An Incomplete Guide to the Radical Left in the United States

Communist Party USA/Young Communist League

The CPUSA formed in 1922 out of two splinters from the original Socialist Party, USA: the Communist Party of America (CPA) and the Communist Labor Party (CLP). V. I. Lenin's Communist (Third) International ("Comintern") forced these two groups to merge in order to become the official American section of the Comintern. In 1928, following Leon Trotsky's expulsion from the Soviet CP, his supporters in the US were similarly expelled; subsequently, they formed the US branch of the Trotskyist movement, while the CPUSA remained loyal to Soviet premier Josef Stalin, as well as all those who succeeded him. CPUSA members thus denied the totalitarian nature of Stalin's regime.

In the 1930s, the CPUSA opposed American intervention against the Nazis (mainly because of the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact) and ran campaigns against Franklin Roosevelt. By 1941, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, the CPUSA called for the US to enter the war and took part in a "Popular Front" with the Democrats, avidly supporting FDR. After the war, the Popular Front came to an end and the CP entered the presidential campaign of former Vice-President Henry Wallace on the Progressive Party ticket. During the 1950s, the McCarthy hearings and such laws as the Smith Act led to the indictment of many Communist leaders. The CP also suffered from Nikita Khrushchev's admission in 1956 of the many crimes of Stalin's dictatorship (responsible for the deaths of millions). Following the split between Khrushchev and Chinese Communist chairman Mao Zedong (the "Sino-Soviet split"), the CPUSA sided with Russia, causing a number of pro-China members to leave the party and form the Progressive Labor Party, which still exists. During the late 1960s, the CP saw notable growth—particularly among blacks and Latinos—via recruitment through the Angela Davis defense campaign. (Davis was a CP member who was also associated with the Black Panther Party.) Gus Hall became general secretary and, via the authoritarian structure of the party, ensured that the CPUSA always supported the positions of the Russian CP. In turn, the Russian CP secretly funded CPUSA activities.

In 1989-1991, the CPUSA faced the crumbling of the Soviet Bloc. The CPUSA supported the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev by Stalinist hard-liners, causing the departure of some 900 pro-Gorbachev members. These former members, along with former members of Trotskyist and Maoist organizations, formed the Committees of Correspondence, an open and democratic organization that at least acknowledges the democratic deficiencies of the former “socialist world,” though it mostly still looks at Cuba through rose-colored glasses. The CPUSA continued to shrink after the end of the USSR, and stopped fielding candidates in any races. It tends to endorse the Democrat in any election, and was opposed to Ralph Nader's presidential run in 2000 and in 2004. The new CP leadership around Sam Webb seems to be working to open up the organization, including allowing dual membership with the Committees of Correspondence. Though it works in good faith with other organizations and is less disciplined than in previous years, the CP—and its youth section, the Young Communist League (YCL)—still officially supports the Stalinist regimes of North Korea, Vietnam, China, etc. The CP publishes a newspaper (People's Weekly World) and a magazine (Political Affairs). It probably has around 2,000 members today, including YCL members.

Green Party

Largely inspired by the success of the German Green Party, political activists in the US formed the Green Committees of Correspondence (GCOC) in 1984. The GCOC held national gatherings of green activists in 1987, then annually starting in 1989. At the 1991 national gathering, the GCOC was disbanded, and a new structure was put into place, named the Greens/Green Party USA (GPUSA), which was organized with delegates from local and regional green groups, in addition to individual members.
From 1992 to 1995, the number of candidates in local and statewide elections identifying themselves grew, in addition to the number of organized local and statewide green groups. At the 1995 national gathering of the GPUSA, a measure to run a candidate for president was defeated. However, those who wished to run a candidate for president continued to pursue this possibility. They selected Ralph Nader as their presidential candidate and Winona LaDuke as their vice-presidential candidate. The pair were on the ballot in 22 states and received 0.7% of all votes cast.

In the aftermath of the 1996 election, representatives from 11 state Green Parties joined to form the Association of State Green Parties (ASGP). The focus of the ASGP, while still including issue activism and non-electoral politics, was more clearly on getting greens elected. In the years from 1997 to 1999, more local, regional, and state-wide green parties continued to form. Many of these parties affiliated themselves with both the ASGP and the GPUSA. In the year 2000, the ASGP nominated Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke for President and Vice-President again. This time, the pair were on 44 state ballots and received 2.7% of all votes cast. Whether or not they should be blamed for the “election” of George W. Bush has been a subject of heated debate.

In October 2000 (during the campaign), a proposal was made to alter the structures of the ASGP and GPUSA to be complementary organizations with the ASGP focusing on electoral politics and the GPUSA focusing on issue advocacy. The Boston Proposal (so named because it was negotiated at Boston in the days before the first presidential debate) was passed by the ASGP at its next annual gathering, but did not pass at the GPUSA Congress. The ASGP then changed its name to “The Green Party of the United States” and was granted status as the official National Committee of the Green Party by the Federal Election Commission in 2001. In 2002, John Eder became the highest elected official in the history of the Green Party in the United States when he was elected to the Maine State House of Representatives.

