

Radical, Pragmatic And Successful

Van Gosse analyzes the reasons for CISPES' success in developing a fresh and tenacious approach to solidarity work.

Why should I or anyone else write about CISPES? As a national organization, it was neither famous nor large, the usual criteria for organizational significance in this country. Compared to the NAACP or NOW, with their hundreds of thousands of members and name-recognition among the general public, CISPES was an obscure, fringe group. It is unlikely if as many as 2,000 people considered themselves active members at any single point in its history, except perhaps in 1981, when hundreds attended start-up meetings in cities as different as Boulder, New York and San Francisco. And while it certainly got into the news in the late '80s as the target of the decade's largest FBI "investigation," the mainstream press never paid much attention to the organization itself.

For that matter, the larger Central America movement, in which CISPES sometimes played a leading role, was always quite small, with only a vague public persona -- the archetypal nun who'd been to Nicaragua and got on the local op-ed page. At its peak in April 1987, with substantial union support and important allies from the anti-apartheid movement, the combined forces of solidarity barely managed to mobilize 100,000 people onto Washington's streets for a joint Central America-South Africa rally, a fraction of the crowds regularly turned out by the decade's big pro-choice, gay or Black-led marches. Even the disarmament or "peace" movement within which solidarity usually operated (and into which it was often inaccurately subsumed by observers) had much greater recognition and numbers in the heyday of the Nuclear Freeze.

Nonetheless, the Central America movement was the major expression of U.S. radical politics during the '80s, the only explicitly "left" current that operated consistently all across the country (in all 50 states, not just a few big cities), with a practical commitment to revolutionary change -- if not in this country, then close enough to matter. And within that extremely diverse movement, encompassing solidarity with several countries by many different sectors of U.S. society, CISPES played a unique role. To reach and service the up to 2,000 mostly autonomous local committees, other groups of organizers assembled supple but porous networks, and set up various national campaigns, coalitions, task forces, projects and foundations.

GOAL-SPECIFIC PROGRAM

Eschewing the decentralized "network" model from the very beginning, CISPES gradually -- in fits and starts over time -- built a cohesive nationwide organization, with a stable grassroots volunteer base, local, regional and national staff, extensive training and evaluation processes and, most important, a time- and goal-specific national program.

It is this last element that made all the rest

possible. Without a concrete program that is debated, planned, implemented and then assessed before starting all over again, a political organization is mostly a fiction, something waiting to happen (as opposed to a network, which typically exists for sharing of resources and information rather than implementation of a common program).

Unfortunately, too many left groups in the past generation never really had a program to which the entire organization held itself accountable through a voluntary discipline. SDS, for instance, in its period of mass growth after 1965, rarely had any national program worth the name. That CISPES members had one, and knew it, was the source of their strength.

CISPES' main virtue, perhaps even its sole distinction, was tenacity. Given that that particular, old-fashioned character trait has been so lacking on the U.S. left since 1945, this alone caused it to stand out. As I write, CISPES has just passed its thirteenth anniversary, and with the war in El Salvador finally ended, it can at least claim it went the distance, a singular feat in itself. Most of the prominent 1960s New Left organizations fell apart long before hitting a decade, despite the much greater space for activism at one time. Indeed, it could be argued that one reason CISPES has lasted so long is the "empty space" it inhabits -- a backhanded advantage at best.

Developing a national program and cohering as an organization was not an easy or immediate process. Simply to get to where it was possible for CISPES' leadership to consciously shape their infrastructure, moving activists around the country to plug gaps and constantly levying new "cadre" from the strongest committees, took years of hit-or-miss efforts, and much internal dissension lasting through the first half of the '80s. But instead of fading away or falling apart, CISPES hung on. And in the later 1980s -- when El Salvador largely dropped out of the public eye except as a moral eyesore -- it came into its own as a genuinely consequential organization, both "large" and "well-known" in terms of left-liberal interest-group politics. It had enough staff (about 100 paid and unpaid fulltime organizers at peak 1988-89), enough donors (72,000 at one time or another, unfortunately never converted into formal, card-carrying "members") and dozens of highly visible chapters in nearly all of the major cities and key college towns in the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast.

