day celebrations on behalf of the F.P.C.C. Purdy later wrote a very powerful account of the destruction of a sugar refinery by counter-revolutionaries in Oriente province, along with a "Poem to the Sailors on the American Warship, 'Oxford'..."¹⁹ When Purdy returned to Canada, he readily agreed to speak at several meetings about his experiences and I remember in

¹⁹ Summer, 1964, F.P.C.C. Bulletin. The Oxford, a U.S. warship, in the aftermath of the missile **crisis** of 1962, constantly hovered close to the coast, in full view of Havana, spying on the island's communications system.

Vancouver, when he was on one of his visits, he spoke to a packed meeting of the Y.S.A.

The U.S. State Department's efforts to line Canada up against Cuba was relentless. An ominous sign about what was in store came very early when Senator Croll, a "left" Liberal and powerful influence in his Party, denounced Cuba and came out against trade with it, demanding that a Cuban trade mission then in Canada, "should be sent packing". At about the same time, many of Cuba's supporters became very alarmed when the Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker indicated that he had acquiesced to the Americans' policy towards Cuba. The F.P.C.C. promptly issued a press release – one of the many over the course of its life -- calling on Diefenbaker to reject the "Kennedy doctrine", pointing out that the U.S. policy also called into question Canada's own sovereignty. And when Cuba was bombed by "unidentified military air-craft" in early 1961, a prelude to the Bay of Pigs' invasion, Verne condemned it as "nothing less than a flagrant act of aggression on a member nation of the United Nations"²⁰ and called upon the Canadian government to denounce it and just as importantly, when Kennedy launched that invasion, F.P.C.C. supporters across the country immediately mobilized to protest. The Vancouver Labour Council, led by F.P.C.C. activists in the hall, condemned the action, pledging full support to the Cuban people "in their fight for freedom and for a better life", as did the Regina and Hamilton Labour Councils. During the course of the invasion, the

²⁰ F.P.C.C. Press Statement, April 15, 1961, Cont.109, File 20, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

Committee organized a series of pickets of several hundred each outside the Vancouver and Toronto Consulates.²¹

Very soon after it was organized, almost in defiance of the growing Diefenbaker hostility to Cuba, the Committee received a warm response for its goals from hundreds of young people in Canada, especially students. Five campus clubs were soon affiliated to it, most of them headed up by members or supporters of the L.S.A., by then the successor to the S.E.L. Alongside Bob Horne, Brian Belfont – who would also become a leader of our group on the West Coast -- became prominent in the Committee's activities right up to the end of the decade. A welcome find, prior to that he had spent a year studying in Cuba after which he became a very active chairman of the Committee on the University of British Columbia. In the summer of 1964, the Committee sent a delegation of 45 students from all over Canada to Cuba, led by a retired Canadian military officer, David Middleton, a left-wing leader in the Toronto N.D.P. The tour had been over-subscribed with 125 students expressing an interest in participating. Plans called for the tour to join several hundred other students from around the world to work "on the construction of the Camillo Cienfuegos School in the Sierra Maestra Mountains during July and August".

Ross, who during the Second World War had been a lieutenant in the Canadian army, had figured Middleton would be an ideal team leader, but we later learned that he had to deal with a rebellion of his young charges who had resisted his attempts to impose a military-like discipline upon them. It all began

²¹ Workers Vanguard, May 1961, Vol.6, No.3.

in Mexico City where the group was waiting for a flight to Havana and continued in Cuba, when a few of the students – who were not connected to the L.S.A. – who in addition to resisting Middleton’s discipline, figured that rather than going into the mountains, they would rather experience the city life of Havana. Ruth Tate, who was a founder of the Vancouver Y.S.A. and editor of Young Socialist Forum at the University of British Columbia and Hans Modlich, then an engineering student at the University of Toronto and a leader of the Y.S.A., both members of the L.S.A., tried their best to assist Middleton in preventing the tour from falling apart. It became even more difficult once they arrived in Cuba. Ruth and Hans quickly noticed that in addition to the problem of keeping the tour on course, many of the tour group seemed to be constantly engaged with individual Cubans in discussions about the topic of Trotsky.

The views of many of the youth on that tour were not that much different from those of many non-CP activists anywhere in Canada, where the topic of Trotsky was no big deal. It would have been quite natural for them to talk about Trotsky in those days, but we were suspicious that many of these debates had been provoked by P.S.P. people who seemed intent on “setting up” the tour group as a “Trotskyist” enterprise, part of a political operation we suspected, to discredit the work of the Committee in Canada. But despite those difficulties, we – and I.C.A.P. -- considered the 1964 tour a big success, with many of the students later speaking on their campuses about their experiences and bolstering the work of the F.P.C.C. “The result of that visit will always be happily remembered

by our revolutionary people”, Giraldo Mazola, Director of I.C.A.P., would later say.²²

From the very beginning, the Canadian Committee was treated with deep suspicion by the Tory government and soon after its formation it was added to an unofficial blacklist of “subversive” organizations the government deemed a threat to the security of the state. And the American Committee was coming under similar pressure. Soon after its formation, in the summer of 1961, the right-wing news agency, United Press International (U.P.I.) dispatched a witch-hunting article targetting the American Committee, with the headline, “Pro-Cuba Reds Infiltrating Our Campuses”. The article soon appeared in all major newspapers throughout the United States and not long after the Canadian Committee became the object of a string of virulent, red-baiting articles in the Toronto Telegram, a hard-right daily similar to today’s National Post, smearing Verne and F.P.C.C.’s work.²³ The way the wind was blowing could also be seen when MacLean’s magazine told Farley Mowat that an article about Cuba that he had been preparing in consultation with their editors was no longer wanted.²⁴ There was also some red-baiting by the leadership of the Ontario C.C.F. and the United Auto Workers (U.A.W.) against the Committee, and Leslie Dewar and Kenneth McNaught seemed to bend to these kinds of pressure when they publicly withdrew their endorsement of the Committee, precipitating internal crises in its ranks.

²² I.C.A.P. Press Release, undated, (most likely the summer of 1965) , R.D. Fonds, M.G.28, 1V, 11, Container 110, File 2, LA.C.

“We have some intelligence concerning the people who had been appointed officials and to the executive,” Dewar told the press. He did not say where his “intelligence” came from, but as far as the L.S.A. was concerned, this was the work of the R.C.M.P., pure and simple. Their filthy finger-prints were all over the affair and could be seen in Dewar’s next comment. “McNaught and I put certain questions about policy to the Chairman, Mr. V.O. Olson”, he said. “We suggested that all governing officials of the committee should be above reproach in their loyalty to the Queen and Canada’s established constitution.”²⁵ It was sad to see these two academics – one of whom, McNaught, was an important public intellectual in his own right and a spokesman for many progressive causes, succumbing to the state’s pressures on this issue. Verne, in no uncertain terms told the two of them where to go with their idea, letting them know that their suggestion would defeat the aim of uniting the greatest number of people behind the goal of fair play for Cuba. “It would require some committee members to investigate the political associations of elected members,” he said. “Such a policy would lead to a witch-hunt in the organization.”²⁶ In a later report, Verne expanded on this point, characterizing it as a form of McCarthyism. “I have taken it for granted that all Committee supporters were vigourously opposed to the witch-hunt which has stultified intellectual life on this continent. We have to combat this atmosphere from the word go in order to establish the truth about

²³ Workers Vanguard, Mid-July, 1961, Vol.6, No.5.

²⁴ Op.cit. Cynthia Wright, p100

²⁵ Toronto Telegram, June 27, 1961.

²⁶ Toronto Telegram, June 28, 1961

Cuba. It was in this belief that I declined to become the instigator of a policy to keep the Committee 'above reproach'."

Backing for Verne's position quickly flowed in from Committee supporters across the country. The Montreal F.P.C.C. likened it to "Intimidation by thought police reminiscent of (the) twenty-year Duplessis Regime." Howard Pawley wrote: "Don't become discouraged. We are with you in Winnipeg." Nevertheless, Dewar and McNaught had supporters in Toronto and in a meeting of the Committee with about sixty people in attendance they proposed that it dissolve itself. The motion was defeated.²⁷

In the midst of the crises precipitated by the Dewar and McNaught affair, Verne and Ann were also placed under continuous surveillance and subjected to harassment by the R.C.M.P., with a police car parked twenty-four hours a day outside their home. "Their resignation followed an RCMP statement appearing in the Toronto papers which said that the Mounties were 'watching' the F.P.C.C...." Verne wrote a correspondent.²⁸ This kind of harassment would continue throughout the Committee's life. In a letter to the Toronto Star, in 1967 for example, Hans Modlich, on behalf of the Committee, protested a bizarre campaign against it, when media reports appeared saying that the F.P.C.C., "was training 'separatists' in Quebec during Expo."²⁹

²⁷ Report from the Chairman, by Vernel Olson, MG 28, 1V 11, Cont. 109, File 16, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

²⁸ Op.cit. p 108, "Between Nation and Empire",

²⁹ Cont.109, File 20, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

In September, 1961 a new crisis erupted for Verne and Ann, but from a totally unexpected direction. Robert Williams suddenly showed up on their doorstep, on the run from the F.B.I. in the U.S. Williams had been to Toronto prior to this and had helped get the F.P.C.C. started, speaking several times in support of the Committee across the country, but now he was on the run from both the F.B.I. and the R.C.M.P. From Monroe, North Carolina, where the Ku Klux Klan was a mass movement, he was a leader of the Black Power wing of the civil rights movement in the U.S. Critical of the pacifist methods of Martin Luther King, he had advocated a policy of armed self-defense and had formed a Black Armed Guard to protect his community against racist violence. During a riot in Monroe, he had been forced to flee under threat of death after the F.B.I. had issued a warrant for his arrest, declaring that he was armed and dangerous. It meant he would be shot on-sight. The S.W.P. had a good rapport with Williams that went back several year from when he was head of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) in 1958, when he was in dispute with the national organization about his advocacy for a more militant policy for the civil rights movement, and which led to his expulsion. The S.W.P. had mobilized broad public support for him when he was agitating in the courts and against the police, in what's now known as "The Kissing Case", where two black children had been incarcerated because, while innocently playing, one of them had kissed a young white girl. The S.W.P. made a major issue of the case that had outraged many in the U.S. and which received headlines around

the world. The party would become one of the first of the so-called “white” revolutionary groups in America to fully throw its support behind the “Freedom Now” wing of the civil rights movement and through the writings of George Breitman, recognize the significance of Black Nationalism in the struggle for socialism, explaining it from a Marxist perspective and highlighting it as a critical factor in the class struggle. They gave full support to Malcolm X, and Malcolm, for his part, considered The Militant to be one of the finest newspapers around. Williams and his supporters, with their tactic of self-defense, were regarded by the S.W.P. as having set an exemplary example of resistance in the black struggle.

