

A surfeit of gospel:



The banner hanging over the back of the hall proclaimed the theme of the mini-conference: '*Food for people not for profits.*' The pamphlets on the display table under it were titled with urgings from: '*Support Tigre liberation*' to '*Venceremos El Salvador*' and '*Canadian Farmworkers Union-zindabad!*'

The gathering of 50 or so, drawn to a church hall rear Crescent Beach in White Rock on a Saturday afternoon, needed little persuasion to add those causes to their inventories of needful issues. Many of the attendees, apart from accompanying kids, dogs and a cable TV technician taping the proceedings—were RVs (returned volunteers) of the Canadian University Service Overseas. Along with the International Development Education Resource Association (IDERA), CUSO was co-sponsor of the event. Several attendees (including myself) were recent RVs. Along with the rousing gospel of social justice, was the possibility to talk about one's overseas experience without triggering the usual glazing over of eyes...

Yet before the informal mingle of the congregation, there was the 'service':

The first speaker was Mr. RC, an East Asian Canadian lawyer in a blue jean jacket. He spoke of the struggle to unionize the East Asian immigrant farmworkers in the Fraser Valley. He depicted a homegrown version of '*Grapes of Wrath*': a struggle in the Fraser Valley against unscrupulous growers and middlemen no less dire than the plight of non-unionized farm labourers in California.

Still, there was a murky issue which Mr. RC tried to clarify. Apparently, there is a farmworkers' group challenging his unionizing effort—one claiming to be more radical yet one he suspects surreptitiously infiltrated by the RCMP...

In that alarm, by which RC ended his speech, a pony-haired fellow from IDERA—the conference chairperson—stepped up to the mike. He proposed that the conference officially recognize the Canadian Farm Workers' Union (CFWU) as: '*the sole legitimate representative of the Fraser Valley Farmworkers' Union.*' Whether that was a rehearsed move—or even whether the conference was blindly taking sides in factional in-fighting—the show of hands was unanimous.

RC nodded his thanks and the session moved on to the presentation of Dr. JW, former political science professor and current head of the South Okanagan environmental coalition. The professor began with a revelation that his dream of raising organic apples in the Okanagan was thwarted by obstacles to selling his produce in supermarkets beholden to agrobusiness growers. When he was forced to sell his farm, his trees were cut down to make way for a vineyard—again financed by agrobusiness interests.

"The fundamental purpose of the agro-businessman," the professor opined: "just like any other capitalist—is to drive his competitor into the ground."

He paused with a smacking of lips (sour apples?) while that outage sank in. He then went on to speak of how agricultural land was being systematically consolidated under the control of fewer and larger corporate entities. Still, he maintained: "With ever-depleting energy and resources to exploit, the corporate capitalist system of food production will eventually collapse under its internal contradictions."

A hand unexpectedly shot up, rousing the video technician to swivel his tripod around to the skinny fellow with straggly beard standing a few metres to my right. His name tag, in bold felt pen read: 'RV, Papua New Guinea'.

"What is your reaction, Professor," he asked, "to the importation of food products from third world coops?"

The Professor grinned. "Yes, that could be a viable strategy. First though, we have to acknowledge that our dietary habits have been absurdly patterned by advertising and marketing strategies. Why should we want to eat mangoes or papayas when we can grow right here in BC—the best apples and peaches in the world. Tropical fruits—even bananas—should be regarded as luxuries..."

The professor adjusted his glasses. "Well, I don't need to go into the history of the United Fruit Company or the origin of the expression: 'banana republic.' But when we buy Chiquita bananas at Safeway, we ought to remind ourselves that they are cheap only because they are produced in a context of deeply repressive neo-colonial structures... However, there are certain nations with which we could establish fairer bilateral trade in agricultural products... A country such as Cuba, may choose to export surplus after meeting its own nutritional requirements... Bananas from coops in Cuba would be more expensive than those from the plantations of Honduras—but products purchased through fair trade probably even taste better!"