Late in 2003, Ralph Nader declared that he would not be the party's nominee for president in 2004. However, in February 2004, Nader announced his intention to run as independent. A few months later, Nader stated that he would accept the “endorsement” rather than the “nomination” of the Green Party, as well as of other third parties. Several prominent Greens, including Peter Camejo and Lorna Salzman, endorsed this plan (Camejo would later accept a position as Nader’s vice-presidential running-mate). The most notable opposition came from lawyer and activist David Cobb, who wanted to run a campaign focused on building the party. On June 26 the GP convention rejected the idea of an endorsement for Nader and chose Cobb as its presidential candidate. Cobb has been trashed by Nader supporters because he does not wish to heavily campaign in “swing states” and understands the importance of defeating Bush. The Greens are ideologically mixed: some will only support third-party candidates, others are willing to support progressive Democrats. The Party claims 300,000 registered Greens, though it has perhaps 8,000 actual dues-paying members.

International Socialist Organization

The ISO is a Leninist-Trotskyist organization, unorthodox in that it claims that the Communist states are (or were) state capitalist societies and not, as orthodox Trotskyists would have it, bureaucratically deformed workers’ states. (What this meant in practice was that the ISO didn’t support, say, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, while many other Trotskyists did.) The ISO formed in 1977 and patterned itself after the Socialist Workers Party of Britain (SWP/UK), using the same theoretical framework and designing its paper, Socialist Worker, after the SWP’s own paper of the same name. In the 1980s and 1990s, under the leadership of Ahmed Shawki (a former SWP/UK member), the small ISO grew by organizing on university campuses. Like all Trotskyist groups, the ISO sees the Democratic Party as a capitalist party pure and simple and never supports Democratic candidates. It also sees the state of Israel as inherently illegitimate and wishes it to be dissolved into a secular, democratic state of all historic Palestine. (How this is to be done is left rather vague.) In 2000 and in 2004 the ISO recruited new members by working for Ralph Nader’s Green Party presidential campaign. In 2001, after a battle between Shawki and the leaders of the SWP/UK, the ISO and the SWP broke off relations.
Traditionally the ISO has acted in a sectarian and manipulative fashion towards other leftist organizations. It still tries to sell copies of *Socialist Worker* and *International Socialist Review* (its journal) at progressive events, hoping to pick off possible recruits. As with most avowedly Leninist organizations, if ISO members disagree with an official ISO policy or decision, they’re not allowed to openly admit to it. (Though the CP is rather lax on this these days.) A great many students went through the ISO over the last decade, leaving because of the group’s internal authoritarianism and constant pressure to sell more papers (a requirement of membership) and give more money to the organization. The ISO currently claims 1,000 members. Obviously, for better or worse, their hoped-for revolutionary party is a long way off. The ISO is the lead organization behind the Campus Antiwar Network and the Campaign to End the Death Penalty and largely uses them as front groups to recruit members.

**Revolutionary Communist Party**

The largest Maoist group (and almost the only one left), the RCP began as the Bay Area Revolutionary Union (BARU) in the early 1970s, led by Bob Avakian. Previously it was a faction of Students for a Democratic Society, the main organization of the New Left of the 1960s. Since 1975, the RCP has created an array of protest-oriented front groups, including Refuse & Resist (headed by RCP member C. Clark Kissinger) and, most recently, the peace group Not In Our Name (NION). Until very recently, the RCP claimed that homosexuality is a form “bourgeois decadence”; they finally changed their line on this matter in 2001. The RCP publishes a newspaper, *Revolutionary Worker*. The RCP also has an international federation, the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM), which includes the Communist Party (Shining Path) of Peru and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). They do not support the current Communist Party of China, which is currently building capitalism “with Chinese characteristics.” Chairman Avakian is currently in exile in France, hiding from the FBI. The RCP is a very authoritarian and downright nutty sect. It has perhaps 300 members.

**Socialist Party USA/Young People’s Socialist League**

Like the Democratic Socialists of America, the SP-USA is one of the heirs to the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs and Norman Thomas. Formed as the “Debs Caucus” in the old Socialist Party, the founders of the SP-USA were the most left-wing of the forces who opposed the right-wing, pro-Vietnam War SP leadership which renamed the Party as Social Democrats USA (SDUSA). Leaving SDUSA—which consisted mostly of pro-Cold War trade union officials—the Debs Caucus reconstituted the SP in 1973. Several old Socialist leaders, including former Milwaukee mayor Frank P. Zeidler and peace activist David McReynolds, became leaders of the new party, and the organization began fielding presidential candidates once again in 1976. In 1980, the SP became the first party to field an openly gay man for President—David McReynolds. There is some membership overlap between DSA and the SP, though SP members usually oppose supporting progressive Democrats—some even oppose supporting Greens or anyone else who isn’t an openly socialist candidate—and the party is currently running Walt Brown for president. That SP candidates almost never win any office seem to not bother them—many of their members seem to think that they can turn the SP into a mass socialist party through sheer willpower. The SP claims 1,000 or so members. It publishes a magazine, *The Socialist*. Its youth section is the Young People’s Socialist League (YPSL).