When Williams fled to Canada, he could be fairly certain our people would render him assistance. While on his speaking engagements in Toronto – he had been to Montreal and Toronto as recently as the previous May -- he always stayed with Ann and Verne. In conjunction with the F.B.I., a manhunt had been launched in Canada by the Mounties who stated as a fact that he was armed and a “common criminal”, a characterization that the F.P.C.C., vehemently protested.³⁰ It was touch and go whether he would be captured or not. The police and the R.C.M.P. harassed many F.P.C.C. members and supporters in looking for him, searching several people’s homes and at one point the basement of the First Unitarian Church. It was pure chance Williams wasn’t picked up. The Olson’s kept him hidden for six weeks while trying to arrange his flight into exile. Finally, they arranged for him to travel to Nova Scotia where a

³⁰ F.P.C.C. Statement, October, 1961, MG 28,1V, Cont.109, File 20 R. D. Fonds, L.A.C.

sizable black population lived and where he had a good chance of not being noticed. There he boarded a plane to Cuba and was granted asylum. Mabel, his wife, joined him a few months later. A lot of the details about this event, I didn't know until I read Wright's essay.³¹ In the leading committees of the League for Socialist Action (L.S.A.) (the successor organization to S.E.L.) and the F.P.C.C., it was only discussed in the most general terms and information about it was only given out, correctly so, on a need-to-know basis to protect those involved. The S.E.L., mainly through the F.P.C.C. maintained very good relations with Williams over the years, with many of our people visiting him from time to time in Havana where the Cuban government had provided him with a radio program on Havana Radio, "Radio Free Dixie", through which to broadcast to the United States his opinions about current events in the black struggle. He also edited a small journal, The Crusader, which Ann and Verne helped him circulate in North America. A few S.E.L. members gathered at their home every month to mail it out to his subscribers, with Ann and Verne's home address on it. We looked upon all this as part of our elementary duty of solidarity to help the black liberation struggle in the U.S.

When Verne had met with Dewart and McNaught before they severed their connections to the Committee, he hadn't been entirely frank about the role of the S.E.L. in relation to it. He had countered their complaint about our influence by telling them that out of an eleven-member executive, only one could be characterized as being in the S.E.L. But in this he was being a little

³¹ Op.cit. p. 110, Cynthia Wright.

disingenuous. While perhaps technically correct, he sought to down-play the S.E.L.'s influence, trying to protect the Committee against red-baiting. Those were hard anti-communist times, but without the S.E.L., the F.P.C.C. would never have gotten off the ground, which didn't mean it wasn't broadly based. With a lot of support in the N.D.P. and the unions, it was by no means a "front organization", the kind the C.P.s were infamous for putting in place and which were basically an extension of their own organization, to be used for any purpose they thought fit. While the S.E.L. had won the respect of many independent activists around the Committee, it very much had a life of its own to the degree that we would occasionally find ourselves in the minority within it. This could be seen early on when we had hoped the Committee would formally affiliate with the American F.P.C.C., something we thought everyone would be in agreement with. However, when we raised this idea, a majority opposed us. They were concerned that membership lists crossing the border might make them vulnerable to the prying eyes of American security agencies, and that possibly money from Canada might be used to publish American literature. The Committee decided to remain independent. As Pat Mitchell, a leader of the S.E.L. and the F.P.C.C.'s membership-secretary later put it, "I don't think this was a good decision because the American committee needs any support it can get but we could not carry our position on this question."³² Later, Verne, probably trying to make the best of this rejection, spoke positively about the committee's "independent position", but in the end, happily, it proved to be a wise move

³² Letter to Harold (Vancouver) from Pat Mitchell, January 27th, 1962, MG 28, V11, Cont. 109, File 11, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

because in less than two years, the American organization would be forced to dissolve. It had come under worse attack than we had suffered in Canada. Hauled before various Senate Committees to explain its activities, they demanded it hand over its membership lists and register as a “foreign agent”. And there was some falling away of endorsers, among them people like Sydney Lens, then one of the United States’ best known labour historians, who was one of the first to buckle, disassociating himself from the Committee because of “Trotskyist influence” in it.

The witch-hunting only served to make us redouble our efforts to expand the work of the Committee, especially in the unions. We were convinced that sympathy by many Canadian working people for Cuba remained strong which seemed to be confirmed when Hazen Argue, the new leader of the C.C.F. took a firm stand, saying that “...in the last analysis what the Cubans are doing is asserting the soil and resources of their country should belong to them. Threats of intervention from other countries should be opposed, no matter where they come from.”³³ “The real reason for the U.S. attitude is economic,” pointed out Frank Howard, the C.C.F.-N.D.P., M.P., for Skeena, B.C., referring to the Cuban expropriation of U.S. properties.³⁴ Wherever we had members or contacts in the unions, we would persuade them to try and have resolutions passed in their local membership meetings, asking that their national unions send delegations to Cuba so that the unions could witness for themselves the achievements of the revolution. The C.L.C. sent a delegation, as did the B.C. Federation of Labour

³³ Undated F.P.C.C. statement, possibly 1961, Cont. 109, File 20, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

and the Vancouver Labour Council. All returned with favourable reports. To this day, there is still a deep sympathy among Canadian trade unionists for Cuba and over one million ordinary Canadians go there every year on vacation, making Canada amongst all countries, the largest source of tourists for its beleaguered economy.

Typical of the work of the F.P.C.C. in those days was that of the Vancouver chapter led by Phil Courneyeur and Cedric Cox. It had a very active life organizing protests, public meeting and promoting Cuba in the N.D.P. and in the unions. Within a couple of years there would be two other “competing” Cuban support committees in the city, one organized by the C.P., and the other organized by Jack Scott’s small pro-Mao group that had recently emerged from the C.P. We deplored this division and at various times reached out to them to try and arrange joint activities with them, but nothing much came of this. Neither was as successful as the F.P.C.C. I remember when moving out there in 1962, how impressed I was by its energy, partly due to it being led by young people. Ken Orchard – Cliff Orchard’s brother, a twenty-one-year-old, active in our youth group, was its communications director and Bud Bennet, a leader in the New Democratic Youth was its secretary. Every important Cuban anniversary, it would organize a large public event, often attended by Cuban consulate officials – and sometimes the Cuban Ambassador, Americo Cruz -- with speeches and talks about Cuba, often followed by a banquet, and attended by almost two hundred people, many of them from the N.D.P. and the unions. It’s where I got to

³⁴ F.P.C.C. Bulletin, Summer 1962, Cont. 109, File 19, R.D.Fonds, L.A.C.

practice cooking for large numbers of people, something I had learned while helping Fred Halstead at the S.W.P.'s Mountain Spring Camp. Phil, a very bright and precocious teenager, had been recruited to our group by Ruth and Reg Bullock. With a political maturity way beyond his years, he was at the same time, secretary of the Burnaby N.D.P., a centre of the left in the party. He quickly won the respect of the Cuban Ambassador and they became close friends. Cox, also from Burnaby, an N.D.P.M.L.A., had been inspired by the revolution and had become one of its most outspoken defenders.

During the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, in addition to organizing several demonstrations outside the U.S. Consulate, the Committee members distributed over twenty thousand leaflets in the Vancouver area, most of them at shopping centres, factories, high schools and at the U.B.C., all within a couple of hours of President Kennedy's October 22nd speech, the closest the world has ever come to all out nuclear war.³⁵ I remember one particularly scary moment after I had moved out there, during the Cuban missile crisis when we were discussing the launching of a possible protest outside the American Consulate, over other's objections, I pushed to go ahead with it even though there had not been much preparation, expecting somehow that our supporters would simply turn out because of the crisis. Unfortunately, when we showed up at the U.S. Consulate, we were so few in number that we were immediately surrounded by several hundred hostile Americans spoiling for a fight. They had obviously been mobilized to counter us and I had learned a lesson to listen to others next time

³⁵ F.P.C.C. Bulletin, Summer, 1963.

who knew the situation better than me. We were forced to end the protest early at the Consulate, later organizing a demonstration where we out-numbered our opponents.

Both Cedric and Phil at different times toured Cuba for several weeks in 1963. Their experiences and observations were put to valuable use in talks to labour groups, N.D.P. clubs and the constituencies throughout the province. A high point was the N.D.P.'s Provincial Convention that fall that saw a big upsurge in interest about Cuba among the delegates who voted for a resolution "almost unanimously" calling for sympathy and support of the Cuban people 'in their struggle to achieve decent living standards' and condemning the U.S. boycott of Cuba."³⁶ The Committee also rallied to organize material aid to Cuba whenever it suffered natural disasters. In October of that year, in addition to the difficult economic conditions that resulted from the American blockade, two of Cuba's eastern provinces were laid waste by Hurricane Flora. The Committee responded by issuing a public appeal – "Help Cuba!" It urged people to donate generously and asked that its supporters hold social events with the specific purpose of raising money for Cuba.

Among its most popular publications -- the product of an F.P.C.C. sponsored tour -- was the 1964 pamphlet, "The Real Cuba, As Three Canadians Saw It", by Michel Chartrand of the Parti Socialiste du Quebec, John Riddell from Toronto, a member of our group on the tour representing the Canadian Universities' Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (C.U.C.N.D.), and Verne Olson. Many

thousands were sold across the country. Another popular pamphlet, was “Four Canadians Who Saw Cuba”, featuring accounts by Cedric Cox, who, in opposition to his provincial leader Bob Strachan, had toured Cuba; John Glenn, a school principal from Ontario and provincial council member of the N.D.P. (and a member of our group); Charlie Bieseck, a columnist for the Prairie New Democrat Commonwealth and Richard Fidler, chairperson of the U of Toronto Student Committee on Cuba and also a member of our group. As Cynthia Wright remarks, most of these pamphlets circulated widely across the country and today can be found in the archives of many universities throughout North America.

Working with the Cubans was not always smooth sailing, it turned out. For successful solidarity work, of course, their cooperation was essential for us, but sometimes we faced strong head-winds in dealing with them. One of our objectives was to have as many people as possible, from the cultural community, from the unions and the C.C.F., travel to Cuba to witness the dramatic improvements in health and agriculture and to especially see the spectacular results of a reading and writing campaign that in a very short time had given Cuba a literacy level equal to that of some advanced capitalist countries. Teams of visitors were usually organized in Canada in cooperation with the Cuban Institute for Friendship with Peoples, otherwise known by **the** acronym, “ICAP”. Our hope was that once people returned, they would spread the good word about the reforms they had seen, and this usually turned out to be the case. In

³⁶ F.P.C.C. Bulletin, Winter, 1963.

the early days of the Revolution, things were always a little chaotic in trying to arrange such visits. A tour the Montreal F.P.C.C. had organized for the winter of 1960, for example, was called off because the Cubans couldn't provide air travel. To say that communications with Cuba "were difficult" would be an understatement. A scheduled tour would neither be on nor off and we always seemed to be in limbo, anxiously awaiting word from Havana about this or that project. A tour for the July 26, 1961 celebrations was called off by the Cubans without any explanation. Verne on one of his trips to Cuba found that many of the people he met regarded I.C.A.P. as a bit of a scandal because of its inefficiencies. I.C.A.P. would often be late getting back to Verne in response to his letters and undoubtedly some of the difficulty was caused by the chaos resulting from transforming the bureaucracy, but nevertheless we believed, rather than the problem of "inefficiency", a lot of it was also due to the political influence of the Popular Socialist Party (P.S.P.), the name by which the C.P. was known in Cuba, which although reduced by the success of the July 26 Movement, still had considerable presence in the state apparatus and the union movement. Whenever we encountered their people as we tried to move our projects along, invariably they would be sectarian towards us, often spreading malicious rumours behind our backs and misleading others who often did not know any better into doing their dirty work for them.

