

Community Politics

Fifth Estate Collective

1966

The Committee for Independent Political Action (CIPA) on the West Side of New York City was formed at the end of the summer of 1965, on the basis of a draft statement prepared by two editors of *Studies on the Left*, Jim Weinstein and Stanley Aronowitz. The initial CIPA nucleus consisted of about twenty people, all conscious “radicals” from a diversity of activist backgrounds—single issue and housing groups, reform democratic clubs, “old left”, SDS and others. They all came to CIPA with some sense that the actions they had been engaged in were inadequate: those of us from the anti-war movement felt that a certain saturation point was being reached with demonstrations: that they were no longer bringing in or educating significant numbers of new people, and that the old people were beginning to feel frustrated and discouraged.

All agreed that if the left were to pose a significant challenge to the corporation-dominated structure of American society, which is ultimately responsible for the pattern of our foreign policy, it must become political—that it not merely run individual “protest” candidates out of desperation, nor support Congressmen who take a reasonable “good” line towards the war, but that it must begin to develop and educate its own base, an independent radical constituency. This constituency would not merely criticize foreign policy, but have a sense of its interrelationship with domestic problems, and be prepared to formulate alternatives to the present structure of society on a whole range of issues.

The original nucleus expanded, with conscious slowness outward, so that the organization now comprises about 300 members—and 50 more activists.

This development was to insure that an initial group, at least, basically understood and accepted the fundamental aspects of CIPA’s perspective, so that the perspective could then be itself more fully developed and detailed without factional disputes over irrelevancies.

This by no means meant that all CIPA members were in accord on all specifics. It simply meant that to some degree all felt themselves to be radicals—that is, demanded fundamental structural change in America through the alteration of power relationships, and that all accepted to some degree the validity of political action. CIPA’s working premise is that the political machinery which exists putting forth opposition positions is relatively open at the moment in America, and has not been fully and properly utilized by radicals. A prejudice against political action as a “sell-out” by many of the New Left, and a rigid view of politics by the Old, has blinded an important organizing and educational tool: that many people can be reached this way, for whom demonstrations and dramatic expressions of conscience are an unfamiliar and alien form of activity.

Although we will almost definitely be entering an independent candidate for Congress in November, we have not yet selected that candidate, nor is the choice ultimately of prime importance. We do not plan to win the election, or to alter any aspect of our program to make it politically “palatable.” We seek rather a wide public forum for our platform.

Basically the CIPA tries to combine the best aspects of “movement” and political action. It is prepared to demonstrate and have rent strikes. It stresses community organizations and local units of identification. Yet it recognizes that if it restricts itself to the neighborhood or even to the city level, it may give people the false illusion of power,

while the real power “to affect lives” rests elsewhere. We seek power to effect fundamental social change and recognize that this entails a slow process of talking, building and learning. Education is a continual process for us, that goes on all levels, for example, a Puerto Rican man, initially pro-war, who in fact works at the induction center, after a series of discussions with one of our organizers, told him, “You know, you’re the first person—and you don’t wear a beard—who’s taken the trouble to discuss this issue intelligently with me.” Such people are not reached by demonstrations. It is these people that CIPA will attempt to “organize” in such a way as they will not simply oppose the war in Vietnam, but have the perspective to be skeptical of the next Vietnam, and the political strength to express their skepticism.

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