

# Pathfinder Mural

*By Mike Alewitz and volunteer artists*

**New York City, 1988-89**

**Destroyed by Administrators of the Socialist Workers Party**



## The Life and Death of the Pathfinder Mural

*By Mike Alewitz*

THE PATHFINDER MURAL PROJECT was initiated in 1988, inspired by global revolutionary struggles, including in Grenada, Nicaragua and South Africa. Eventually, the effort involved hundreds of international artists and activists in the creation of one of the largest political murals in the world.

Pathfinder Press is the publishing house of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP,) of which I had been an active member for two decades. I proposed the project at a time when it seemed that the party had developed serious problems with bureaucratic functioning. The willingness to sponsor a serious cultural initiative made me hopeful that it would be a contribution to combat those tendencies.

My optimism was misplaced. As the project progressed, I began to receive a series of arbitrary and bizarre demands to paint the "right line." This included convoluted political requirements (such as how big Trotsky's head should be) as well as strictly aesthetic stipulations (what colors should be used.) These orders emanated from SWP National Secretary Jack Barnes and the coterie of toadies that surrounded him. (Barnes was a party functionary of modest talents – he never led a mass movement, worked in a union, wrote substantive theory or engaged in creative cultural work. But he was a glib and capable apparatchik.)

I responded to the dictums by writing the following article for a pre-convention discussion bulletin. The

article was published, but the convention was cancelled and there was never a debate about the substance of the article.

I was replaced as Project Director and, shortly thereafter, expelled by the central leadership of the party. I was subjected to a slander campaign that included charges of anti-Semitism, egotism, racism, homophobia, etc. I was not permitted to respond to any of these accusations.

The night of my expulsion, all project brochures identifying me as the author of the mural were thrown into a dumpster. The history of the mural was re-written, and I became a non-person, airbrushed out of existence and officially shunned by the party membership.

The painting was mutilated by effacing any surreal, humorous or autobiographical elements. This included portraits of the Kent State Massacre martyrs (where I was a student protest leader,) planned portraits of Nora Astorga and Ben Linder, etc. A portrait of John Brown, lovingly painted by a nurse who came, day after day, was arbitrarily painted out. A list was drawn up of who could and could not be painted. What began as a visionary celebration became a disfigured plaything of art-illiterate party hacks.

In the years after its completion, the mural faded, even as the revolutionary traditions of the SWP had faded from the memories of its members. Later, the mural was completely removed - an embarrassment to the organization. Eventually the building was sold for millions of dollars.

At the time of my expulsion, I still considered the SWP to be a revolutionary party. But the organization abandoned more and more of its program, abstaining from the anti-Gulf War movement and reversing its support for a Labor Party. It became a sad cult around Barnes, who lived in lavish style not far from the mural site.

The SWP ceased to exist as a revolutionary organization. The once-great party that led the Minneapolis Teamster strikes and the anti-Vietnam War movement, that published the words of Malcolm X and represented much of what was best about the youth radicalization of the 1960s became a grotesque caricature, comprised of drab sycophants.

Looking back, there are clearly mistakes in this document, most notably a failure to understand how the party turn (colonizing key industries,) was used as a way to out-manuever and disenfranchise the membership. However, I believe that the basic ideas of this document have stood the test of time, and are of value today.

---

## **WHAT IS THE PATHFINDER MURAL?**

*...the revolution is made, at the moment of its climax and the exertion of all human capabilities, by the class consciousness, the will the passion and the fantasy of tens of millions who are urged on by the very acutest class struggle.*

- Lenin

In the summer of 1920 Lyobov Popova, Alexander Vesnin, and Vsevolod Meyerhold began work on the "Project for a Theatricized Military Parade for the Congress of the Third International entitled: 'The End of Capital.'"

Planned for the third congress of the Communist International in Moscow, the performance was to be composed of 200 riders from the Calvary school, 2300 foot soldiers, 16 big guns, five airplane searchlights, several armored trains, as well as tanks and motorcycles. This array of actors and machinery was to surround a manufactured Cubo-futurist fortress, the "closed city of capitalism," with a curtain of smoke. Soldiers would cut through the smoke with flamethrowers writing out the worlds: "What work has created shall belong to the workers."

