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“Revolutionary Activism” 1955-1970 - Learning from our history: Ernie Tate’s memoir of his early years

Saturday 14 June 2014, by [FIDLER Richard](#) (Date first published: 12 June 2014).

The two volumes reviewed below were launched at a meeting attended by about 70 persons in Toronto on June 11, sponsored by the Centre for Social Justice and Socialist Project. The meeting, introduced by Greg Albo, was chaired by Carolyn Egan of the United Steelworkers and the Toronto & York Region Labour Council.

[Among the speakers were Bryan Palmer, the prominent labour historian; Chris Schenk, recently retired Research Director of the Ontario Federation of Labour; myself; and the author, Ernie Tate. The following is an expanded version of my presentation.]

Richard Fidler

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Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: Ernest Tate, a Memoir

Volume 1, Canada 1955-65. London: Resistance Books, 2014, 268 pp., C\$15.00.

Volume 2, Britain 1965-70. London: Resistance Books, 2014, 395 pp., C\$21.00.



Ernie Tate and Jess MacKenzie. Photo by David Carrington

I will start with an anecdote that is not included in Ernest Tate's two-volume account. I mention it because it was one of the first occasions when I encountered "Ernie," as all of us came to know him.

In July 1960 a young man was caught by the police in the middle of the night painting "Ban the Bomb" in big letters on three sides of a demonstration fallout shelter erected at the corner of College Street and University Avenue in Toronto. It was the height of the Cold War. The Diefenbaker government was under pressure from the Pentagon and the opposition Liberals (headed by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Lester Pearson) to arm the Bomarc missiles it had installed north of Toronto and Montréal, under the Norad agreement, with nuclear warheads. Meanwhile, the government had erected this fallout shelter as part of a general effort to foster the illusion that somehow we could survive a nuclear holocaust.

The newspapers reported that the slogan-painter was Ernest Tate, a 26-year old stationary engineer. When he told the magistrate he would do the same thing again if given the opportunity, Tate was ordered to pay \$35 for the cost of painting over the slogans and fined \$15 or two days in jail for malicious damage.

At the time, as a high-school student in Toronto, I was active in the ban-the-bomb movement. Reading the news reports, I recognized a kindred soul. Soon afterward, I was fortunate to meet Ernie and we have been close friends and comrades ever since.

I was reminded of this incident when I approached the end of Ernie's second volume. In a gripping chapter he describes the critical debate at the 9th world congress of the Fourth International, which he attended as a delegate, over the adopted proposal, supported by Ernest Mandel among many others, that all the FI sections in Latin America implement a continental tactic of rural-based guerrilla warfare in supposed emulation of the Cuban revolutionaries and Che Guevara's ill-fated Bolivian experience. Ernie was in the minority that opposed this, arguing that revolutionaries in Latin America should determine their own tactics in light of the distinct and varied conditions of the class struggle in their respective countries.

But Ernie follows this account with a chapter on the disastrous attempt by the FI's Argentine section, the PRT-Combatiente led by Roberto Santucho, to implement the g-war strategy, albeit in a predominantly urban context in that country. While critical, Ernie evinces an air of admiration for Santucho and his comrades and their bold adventurism — the kind of thing that would become known by our European comrades like the late Daniel Bensaïd as "initiatives in action," bold attacks on institutions and individuals associated with the regime in the hope of stimulating mass consciousness and revolt. Was Santucho a "kindred soul" to the Ernie Tate of that audacious anti-bomb action of 1960?

'A trove of movement history'

Stories like these — and there are many in these two volumes — bear out a point made by John Riddell in his review of Ernie's account of his first 15 years in the Trotskyist "movement" (as we called it). [1] And that was the very positive impact that Ernie had on young radicals like us in a period when it was winning its first student members. As John puts it, "An experienced union activist, Tate also had an instinctive feel for and capacity to learn from the nascent social movements in which the student comrades worked.... What is more, Tate could speak in the idiom of radical youth...."

These books will have wide appeal to today's radicalizing youth, bringing to them (as Derrick O'Keefe writes in his preface) a "trove of movement history" viewed through the lens of "a life lived in the struggle for a better world," and now leavened by "an accumulation of experience and wisdom — more compassion, less dogma and better political judgment."