The RV from Papua New Guinea nodded.

Smiling, the professor concluded: "Well, it's really very simple. Canadians may eventually be forced to do what is in fact, the natural and sensible thing: to stop treating food like cosmetics or cars. We have to stop treating food like a commodity to be advertised, packaged and sold for maximum profit. We have to regard nutrition as a *basic human right*!"

Applause echoed through the half-empty hall.

With arm raised in acknowledgement of solidarity, Prof. JW stepped off the platform... The chairperson then announced a short break before commencement of invited testimonials ('*How my third world experiences altered my political perspectives...*')

I had planned to stay for the mingle—but in the surfeit of gospel, I had changed my mind. More pressing was the fact that missing the bus back to Vancouver that left in 10 minutes would obligate me to another hour. Without making eye contact, I drifted towards the back of the hall and ducked out...



Throughout the session, a late 40ish lady in sunglasses sat at the back of the hall scribbling notes. Her white fur vest over a black silk blouse and sleek black slacks seemed an attempted dressing down for the blue-jeaned gathering.

In a whisper from the secretary of the CUSO local committee before the meeting, I had heard that the elegant lady (silver hair bunned in leather barrette) was the Right Honourable IC. She had been the Minister of Fitness and Sports in the recently defeated Trudeau government. Having lost her own seat to the NDP—possibly in temporary self-imposed political exile—she was fundraising for CUSO...

In coincidentally slipping out at the moment as did she, I held the door for her. As I started across the street for the bus stop, she waved me back.

“Would you like a ride to Vancouver?”

Moments later, I was strapped into the metallic grey sports car with the former federal cabinet minister at the wheel. While we cruised top-down in October sunshine along Highway #99, I asked her how she felt about the presentations by Professor JV and Comrade RC.

“Well, some of the rhetoric from the left can be a little off-putting.” She raised her voice in the wind's whistle. “But certainly, there's an element of truth in it. It would be silly to pretend that there's not an element of exploitation in all enterprise. Wealth-creation is a two-edged sword. What is important, I believe, is to see the whole picture. The benefits of free enterprise as well as the short-comings.”

As we zipped along in the open sports car through the dairy air of Delta farmland, she explained her role as 'Corporate fund-raiser' for development NGOs, including CUSO:

“I know how to approach these board room people. In fact, I have personal friends in those circles... Obviously, if they're the ones with the means to help fund the worthy projects—well, it would be rather silly, wouldn't it—to be hostile towards them?” She glanced towards me then adjusted her smoke-tainted glasses. “They're not monsters, you know.”

After the Ladner tunnel, we veered into the passing lane to zoom past a pick-up, loaded (appropriately?) with manure.

With the barnyards wafts along the delta giving way to the effluvium from the pulp-mills, she struck a more personal note:

“You know, I don't think I can remember the world being in a worse state than it is today. I'm almost 49, mind you. But it's not in my nature to be pessimistic. It's been interesting, these last few months, travelling on behalf of CUSO. I've been almost living out of a suitcase. My daughter at Carleton University is *amazed* I'm doing this.” She tapped a sleek finger taps the steering wheel. “But honestly, what I'm enjoying now is a freedom and an independence I've never known. You could almost say I'm having the time of my life!”

By that time, we had zoomed over the murky Fraser and were edging up south Granville's leafy boulevard.

Moments later, with a gamely smile, she dropped me off at the honking corner of Granville and Broadway. I darted towards the line-up for the Broadway trolley, while she gunned away to her suitcase in the British Properties.

On the bus as I shuffled down the aisle and grabbed the overhead rail as we lurched away.

'Which is more irritating', I wondered: academic socialists who've never spent time in a socialist country; or boosters of free-enterprise who know in their bones they'll always be winners?'

"Watch it!"

Too late, I realized that my swinging khaki bag had bumped the shoulder of the scowling lady sitting below me. For the latest absence from here and now—I nodded an apology...