Then would follow a mass dance on the theme of "Joy and Strength-Victory to the Creators," which would include gymnasts and discus throwers in homage to the "Open City of the Future..." The city was a construction including dirigibles with banners flying the slogans of the Communist International in the different languages of the participants.

This particular piece was never performed, but similar ones were. A mass spectacle at the second congress, for example, included a cast of thousands in Petrograd, acting out 18 scenes from contemporary political history including the revolution of 1848, the Paris Commune, World War I, the collapse of the Second International, etc. Sculptures, plays, kiosks, and other art forms were commissioned or inspired by the International as well. The Communist International represented a new spiritual life, as well as political one, for the Soviet people.

And it is precisely when the efforts of a society are united that an important art can arise. The Russian Revolution inspired some of the greatest experimental art of our epoch. It did not create modern art, capitalism did that. Capitalism tore apart the fabric of existing society, its art and architecture, its social mores and replaced them with commodities.

Like a giant locomotive, the Russian Revolution took the fledgling modernist movements and propelled them forward. It created a vacuum that dragged the artists of Europe along with it. Soviet artists took theater to the streets, painted ships and trains, loaded them with whatever culture they had to offer, and sent them throughout the Soviet republics. They opened the door to artistic appreciation and production to workers and peasants on a massive scale for the first time in modern history. Sculpture, design, filmmaking, photography were all revolutionized.

In painting, the Russian Revolution found its expression in the monumental mural movement of Mexico, whose artists traveled to the new Soviet Republic and were profoundly influenced by its art and politics.

It is out of these traditions that the Pathfinder Mural comes. It flows from the idea, not of creating a precious object, but from the idea of using art as a weapon in the living class struggle. Our mural is a modest project, it aims to involve hundreds. It will break no new ground visually; in form it is quite conservative. Its importance lies in what it indicates about the road the party is taking in reaching out to broader forces as part of the turn to industry and preparation for the coming social crisis. For artists, its importance will lie in showing a way forward, a way for artists to reach out and join with working-class forces in this country as well as internationally.

### **Political Roots**

*Art is the creative act which gives material and ideological life-contents of a concrete society adequate visible forms... art has historical roots that lie outside it and has historical consequences that again lie outside it.*

- Max Raphael

The mural grows out of the real political experiences the party has gone through in the past decades. This includes, first and foremost, the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979. With the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, the Nicaraguan people have been able to take their culture and their future into their own hands. One product of this effort has been the founding of art schools, workshops, centers, etc., where none existed before. The Nicaraguans have welcomed internationalist brigades to come paint murals, perform, conduct workshops, etc. Just as many North Americans were able to tour the country or join agricultural and construction brigades, so, too, were artists able to go to Nicaragua. There they learned from the revolution and participated in mural projects which have helped to inspire the Pathfinder mural.

The mural flows from the ideas and experiences of the Cuban revolution and the participation of North American artists, even in a limited way, in the rich cultural life of Cuba – the Bienals, the festivals, tours, etc. Here we see a living example of a revolutionary policy applied to the arts. We particularly see it today, as the Cuban artists grapple with the rectification campaign and what it will mean for art-making there. Cuba has been and will continue to be the leading force internationally in counter-posing an art of socially relevant work, which expresses the aspirations of the worlds oppressed, to the biased policies of U.S. and Eurocentric art.

Unfolding struggles in this country have likewise inspired the project, particularly the historic P-9 strike in Austin Minnesota, in 1985. Through the course of their struggle, those workers realized that they had an important story to tell and were willing to say it on the side of their building. That mural came to symbolize the struggle, and in a sense, the struggle of working people throughout the country. It was a visual blow against the great myth that workers in this country are somehow different from workers in other countries. It showed that workers here are capable of inspiring struggles. Its dedication to Nelson Mandela showed the rapidity with which workers could develop as internationalists.

Just as it showed the potential of workers in this country, once they have moved into political action, its destruction was a visual symbol of the limitations of the trade union leadership and trade union strategy. The method of destruction revealed the feelings that the bureaucrats have for the ranks – by sandblasting off, first the faces of the workers in the mural and then the slogans on the banners.

Our mural project is a product of our turn to industry, our becoming a party deeply rooted in the organized industrial workforce of the country. We launched the project at a time when we were reconsolidating our forces to deepen the turn, rebuilding coal branches, etc. It may seem like an off time to embark on an artistic project but this project could only be accomplished by a turn party.