In addition to the F.P.C.C.'s official visits to Cuba, the Committee also had a policy of encouraging supporters to visit Cuba for their holidays but the odd time they would become a victim of P.S.P. sectarian tactics, we suspected, and be

picked up by security forces and held without any explanation or charges being laid, and then released just as mysteriously. Alan Judge, an activist in the Stanley Park C.C.F. in B.C., and supporter of the F.P.C.C., once disappeared for several weeks under such circumstances, as did John Darling, a stalwart of the S.E.L. and the Y.S.A., and a founding-member of the F.P.C.C. In Cuba for a vacation during the dangerous time of the Bay of Pigs invasion, John, an enthusiastic supporter of the Cuban Revolution, ironically, on April 17, 1961, was picked up in a sweep along with thousands of other non-Cubans and many Cubans who had a history of being opponents of the government. He was held for three weeks in La Cabana Military Prison without any interrogation or explanation or any help from the Canadian Embassy. When he returned to Toronto, in an effort to clear his name, he wrote the Cuban Ambassador that a rumour was circulating in Toronto that he “had been charged and found guilty of black marketing”. We figured elements in the L.P.P. were behind this slander. While in Cuba, “I was unable to establish my support for the Cuban government,” he wrote, “and my innocence of implied charges of being suspected of counter-revolutionary activity” he stated, requesting from the Ambassador that “you affirm that I have been released clear of all charges or suspicions, and that my detention was an error.” The Ambassador replied that his “request has been forwarded to the proper Department in Cuba and as soon as we get a reply, we will call you...”³⁷

³⁷ Letter to the Cuban Ambassador, Americo Cruz from John Darling, June 10, 1961, Letter to John Darling from the Cuban Ambassador, June 19, 1961 M.G.28, 1V 11, Container 110, File 2, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

Bob Silverman, one of the main leaders of the Montreal F.P.C.C. also disappeared in similar circumstances to John's, throwing his wife, Edith into a state of justifiable panic when she hadn't heard from him for several weeks and was unable to contact him, all of it causing a flurry of frantic phone calls from Verne to Ottawa and Havana to find out where he was. He too was released without any explanation and we put it all down to a few P.S.P. elements acting in a free-lance way to harass anyone they suspected of being associated with us.

Founded in 1925, the Cuban C.P. (later to become the P.S.P) had been in its time one of the most formidable C.P.s in Latin America, a mass party with a strong working-class base and a lot of influence in Cuba's intellectual left. We didn't know it at the time, nor did Fidel, but Raul Castro had attended Moscow University in the early Fifties and had been a member, as was Che Guevara who had joined for a short time in 1957 in the hope of moving it to the left.³⁸ A loyal follower of Stalin and in a comfortable relationship with Batista before he became a brutal dictator, the C.P. in its early days had played a leading role in founding the main union federation, the Cuban Confederation of Labour (C.T.C.). In cooperation with Batista – who, the C.P. stated “was no longer the focal point of reaction, but the defender of democracy” -- it helped write the new Cuban Constitution adopted in 1940, and as part of his “Social Democratic Federation”, campaigned for him to be President and itself electing ten members to the Chamber of Deputies and hundreds to city councils throughout the island,

³⁸ p14, “One Hell Of A Gamble”, Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964, by Aleksandr Furenko and Timothy Naftall, 1997, W. W..Norton and Company and “Che: A Revolutionary Life”, by Jon Lee Anderson, Grove Press, 1997.

including electing the mayors in two major cities and coming close to winning the mayoralty of Havana. In the build up to the Second World War, during the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, like C.P.s everywhere else, it had vigorously campaigned against the war and had opposed Cuba's entry into it. But when the U.S.S.R. declared war on Germany, it swiftly reversed itself becoming a champion of Cuba's participation and changing its name to the Partido Socialista Popular (P.S.P.). "Blas Roca, its leader became the first to volunteer in the army of the Allies." ³⁹

After Batista seized power in 1952, he banned the P.S.P and many of its leaders were arrested or went into exile. Yet, curiously, some of its prominent people— many of whom had been candidates in previous elections -- showed up in important positions in his regime, some of them even becoming key advisors.⁴⁰ Support for the party declined under Batista's subsequent repression, but it utilized that period to strengthen and re-organize itself. Although weaker, it was still one of the strongest political parties in Cuba at the time of Batista's fall in 1959, but fated to end up on the wrong side of history. The P.S.P. had publicly denounced the 1953 Fidelista attack on the Moncada Fortress, that had failed but which became the opening shots in an armed struggle that would eventually transform Cuba. While condemning the repressive methods of Batista – but just in case there was any confusion about where they stood -- they at the same time publicly disassociated themselves

³⁹ p124, "Cuba, An American Tragedy", a Penguin Special by Robert Scheer and Maurice Zietlin, 1964.

from the new movement, in a position, I must admit, that would have been shared by many Trotskyists: “We repudiate the putchist methods, peculiar to bourgeois political factions of the action in Santiago de Cuba and Bayamo which was an adventurist attempt to take both military headquarters...”⁴¹ But early in 1958, when the July 26 Movement and the National Directorate were putting plans in place for a national strike, the P.S.P., softened its position and hurried to get on board giving its support to the action, but the Directorate, for anti-communist reasons mainly, had blocked their involvement, over the objections of Fidel, to whom the P.S.P. had made a special appeal.⁴² Up to the seizure of power – and even after -- relations remained tense between P.S.P. and the Fidelistas. (It is now recognized that some of this was also due to the anti-communist prejudices of some of the Fidelistas.) But as Scheer and Zietlin, point out, “As late as May 1958, the Communists were still referring to the 26th of July Movement as ‘those who count on terroristic acts and conspiratorial coups as the chief means of ousting Batista...’ The April 1958 strike was a failure and the Party publicly declared that the strike movement did not have enough support to succeed, a statement that helped Batista defeat the workers as he quickly circulated it throughout the country.⁴³ And when the C.P. welcomed the July 26 Movement’s “recent espousal of the general strike as a slogan...away from excessive reliance on heroic indecisive guerilla warfare...” the Fidelistas flat out rejected it and “expressed surprise that the Communist leaders, Blas

⁴⁰ Op.cit. p 125

⁴¹ Cited in the Daily Worker, New York, August 5, 1953, p3, from “Cuba: An American Tragedy”.

⁴² Op.cit, P. 198, Jon Lee Anderson.

⁴³ Op.cit P.127, Scheer and Zietlin.

Roca, Juan Marinello, and others were living peacefully in Havana without interference from Batista's police."⁴⁴

During the lead up to the seizure of power and for a few months after, it's understandable that many socialists around the world would be slow in recognizing the significance of what had taken place. A new phenomenon, it seemed to contradict our traditional notions of how a capitalist system would be overthrown. That was even the case with the I.S. of the F.I. which although adopting a position that Cuba was a workers' state, had let itself be outmaneuvered by the sectarian Juan Posadas and his "Latin American Bureau" to where Posadas, with his crazy positions, was seeming to speak for the entire movement.

Difficulty in understanding what was going on was also true for many of us in North America, as I have already pointed out. Our slowness, however, did not cost us as much as it did the P.S.P. Its differences with the July 26 Movement were deeply political and the product of having a two-stage conception of how the working class and peasants would achieve power. In their view, it was first necessary to have capitalist development in Cuba and to support "progressive" capitalists to do this, and then following this phase – who knows how long that would last -- a socialist revolution would be on the agenda, a conception similar to that of Canada's L.P.P. which during every election campaigned for an "anti-monopoly coalition" that would include "progressive" capitalists. The consequence of this policy for the P.S.P was profound, causing it to lose support

⁴⁴ Op.cit, P.128, Scheer and Zietlin, quoting P187 from The World Today,

in a sharply radicalizing political environment. It initially kept its distance from the new government. “The fact that the C.P. of Cuba during the first months of the revolution “, says Scheer and Zietland, “continued to call for wage increases and improved working conditions, even in the new situation, indicated that it did not expect the Revolutionary Government to fulfill its program and make a revolution and that they did not have close ties to the government.”⁴⁵. It was as if the P.S.P. was confronting a liberal bourgeois regime of some kind, not recognizing that a fundamental transformation was underway. Seeing their errors, and no doubt having their concentration focused by seeing their support melt away like snow from a warm spring hillside, combined with the threat of an internal split, they quickly changed course and eventually gave the July 26 Movement full support, fusing with it and the Revolutionary Directorate (R.D.), a mainly student organization based in Havana, to form a new governing party, the Integrated Revolutionary Organization (O.R.I.). Anibal Escalante, who had been a leader of the P.S.P., became O.R.I.’s Organizational Secretary and proceeded to use his position to appoint P.S.P. people to key positions in the party and government, often jumping over revolutionaries from other political backgrounds, and moving to get control over the state’s security forces.

The Canadian F.P.C.C. tour, scheduled to arrive in Havana for the July 26, 1961 celebrations, plus a proposal to send a delegation from the Canadian arts’ community at a later date, seems to have been victims of this factionalism. A list of twenty-five people had been submitted to I.C.A.P. by Verne, at the request

⁴⁵ Op.cit. P.119, “Cuba, an American Tragedy.”

of the Cuban Consul in Montreal, to arrive in Cuba in time for the celebrations. “(T)he list was an impressive one,” Ross Dowson wrote, trying to explain the reasons for the failure of the trip to take place, “prominent persons in the C.C.F.-N.D.P., the trade union movement and in Canadian letters...all persons who in some way or another had signified strong support of the revolution and were prepared to put themselves at the service of the revolution following their return by speaking both here and in the U.S. My name along with the secretary of the F.P.C.C. and Olson and his wife were included. At no time was there any exception to the list in any way expressed by anyone, local Cuban officials, Ottawa Embassy officials, I.C.A.P. officials in Cuba, etc., etc.”⁴⁶ As the time neared when the F.P.C.C. would have to confirm to those on the list that the tour was definitely on, leadership of the Committee became anxious when nothing was heard from I.C.A.P., whose Director, Giraldo Mazola, Verne had learned, was either a member of -- or was in the political orbit -- of the P.S.P. In conversations with our contacts in the Cuban tourist bureau in Montreal and in our conversations with the Cuban Ambassador – all of whom we were convinced were supportive of the project – including several phone calls to I.C.A.P. in Havana -- we would always be given assurances that matters were in good hands. Still nothing happened. Finally, Verne persuaded Leslie Dewart, before he had made his spectacular departure from the F.P.C.C. and whose father was Spanish and mother Cuban, to get involved. “After several contacts were made, Dewart informed V.O. (Verne Olson) that he was absolutely convinced that the

⁴⁶ Letter to Joe Hansen, from Ross Dowson, August 16, 1961, MG 28, 1V, Cont. 109-11, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

Canadian F.P.C.C. was being given the run around Cuban style. He expressed the opinion it was Stalinist sabotage. He told V.O. that he had been noting that the short wave broadcasts from Cuba had been taking on more and more a C.P. character with more and more coming from Hoy and less and less from the Fidelista press services...he suggested that possibly I.C.A.P. had fallen into the hands of the C.P. and that the list was being sabotaged because there were no C.P.ers on it..."⁴⁷ Although the Committee eventually sent five people to the 26th of July celebrations, we were finally forced to call off the larger tour of twenty-five, much to the disappointment of the prospective tour participants. And ours, I should add. It was a blow to the Committee and a very demoralizing one at that, not so much because the tour had been cancelled, but because of the manner in which it had happened: no explanation provided. Although we were never directly challenged about it by the Cubans, since then I've wondered that by placing names of Pat Mitchell and Ross Dowson on the list -- two well known Trotskyists, especially that of Ross -- may have been just too much for the Cubans to swallow, making it an easy target for those hostile to us in Cuba, and making it also more difficult for F.P.C.C. supporters there to give us their backing. The other proposal, made at the same time as the one for July 26th, for a tour made up of representatives from the Canadian arts world -- upon which considerable effort had also been expended -- was also nixed without explanation.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Op.cit. Letter to Joe Hansen, August 16, 1961.

