

The Fifth Estate Meets the All People's Congress

Or What's a Nice Newspaper Like You Doing at a Congress Like This?

George Bradford (David Watson)

1981

A couple of us went downtown to Cobo Hall on a cold Friday night to check out the rally to “overturn the Reagan program” and to pass out a few copies of the last issue to the curious. The rally was being staged by the “All Peoples Congress” all-weekend convention, a left-liberal amalgam; everyone from Dykes Against Racism Everywhere to trade unionists, feminists, Democratic Party hacks looking for a constituency, and leninists looking for cannon fodder. The posters had been all over the city since summer, free bus rides were being offered every fifteen minutes or so from various welfare and unemployment offices, Gil Scott Heron was supposed to perform on Saturday night for a benefit—it had all the makings of a slick, combination carnival and revival meeting. The revival, that is, of the Popular Front to Fight “Reaganism,” led by liberal politicians and trade union bureaucrats and staffed by the minions of the leninist parties looking for a piece of the action. But we had a lot of extra papers lying around turning yellow, and we were starting work on another issue, so we decided to potlatch them out of here and hand them out to the folks who might have taken the free bus ride to go somewhere where it was warm, and to perhaps shake up the true believers with some blasts against civilization.

When we got down there, we realized almost immediately that we were probably just wasting our time. The people filing into the building had all the markings of professionals shipped in for the event, and at the entrance we were met first by a smiling Militant salesman resembling a moonie flower peddler, and then by probably ten Spartacists, all holding the same issue of their paper open to a different page to suck us into their important debates and their “regroupment plans,” shrilly calling for the “defense of the Soviet Union” and the unleashing of Soviet nerve gas on Afghani tribespeople, Polish workers, and everyone else who didn't understand the nature of “combined and uneven development.”

Once inside the building, we found our way to a main hall, where registration was taking place. There were less than two dozen people there, waiting patiently to register the masses, very serious-looking people running back and forth with walkie-talkies, a few PATCO members looking uncomfortable. We walked to the far end along a partition, to an opening which faced the main hall of the event, thousands of empty folding chairs like the metallic residues of history congealing on the humid floor of a cave. At the rear of the hall were narrow, oblong placards designating the names of states, just like in the political conventions of the major parties, looking like syringes. An officious woman came up to us as we were walking to the other hall where the rally was going on. She was carrying a bundle of thick manila envelopes, and they must have gone to her head.

“Hi, are you registered?” she asked, sounding like a psychologist trying to smile you into a corner while they get the net.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. She eyed our papers.

“Where are your badges?”

“We don't like badges, so we aren't wearing them. Just like we don't like uniforms.”

“Who asked you, anyway?” my partner asked. “You in charge here?”

“Well, we've got to be disciplined.” she said.

“Actually, we aren’t interested in your opinion, goodbye,” said my partner. We headed out into the corridor and over to the main hall where we started handing out papers to people as they approached the entrance. Within a minute or so, a guy came up wearing two sets of badges.

“Ah, have you guys been cleared?” At first I thought he was a scientologist. “You can’t hand out literature here unless you’ve been cleared,” he said.

“No, we haven’t. You want a paper?”

“Listen, why don’t we go get you cleared, and then see if it’s all right for you to pass out papers here. Its prohibited to pass out papers here.”

“We’ve got a better idea. We’ll just pass out papers until they kick us out. That way, we get rid of more papers.

You work here or something?” “No, I’m with the Congress,” he gulped. “Really, I can’t let you pass papers out here.”

“Oh, you’re a cop, eh?”

“Hell, no!”

“Well, quit acting like one, it doesn’t become you.” A woman came up and he whispered something in her ear. She left, and we kept passing out papers.

“You see, this is an umbrella organization, and we have agreed that no one can pass out papers here; no one has the right to pass out papers here. If I let you do it, I’ll have to let everyone do it.”

“Look,” said one of the anarchist troublemakers, “Do you see anyone else around here passing anything out? So why do you care? What’s it to you?”

“You can pass papers out in front.”

“We don’t want to pass out papers with the Spartacists. And it’s cold outside. Are we breaking any law? If we are, tell those cops over there to make us leave.” About a half dozen Detroit cops were lounging around, taking only minimal notice of our little drama. By this time we were being surrounded by five or six of the “marshals,” the all-peoples commissars, sergeants-at-arms, peoples-flying-goon squad, whatever they call themselves.

“Hey!” yelled one. The discussion was coming to an end. “Ya can’t pass out papers here, Y’unnerstan?”

I passed another one out to a woman who smiled and gave me one of hers. My partner in petty crimes against order said, “Yes sir, officer!” He snapped to attention and saluted.

“I’m not bothering you, pal, don’t bother me,” I said and passed out another one. I was starting to get a little nervous. Their eyes were filing down to small slits like the rifle openings in a mobile barricade as it advances across the ice toward Kronstadt. They were closing in. The cops were snickering and beginning to be amused by the leftist police force trying to impose order on the unruly and the unwashed. I passed out another paper and one of the commissars grabbed me by the arm.