In making the turn we are not doing it to implement a narrow 'trade union' focus but to bring the totality of our program into the working class. That is what the party does, its historic role. By its very nature it must combine the efforts of workers with those of artists and intellectuals. This mural flows from the confidence we have gained in being open communists in the organized labor movement.

The mural could only be accomplished by a party attempting to overcome its isolation and aligning itself with revolutionary forces throughout the world. It is a visual reflection of our convergence with revolutionary forces in Cuba, Nicaragua, South Africa and El Salvador. Far from being a digression, the mural strikes at the heart of what we must do as a party of revolutionary workers. If we fail to take advantage of opportunities like this, then something is seriously amiss.

## **What the mural is**

*The 'pintas' were a voice from the darkness, coming from the night, and to tell the truth, the walls were always our accomplices. They were our means of communication with the masses, the means of communication of the masses. The newspaper Barricada was born on the walls. The Voice of Nicaragua and Radio Sandino were born on the walls, and the television system in the hands of the people was born on the walls.*

-Omar Cabezas

The Pathfinder mural celebrates the role of the working-class press. It uses, as a specific image, the press of Pathfinder, which represents the continuity of the publishing of revolutionary ideas. Pathfinder, as an independent revolutionary publisher, carries on a tradition which goes back to the very beginnings of the working class movement. The central image of the mural is a web press and pages being bound into books, on whom Pathfinder's authors are portrayed. The mural is specifically designed to involve broader forces in its painting.

The mural is not meant to be a pecking order of revolutionary figures. Big does not mean important. The image is meant to give a sense of Pathfinder and the struggles it grows out of. The portraits are not meant as a way to make the authors into icons removed from the struggle, just the opposite. It is important to keep in mind the difference between viewing the mural and viewing a sketch of the mural. What may appear large on the sketch can be quite small from fifty feet below. In actual viewing of this mural, the crowds and banners will appear much larger, the portraits much smaller. Some of the authors will be repeated in the crowd.

The mural will reveal the truth of our past, with its strengths and its weaknesses. It will not rewrite history in some weird sectoralist approach that miseducates the viewer. Our authors reflect where we are coming from, and that cannot be changed. Other visual elements will reflect where we are going. They will reflect the truth today – the new leadership emerging in the world, including more Black, brown, Asian and female leadership.

The mural takes a class approach, not a sectoralist one. It is not designed so that women paint women, Blacks paint Blacks, etc. This may happen at times but it is not designed that way.

The mural is not what is commonly called a "group mural." It is basically one artist's idea. There are an infinite number of other ideas which could have been thought of, with different approaches, styles, images, conceptions, etc.

The mural is not a "correct" mural. It does not have the "right line." We should unceasingly fight the idea that art produced by communists should be "correct." That confuses a work of art with a political program. The party, correctly, has little to say about the music, poems, and murals, of its members.

## **Designed to involve others**

Through inviting specific representatives of organizations and individuals, we have been able to reach far beyond the mural site with word of the project. This piece is designed to involve others, particularly in the political campaign around it. As such, it is helping to break down the imposed isolation of our movement from one of its traditional allies, artists and cultural workers.

The SWP has a rich tradition of working with artists and intellectuals, particularly during the 1930s, when many artists internationally were drawn around our movement, and around the figure of Trotsky. With the



war drive going into the Second World War, and the witch-hunt following the war, artists were driven away from the revolutionary movement, and eventually out of radical politics of any kind. The whole complexion of American art changed as the tradition of socially relevant art was forsaken for an "art for art's sake."

This was to be the "American Century," and an art had to be found that would represent the triumph of U.S. imperialism. It was found in Abstract Expressionism and its offshoots, from the color field paintings to Minimalism. Defeated and demoralized intellectuals like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg became the apologists for an art used to champion U.S. imperialism. The art was put on the road to Africa and Asia, to show to the world what a tolerant and innovative society the U.S. had created.

But with the advent of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movement, the depoliticalization of American art began to break down. The Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions have helped many artists to see beyond their studio walls. In fact, today there exists a layer of artists who are marching the same road as we are. They have gone to Nicaragua to work, to learn and to contribute their art. They have made videos, film and murals there. The continuing revolution in Cuba has inspired many artists to contribute work, as exemplified by the recent group show of sixty U.S. artists who donated their work to Cuba at the Havana Bienal.