⁴⁸ Op.cit, Letter to Joe Hansen, August 16, 1961.

By 1962, Fidel Castro had become so alarmed by the role of some P.S.P. people in O.R.I., in a major speech he created a sensation by publicly denouncing Anibal Escalante for meddling in government affairs and for creating in O.R.I. a “nest of privilege, of benefits, of a system of favours of all types,” and for alienating the party from the masses.⁴⁹ Consequently, several P.S.P. people were removed from their positions in the bureaucracy, as was the head of police. With that speech by Castro, and another, “The Revolution Will Be a School Of Unfettered Thought,” both of which the F.F.C.C. quickly published in English, it confirmed to the world that Stalinist influence in the revolution would be under a watchful eye.

For the next couple of years, the Escalante affair had a major influence upon the political life of Cuba and there seemed to be an increasing openness towards the the Fourth International’s ideas. Normally regarded with anathema in China, Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R., we regarded it as important sign of acceptance when Ernest Mandel, the internationally recognized Belgian Marxist and leader of the Fourth International, whose work, “Marxist Economic Treatise” had just been published, received a formal invitation from the Cuban authorities to visit Cuba. “I’m due to leave for Cuba where very favourable developments for us are taking place,” he wrote with his typical enthusiasm.⁵⁰ “Che has received my book and had whole chapters translated”, he wrote a

⁴⁹ “ Cuba: How the Workers and Peasants Made the Revolution,” by Chris Slee, Resistance Books, 2008, p 34.

⁵⁰ Letter to Dear Friend from Ernest Mandel, February 23, 1964, Ernest Mandel Papers, 21-28, International Institute of Social History(I.I.S.H.), Amsterdam

correspondent,⁵¹ and to another, he wrote that he was, “On my way to Cuba. Cuban Ambassador has given me many parcels – expect to meet Raul and Che”⁵² and when he returned, “I’m just back from a long trip to Cuba (I stayed there for seven weeks in the course of which I had many long conversations with many leaders of the Revolution) ...” I don’t remember if he met with Raul at that time but I remember it being reported to us that he had led several long seminars for the economics team around Che Guevara. A few years later, he also received an invitation to visit Cuba that “came through Fidel...they kept me there for six weeks”, he wrote.⁵³

One of our best sources of information about Cuba in those years was a young intellectual in Havana who was politically close to us, Nelson Zayas Pozos, who many of our people met whenever they visited Havana. He was one of around fifteen people, some of them in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were sympathetic to the views of the Fourth International. We got along with him so well, that at one point, one of our Toronto members, Brian Duhig, was dispatched to Havana for a lengthy stay to help him educate the people around him about our ideas. When Verne was there for a five-week trip toward the end of 1963, Nelson told him that the struggle against the C.P. was continuing. “All the preparations are being made to clean C.P.ers out of the Embassies in both Paris and London,” he said. A supporter of the Fourth International, Zayas “has

⁵¹ March 1st, 1964, I.I.S.H.

⁵² Dear Alan, March 7th, 1964, I.I.S.H.

⁵³ Letter to David Horowitz from Ernest Mandel, July 20th. 1967, File 38, I.I.S.H.

many, many connections, is widely known and highly respected.”⁵⁴ His closeness to the Fourth International can be later seen when he was in Paris preparing his doctorate and looking for a British publisher for his thesis, Ernest Mandel wrote a letter of introduction for him – “a very good friend of mine”, he said.⁵⁵

Verne, whenever he was in Cuba, was always very careful in his dealings with the P.S.P. people he encountered. Even though they were a minority – about a third – in the new revolutionary party that the Castro forces were organizing, they still had considerable influence throughout Cuba. He would occasionally bump into them in the bureaucracy, he told us, and they would very often attempt to frustrate his work. Even in the best of times they would attempt to act as self-appointed “gate-keepers” for the people he wished to see. “Our informant reports that there were apparent efforts to frustrate his meeting and discussing with leading persons”, wrote Ross Dowson to the F.I.’s International Secretariat about one of Verne’s trips. “However, he did succeed in having several lengthy discussions with heads of departments concerned with North America. They apparently have been following our informant’s work closely, are amazed, are in complete agreement with its direction, consider it the only really important work being done in the area...”⁵⁶ Verne, on one occasion, managed to meet with Raul Roa, Cuba’s United Nations’ representative, whom he reported was very

⁵⁴ What looks like an untitled letter to United Secretariat of the F.I by Ross Dowson, under the pseudonym “Kent”, containing a summary of his discussions with Verne, January 17, 1964, R. D. Fonds, L.A.C.

⁵⁵ Letter to Russell Stetler, January 11, 1968, I.I.S.H.

⁵⁶ Op.cit. Letter to International Secretariat, January 17, 1964.

supportive of the Committee's solidarity work and insisted that all future tours be arranged through him.⁵⁷ That Verne was able to function so well in such a complicated environment, I'm sure was due to his remarkable political astuteness and his experience in working class politics, but it must also have been helped by his commanding physical presence (although I knew he often harboured inner doubts about his own capacities). He stood well over six feet tall, and firmly holding his crutches under his arms, with Ann standing by his side, they exuded such a firm sense of purpose and ethical integrity, I'm sure they were able to have many doors opened to them **that** would have been otherwise closed.

One of the crosses Verne had to bear whenever he was in Cuba, however, was the sorry reputation of the official Cuban section of the International Secretariat, the Partido Obrero Revolucionario (Trotskyista) (P.O.R.(T). Because of its sectarianism and ultra-leftism, it had become an easy target for P.S.P. factionalists but in our circles, little was known about it. As far as I can remember, the S.W.P and the L.S.A. at the time of the revolution did not have many, if any, supporters in Cuba so, but what news we did have about the P.O.R.(T) had certainly alarmed us. This tiny, recently formed organization seemed to be attempting to "be more revolutionary than the revolution". I remember one time in New York in a discussion about the situation in Cuba, Fred Halstead and Richard Garza, a leader of the New York branch of the SWP, pointing out that during a critical period when the revolutionary government was

⁵⁷ Op.cit. Letter to Hansen, August 16, 61.

seizing American assets, the P.O.R.(T) had been on the streets demanding the take-over of industry. We later learned that it subscribed to the views of Juan Posadas on the question of a possible nuclear war. He looked upon such a nightmare as perhaps being the prelude to social revolution, and even seemed to wish it. Furthermore, the P.O.R.(T) had drawn the wrath of the new revolutionary government because of its campaign to have the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo expelled, that would have required Cuba to launch an attack upon it. It had even produced a leaflet calling for a demonstration at the base, which the Fidelistas feared, (correctly so), might act as a provocation and pretext for the intervention of American imperialism, especially in the tense international situation following the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961.⁵⁸

Part of our difficulty in assessing the group in those years was that we simply lacked adequate information about it. We were still in the early stages of overcoming the 1953 division in the International and it was hard to find out who was who in some countries. As I've mentioned, the P.O.R.(T) was part of a minority grouping within the International Secretariat, affiliated to the "Latin American Bureau", led by Juan Posadas. An F.I. grouping had ceased to exist in Cuba for many years -- it had dissolved in 1947 -- but after the revolution, Posadas in early 1960, assigned some of his leading people to go there to help get one re-established. It became the official Cuban section at the Sixth World Congress in January, 1961, where the position that Cuba was a workers' state

⁵⁸ Op.cit. "How Sectarians Misrepresented Trotskyism in Cuba", by Jose Perez, I.P.

was adopted.⁵⁹ That summer, even though our organizations in North America had strong disagreements with the Posadas group, we became very alarmed about its fate when we learned that its weekly publication, Voz Proletaria had been suppressed and the typeface for a Spanish language edition of Trotsky's book, "Permanent Revolution", which the group had been getting ready for printing, had been destroyed, during a so-called "intervention" by the government to take over the printing industry on the island. We knew nothing of the P.O.R.(T)'s circumstance as a result those events and wondered what this signified about democratic rights under the new regime.

Not long after that, Verne used the opportunity of a visit to Cuba for the July 26th celebrations to meet with the P.O.R.(T) to see if he could provide them some assistance and get some information from them about what had gone on with the suppression of their press. What follows is based upon a report he wrote when he had returned to Toronto.⁶⁰ Verne reports that he met with Idalberto Ferrera, the editor of the group's journal, and Jose Lungarzo, who had been assigned to Cuba by Posadas. In Verne's estimation, the organization consisted of approximately forty members, many of them in the militia or in the rebel army he was told, and was mostly made up of workers along with a few intellectuals

⁵⁹ "The Fourth International: The Long March of the Trotskyists" by Pierre Frank, 1979, Ink Links.

⁶⁰ ."REPORT OF DISCUSSIONS HELD WITH COMRADES FROM THE CUBAN SECTION—FOURTH INTERNATIONAL", August 14, 1961. This report is unsigned and was probably meant for the International Secretariat. I know that Verne often left his name off sensitive documents in case they fell into the wrong hands, wishing to protect the F.P.C.C. against factional attacks, and not wishing to compromise its formal independence from the L.S.A. and the S.W.P. The sensitivity of the political situation in Cuba also demanded this, along with the fear of being red-baited in Canada. The report's point form and the fact that he refers to the L.S.A. also suggests this. It's highly unlikely an SWP member would have made this specific reference. MG 28, 1V 11, Container 109, File 11 R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

and professional people. At no point did Verne discuss their alleged position of calling for the expulsion of the Americans from Guantanamo. It's highly likely he was not aware at the time they had promoted such a position.

According to Verne, the P.O.R.(T) had three branches, one in Havana, and the others in Guantanamo City and Santiago de Cuba respectively. Although Hoy, the official P.S.P. journal had carried articles attacking them, and even though P.S.P.ers in the unions had been labeling them as “counter-revolutionary”, the group had been able to function openly and relatively free from harassment. Not all workers were buying the P.S.P. line, it seems. In one plant, they told Verne, one of their members had been elected three times to a leadership position over fierce opposition from P.S.P. loyalists. The first sign of an escalation of trouble had come just as a May, 1961, issue of Voz Proletaria was going to press. An eight-page paper larger than tabloid size, it had by then appeared eight times, beginning in April. Just as the ninth issue was about to be printed in one of the few privately-owned print shops in Havana, it was “intervened” – that is nationalized -- by the National Print organization, that coincidentally, was headed up by a well-known P.S.P. member. It was a harsh action against the group and the editor and the workers in the print shop were told the paper would not be printed any longer because it was “counter-revolutionary”. Also, in the print shop was the typeface for a Spanish edition of Trotsky's book, “Permanent Revolution”, which was being readied for publication; it was removed by National Print, and presumably smashed. Lacking confidence in their actions, the “interveners” refused to put anything in writing. A few months

earlier, the group's offices in Guantanamo City had been shut down under the pretext of late payment of rent and it wasn't allowed to rectify the error, an action carried out against them by a civic official who was a member of the P.S.P. And just before the July 26 celebrations in Guantanamo City, a P.S.P. led union and a local defense-committee, distributed a leaflet calling on the workers to attend a local gathering celebrating the 26th, to strike a blow against the enemies of the revolution and listing the Trotskyists as such enemies. In that instance, the P.O.R.(T.) responded by quickly rushing out a statement into print, a copy of which they supplied Verne. "Workers and farmers", it stated, "— everyone come to the Civic Square on the 26th of July, the date which commemorates an anniversary of the struggle which was started against the tyranny of Batista and the imperialist Yankee. With our presence we will demonstrate once more our unity in action to advance the Socialist Revolution. We will defeat imperialism and the internal counter-revolution, intensifying our agricultural and industrial production and revolutionary consciousness. For the defense and consolidation of our Cuban Workers State, the first in Latin America. LONG LIVE OUR SOCIALIST REVOLUTION; LONG LIVE THE COLONIAL REVOLUTION; LONG LIVE THE WORLD SOCIALIST REVOLUTION. Signed: Revolutionary Workers Party (Trotskyist), Cuban Section of the 4th International, Regional Committee of Guantanamo, Dated Guantanamo, 24th of July, 1961." The leaflet was distributed throughout the city, but one of the P.O.R.(T.) members was arrested a few days later while he was handing it out. He worked on the railways and was subsequently, arbitrarily removed from his position in his union.