“I thought I told ya to quit passing them papers out,” he wheezed.

“What are you, a cop or something? Let go of my arm.”

“Wha—” He looked as if he had just stepped on a nail. One of his mates closed in and started pulling him off me. He squeezed my arm. I was going to ask him to dance, but I didn’t think that he would appreciate my humor. “You call me a cop again and I’ll punch yer face in,” he coughed.

“Hey, wait a minute, pal,” I said, backing off slightly and trying to figure out what to do with the bundle of papers under my-only free arm, seeing the official cops starting to take more interest in the scene. “You can pass papers out in Cobo Hall, but you can’t punch people.”

His friend had pulled him off me, if such people can have friends. “But he called me a cop, man!”

“Well, you act like one,” said my partner. The peoples guard turned around towards us, but the boys in blue were there. “Am I breaking the law?” I asked one.

“Well, no,” he drawled, probably tickled by all this silliness. “As long as you keep moving, they can’t stop you.” Then he asked my partner for a paper. We gave him one. We started moving away from the entrance and back down the corridor of the building toward the main entrance and out. There were really very few people, maybe a few hundred at the rally, I guessed, and no one was arriving any more. A woman came up, wearing about twenty Solidarnosc buttons, and told us how indignant she was about our treatment. She meant to do something about it. We gave her a paper, and started to leave.

"Hey, there!" A fat, elderly security guard came up to us in a wounded, half sideways crab-walk, mumbling, "Don't be passing them papers out in here."

"But those police said we could do it."

"They don't know nothing. I'm with the Cobo Hall security and I says you can't." Somehow, I knew that this confrontation would be the one that would land us in jail.

"Well, we're just leaving, so we'll just hand a few more out as we go, OK?"

"You hand out another one of those and I'll take them all from you." He sat on his little motorized cart, ready to make chase. When we got outside, the Spartacists were gone, and the air smelled of nerve gas, but it was Detroit after all, and it was Friday evening.

Later, in the bar, we laughed at how amiable by comparison the real cops acted, how much nastier the rent-a-cop was, and how thoroughly machine-like and overbearing the midget cops for the left were (most of them probably were members of the Workers World Party, a freakish hybrid of trotskyism and maoism, which has been running the "All Peoples" from behind the scenes). The less power each layer of cops had, the meaner they were. We also laughed about that Detroit cop opening up the paper and seeing on the first page, "When I pronounce the word civilization, I spit" I took a look at the one paper someone had given us, in exchange for the FE: a thin tabloid from the "Red Balloon Collective" with a tongue-in-cheek letter from Highgate Cemetery and signed Marx and Engels! Cute! And that, followed by a reprint of...The Communist Manifesto. And timely, too! And so hard to come by! And filled with exciting, new ideas which will help us grasp the enormous, unprecedented crisis in which this civilization flounders and which threatens to annihilate us all!

And who was the poor, foolish sap who got talked into retyping the Communist Manifesto on a cheap typewriter to be handed out at a convention of the mostly already converted? A security guard of the imagination.

On Sunday, Oct. 18th, the Free Press reported that a thousand people showed up at the All Peoples Congress. As "security duty" ran back and forth sporting fancy forty-channel walkie-talkies, the delegates cheered speakers denouncing "Reaganism," and called for recruiting drives to gain "more troops, more soldiers, more followers." Presumably, no one passed anything out in the hallway to offend the tastes of the delegates, the political parties, the leninist organizers. If any ideas, any viewpoints, any criticisms are to be raised, it will be done only from the podium, and the popular front police will be on hand to insure that this remains so.

What a cause for the leftist leftovers! Reagan is easy to hate. By focusing blindly on Reaganism, they can cover up the fact that this crisis reaches to the depths of this entire civilization and that their technocratic cracker jack communism is just one more part of the problem, one more banality, one more deception concealing murder and immiseration.

After the conventional ritual denunciation of the political parties they will fall back into line with the bureaucrats and the politicians who justify their existence making sure that no one else passes out papers, or gets in front of the banner, or goes in the street, or breaks down the police barriers, or breaks discipline, or in any way challenges any of the customary practices of counter-revolution.

Ah yes, Reagan is so easy to hate! If that decrepit box-top cowboy had purposely set out to make himself the object of generalized loathing, he couldn't have done a better job of achieving his ends. And the leftists, the democrats and the union bureaucrats stand in the wings, ready to inherit this universal rage against capital which has, conveniently for them, settled upon this Las Vegas casino Greeter for Big Business. Yes, the All Peoples Condom, the congealed and the constrained, will be there with walkie-talkies and badges and security police to guarantee that when this limitless rage explodes into action, that their leadership, authority, discipline, the chain-of command and the entire dead weight of the past are once again preserved.

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