What did all this infrastructure mean in terms of program? At the beginning of the '80s, before any of the above had yet been put in place, CISPES embodied a wave of militant anti-Reaganism that sent an unmistakable message to the administration that re-fighting Vietnam in El Salvador would carry a definite cost in terms of radical mobilization here. In the decade's latter half, CISPES kept El Salvador's civil war alive in the conscience of liberal and radical America. Besides a steadily rising tide of protest actions from 1988 on which were quite explicitly tied to the FMLN's offensive strategy, it developed (or borrowed, really) techniques of constructing "people-to-people" bridges between concerned citizens in this country and the reviving

"popular movement" in El Salvador of unarmed civilian organizers: walk-a-thons and "work-a-days" raising millions of dollars in humanitarian aid in small donations; telex banks to respond instantly to arrests and disappearances; constant delegations of grassroots activists that in El Salvador assumed considerable public importance. In fact, the greatest paradox of CISPES' history as a U.S. radical organization is that in the U.S. itself it was condemned to marginal visibility by the national media's conviction that it would not repeat the mistakes of the '60s by giving "undue" attention to leftists; in El Salvador, on the other hand, CISPES became famous, or infamous, depending on your point of view. It was regularly denounced by Salvadoran officials, including President Alfredo Cristiani, and many CISPES activists accustomed to laboring in obscurity found it a heady experience to be introduced before large popular assemblies of trade unionists or students and cheered to the rafters.

RADICAL AND PRAGMATIC

What made all this organizational and programmatic expansion possible, besides sheer stubbornness, was that CISPES defined a new model for what a single-issue left organization can be -- both very radical and very pragmatic. CISPES emphatically was not just another liberal lobby, yet it could not be marginalized by either aboveground political actors or the moderate forces in the "anti-intervention" wing of the solidarity movement. Why? Because its immediate goals were always eminently reasonable in the terms of radicalized post-Vietnam liberalism: cutting off all U.S. funding of a government responsible for massive state terror; pursuing a negotiated end to the civil war; sending humanitarian aid to desperate peasant communities for their clinics and schools; instituting a human rights "rapid response network" to save the lives of trade unionists, student leaders and shantytown organizers. Instead of spurning mainstream politics (you know: the two parties are exactly the same, you'll get dragged to the center, you'll be forced to sell-out and compromise, you'll get used, and so on), CISPES embraced the rough-and-tumble of this country's political system. On occasion, it was the proverbial skunk at the garden party. But more often it worked to reward its friends and punish its enemies like any other competent single-issue organization.

It's important to be clear about what CISPES was, and what it was not. Its claim to be on the leading edge of what's left of the U.S. left is based on purely operational criteria rather than any ideological cohesion, other than explicit "solidarity": anyone looking for the words "capitalist," "socialist" or "imperialist" in its direct-mail appeals, its newspaper Alert! Focus on Central America, or its voluminous internal program mailings, would be severely disappointed. CISPES was not some miraculously red-flag-waving, Leninist embryo that prevailed despite its time and place.

In fact, it struggled very hard to avoid becoming a place of regroupment for the stray fractions of the U.S. socialist tradition. As anyone familiar with the past 30 or

more years well knows, to become that common ground is to invite sectarian "interventions," infighting and paralysis. It would be more accurate to say that CISPES was an escape or even an end-run around the dead end that U.S. socialism had sadly become. With no pretence to any more generalized leftist -- let alone Marxist-Leninist -- politics among its volunteers and staff, it built its donor-base among liberals and appealed to many new campus activists in the late Reagan years precisely because of its lack of ideological specificity.