After his meetings with the POR(T) leaders, Verne met with Enrique De La Osa, the editor of Bohemia, a current-events journal published in Havana, to see if he could enlist his help. He told Verne that he was familiar with Voz Proletaria but had not known that it had been suppressed. Familiar with the works of Trotsky, he agreed with Verne that it had probably resulted from growing Stalinist influence and said he would meet with Idalberto Ferrera, the paper's editor to see if a meeting could be arranged with Castro's secretary, with the possibility of even meeting with Castro himself. The interview with De La Osa went very well, according to Verne, but we don't know what happened to the possible interview with Fidel. I doubt this took place, because the attacks on the P.O.R.(T.) seemed to have the backing of Che Guevara, when he repeated some of the P.S.P.'s criticisms of the group in an interview carried in the August 15, 1961 edition of Ultima Hora, a Santiago de Chile newspaper, although Guevara in an earlier criticism, had referred to them as "Trotskyist comrades", treating them as if they were part of a common struggle. We later learned from our sympathizer, Nelson Zayas Pozos, that Che's first wife had been sympathetic to Trotskyism and that the only Trotskyists he had ever met were those of the P.O.R.(T.), that is until he went to revolutionary Algeria in 1964 where he met Michel Pablo and with whom he had been very favourably impressed. Pablo by that time had split from the F.I. and was functioning as an advisor to Ahmed Ben Bella, the new President of Algeria.

Within a year Posadas had hived off his Latin American Bureau from the Fourth International to "re-constitute" it as his own "Fourth International". It lasted

a few years before petering out but I remember running into the remnants of his grouping in Venezuela a few years ago, at the time of an international solidarity conference in Caracas. In my discussion with them they identified themselves to me as “supporters of Bandera Roja”, the main journal of Posadas that was no longer being published, and very quickly they revealed themselves to me to be extremely hostile to Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution. They seemed to be totally out of sync with the radicalization sweeping Venezuela and I couldn’t distinguish their criticisms from what I was reading in the right-wing press in Caracas. It seemed to me that from their ultra-left days they had travelled quite a distance to the right.

But in 1966, a few years after the suppression of the P.O.R.(T), the S.W.P.s Joe Hansen -- who strongly rejected the politics of the P.O.R.(T.) -- spoke for all of the F.I. when he wrote about how it had been badly treated, saying that “It was injurious to the Cuban Revolution to muzzle the Posadas group...Was the Cuban Revolution so weak ideologically that it was incapable of answering even a Posadas?...The overhead cost of suppressing the group was rather high, for it gave substance to the false charge that the Cuban Revolution is going the way of the Russian Revolution, i.e., becoming *Stalinized*...The slowness of the process of setting up democratic institutions of proletarian rule is of concern to many supporters of the Cuban Revolution besides the Trotskyist movement.”⁶¹

⁶¹ “Stalinism or Trotskyism in the Cuban Revolution?” by Joseph Hansen, International Socialist Review, Vol. 27, No3, Summer, 1966. Joseph Hansen Internet Archive, 2006.

Robert Williams, the American black revolutionary to whom we had provided succour in 1961 when he was fleeing the U.S, also had had his difficulties with the P.S.P. When they were in Cuba, Verne and Ann would often make a point of getting together with him and his wife Mabel, as would others from our group when they were in Cuba. Invariably charming and generous, they always gave us a warm welcome. In December, 1963, Verne and Ann, after several long conversations with Williams, noted that he had undergone considerable political change over the previous couple of years. Referring to when he had first met Williams in 1961, Verne wrote that “it was my impression that Rob was very soft on the Communist Party of the United States as well as the C.P.-U.S.S.R.... While not a C.P.er in our usage of the term, he was not receptive to any serious political criticism of the C.P...Now he has evolved 180 degrees and almost breaks out in hives when the word communist is mentioned in front of him.”⁶²The American C.P., which in those years, had an orientation to the most conservative wing of the Black leadership, Williams told Verne, had launched an attack upon him in the Worker. It appeared to be a signal to its “Havana branch” to initiate a “Williams Must Go” campaign as it had begun to circulate a petition among American émigrés in Cuba demanding that he, Williams, be removed from Radio Havana. The reason for the hostility was that Williams’ views on the American Black struggle were diametrically opposed to those of the C.P. “The most important struggle in the U.S. today is the “Freedom Now” struggle,” he told Verne, “but the C.P. says that the emphasis upon the race question divides the

⁶² Letter to George Breitman from Verne Olson, January 29, 1964. Cont.109, File 16, R.D.Fonds, L.A.C.

working class”. According to them, “The struggle for socialism should be paramount to the struggle for Negro freedom”, he said. Williams, who had recently been in China where he had been treated like a “head of state”, said that China had taken a public stand in support of the “Freedom Now” struggle whereas Cuba – but not Fidel – seemed reluctant and even negligent about taking a position on the issue. He complained that an article he had written for Bohemia about his visit to China had yet to appear, which he figured was due to the influence of the C.P, but when Verne met with Enrique De La Osa, its editor, he learned that the article would be published soon, something that happened while Verne was there. Williams’ position in Cuba may also have been influenced by the Sino-Soviet conflict. Early on, Cuba had tended towards sympathy for the Chinese side in the dispute, but by 1966 Fidel had publicly come out with a list of grievances against China, accusing the Chinese of trying to meddle in Cuba’s internal affairs by attempting to take advantage of the country’s desperate need to import rice, as a tool to pressure political compliance.⁶³

As a result of having very little contact with the Cuban people in their everyday lives, Williams, in Verne’s estimation, tended to live in “the immediate past” and had a very limited and distorted picture of the Cuban reality, “completely divorced” from the political struggle that was underway between the P.S.P.ers, “the sectarians”, as Verne called them, and the Fidelistas, the ebb and flow of which may have effected Williams’ situation. “He is a true exile in every sense of that word”, Verne wrote. “He sees Cuba merely as a vantage

⁶³ Op.cit. p644, Anderson.

point from which he conducts his struggle back home...Cuba is good or bad in his mind to the degree that he gets cooperation or hindrance in his efforts to conduct his struggle as he sees fit.”

Williams’ instrumentalist approach towards Cuba, it turned out, happened to be also true of how he regarded the people in Canada who had helped him the most in getting to Cuba in the first place and who were now circulating his Crusader throughout North America. He was not – despite his noble intentions -- above careless behavior, however when it came to his dealings with us. This was seen the next year, 1965, when he took advantage of the naiveté of two young women from our ranks, Jess MacKenzie and Joan Newbigging – new members of the Y.S. – by enlisting them to act as go-betweens with his supporters in Detroit. This came about because at the last minute, the F.P.C.C. had received an invitation from I.C.A.P to send two representatives to Havana for the 1965 May Day Celebrations, traditionally a large international gathering of many thousands of people where Fidel usually gave a major address. Jess and Joan were the only ones in the F.P.C.C. in a position to make such a trip on short notice and rather than letting the invitation lapse, the Executive Committee recommended they represent the organization. Jess and Joan, aged twenty-two, both fresh out of University, had arrived in Toronto the previous year from Scotland as landed immigrants and were overjoyed at the opportunity to go.

Jess and Joan were strong supporters of the Cuban Revolution. Like many young people in Britain in those years, especially students, Joan and Jess before they had come to Canada, had begun to develop a social awareness about the

world and had been active participants in the anti-apartheid struggle and the ban the bomb movement. Through the happy circumstance of having rented an apartment in the same house where a number of our members lived, they were soon won over to our organization and had become active in the **Y.S.**, becoming executive members and not long after, members of the L.S.A. When they were preparing to leave for Havana, Verne asked them to make contact with Williams, providing them with his phone-number and address. They met Williams several times in Havana and were given a warm welcome by him, but they were struck by how paranoid he seemed to be every time they got together with him. He was always seemed to be looking over his shoulder and suggested he was being followed by the security forces or P.S.P. people. Williams -- who was moving quickly to Maoism by this time -- may have aroused the suspicions of the Cubans, who began to question his motives. After all, it was the Cuban government that was helping him finance his stay in Havana and had given him a radio program on Radio Havana to speak to black Americans and was probably wondering what their famous black guest was up to. Jess says she remembers that she and Joan seemed to be also under some kind of suspicion by Cuban authorities during their visit because while they were able to participate in the celebrations without any problems, even being given favoured seats for the celebrations, they were closely followed around by the police and were restricted in where they could go in Havana, unlike other international guests, probably a result of their association with Williams.

Williams, who as Verne had noted, was relatively isolated in Cuba and effectively cut off from his supporters in Detroit because of the American travel ban, and obviously anxious keep in touch with them, through the force of his powerful personality ended up persuading Jess and Joan to become couriers for him between Havana and his supporters in Detroit for the purpose of smuggling money and documents back and forth. He swore them to secrecy about this endeavour, persuading them to keep their new “assignment” hidden from the L.S.A., including Verne and the F.P.C.C., saying it was probable that the R.C.M.P. might have spies in these organizations and it would place him and his supporters in danger.

Another memorable aspect of that May Day visit for Jess and Joan was an unexpected development in Algeria that threw their plans for returning to Toronto into chaos. Houari Boumediene, a military leader in the independence war against the French, in a counter-revolutionary coup d'état, overthrew the progressive government of Ahmed Ben Bella. Cuba, which had been in the forefront in supporting that liberation struggle against French colonialism, had mobilized its people to give assistance to the new government, was now compelled, because of fears for their safety amidst the political uncertainty, to immediately recall its citizens who had volunteered to go to Algeria to assist with health and education. This required the re-routing of all of Cuba's commercial air-craft to Algiers to bring them home. There would be no planes flying to Canada, Jess and Joan learned, until all the Cubans had returned from Algeria.

As a result, they were stranded in Havana for several weeks, unable to get a flight home.

By the time Jess and Joan got back to Toronto from Havana, they were in a very tense state because of their fears about carrying a large sum of money concealed on their persons through Canadian customs for delivery to Williams' Detroit people. The L.S.A. leadership was ignorant of all these clandestine arrangements with Williams, but had noticed that since Jess and Joan had gotten back, they had been acting unusually reticent about their experiences in Cuba and seemed to be taking their distance from us, prompting Verne to have a discussion with them to find out what had gone on. That's when he learned the details of Williams' actions. It had been clearly a mistake to have sent such relatively inexperienced people to Cuba to be taken advantage of in this way. After learning what had happened, Verne and Ross Dowson, tried to make the best of the situation and decided to help out. A Williams' supporter in Detroit was contacted, who immediately drove up to Toronto to get the money, along with the package of documents Williams had sent. Eventually, Williams left Cuba for China where he remained for several years before returning to Detroit in the 1980's.