### **Who are the artists?**

*If the artist needs the labor movement, no less does the labor movement need the artist. The workers need not only the crude truth which is the ugly reality of their daily existence. They need also the truth that illuminates and inspires, the truth that shines as only the artist can reveal it. It is a lucky day when our movement finds such a person.*

- James P. Cannon

Who are these artists who identify with the same struggles as we do? Nicaraguans call them cultural workers, and it is a good term. Most artists are workers, many are industrial workers, most are poor.

The art structure is set up very similarly to the sports structure under capitalism. The great majority of artists work for very little, while a few are allowed to achieve superstardom. The possibility of "making it" or having a "breakthrough" is what keeps many artists going. Most artists must work as carpenters, waitresses, etc, in the hopes they may one day devote their full attention to their art.

Many of our coworkers are artists, as are a number of comrades. Clearly, working people have an intense interest in, and respect for the arts. They become craftspersons, poets, musicians or dancers whenever the door is opened to them.

A recent Harris poll showed a majority of Americans favor federal assistance to the arts, with 46 percent favoring support for individual artists, as opposed to 29 percent in 1975. A majority supported arts education in the schools. The poll showed widespread rejection of the idea that artists are "undisciplined, unfocused, or unable to do an honest days work." 84 percent believed that artists are "highly important" to the life of the country.

Like the working class as a whole, artists are stratified. Those who have worked on and supported the Pathfinder mural project reflect those differences – from artists who identify with their petty bourgeois patrons and customers, to those who identify with the strikes and struggles of fellow workers.

### **The Pathfinder Mural Project**

A year has passed since we formally launched the project. Already the mural is known throughout the

world, and it has yet to be completed. (We have been delayed primarily due to rain). Among our goals were to create the mural, to promote Pathfinder, to involve artists in the project, to open up avenues of fundraising, to increase our influence in this milieu and to recruit to our movement.

How have we done? Dozens of artists and supporters have become sponsors or returned coupons offering to donate work. Many prominent artists have lent their names. Financial support has come from throughout the world, though we have yet to break even.

Influence is hard to measure, but we can safely say that the project has placed us at the center of what is happening among political artists. This was reflected in the New York speak out against city harassment. It has been reflected on the broadly sponsored meetings for the artists on tour. We are developing a reputation as people who fight to bring in and tour artists from Nicaragua, El Salvador, or Ireland. We have increased our collaboration with some of these international forces. The project has led to proposals for similar projects in other countries.

As Rudolf Baranik stated at the speakout, the project is a beacon for those who are revolutionary minded. That is no exaggeration. Under U.S. capitalism, artists are forced to self-censor themselves. Any time the frail bounds of "proper" art are crossed, as we are doing, the work is immediately thrust forward to public scrutiny, and becomes counter-posed to official "good taste".

The increase in our influence is no small accomplishment. This milieu has long been dominated by the Social Democrats and particularly the Stalinists. We are attracting some members of the CP to this project, because they too, are looking for a way forward.

The recruitment of artists to the party is problematical. We have always recruited artists. We recruit them as we would others, by talking politics and through joint activity. We need no special knowledge of art to recruit, any more than we need to know turning technology to recruit a machinist, or locomotives to recruit a rail worker.

But now we face a new challenge. Some artists will want to build our movement primarily through their art – they are unwilling to give it up to be a communist. These are not unserious people. Artists should not have to give up their work to join our movement. It is we who must learn to use the talents and efforts of these artists, because by doing this we strengthen the party as a whole.

Artists are attracted to us because they see us as a serious party, a party of industrial workers, a party that leads in the promotion of the ideas of the people portrayed in the mural. If we fail to use the talents of individuals like this, people who agree with the ideas of the people we publish (or are at least willing to learn) then we have gone seriously off course.

Today there are artists who are willing to make contributions to our movement. It is we who have been unwilling or unable to take advantage of what they have to offer. We have had artists volunteer to make posters or banners, do performances, make photos and book covers. We have failed to make use of their talents because we have considered them a problem.

It may seem easier to do it the way we always have – grab the comrade who has a knack for design and have them throw something together. Working with an artist may require a discussion, or a different routine. It may mean readjusting our own thinking on what goes on a book or a banner. Today there are outstanding artists who have offered us their help; we must begin to view them as what they are: an im-

portant asset.