1981, October

Among the marginalized:



It was one Peter, a researcher in the IDERA office in Vancouver, who suggested that I might be interested in attending the Human Rights Symposium at a union hall in New Westminster on Saturday afternoon. From our brief chats in the IDERA reading room over the last couple of weeks, he had obviously sensed my desperation in the job search. He suggested that the event might provide an opportunity to network among NGO people a little closer to my home...

If for nothing else, it was also a few hours break from the stuffy apartment...

As usual, I missed a bus by 10 seconds at Lougheed Mall and when I finally got to Columbia St., got mixed up in directions. Arriving late at the venue, I jerked out of my raincoat and sat at the back of the near-empty room. At the front, a Chinese girl in a baseball cap was pointing a video camera on a tripod at the panel. Half as large as the audience, the panel featured an elderly Indian lady, a grim-faced women's rights advocate, an ILO representation with a grey buzz cut, a young woman in a wheelchair and a lawyer representing the gay community. Off to the side of the semi-circle was the moderator—a community college political science instructor.

For the following 90 minutes, every speaker excoriated the heartless government (both provincial and federal) for, as the moderator summarized: “utterly neglecting the needs of vulnerable communities”.

Unable to inconspicuously slip away, I listened with growing irritation. What did any of these “marginalized” individuals know of actual oppression? Could any them even imagine goons bursting in to break up our nest of discontent? Meanwhile, how many of them at the moment have not a cent of income?

In growing gall, I decided to ask a question. Bracing myself, I rose to the ‘audience’ microphone, placed for the benefit of the video recording:

“You have spoken of several vulnerable groups whose basic rights are being abused,” I said falteringly. “Yet there is one vulnerable group who are not represented here.”

There were puzzled looks around the room.

“You spoke of how people struggle on welfare payments or old age pensions that are so inadequate. That is true enough—but some income is better than none at all... New immigrants and refugees get settlement allowances—again, I can’t speak to how adequate that might be. But some people fall completely through the cracks. A citizen who returns to the country after a long period of absence has to wait 6 months completely outside the social safety net...”

Even sensing the impatience of the panel, I pressed on.

“While someone in that situation is looking for work, he has no income, no benefits—not even basic Medicare. If he or she has dependents, then their families also go unprotected... What I mean is: what about the vulnerable unemployed?”

Panel members glanced quizzically at one another.

“That question will be tabled,” said the moderator after a polite pause.

Sinking back into my chair for the dreary 20 minutes remaining, I realized that in seeing my empty sleeve, the panel members had probably concluded that “my community” was already represented by the girl in the wheelchair... So, what could I possibly be bitching about?



On the walk back to the bus stop, I revolved not to torment myself with a memory loop of that moment before the mike. If I had wasted 2 minutes of the panel’s time with my question—they wasted 2 hours of mine. What could have possessed me to imagine there was a hope in hell of finding work in the NGO world? Even with the nest egg shrunk to about 6 weeks—I will have to scramble to rewrite my resume. Shivering, I stepped into the bus shelter...

1988, November

Stalwart under the volcano:



For the second year running, C. and I attended the ‘*Under the Volcano*’ Arts Festival at Cates Park in North Vancouver. Named after Malcolm Lowry’s masterpiece written back in the 1930s in his then-wilderness cabin near the festival’s present venue, it is a quirky event. Along with the musical performances, the food and handicrafts was a market-like display of left-oriented advocacy groups. This year has been billed as the festival’s finale...

Before finding a place to sit in the grass near the stage, we walked along the tables devoted to a myriad of causes. Remembering the pamphleteering outside of the solidarity events attended in the mid-70s, I browsed with a certain nostalgia.

The displays were more decorous than those of the political events of old. Along with the pamphlets, were tee-shirts and caps bearing political sloganry. Among the eye-catching buttons was one urging ‘*Heal the Sacred Circle: Free Leonard Peltier*’ and another by a vegan advocacy group declaring: ‘*meat tastes like ass*’.