Organizing representatives from the cultural community, from the labour movement and universities every year to go to Cuba to get a glimpse of the improvements the Cuban Revolution was making in the lives of ordinary Cubans, continued to be a main feature of the work of the F.P.C.C. But this activity virtually came to an end after 1965. During that summer, the F.P.C.C. – mainly

Verne and Ann -- had worked feverishly at organizing something special for the July 26th celebrations. The previous year's students' tour, despite a few difficulties, had come off very well, but what was envisaged for 1965, would be more ambitious, much larger, encompassing at least one hundred students from major university campuses across the country. In the end it all came to nothing, and would throw F.P.C.C.'s relations with the Cuban government into a severe crisis. According to the F.P.C.C., the tour had "been launched early in March after a firm commitment from the Cuban institution I.C.A.P. was obtained through the Cuban Ambassador to Canada, Dr. Americo Cruz"⁶⁴ and Verne had proceeded to organize it in the knowledge that the Ambassador, whom we regarded as a firm supporter of the Committee, had also helped him formulate the original tour proposal to I.C.A.P. Even though by this time we had suspicions there might be a change of attitude by the Cubans towards the Committee -- possibly as a consequence of the growing closeness of Cuba to the U.S.S.R. due to the American embargo -- we figured the same arrangements for 1964 would work again this time. It was planned to be the best ever. The intention was to send 100 students for eight weeks. But the Committee was quickly thrown into a huge **crisis** when only two weeks before the students were to leave for Havana, Verne received the startling news "that the tour was called off by the Cuban authorities without explanation."⁶⁵

Verne immediately flew to Havana where he spent five days trying persuade I.C.A.P to reverse its decision, but I remember him telling us later that as far as

⁶⁴ "F.P.C.C. ,Statement On Cancellation Of The Tour", F.P.C.C. Fall, 1965 Bulletin.

he was concerned he had not received a satisfactory explanation for the plug having been pulled and had gotten the run-around from the Institute's officials when he met with them, although some of them seemed a little embarrassed about the cancellation but seemed incapable of giving him a straight answer, only saying that I.C.A.P. was in the midst of "discussions" about its relations with all international solidarity groups. As a result, the F.P.C.C. issued a statement to the public and its supporters, under the signatures of Verne and Andre Beckerman, chairman of the Student Committee on Cuban Affairs at the University of Toronto and a member of the L.S.A., that stated, "four years' work ... has now been jeopardized, not by the external enemies of the Revolution, but by the arbitrary action of an institution of the Revolutionary Government"

The F.P.C.C., for the first time since its formation, aside from taking on I.C.A.P., and throwing all caution to the wind, was also, by implication, pointing a finger at Cuba's revolutionary government, something I probably agreed with but from this distance in time, I have some reservations with the statement. It didn't pull any punches nor was it very diplomatic about what it thought were the reasons for the cancellation. Using the code-word, "sectarian" to point to what it thought was the role of the ex-P.S.P. members' influence in the affair, the F.P.C.C. asserted, gave an opinion really without any hard facts to back it up, that "the student tour was the victim of sectarian forces within the Revolution itself which have been measurably strengthened in recent months as a result of the critical international situation" and that the cancellation would be "a source of

⁶⁵ F.P.C.C. Statement On the Cancellation Of The Tour", F.P.C.C. Fall'65 Bulletin.

satisfaction only to the sworn enemies of the Cuban Revolution, or to hopeless sectarians”. “The Fair Play for Cuba Committee has been struck a harsh blow”, the statement concluded, “but our confidence in the Cuban people and their cause, and the pressing need to continue our activities in defense of the Revolution, is unshaken.”⁶⁶ This was followed up a couple of days later by a joint letter addressed directly to Fidel Castro, the Prime Minister, signed by, among others, Harry Kopyto, Hans Modlich and John Riddell, all members of the L.S.A. but also leaders of several campus Fair Play clubs, stating that while regretting “the strong tone of this letter”, the signatories believed that “unjust vilification has been directed toward the Committee serving as an agent for this tour...we suspect the Committee and in turn the students have become victims of pressure politicking and, if so, the exigencies of the issue warrants the immediate attention of the Cuban people” and asking for “a reversal of the unfortunate decision.”⁶⁷

Stung by the F.P.C.C. criticism, I.C.A.P. wasn't long in coming back with a sharp rebuff. In a press release issued under the signature of Giraldo Mazola, I.C.A.P.'s Director that received a big play in Canadian Tribune, the L.P.P.'s weekly, he challenged the assertion that the cancellation had been “left to the last minute”. I.C.A.P. at any given moment, he stated, “confronts the need to postpone some projects not contemplated in its yearly planning due to strictly budgetary reasons”. “From the very beginning of the elaboration of this plan”, he claimed “this matter was brought to the attention of the organizers, and it was

⁶⁶ F.P.C.C. Bulletin, Summer-fall, '65

clearly pointed out to them not to encourage young students about the trip without previously having an affirmative answer.” It is not true that “the reasons for the cancellation were not explained and, far from it, that Mr. Olson had the approval from our Embassy.” And taking up the direct political attack upon I.C.A.P. in the F.P.C.C. statement that had alluded to “sectarian forces within the Revolution”, Mazola issued a strong reprimand, in an argument that one can easily see, again from this vantage point in time, the Committee could not have won, and probably had made a mistake in raising it in the first place. “(T)hey refer to certain matters, which since long ago have been overcome by our Revolution, echoing in a subtle way what the imperialists cry out and pretends to insinuate: the existence of factions, divisions or groups within the Revolution, yet this insinuation crashes against reality, stumble(s) upon the Cuban revolutionaries’ stern unity who consciously and most decisively break through all difficulties to achieve victory. Regardless of how frequent this pretended division is printed in foreign releases, it will not materialize.”

While expressing surprise at Mazalo’s assertion that he had been told not to “encourage” students about the tour, in a further comment on the matter, Verne pointed out that he had only proceeded after a “telegram received from Havana on March 6th which we interpreted as leaving in doubt only the numbers...”⁶⁸ I don’t know if I.C.A.P replied to the “Postscript”, but Joe Hansen, who had been copied in on the various statements that had been going to and fro between Toronto and Havana, began to grow alarmed that the matter may have been

⁶⁷ “Dear Dr. Castro”, June 5th, 1965, Cont. 112-2, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

getting out of hand. “It appears to me that it would be well to drop any further pursuit of the polemic,” he wrote to Verne, “even if the last word is left to the other side...I believe that the Canadian friends of the Cuban Revolution would stand to gain by doing their utmost to reciprocate any efforts from any quarter whatsoever in Cuba to overcome the effects of the setback...This can be done by dropping the dispute, restraining those who want to pursue it, and accepting in the most vigorous way anything offered to make up for the setback.”⁶⁹ “Your advice has been digested and acted upon”, replied Verne.⁷⁰

Of course, the F.P.C.C.’s members and supporters were devastated by what had transpired, but I remember we sort of comforted ourselves with what looked like a glimmer of hope in Mazola’s reply when he referred to the student tour as having been “postponed to another date, when it would be conveniently feasible” and that might mean, we hoped, that we would have I.C.A.P’s cooperation in the future, so we began to discuss a proposal for another student tour and continued with our activities in defense of Cuba. But the Committee’s relations with the Institute did not look good as could be seen later that summer when the Committee sent two representatives to Havana to represent it in the July 26th celebrations. “I.C.A.P refused to accept them as part of the Canadian delegation”, Verne wrote to Joe Hansen. “They had had several talks with secondary officials in the Institute, who revealed the deep hostility which our statement aroused. On the last day of their visit they were able to see the

⁶⁸ Student Tour Cancellation: Postscript by the F.P.C.C.”, July 25th, 1965, Cont.112-2, L.A.C.

⁶⁹ *”Dear Verne” from Joe Hansen, September 21, 1965, Cont. 110-1, L.A.C.

⁷⁰ ”Dear Joe”, from Verne, December 14, 1965, R.D. Fonds, Cont. 110 – 1, L.A.C.

Director who was full of venom, labeling myself and the Committee as ‘agents of imperialism’”. And despite appearances, things were not going well with the Cuban Ambassador either. A long-time supporter of the Committee, we had assumed he had not changed his attitude to it during the whole kerfuffle over the cancellation. He had been in Cuba for three months during the dispute and when he returned he told Verne that it “was the desire of the Ministry, to repair the damage done to our Committee, and that he was prepared to undertake a tour of Canada under our auspices.”⁷¹ And at the F.P.C.C.’s annual banquet that year, on November 20th, celebrating the Fifth Anniversary of the Revolution, with close to 200 supporters in attendance, and where he was the featured speaker, “he expressed a warm appreciation of Vernel Olson, who launched the Committee, thanked the committee for its efforts to establish the truth about the Cuban revolution in Canada, and pledged himself to help the committee in every possible way in the coming years that he expected to be here.”⁷²

But the Ambassador’s words turned out to be a kind of diplomatic double-speak, especially when it came to Vancouver where a similar banquet had taken place and where F.P.C.C.’s executive body was made up almost entirely of people not affiliated to the L.S.A., the exception being Phil Courneyour, its organizational secretary and its main leader alongside Cedric Cox. Cox and several other members, including John Macey, a prominent left-wing Vancouver lawyer, had been upset by the tour cancellation and the dispute with I.C.A.P. and

⁷¹ “Dear Joe”, from Vernel Olson, August 31, 1965, R.D. Fonds, Cont. 110 – 1, L.A.C.

⁷² “Ovation for Ambassador at Cuba Fair Play Supper”, Workers Vanguard, Mid-December, 1965, Volume 10, No. 7, (115)

were very unhappy with the public statement that Verne and Andre had issued about it. Hugh Clifford, a major figure in the left of the N.D.P, who had developed an antipathy to the L.S.A. over the previous couple of years, was of the opinion that the L.S.A. had been entirely responsible for what had happened. According to Phil, he was questioning whether because of it, he should stand again for re-election to the Committee's executive. Despite his reassuring words to Verne, the Ambassador, it seems, during his visit to Vancouver to speak at the banquet, sought to exploit this crisis for his own purposes. He met privately with Cedric, something Phil did not find out about until two months later when he learned from Cedric that the Ambassador had told him directly that "he had been instructed to break off relations with Fair Play by Havana and that he could no longer deal with Cedric or the Vancouver Committee, (and that) he asked Cedric to form a Friends of Latin America Committee..." Cruz charged that Fair Play was "a Trotskyist organization using its influence to interfere in Cuba's political affairs" and among other things, Verne Olson "maintains correspondence with dubious people (who are being watched). He uses his contacts in Havana to pressure the ministry and bypass normal channels. He sends Trotskyist literature to Cuba. He tries to interfere in Cuban politics..."⁷³ The problem for the Ambassador, however, was that despite his behind the scenes maneuvering to replace the F.P.C.C. with something that he could perhaps exert more control over, he could find no one to go along with his plans and he had to face the hard reality that the Fair Play had more public support, especially on the West Coast,

⁷³ "Letter to Verne Olson" from Phil Courneyour", January 28, 1966, R.D. Fonds, Cont. 110 – 1, L.A.C.

and had been a lot more successful in promoting Cuba than the Communist Party's committee. So, Verne, understanding that the Ambassador was smart enough to know that Fair Play was the only game in town, and choosing to overlook his activities in Vancouver, began the difficult work at rebuilding the Committee's relationship with him. But even though the Committee continued to send guests to Cuba for special events, such as anniversary celebrations like May Day and the 26th of July, the 1964 student tour turned out to be the last that the F.P.C.C. organized.