If we are able to involve a layer of cultural workers in party building activities, we will begin to change not only the political life of the movement, but the cultural life as well. We will bring it more into line with the young people, the workers, and our allies that we must win to our program. The quality of our cultural and artistic endeavors will improve as well. Pathfinder publishes some of the most important books and pamphlets in the world. Shouldn't we have the best covers we possible can – covers that excite and inspire people to buy the books? We should be producing the best T-shirts around, not the deadliest, and the same holds true for buttons, banners, bookstore signs etc. We must learn to place the same importance on how our materials look, as well as what they say.

### **Correcting Some Errors**

*Why is the Pioneer girl looking upward? That has no ideological content. Pioneer and Komsomal girls should look forward.*

- I. Bokhonov, 1930, USSR

(in response to an experimental photograph by Alexander Rodchenko)

As with any new area of work, we have made some errors which need to be corrected.

Last December, the political committee voted to change, against the artist's wishes and without his knowledge, the sketch of the mural as it related to the portrayal of the leadership of the Russian revolution and the Comintern. The original sketch showed Lenin and Trotsky, each on the page of a book. First, the artist was told to make Trotsky smaller, then larger, then to add the rest of the Comintern International Executive Committee. This was done by showing Bukharin, Zinoviev and Radek on smaller books behind Lenin and Trotsky, which was approved and printed on brochures.

Without consulting the artist, the Political Committee then reversed itself, determined that the sketch was unacceptable, and ordered the brochures destroyed. The artist was then told to redo the sketch to show all the figures on one book.

A new sketch was prepared using actual photos from a congress of the Communist International. This was rejected because it showed Trotsky saluting and Bukharin looking to the right! (Keep in mind that the sketch was simply to show where particular figures were to be placed when we actually painted the mural. They were not meant as a final drawing.) The artist was able to win approval for the sketch only by showing the five figures looking ahead, arms at their sides. A Militant editorial, in the form of a reply to a letter, explained that the change was a way to "do justice" to the leadership of the Comintern. A letter from the artist was not printed.

The unprinted letter pointed out that the intention of the artist was not to "do justice" to revolutionary leaders, rehabilitate them, or to rank them in order according to size. Rather, it was to give an indication of the roots of the working-class movement, specifically by showing Pathfinder's authors.

It pointed out that we need to demystify these revolutionaries, not make icons out of them. They were flesh and blood, and some of those portrayed will also be shown in the crowd, where they would be today if they were alive. They were ordinary people who did extraordinary things – propelled forward by the movements of their times. Lenin did not create the Russian revolution, the Russian revolution created Lenin.

There are many important revolutionaries who will not be in this mural at all. Others will be small, some



large. Some may be painted quite abstractly or non-objectively. This is not judgmental of their historic contributions or individual qualities.

The letter pointed out that the most important element of the mural is in the fact the 'people from nowhere' whose faces are unknown to us, and who will be portrayed by people from the neighborhood, comrades in the shop, and photos from around the world. It is this great mass of humanity who are making history today, from Nicaragua to South Africa and who will create in struggle new Malcolms, Ches and Lenins.

It is unfortunate that the Militant did not allow the artist to explain his intentions. This incident is a modest but important error. It shows how quickly things can unravel once the party intervenes in aesthetic affairs. What the political Committee wanted to do was to get across the idea that the Comintern had a team leadership. This is an appropriate goal, but an inappropriate means of doing it. By the same logic, shouldn't Fidel and Che have been portrayed as a team? What about Marx and Engels? The team around Maurice Bishop? Most everyone in the mural had a team around them.

I do not believe we should demand that art made by our members must conform to our immediate political tasks. We must allow artists to express their support for the revolutionary struggle in their own way, as they see it. We cannot and will not win artists to a party that demands they point to the momentary needs of the movement. Art must follow its own way, even on the walls of our own building.

The original idea is still the best: Lenin and Trotsky as symbolic figures, along with the other portraits. This does not represent a disagreement on my part with the goal of educating about the team leadership of the Comintern, or the many other rich lessons we are learning through the Comintern publishing effort. In fact, the Comintern project was and remains one of the inspirations of the mural.