The exception to this get-the-job-done, number-crunching instrumentalism was CISPES' unequivocal but usually reasoned, non-dogmatic public support for the FMLN. This stance, often criticized as an unnecessary deterrent to potential supporters or allies outside the left, was a crucial element in the organization's success. It provided CISPES with an unequivocal benchmark against which to measure itself, and great internal elan; it also required that people think about the ethical and moral implications of their solidarity. The short-term costs were real, but the longer-term gains were profound in establishing that it was possible to be both unflinching supporters of a group deemed "terrorist" by the U.S. government, and at the same time, familiar and accepted faces within liberalism's various enclaves of power, from Congress to many city halls. Distinctive proof of this special role came on March 18, 1989, the night before the Salvadoran presidential elections and near the civil war's climax, when ABC News Nightline had CISPES Organizational Director Michael Lent go mano a mano with arch-Reaganite Elliot Abrams.

LEARNED LESSONS

The distinctly pragmatic orientation of CISPES, based in its self-definition as the "North American front of the Salvadoran revolution" rather than the "Central American wing of the U.S. left" (to repeat a formulation from its 1985 National Convention where these two options fought it out, with the former scoring a decisive victory), points towards the original source of CISPES' political direction and organizing methodology: the Salvadorans themselves. CISPES came out of a particular historical conjuncture, and a series of powerful lessons about U.S. politics that had been learned during the 1960s and '70s. It may be ironic or hard for some to accept that those lessons were best learned by people outside the U.S., and then "imported" back in via small groups of exiles, but there it is.

It should be evident to all North American activists that U.S. politics in the past 20 years have been, in a deep sense, post-Vietnam politics. Yet we have often failed to appreciate the depth of opportunity this presents. If during these two decades anyone among us had described the U.S. as a rich and fertile terrain for anti-imperialist solidarity, he or she would have been derided as a dreamer, so great was the legacy of alienation following the war visited upon the peoples of Indochina and assorted other imperial debacles.

Certain Salvadorans did not see the U.S. in the same way. They looked at the example of the antiwar movement crippling this world-hegemonic power at home, and made a

strategic decision long ago that the U.S. was not only their natural antagonist, but also the best possible "rearguard." If hindsight is correct, as long ago as 1976 activists in the Bloque Popular Revolucionario, linked to the Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion (one of the five political-military organizations that in 1980 formed the FMLN) began their patient work here, not only in the expanding refugee communities in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York and Washington D.C., but also focusing on the recruitment of unaffiliated young North Americans to their cause.

Key to the development of everything that came later, from CISPES' founding in the same week as the FMLN in October 1980 through the Peace Accords of January 1992, was the political milieu within which these Salvadoran exiles -- some few dozen people spread around the country, many of them still hard at work -- found themselves. A self-named "Latin American solidarity movement" had slowly begun to gel in the late 1960s out of militant New Left anti-imperialism and the return of many radicalized ex-missionaries from all over the hemisphere. In the '70s this movement, focused on Chile and Puerto Rico but encompassing much of the Southern Cone and the Caribbean, was both quite successful and seriously crippled by sectarian intrigues. These rivalries stemmed from the open disunity of most of Latin America's left movements, at home and in exile, which combined with the factionalism endemic to the "party building" phase of the post-New Left.

The Salvadorans who initiated CISPES and continued to work closely with it and related organizations over the next 13 years (and who were the main, though not the only, FMLN tendency among the Salvadoran exile community throughout) drew clear lessons from the political conditions of the 1970s. They did not accept at all the then widely-held proposition that the first task of "solidarity" was to construct internationalist links and a common struggle between the oppressed in the U.S. and other countries. They did not believe that building a revolutionary movement in the U.S. was any of their business, nor did they care to have U.S. political organizations, "revolutionary" or otherwise, involved in their business. To put it bluntly, they wanted to keep the organized sectors of the U.S. left out of El Salvador solidarity work, because they had little confidence in the political maturity or the organizing capacity of that left. Who can blame them?

Did these Salvadorans exclude and marginalize some U.S. activists because of their politics? Yes.

Was this a "narrow" conception of what solidarity could be? Yes.

Was it, to use one of the old epithets, "opportunistic?" Undoubtedly.