These volumes highlight Ernie's first decades as a political activist, from poverty-ridden Belfast to immigration to Canada, his initial encounter with a small group of socialists and his subsequent experiences in working with his comrades to build a revolutionary Marxist current rooted in the actuality of the workers movement of the day — in particular the trade unions and the CCF/NDP — but alert to new possibilities opened up by the crisis of Stalinism, the Cuban revolution and the youth radicalization of the Sixties. The second volume documents how he applied the lessons of these experiences in building a revolutionary Marxist group in Britain.

Here I want to draw particular attention to three aspects of Ernie's experiences that I think are relevant to today's young anticapitalists.

A coherent world view

The first is what he says about discovering Marxism and the Marxist movement. When he joined it in the mid-1950s, the Socialist Education League (SEL) was a very small organization, although it was part of a somewhat larger international current, the Fourth International. This put him in contact with a coherent body of ideas and the experience of an international tradition of struggle, independent and critical of Stalinism and Social-Democracy, and that carried forward the best traditions of revolutionary Marxism.

"... for me as a young person," Ernie writes, "joining a socialist organization, no matter how small, was like at last awakening from a long sleep. Vague ideas and feelings I had about society that I had come to by myself now began to be integrated into a systematic historical and political outlook, a new understanding about the world and how society is organized and a conviction about the grim future of humanity if fundamental change did not take place. Above all, it gave a coherent expression to what had been a sense of injustice that I had until then been unable to articulate.... To this day I have always separated those two phases of my adult life: the period before and after joining the group...." (pp. 30-31)

A second feature of Ernie's memoir is the emphasis he gives to international solidarity as a crucial ingredient of socialist politics.

Fully one fifth of the first volume is devoted to describing our efforts in building a united-front defense of the Cuban Revolution, including a long-overdue tribute to the work of Vern Olson in the leadership of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

Cuba solidarity

Our Cuba solidarity work involved far more than campaigning against the imperialist blockade around slogans like "Hands Off Cuba!," important as that was. A major objective was to "get out the truth about Cuba" as a massive social upheaval led by new revolutionary forces influenced far more by anti-imperialism than by Stalinism. We translated and published dozens of speeches by its leaders, and accounts by Canadians who visited Cuba of how the revolution was unfolding. (The two pamphlets of this nature mentioned by Ernie are available on-line on the Socialist History Project web site. [2])

An offshoot of this work (not mentioned by Ernie) was our participation in the successful international campaign to save the life of Hugo Blanco, a young Trotskyist in Peru sentenced to death by a military court for his leadership of a peasant movement. Hugo, who will be 80 years old this year, is still an influential political activist known throughout Latin America, as I confirmed in recent months while residing in Bolivia.

Later, in Britain, as Ernie describes in his second volume, solidarity with Vietnam and opposition to the Labour government's complicity in the US war occupied a major share of the activities of the revolutionary Marxists with whom Ernie was working to build a section of the Fourth International. From modest beginnings, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign grew exponentially, mounting demonstrations of tens and even hundreds of thousands.

Russell War Crimes Tribunal

Of particular interest is Ernie's account of his work with the Bertrand Russell Foundation and with Isaac Deutscher, the biographer of Trotsky, in setting up the Russell War Crimes Tribunal to expose the imperialist atrocities in Vietnam. Much of this fascinating history was new to me. [3]

Vietnam solidarity was, unfortunately, far down the list of priorities for most of the British left, including the far left, Ernie reports. Some argued that nothing meaningful could be done on the issue until the working class and the labour movement became involved — an insularity that our current would in the past label "imperialist economism."

"I put it to them," says Ernie, "that defending a third world country's right to self-determination was the highest expression the class struggle in an imperialist country such as Britain could take."

Solidarity with Cuba and Vietnam, in different ways, frontally challenged the Cold War mentality of a geopolitical bipolar opposition between imperialist "freedom" and soviet "totalitarianism." And in fact Cuba and Vietnam benefited to varying degrees from the existence of a bloc of countries, led by the USSR, able to provide an alternative source of material support — crucial in the case of Cuba, more problematic in Vietnam owing in part to the negative ramifications of the Sino-Soviet dispute and the bureaucratic rivalries it engendered.