The crisis over the aborted 1965 tour would not be the last in the difficult relations between the Canadian F.P.C.C. and the Cubans. They would reach another low in early 1966. At the Tri-Continental Congress that year in Havana on January 15th, Fidel Castro, whom we came to believe had been influenced by Regis Debray, the French radical intellectual and writer who had been teaching in Havana and who was associated with the top circles of the former Cuban C.P., went out of his way to attack Monthly Review – an American magazine sympathetic to Cuba– and zeroed in on the ultra-leftism of the Posadists about their irresponsible speculation concerning the disappearance of Che Guevara. It is now well known that Che had left Cuba because he was preparing for the opening of a guerilla front in Bolivia, but at the time, many in the big business media were speculating – with no basis in fact --that he had been murdered by Castro. This was a slander also repeated by Adolpho Gilly, a main spokesperson for the Posadists in those years and also spread, incidentally, by many in the sectarian left -- who claimed that Che, because of so-called political differences

over China, had been “liquidated” by Castro. Fidel at the Tri-Continental Congress, in the process of taking up the speculation about Che, also used the occasion to launch an attack upon Trotskyism, in a tone reminiscent of the worst of Stalinism, characterizing the Fourth International as “...a vulgar instrument of imperialism and reaction”, referring to it as “mercenaries in the services of imperialism.”

Even though we suspected that Castro’s comments were possibly based on the grievously erroneous positions of the Posadists, the Fourth International in order to defend itself, was compelled to make a sharp reply: “The dossier you placed before the participants...is made up of amalgams and links which collapse at the slightest touch...”, it stated, showing that Castro was employing the methods of the Stalinists in attempting to connect statements and actions of individuals and groups -- who had long left the organization -- with the F.I. “It is shameful, Comrade Fidel Castro, to utilize your prestige and the admiration and affection which the revolutionary masses of the entire world feel for the Cuban Revolution to dig out of the dustbin of history the slanders and lies that no one dares to utter, even in the Soviet Union itself, after the twentieth and twenty-second Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union!” The F.I. demanded that Castro “submit his proofs before a Tribunal of the Cuban people; five of the most representative leaders of the Fourth International are ready to stand before such a public Tribunal and answer the accuser before the people of all Cuba. Thus the people of Cuba will discover that the entire activities of the

Fourth International are devoted to but one aim: the victory of the world socialist revolution!”⁷⁴

A few weeks later, Pierre Frank, while discussing Castro’s attack, went even further and took up some of the limitations that were inherent in the character of the Congress. At a meeting in London, which I reported on at the time, he told us that a basic weakness of the event was that many of the delegations, instead of representing independent revolutionary movements, came from states under C.P. control or from states that had won a measure of political independence from imperialism and thus were limited by the conservative bureaucratic outlook or passing diplomatic needs of the rulers of those countries. Consequently, despite its many positive achievements and declarations, the Tricontinental Congress was unable to work out a consistent world strategy of revolutionary struggle and such statements as Castro’s on January 15th made against us, Pierre said, would probably remain unchallenged by the delegates.⁷⁵

Because of what they believed was its implication for Cuban solidarity in Canada, the F.P.C.C. also responded to Castro’s attack against the F.I. “We are not concerned here”, it stated, “with a defense of the Fourth International, Trotskyism or Trotskyists, real or alleged, in an academic sense. We assume they will respond as they see fit. What is of serious concern though, is the integrity of the Fair Play for Cuba and persons associated with the Committee. It

⁷⁴ World Outlook, February 18, 1966, Chris Arthur Archive, 711/B/1/3, Warwick University.

⁷⁵ World Outlook, Vol. 4, No 8, March 25th, 1966, Chris Arthur Archive, 711/B/1/3, Warwick University.

goes without saying that the Committee would have to take some actions if known ‘mercenaries’ or ‘agents of imperialism’ were active in its ranks.”

Stressing that the F.P.C.C. was a broad non-exclusive organization open to all those who have shown interest in furthering the truth about Cuba, the executive challenged the Castro charges head on: “For five years of experience of the Committee in Canada has shown”, they said, “that persons who are known adherents of, or sympathizers of the organization in Canada known as Trotskyist, have been among the most active, energetic and enthusiastic defenders of the truth about the Cuban Revolution...We have no evidence to sustain or justify the allegations of Prime Minister Castro regarding Trotskyists, Adolfo Gilly or Monthly Review...These charges by the most respected leader of the Revolution – charges which are not confirmed in any respect by our experience, but on the contrary are unacceptable to any serious political tendency on the North American continent – will make this task unnecessarily difficult and will impede further development.”⁷⁶ The F.P.C.C. called upon Castro to “reassess” and “repudiate his charges against proven defenders of the Cuban Revolution.” The following year, on the anniversary of Castro’s speech when Radio Havana re-broadcast it with the attack upon Trotskyism carefully edited out, we felt a measure of vindication and comfort in our belief that Castro may have been misled on the issue by some of his advisors.

During the dispute with I.C.A.P. over the student tour, Verne, it seems, had begun to revise his views about what lay behind the cancellation. In the

⁷⁶ Statement of the Toronto Executive of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, February 14, 1966,

F.P.C.C.'s June 3rd, 1965 statement issued under Verne's and Andre Beckerman's signatures that did not mention anything about the Castro leadership's role in the affair, Verne had not too subtly ascribed the cancellation as being due to the influence of C.P. elements within I.C.A.P. But during his five-day visit to Havana as he sought to have the decision reversed, as he told Joe Hansen soon after in a letter on June 8th, he had come to see the cancellation as an expression of a general conservatizing trend within Cuba that had resulted from its growing closeness to the Soviet Union – it had ninety percent of the island's trade – and it could be also be seen in Castro' March 11th, criticisms of China that year, provoked by its prevention of Cuban arms getting to Vietnam – in which he referred to the “senile Mao”. Two days later Castro called for the banning in Cuba of Hsinhua, a Chinese weekly widely read on Cuban campuses. “Up until this speech”, Verne wrote, “the Chinese view was popular and widely read on campus. Today, political discussions are rare on campus and discretion seems to be the better part of valour for all students regarding controversial subjects. This attitude seems to permeate the whole country if my sampling was indicative of a trend...” While there were justifiable concerns about C.I.A. activity on the campus, Verne wrote to Joe, many of his contacts had become alarmed by efforts by the Federation of University Students (F.E.U.) and the Young Communists “to drive from the university all students who are not completely identified with the revolution as well as counter-revolutionary students and homosexuals, etc.” “There seems little doubt”, he wrote, “that the general situation described is the basic cause of the cancellation of the Student Tour

which we had organized. Information gained would suggest that this move was not a high-handed action on the part of conscious Stalinist forces but was taken with at least the knowledge of the tacit approval...(and) could well indicate a qualitative change in the relationship of forces within the revolution itself.”⁷⁷

By February 21st of the following year, Verne had come to believe that the negative political trends, “the beginnings of new and profound changes”, that he had noted in his earlier letter, had further deepened. In a long, dense, closely-typed six-page letter to Joe Hansen, he wrote that part of the evidence for this change had come from, “two comrades who visited Cuba in July”, and who were told by two of their contacts “that there was no internal intellectual life in Cuba. The line was set by the top leadership and no discussion or dissent is allowed. In the libraries, Trotskyist publications have disappeared from the news rack and libraries have removed books by the Old Man (Trotsky).” Verne also criticized The Militant, the S.W.P.’s weekly paper, for taking “at face value” what Castro had said about trade with China and urged the “need for a serious evaluation of the Cuban Revolution” by the S.W.P in the light of what was occurring. Relying on anecdotal information from people such as Robert Williams – who by phone had told him that “all dissenters are being called Trotskyist” – he had come to the conclusion that there had been a serious shift to the right by the Cuban government, a shift that also could be seen in the pattern of events that included “the removal of Che” by Fidel for political reasons and Che’s disappearance from public life; the January 15th. 1966, speech by Fidel attacking the Fourth

⁷⁷ “Dear Joe”, from Verne Olson”, June 8th, 1965, Cont.110-1, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

International; Cuba's support for the Kremlin in the Sino-Soviet dispute; the clamping down of political discussion on the University of Havana campus, and the cancellation of the F.P.C.C. student tour.

According to "a Canadian friend", Verne reported, a Fred Brown who has spent the previous 2 1/2 years teaching at the invitation of Fidel Castro at the University of Havana, "Castro himself was very angry over our statement following the cancellation of the student tour; the decision to cancel being a top level one. Castro has been moving to the right not only in regards to foreign policy but also in regards to internal policy. The result of this, he says, is a growing disenchantment with the leadership of the Revolution among growing layers of the Cuban masses...and was most dramatically expressed in the large, surprisingly large, numbers which our friend reported as having registered with the announcement by Castro that anyone wishing to leave could do so. The report is that 500,000, yes five hundred thousand persons registered to leave..."⁷⁸ Verne was referring here to a recent propaganda offensive against Cuba by the American government when it had offered to accept anyone into the United States who wished to leave the island, an offer it would quickly revoke when the Cuban government turned the tables on it and informed its citizens that anyone who wished to leave the country could freely do so.

Joe Hansen wasn't very long in replying to Verne's February 21st letter, and questioned his conclusions. "The facts you report are of greatest interest", Joe wrote, "and must be given due weight in estimating what is occurring in Cuba

and what our attitude should be. I would say, however, that while we accumulate material of this kind, in addition to facts from other sources, and while we should speak out emphatically on any particular event as clear-cut as the attack in Castro's January 15th speech, it would be premature to take the public position that a qualitative change has actually occurred; i.e., that we now face a degenerated workers state." Regarding the growth of bureaucratism in Cuba, he wrote, "I do not have the slightest doubt that this has been occurring – and on a dangerous scale." But has this reached the point, Joe asked, "where it can be said that a hardened caste has crystallized out, one that can only be removed by political revolution? If this is so, then we should of course say it. But I am not sure that it is the case. We should recall what happened around Escalante. At that time too, Castro appeared not to be seeing what was happening – if anything it could be concluded from a distance that he was abetting it – and incidents were rife of the kind you cite. But as it turned out the bureaucratic crust was not as deep or as hardened as it appeared to be. The experience should incline us to be all the more cautious for the time being in coming to a definitive conclusion on this."

In taking up Verne's concern about the half million Cubans who had recently registered to leave Cuba, Joe in his letter, cautioned against jumping to "one sided or impressionistic conclusions" about the matter. "Whatever the reasons adduced to explain this, they remain meaningless in the absence of a comparable offer from Washington to any other country", he wrote. "How many

⁷⁸ "Dear Joe" from Verne Olson, February 21, 1966, Cont.110 – 1, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

would register to come to the United States from Venezuela or Brazil, for instance, if they were given the opportunity? Only with at least one control case could the 500,000 figure be seen in the balance – and then it might show Cuba in a favourable light. Despite all the pressure from the U.S., the tightening blockade that has lasted almost six years, the constant threat of invasion, the hardships and absence of an early perspective of substantial relief, only this number wished to leave the beleaguered fortress...whereas in Venezuela, for instance, virtually the entire population registered” when the Americans made a similar proposal. If some weariness has finally set in, Joe warned, “then it would be a considerable error to interpret this weariness as revolutionary fervor to which the leaders no long respond. It may be the other way around; the leaders are beginning to reflect the weariness of the masses.”