Were the Salvadorans and the North Americans in CISPES who were their close collaborators arrogant towards much of the U.S. left and peace movement on occasion? Absolutely.

But consider it from another point of view: Was there any current example of a cohesive, united solidarity movement built by U.S. left organizations? No.

Did Marxist-Leninist "parties" in the U.S. try, once

again, to take over CISPES as part of their never-ending war of position? Of course; an undercover volunteer from a Trotskyist organization helped set up the first CISPES National Office in 1980 before being discovered.

Would any organized group on the U.S. left have been willing to put the extreme and immediate needs of the Salvadoran revolution first, not just for a month or two, but for as long as it took? Never.

At root was the view, which I share, that it was their revolution and they had the right and responsibility to determine the most appropriate forms of solidarity. The '70s post-Vietnam phenomenon of North American leftists evaluating and adopting various stances of "critical solidarity" towards this or that revolutionary movement, offering approval and aid as a bargaining chip, was to virtually everyone in CISPES a repellent memory -- or more often, a distinct shock if and when they heard about it. Indeed, it is safe to say that to a considerable extent CISPES embodied a rejection of much of the recent New Leftist past, especially for the ex-adherents of various Marxist tendencies who were drawn in one-by-one and, so to speak, unlearned old habits.

To at least a few "CISPESistas," its organizing practice resembles much more the mass organizations of the 1930s and '40s Popular Front left, with the obvious difference that there was no party integrating this particular struggle into a more universal vision of social transformation in this country.

TRIAL AND ERROR

The bulk of this essay has been devoted to explaining the success of CISPES' aggressive, flexible and "presentist" strategy, with the implication that this history should be seriously considered in planning the future renaissance of U.S. radicalism. I will stand by that conclusion, but I would not want to leave the reader with the impression that this was a flawless trajectory, moving steadily from one success to another over the years of Reagan and Bush; far from it, CISPES typically learned how to do things well by doing them badly at first, sometimes more than once. How could it be otherwise, given where it came from and its attempt to break new ground with a new methodology? To put it another way, to the extent that CISPES embodied a vanguardist approach, these were the flaws in any emphasis on voluntarism and what a leader of NISGUA, the Guatemala solidarity network, once described as CISPES' intense reliance on the "subjective factor," on organizing and motivating itself.

What this meant in practice was that CISPES' mainly young, inexperienced activists often remained ignorant to the point of disrespect concerning other radical traditions, whether Christian or Communist -- theirs was a pragmatic, nonideological species of sectarianism -- and had considerable difficulty appreciating the diversity of the greater Central America movement, and the success of other organizing models like the faith-based networks.

The organization as a whole never developed a comprehensive approach to working in coalition, and at its

otherwise dynamic national conventions was usually reduced to juggling laundry-lists of all the different "sectors" it would work with at some future unspecified date.

In the late 1980s CISPES Executive Director Angela Sanbrano became a recognized leader of the mainstream "peace and justice movement" as Co-Chair of the largest U.S. peace organization, SANE/FREEZE and a confidante of Jesse Jackson, culminating in her acting as emcee for the main Washington DC protest against the Gulf War in January 1991. Unfortunately, her experience was never incorporated into the training regime at the base level. Certainly, most CISPES chapters around the country built their own coalitions and alliances, but in this one area they were more like than unlike the rest of the decentralized, pluralist solidarity movement. In one city, CISPESistas might have excellent relations with City Hall and various Members of Congress; in some other cases, they boasted of their prowess at street-fighting, though the latter was hardly the norm.

A certain arrogance and disinterest in everything that came before, and an enthusiasm for one's own special newness, are deeply rooted cultural traits in this country, hardly unique to CISPES. The above critique, or self-critique, reflects some distance from the post-student milieu that has always characterized CISPES, and should be understood as such. Its weaknesses were inseparable from the strengths I have attempted to describe -- the energy, tenacity and discipline that allowed this particular organization of North Americans, along with others, to make a distinct contribution to the liberation of the Salvadoran people from a regime of feudal barbarism.