In today's world, increasingly multipolar but still hegemonized by a single imperialist power, the USA, international solidarity is more complex and no single anti-imperialist (let alone socialist) struggle dominates the international political landscape. In countries like Iraq or Afghanistan the forces under attack from imperialism do not elicit our political support as the Cubans in particular did. If anything, however, this problematic points to the importance of infusing our solidarity with a clear understanding of the dynamics of imperialism in its current stage and the many ways in which it opposes even the more limited challenges to its domination by governments and social movements in Latin America and elsewhere.

Labour and the NDP

A third prominent feature of Ernie's account, which runs like a leitmotiv through his first volume, concerns our work in the mass organizations created by working people in the course of their struggles. For the SEL, activity in the trade unions was of central importance, he explains, and "we believed that any organization that aspired to change society should have the bulk of its membership in them... even if we had little influence in the unions."

As it happened, the Trotskyists in Toronto, later organized in the 1960s as the League for Socialist Action and by then beginning to recruit radicalized students, did get to play an influential role in a major labour struggle that developed unexpectedly in a corrupt union then under trusteeship, the Teamsters. Ernie devotes a fascinating chapter to describing the LSA's participation in this prolonged experience of wildcat strikes and battles for internal union democracy. He estimates that up to 40 Teamsters joined the League at some point or another, although in the absence of a general rise of class struggle it proved hard to retain most of them.

Another aspect of the League's "proletarian orientation," often misrepresented by our critics in the left and the labour movement, had to do with our "orientation" to the social-democratic Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and its successor the New Democratic Party (NDP). With some notable exceptions, this was largely propagandistic; the party leaders were quick to expel any members they identified as Trotskyists. But it provided an anchor for our politics. Our general approach was to look for ways in which to popularize our ideas by presenting them as specific proposals for adoption and action by the unions and their party in English Canada. This allowed us to address the political issues of the day in relation to the mass organizations and party of the working class [4] — a valuable antidote to the sectarian impulse inherent to any small propaganda group.

Like our work in the unions, we gained few recruits to our tendency from this approach, although here again there were exceptions: some of the early student recruits came from the New Democratic Youth in its formative years, with a later influx from our participation in the NDP's left-wing "Waffle" caucus. At the same time, the NDP orientation in no way inhibited us from engagement in our own independent election campaigns municipally or in by-elections not contested by the NDP, as well as in unions like the Teamsters not affiliated to the party, or in a host of other activities.

Although Ernie frequently refers to the NDP orientation as an "entry tactic," it differed from the "entrism sui generis" first advocated by the Fourth International in the early 1950s, a long-term submersion by Trotskyists in the existing Stalinist and Social Democratic parties. In fact, the SEL that Ernie joined in 1955 had been constituted to terminate an "entry" by the Trotskyists in the CCF that had resulted in the loss of some valuable cadres. And Ernie's memoir recounts at length the efforts led by Ross Dowson to re-establish the public face and activities of the revolutionary Marxists — an approach that encountered considerable resistance in Vancouver, where the residual existence of an influential left wing in the CCF and NDP provided a comfortable milieu for the local Trotskyists.

Similarly, much of Ernie's second volume describes his efforts to convince his British co-thinkers of their need to establish a publicly identified Marxist group and to supplement their work in the Labour party milieu with independent activities particularly in the antiwar movement.

The party project

Much of our activity during this period was of an educational nature: regular publication of a newspaper, the operation of bookstores, sponsorship of weekly public forums on issues of the day, as well as occasional cross-country tours to meet other socialists. In the absence of major class confrontations, most of our members were recruited individually as a result of their encounters with us through these activities.

Once recruited, a member would experience an intense level of activity internal to the organization, including the weekly membership meetings that were the norm. All members faced enormous demands on their time, and most of all the full-time staff who had to make do on subsistence

salaries.

In a small group with such a demanding regime, personal differences can loom large. Ernie frequently references the difficulties he and many others encountered in dealing with Ross Dowson, the pre-eminent leader of our group who played an inordinate role as the most experienced member, with a remarkable capacity to recognize and take advantage of opportunities as they developed but who also played in many respects a very negative role, driving some fine comrades out of the movement. Such tensions were perhaps inevitable in a small, tightly disciplined group.

All of our activities were infused by the concept we all held then of party-building. That is, our objective was to build a “vanguard” organization of committed cadres who would, we hoped, be instrumental in helping lead the working class to triumph in a socialist revolution. We had an exalted conception of ourselves, reflected in the title of the SEL/LSA biweekly newspaper (which I edited for six years) — The Workers Vanguard, “more of a promise to the future than a reality,” says Ernie. And our small propaganda group was misconceived by Dowson and others as the “embryo” of a mass revolutionary party. “Only history would decide if that was the case,” Ernie aptly comments.