Typical of the current marketplace, it was all an eye-catching jumble of messages from the deadly serious to the frivolous: The Eco-warrior table was next to that of Rape Relief and the Rainbow coalition display jostled with ‘*Solidaridad con Cuba*.’ Next to the Amnesty International table displaying pictures of torture victims, an Iranian man was handing out a broadsheet alleging “*crimes against me by ICBC*” (apparently taking personal revenge for a rejected auto injury claim).

Even more than last year, Palestine was a *cause celebre*. The ‘*Jews for a Just Peace*’ display was particularly focused on the injustices of Israeli settlements on occupied territory. Behind that table, surprisingly, was a Jewish colleague of C.’s from her bookstore days.

The frail old woman with thick glasses, immediately recognized C. and learned forward to hug her. C. introduced me and I shook the smiling lady’s hand. While she and C. chatted, I turned toward the stage beyond the grassy expanse where First Nations drummers were performing...

After a few minutes, C. touched my elbow while stuffing in her shoulder bag the former colleague’s phone number.

“E. used to be my manager at my first job at W. H. Smith’s,” my partner said. “She and her husband were always activists. They lived from hand to mouth,” she whispered. “Now her husband is chronically ill.”

In a glum silence we moved on.



Near the end of the advocacy gauntlet, was a table stacked with '*the Spartacist*' a hoary Trotskyite mag, remembered from the jumbles of free papers leafed through in student union building entrances nearly 4 decades ago.

Then came a startling recognition. The old man with droopy moustache and shoulder-length white hair behind the table was no stranger! Beneath his deep wrinkles was a face remembered from solidarity gatherings in Vancouver back in the mid-1970s... I could not remember his name—but he *was* the same guy!

While C. broke away to browse a beadwork display in the handicrafts tables opposites, I waited on the edge of the advocacy group tables, stealing glances at the grizzled Trot.



It had been in 1976, in preparation for an overseas posting with CUSO, that I attended gatherings for a range of advocacies from anti-apartheid to anti-Chilean *junta*. While the presentations were informative (however lacking in nuance) I often found myself lingering outside the union hall or campus lecture room, eavesdropping on the banter among the would-be revolutionaries.

There were typically 4-5 leftist groups that gathered at adjoining tables. The Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist, Maoist and Trotskyite pamphleteers seemed to bristle in one another's presences quite as much as they would have with a US Marine Corps recruiter placed among them. Their bickering, as I overheard it, could have been dialogue straight out Monty Python's '*Life of Brian*,' which came out a few years later...

One of pamphleteers, a thick mustached fellow who resembled David Crosby, I knew from a CUSO retreat. He had been a CUSO volunteer in Jamaica but believed he had been “used as a missionary” in the grand neo-colonialist design. Still, he showed up at that retreat with his guitar. In a wobbly voice, he sang Pete Seeger-style solidarity songs. After that we always politely greeted one another in passing at solidarity events...

I caught sight of him again at some event (was it anti-nuke or pro-*Sandinista*?) in Vancouver a few years later. He seemed to be wearing the same blue jean jacket only his clothes were scruffier and his moustache stragglier...

In the years that followed, I no longer attended such events. By then I had become a suburban commuter. On the weekends I was far more likely to be driving kids to birthday parties than to be showing up for a cause (however silently supported). Had I attended a few events; I might well have seen him gradually growing old as he continued trying to hand out his pamphlets... Now with the gap of nearly 30 years—what a shock it was to see this stalwart politico—snowy haired!

I wondered how he supported himself all these years. Like a Jehovah Witness, perhaps he is largely sustained by a conviction of righteousness amid the damned... Still, it takes guts to sit all day behind a table ignored if not scorned. What can be more honourable—or more pathetic—than sacrificing oneself to a hopeless cause?

Stealing another glance, I saw him wipe his nose then drop his hand in a slight tremor, back on the stack of magazines. Should I greet him? No, he wouldn't remember me...

Drifting towards C. still at the beadwork table, I had suddenly lost appetite for further browsing.

2010, August