Perhaps the thinking of the Political Committee is that this is an intervention into the politics of the mural, not the aesthetics. Here again we run into a trap, because all art is political in way or another. It therefore leaves the door open for virtually an art to be subject to party approval. This has a chilling effect for the work of any serious artist, who must be free to investigate and create as they wish. We cannot have a narrow definition of what 'artistic' means. In the case of the mural it doesn't mean what colors to use, or where someone's nose is, or how bright the red should be. We must think of artistic freedom in the broadest way possible, not the narrowest.

The Pathfinder mural is conceptual art as well as painting; it involves elements of theatre and spectacle. That was built into the artist's original proposal; it could have been done other ways. As the potential of the project has been realized however, there has been an increasing tendency to have the party assume elements of artistic control over the project, instead of keeping to the political campaign which is in support of the project.

These observations are not meant to imply that artists should have some special status in the party, free to do whatever they want; that they may paint racist or sexist images, etc. The observations are also not meant to imply that there is not a class character to art, for there is. But this is clearly not the issue here, and the Political Committee decision should be reversed.

### **Problems with culture**

The revolutionary party in the United States must come to grips with the problems of culture, both for the

workers here, and the victims of American culture throughout the world. We should certainly be willing to discuss artistic questions around the pathfinder mural project. It is not simply a political campaign, but a work of art as well – that is precisely why it has broad appeal. But it raises aesthetic questions, which we cannot and should not avoid. We should welcome debate on artistic questions, because through discussion and debate we will help to educate ourselves about culture, which we must learn to be able to help to lead our class on these questions.

Coverage of the mural project in our press has improved dramatically – it is livelier and with a broader appeal. But coverage of cultural affairs in general remains weak or nonexistent. Artistic judgments seem to be routinely deleted. Here we have something to learn from our opponent's press, who has far more extensive coverage of cultural affairs. We could also take a cue from papers like *Barricada* and *Granma*, which have extensive coverage of artistic, athletic and similar cultural affairs.

We seem to have a schizophrenic attitude toward our cultural coverage. The shining light of our press coverage was, of course the Borge article "Revolution is the Birth of Light." But we then felt compelled to follow it up with a column in the *Militant* apologizing/explaining because Borge said socialist realism was a necessary stage of Soviet artistic development. It's as though we are caught in a time warp and we are in the 1930s, still defending free expression in the USSR, and unable to comment on the problems of today. It graphically reflects that perhaps our thinking has not developed much in that time.

We tend to have a narrow focus to the coverage even of the mural, though I think it is improving. How can we broaden our appeal and still promote our own project? Instead of an interview with Arnaldo Guillen about how he views Pathfinder, why not an interview about how the ASTC is organizing cultural work or better yet, how they organized it before the triumph?

We could have used the ANC tour to talk about how their cultural commission organizes work, or the controversy around Paul Simon's "Graceland" album, or the work of Sechaba. We could even write of the indigenous cultures of South Africa, the richness of Africa's pre-imperialist past, which was the basis of so much of what we think is western culture. We could use it to expand our vision and inspire our members and readers, instead of having such a narrow focus.

### **Avoiding Controversy**

Good art is controversial, and we should welcome that controversy. Through discussion and debate we can learn much about our own culture, and educate and inspire our class to political action. As the worldwide economic crisis deepens, we can expect that more artists will move into political action in support of the developing labor and farm struggles. They will come to our movement with many different and seemingly conflicting artistic ideas. There is no "correct" way of making political art.

Art by its very nature will be as diverse as the individuals and cultures which give it expression. Art is different from politics. It is determined not only by the class struggle, but by our cultural roots, our biology, our psychology, climate, etc. No two human beings see the same way. An African may have different reaction to dissonance in music than a European. Colors will have different meanings among different nations. Asian picture perspective may be very different than for the North American.

One of the first great lessons of the young poet Karl Marx, that led him to develop his thinking, was the tremendous limiting factors of human development because of the biological limitations, which have not

changed all that much since we crawled out of the slime. This is true in art as well. Our biology limits our ability to see far more than the ruling class does.

We in the United States are educated in western culture, which is Eurocentric and racist. It permeates the forms we see. It makes us think that something is good art because it uses mimesis (it looks like the object or person depicted.) Other cultures see more universal truths, more abstracted, more meaningful to their economic and social life. As communists we can learn to appreciate those art forms based on other cultures. Cubism, for example is based largely on African conceptions of art. It doesn't use the perspective that came from the Renaissance and the rise of Bourgeois culture, in which the viewer looks at objects from one point of view. Rather, it looks at objects from many points of view, shattering the picture's surface in a more scientific and less illusionistic way.