Our model was what we viewed as a “Leninist” party, emulating the party that had led the successful Russian Bolshevik revolution of 1917. We now know, thanks to the scholarship of Lars Lih and others, [5] that Lenin’s party was quite different from the reality of our cadre formation, which organizationally was modelled much more closely on US Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon’s conceptions. However, in the period covered by Ernie’s memoir, the leaders of the US Socialist Workers Party were a counsel of immense value to our relatively inexperienced membership, not least through the SWP’s diligent production of educational materials and activities that assisted us in developing our own grasp and application of Marxist theoretical conceptions.

Our goal was an audacious one, and ultimately — in a later period that Ernie just adumbrates in an Epilogue — proved a failure. A contemporary reader might well wonder, was it all worth it? Ernie shuns such introspection. “I have always been uneasy about retrospective judgments based upon hindsight,” he writes in the introduction to his second volume.

“Of course, we could have done things better and it’s easy to see now that some of our problems arose from failure to grasp the nature of the period we were living through, including a lack of a good appreciation of the resiliency of capitalism and its ability to survive crises, including an underestimation of the ruling class’s capacity to learn from such things.... But I have few regrets about all this. I was educated in the school that taught me to deal with mistakes as a normal part of trying to succeed, and that the worst mistake of all is to do nothing and allow oneself to retreat into sectarian isolation.... I feel we did the best we could with the hands that we were dealt. If we are going to be judged, then it should be done in comparison to what all the other socialist groups were doing at the same time.”

By that criterion, we acquitted ourselves well, as Ernie demonstrates convincingly in his account.

And with all due respect...

Like Ernie in his day, the great Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui travelled in the early 1920s to Europe, where he participated in the founding of the Italian Communist Party and worked with such luminaries as Antonio Gramsci. While there, he fell in love with an Italian woman, Anna Chiappe. Returning to Peru, he famously told friends and the media that “I have come back with a wife and some ideas.”

Well, while in Britain Ernie fell in love with Jess MacKenzie. She returned to Canada with him in 1969 and they have been partners and collaborators politically and in life for almost 50 years now. As Ernie says, in his second volume, "The story I am writing here about those years in England is just as much hers as it is mine."

As to the ideas, *Revolutionary Activism* has many. It is not a recipe book. Ernie does not touch on the mass movements that emerged in the mid-1960s — such as the Quebec labour and nationalist upsurge or the powerful second wave of feminism. Nevertheless, his volumes provide us with a compelling account of how revolutionary socialists could work in and learn from the movements of their day when revolution in Canada, or Britain, was still a far-off dream.

Richard Fidler

P.S.

* <http://lifeonleft.blogspot.ca/2014/06/learning-from-our-history-ernie-tates.html>

Footnotes

[1] "Breaking a path for the sixties radicalization,"
<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2014/05/18/breaking-a-path-for-the-sixties-radicalization/>.

[2] <http://www.socialisthistory.ca/Docs/docs.htm#FairPlay>.

[3] The Russell Tribunal became the inspiration for many such tribunals on other issues in following years. For example, the Permanent People's Tribunal, an international tribunal independent of state authorities, has in recent decades held more than 40 such public hearings around the world invoking international human rights law and the UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to investigate and expose human rights atrocities committed by states and corporations. The Permanent Peoples' Tribunal session on the Canadian Mining Industry in Latin America, held in Montréal May 30-June 1, traces its origins to the Russell Tribunal of 1966. See the trilingual PPT Canada web site at <http://www.tppcanada.org/a-propos-du-tp/?lang=en>.

[4] We may have exaggerated somewhat in our characterization of the NDP as the Canadian "labour party." Founded in 1961, in the anticommunist environment of the day, its component unions already heavily bureaucratized under the dual impact of capitalism's postwar expansion and the constraints of the Fordist industrial relations regime, the party at no point managed to gain more than 15 percent of union members as affiliates, and notably very few in Quebec. See, for example, my article "The NDP, poised for power but to what effect?," <http://canadiandimension.com/articles/5196/>.

[5] For a hyperlinked collection of Lih's major studies, see <http://tinyurl.com/nhvoppr>.