**Socialist Workers Party**

The SWP, led by veteran socialist and trade unionist James P. Cannon, formed in 1938, its leadership having been kicked out of the CPUSA a decade earlier for their support of Leon Trotsky against Josef Stalin. Their ranks included a number of militant unionists including the leaders of the successful Minneapolis Teamsters strikes on 1934. The SWP became one of the strongest groups during the founding of Trotsky's Fourth International (FI) on September 3, 1938. Because of their criticism of World War II (calling it a war between two rival imperialist alliances), many SWP leaders (including Cannon) were imprisoned for the duration of the war under the Smith Act of 1941. During the 1960s, the SWP became one of the strongest supporters of
the Cuban Revolution and played a strong role in the antiwar movement through their youth organization, the **Young Socialist Alliance (YSA)**, though they were often accused of trying to take over coalitions by packing meetings and securing key bureaucratic and leadership positions. (In the 1960s, SWP members who considered the SWP to be insufficiently feminist and pro-gay liberation founded the **Freedom Socialist Party**.)

In 1973, **Jack Barnes** replaced veteran Teamster Farrell Dobbs as the SWP’s national secretary. Barnes—who had come from the campus-based New Left and not the labor movement—was an uncritical supporter of Fidel Castro who expelled hundreds of more orthodox, critical-of-Castro Trotskyists during the 1970s and 1980s. He also ordered SWP members who had been recruited from campuses to “move into industry” and take factory jobs to become more authentically proletarian. In the 1980s the SWP left the Fourth International, while some who remained loyal to the FI founded a tiny rival group, **Socialist Action**. From its height of 1,800 members, the SWP has become a miniscule propaganda sect, 300 members at best, doing little more than selling issues of *The Militant* and *Pathfinder Press* books to financially support Barnes and his partner, **Mary-Alice Waters**.

**Spartacist League**

The most obnoxious group on the left for the longest amount of time, the SL—taking its name from the group that Rosa Luxemburg founded in Germany during World War I—originally formed as a faction of the SWP which claimed that the Party was too uncritical of Fidel Castro. Led by **James Robertson**, the “Sparts” are essentially a cult, well known by leftists for their extreme sectarianism—they don’t participate in coalitions, and if they appear at a meeting organized not by them, it’s because they want to loudly denounce “misleaders” and “betrayers.” In the 1970s and 1980s the SL also became known for its strong support of “revolutionary” actions by the Communist states, such as the Russian Army’s invasion of Afghanistan and the repression of the Polish *Solidarnosc* trade union. The SL has at most 200 members, probably less since the splits that founded the **International Bolshevik Tendency** and the **Internationalist Group**. The Sparts and their offspring represent Trotskyism’s most repulsive face. Their newspaper—rather amusing in its own way—is **Workers’ Vanguard**.

**Workers World Party/International Action Center/ANSWER**

Former members of the Socialist Workers Party founded the WWP in 1959. The split occurred because while the SWP supported the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 as a student and worker-led revolt against Stalinist oppression, **Sam Marcy** and his followers—who became the WWP—believed that the revolution was a pro-capitalist uprising and that as defenders of the USSR (a “degenerated workers’ state”), Trotskyists had a duty to support Soviet intervention. The WWP’s Trotskyism soon transformed into a version of Stalinism far crazier than the CPUSA’s, uncritically supporting the Stalinist world and always supporting repression against “pro-capitalist” uprisings in the Stalinist states (the USSR’s invasion of Czechoslovakia, China’s suppression of Tien-An-Men Square uprising, etc.) The WWP supports any regime that the US opposes, no matter how vile—even Saddam Hussein’s—because the only evil that matters to the “Marcyites” is US imperialism and its allies. Despite its supposed commitment to gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered rights, the WWP has never criticized the repressive practices directed against queers in China, North Korea, and Cuba, let alone Iraq. Like the ISO, it opposes Israel’s existence.

The WWP have created many front groups over the years in order to draw in progressives who would not likely join the Party. The most recent front groups are the **International Action Center (IAC)**, which presents itself as a peace and human rights organization, and **Act Now To Stop War And End Racism (ANSWER)**, an antihar “coalition” that has organized large demonstrations, but most who attend the protests know nothing about ANSWER’s actual politics. The primary spokesperson for the IAC and ANSWER is **Ramsey Clark**, US attorney general under Lyndon Johnson. (Really. Not a joke.) Clark offers his legal services to any head of state in conflict with the US, no matter how repressive—Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Elizaphan Ntakirutimana of the Rwandan Hutus. The WWP itself has perhaps 300 members.