Murals, poems and songs are not political programs, though they may be used politically and the distinction is important. Art does not have to have the 'right line.' It needs only have the truth as the artist sees it, not as the party sees it. Art will vary dramatically within the same political party. The party need not make decisions on art pieces at all. Comrades should feel free to agree, disagree, like or not like any art as they see fit. It's ok not to like the Pathfinder Mural. The party need not defend its aesthetics, only the political campaign going on around it.

We bit off a lot when we launched this project. We can be proud of that - not only did we launch a mural project - but the biggest one of this sort ever undertaken. The mistakes we have made are small hiccups from that bite. By pushing forward on the project, we will in real life, solve the problems we are confronted with. The moves that the party leadership is making in seeing this project through will help to break down the barriers of our isolation, deepen our turn to industry, and build our ties of international solidarity.

### **The Party and Artists**

*The I.W.W. taught me that culture is part of the struggle of the people. It's not separate. They never had a meeting they didn't open with poetry. They painted. They had cartoons. Their culture was immense, but more than that it was a culture of the people. I once saw a group of I.W.W.s learning poetry, learning Walt Whitman, in preparation for going to prison because they didn't have books, so they learned poetry. When going to prison they would each learn a different poem so they could bring their culture to the prison.*

- Meridel Le Sueur

Many artists have come around the party through the mural project and other activities, and this has raised a question of how to orient towards these individuals, Artists should be treated as any other potential member, and asked to participate fully in all the campaigns of the party. They should be asked to do plant gate sales, build industrial fractions, give sustainers, etc.

Those artists who wish to make art should be encouraged to do so. They can be asked to make banners and storefront t signs, films and videos, slideshows for forums, photos for Militant stories, performances for fundraisers, etc. Like any other area of work it should be organized through the branch executive committee. We should attempt to establish strong working relationships based on respect for the work that artists produce.

## **The Communist and Art**

*For a long time man has been trying to free himself from alienation through culture and art, while he dies every day during the eight or more hours in which he function as a commodity, he comes to life afterwards in his spiritual creations.*

- Che

The spiritual life of our coworkers and ourselves is an important communist concern. Art cannot solve the problems of capitalism; it will take a revolutionary struggle to dot hat. But through art, workers involved in revolutionary struggles can be reached with revolutionary ideas and inspired to new struggle.

We must relearn the Marxist traditions of appreciation for and conquest of culture for the oppressed and exploited of the world. We have to learn from the leadership of the Russian revolution and the Comintern, who organized tens of thousands into artistic production. We can learn much from the Cuban leadership, who wrote of artistic problems even while a small and persecuted minority, and who today are leading the Third World in a discussion of the role of the artist and their social responsibilities. We have much to learn from the Nicaraguan leadership, who used their songs and their walls as weapons in the struggle to liberate their country, and who won artists to the central leadership of their revolution.

We also have to relearn our own history, of cultural work from the legacy of the Left Opposition and the fight to build a proletarian party in the U.S. – from the great cultural contribution of the Wobblies up to today. One of the ironies of our own history is that we, who were so much built around the figure and ideas of Trotsky, have so little of his great command of cultural and aesthetic concerns.

By studying the Marxist approach to culture we will learn something about art. Respect for artistic production is a working class trait. The struggle for leisure time, for access to athletic and artistic pursuits, has been an important aspect for the working class struggle since its inception. Today's workers are no different – we have only to look at the struggle of the P-9ers, arrested for defending a mural that told their story and aspirations.

We have much to learn from art. Through grappling with the problems of painting or sculpture we learn to think analytically and scientifically. This is one of the reasons Cuba places so much emphasis on the traditional fine arts. By grappling with art we become better thinkers. We learn to view things as a whole, instead of a group of disjointed pieces or individual contributions. We develop a more well-rounded world view.

Communists must have that kind of view. It is not enough to know a political program – we must be able to address the problems of humanity, to be broad and open in our outlook, and to understand the spiritual needs of our class. If we can explain culture, how it affects us, what the songs and voices and images mean, why we feel as we do, then we will know how to fight back more effectively.

Culture is not a luxury item for communists, something to discuss after the important things, books to be kept on the bottom shelf. It is essential to our class, and to building the party that will be part of the leadership that leads our class to power.