Regarding Che Guevara and his disappearance from public life in Cuba, Hansen countered that responsible sources in the capitalist media did not believe that Che was dead, and that the New York Times, editorially, was also speculating that, because of ill health he might be in a sanatorium, possibly in Russia. “In the absence of good evidence one way or the other it would be foolish of us to be impressed by or help circulate rumours concerning Guevara’s supposed death, particularly the version pinning guilt on Castro.” On the question of the Sino-Soviet conflict, Joe stated that this had, “enormously complicated things for the Cubans. Their economic and defense needs compelled them to maintain good relations with Moscow. The Soviet bureaucracy has taken full advantage of this to put the squeeze on them. The

Cubans have paid for this in political coin up and down the line. That this has been done generally in an unprincipled way is a mark, of course, of the limitations of the Castroist leadership; but a big share of the responsibility lies at Mao's door. Instead of being designed to help the Cubans maintain a certain distance from Moscow, Mao's policy seems expressly designed to leave no room for Cuba to hold an independent position. By forcing Castro to come out decisively, Mao made him choose Moscow's side. This weakened China. In analyzing this point it is necessary to look beyond the immediate issues in the debate, such as the rice-sugar deal, to the bigger moves in the Sino-Soviet dispute. The actual rift between Peking and Havana began in 1964 and the responsibility was wholly Mao's. When the Cuban delegation ran into this in China, they could not believe what had happened since their sympathies in the dispute were with China."

Joe concluded by restating the S.W.P.'s approach to Cuba's internal problems. "During all these years we understood what was involved. The Cuban Stalinists were rabidly anti-Trotskyist; the new revolutionary leaders and cadres were rather sympathetic to us; but they consciously subordinated their own feelings to what they conceived to be the most realistic policy vis-à-vis Moscow. Our policy has been to strengthen the hand of those who incline in our direction, and particularly not to undertake factional moves that would make things difficult for them. That is the one reason our rating with them has

remained high and why we have continued to be appreciated as a force in Cuba and not just a sectarian group.”⁷⁹

But by the time of this exchange of correspondence, Nelson Zayas Pozo, a Cuban, friendly to our political views, who had worked in the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations, was in Paris to begin his studies towards obtaining his doctorate. I am assuming he is the “David” referred to in Verne’s reply of March 31st to Joe. I couldn’t find a copy of his letter in the archives, but from Verne’s reply, it seems that Zayas, one of our most reliable sources of information in those years about the internal situation in Cuba, had earlier written to Verne and had questioned the reliability of some of his sources, especially that of the Canadian already mentioned, Fred Brown, the lecturer at the University of Havana. Although not directly saying so, Zayas had not agreed with Verne’s assessment of what was taking place in Cuba, as can be seen from a letter he wrote to him two days after Castro’s January 15th speech, in which he provided information about the positive attitude of leading figures in the government – such as Ricardo Alarcon who at the time was Director of North and South American affairs – towards the F.P.C.C. and the declining political fortunes of a few leading P.S.P. people he was aware of, including the general receptivity to Trotskyist literature among people with whom he was acquainted.⁸⁰ It appears that Joe had shown Zayas, Verne’s long letter of February 21st. In his March 31st reply to Joe, Verne admits that the assessment of the Canadian, Fred Brown,

⁷⁹ “Dear Verne” from Joe Hansen, March 7th, 1965, Cont. 110-1, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

⁸⁰ “Letter to Verne and Anne”, January 17th, 1966, unsigned, but from internal evidence appears to be from Nelson Zayas Pozo, , Cont.110-1, R.D. Fonds,L.A.C.

about what was happening in Cuba may not have been entirely accurate: “It is quite true that Fred’s last months in Cuba were most disorienting and I do not doubt that for a period he completely lost his base, particularly under the influence of his wife who was on the verge of an emotional and mental breakdown. It is also true that some of his associates were with persons not completely tied to the Revolution. But for this reason, his testimony has a certain value and validity, if properly sifted and interpreted...” Verne goes on to say that Joe had mis-read his February 21st letter. “The sharp nature of my comments and possible overstatement of my position was the result of a desire on my part to dramatize my concern with the present course of the movement (i.e., the Fourth International) was on regarding the Cuban Revolution...I did not intend to suggest that we should draw a balance sheet on the Cuban Revolution as you suggest.” It certainly would be wrong, he wrote, to “take a public position that a qualitative change has actually occurred, i.e., that we now face a degenerated workers state...” But nevertheless, Verne goes on to presents further evidence that would go towards substantiating such a conclusion. “An apparatus loyal to the Castro leadership is well on the way to being molded”, he wrote, “and will inevitably – through gradual formulation of its own special interests – form the base of a privileged caste...At the present time Castro is able to make use of his anti-Stalinist past, and the confidence that the masses have in his leadership based on past performance, in order to institute Stalinist type practices and institutions.”⁸¹

⁸¹ “Letter to Joe Hansen”, from Verne Olson, March 31st, 1966, Cont. 110-1, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

Not long after his March 31st letter to Joe, Verne, sadly, had resigned from the L.S.A. and the F.P.C.C. His differences with the L.S.A. and S.W.P. about their assessment of the recent changes in Cuba had led him to believe he could no longer support the L.S.A.'s viewpoint in the Committee. He had developed strong disagreement, he said, with the L.S.A. team he had been part of from the beginning of the Committee. Much in line with Joe Hansen's understanding of recent events in Cuba, the L.S.A. had maintained its analyses adopted soon after the revolution that Cuba was a workers' state, but as yet lacking in democratic forms of workers' control, and that socialists everywhere had a primary duty to defend it against imperialism. Verne was not challenging the need to defend Cuba, but his concerns were about the significance of the changes he was pointing to. From this vantage point now, it's possible to see that there was no reason the discussion could not have continued. He was a hundred percent in support of Cuba and no principle was involved in the disagreement. We could have easily agreed to disagree, but by then he had "lost confidence in the movement (i.e., the L.S.A.), at all levels, resulting from deep differences with the comrades", as he wrote in his letter of resignation from the L.S.A. "The answer which Joe gave to my initial letter", he wrote, "also went a long way towards establishing or re-enforcing this tendency...this loss of confidence was under way before Castro's Jan. 15th speech."⁸²

Verne's position as Chairman of Fair Play was soon taken over by Hans Modlich. Verne continued to play an important part in the Committee's activities,

⁸² "Letter to Ross Dowson" from Verne Olson, April 14th, 1966, Cont. 110-1, R.D. Fonds L.A.C.

but not to the same degree as before and not as a member of its executive committee. Hans, a long-time member of its executive and a student leader at the University of Toronto had been part of the grouping of the L.S.A. members, such as Pat Mitchell and others, who had originally been tasked with helping Verne get it off the ground. And the Committee's relations with the Cuban Ambassador improved to the degree that Ross Dowson, probably Canada's best known Trotskyist, attended the first congress of the Organization of Latin American Solidarity (O.L.A.S.) in Havana in 1967, at the invitation of the Cubans.⁸³ Even though its membership had declined from when it was first formed – to “slightly less than a hundred in the Toronto area” -- the Committee maintained a very active chapter in Vancouver, continued to enjoy broad support across the country.⁸⁴ And the red-baiting by the right-wing press did not let up. In 1968 the Committee came under a severe witch-hunting attack from Peter Worthington in the right-wing Toronto Telegram – no doubt assisted by information provided by the R.C.M.P. --with photographs of Hans and others of its leadership displayed across its pages. As a result, Hans was forced to abandon his engineering career and to return to University because of the difficulty of finding work due to the witch-hunting. But most people in the broad labour movement saw the red-baiting for what it was. For example, the Workers Vanguard reports that at the tenth anniversary celebration on January 4th, 1969, where Hans Modlich chaired the event and that was attended by some 150

⁸³ "L. A. Solidarity Congress Faces Che's Challenge", by Ross Dowson, Workers Vanguard, Volume 11, No.11 (131), Mid-July, 1967.

⁸⁴ "Memorandum on the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in Canada", July 28th, 1967, by Ross Dowson, "submitted to Minrex with a copy to Fidel Castro." Cont. 110-1, R.D. Fonds L.A.C.

people, the Cuban Consul, Humberto Castanedo and his wife formally greeted the guests on their arrival and the Master of Ceremonies was no less than Gerry Caplan, a leader of the N.D.P., and that Verne read greetings to the meeting from Stephen Lewis, then N.D.P. M.P.P. for Scarborough West. Both prominent N.D.P.ers to this day – and no friends of the Trotskyists – must have been well aware of the red-baiting the previous year.⁸⁵ Every year, the Committee, right into 1970, continued with its successful banquets, to which the Ambassador would always either send messages of support, or personally attend and speak.

Nevertheless, the Committee's activities were reduced, but every month, it kept up its commitment to the Cubans by mailing 400 copies of the English edition of the Cuban publication, Granma to its Canadian subscribers. One of the Committee's last activities was the touring across Canada of a photographic exhibit, "Cuba Today", commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. On display for three weeks at the Sigmund Samuel Library at the U of T, it was displayed at campuses, churches and libraries across the country.⁸⁶

The F.P.C.C. remained active for the rest of the decade and into the very early Seventies, holding film showings, telling the truth about Cuba to whoever would listen and celebrating its important anniversaries every year, often with speeches and gatherings at banquets, attended by hundreds of supporters, usually with the Cuban Ambassador present along with many Cuban consular officials and their

⁸⁵ "Tenth Anniversary of Cuban Revolution", Workers Vanguard, Volume 13, No.9 (165), January 13th, 1969.

families. And support for Cuba among Canadians continued to increase, no doubt helped by the Committee's persistent work -- for example, in the March 1969, N.D.P. paper, the Democrat, the B.C. party's provincial secretary reported to the membership that the following October, the party would sponsor a two-week tour of the island.⁸⁷ By the end of the decade, nonetheless, Fair Play was beginning to run out of steam. There is "overload and fatigue in the members", wrote Phil Courneyour, secretary of the Committee in Vancouver. In a letter to Toronto he reported that a film showing about Cuba, into which they had put a lot of resources to promote, had been far from a success, with only 75 people showing up.⁸⁸

Verne died of a sudden heart-attack in 1999. A severe depression had forced him to take early retirement from Ontario Hydro and for a long time he had withdrawn from any serious political activity, although many of his friends from the old days would often visit him and Ann to discuss what was going on in the world. Whenever we visited, we always came away impressed with his insights and optimism about the future, though sometimes all of us despaired a little about what was happening in the class struggle with the rise of neo-liberalism. When Ann died suddenly, in 1994, I remember well that Robert Williams, although obviously in a state of poor health, made the long journey up from Detroit to stay with Verne and attend Ann's funeral, such was his feeling of solidarity with him. Jess and I helped organize a commemoration at Verne's

⁸⁶ Cont. 105, File 17, R.D. Fonds, L.A.C.

⁸⁷ Workers Vanguard, Vol. 13, No. 18 (174), May 19th, 1969.

⁸⁸ Letter to Ross Dowson, July 28, 1969, MG28,1V11, Cont.109, File 6, R D. Fonds, L.A.C.

funeral. Many of his comrades and old friends were there to bid him goodbye and pay tribute to his remarkable life. Even though it had been many years since Verne had been active in defense of Cuba, a delegation from the Cuban consulate made a point to be there to pay tribute to his memory and to tell the audience about the significance of his contribution in helping Cuba during some of its most difficult days. It reminded all of us that through Verne and the radical left as a whole, we had helped provide critical space so that the Cuban Revolution could be considered by Canadians on its own merits. It was a moving tribute to an exemplary life which had been dedicated to humanity's struggle for a socialist future, and in the words of the Cuban Consul who addressed the gathering, a life that had found its most creative expression in defending Cuba against American imperialism.
