

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



## A Tate Gallery for the New Left

Portraits, Landscapes, and Abstracts in the Revolutionary  
Activism of the 1950s and 1960s

*Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir –  
Volume 1, Canada 1955–1965*

*Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir –  
Volume 2, Britain 1965–1970*

Bryan D. Palmer

---

Volume 75, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1030906ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this document

Palmer, B. D. (2015). A Tate Gallery for the New Left: Portraits, Landscapes, and Abstracts in the Revolutionary Activism of the 1950s and 1960s / *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir – Volume 1, Canada 1955–1965* / *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir – Volume 2, Britain 1965–1970*. *Labour / Le Travail*, 75, 231–261.

---

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2015

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

---

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# A Tate Gallery for the New Left: Portraits, Landscapes, and Abstracts in the Revolutionary Activism of the 1950s and 1960s

**Bryan D. Palmer**

Ernest Tate, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir – Volume 1, Canada 1955–1965* (London: Resistance Books, 2014)

Ernest Tate, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir – Volume 2, Britain 1965–1970* (London: Resistance Books, 2014)

THESE FASCINATING VOLUMES CHRONICLE the coming of age and political activity of a revolutionary Marxist, doing so in ways that highlight Canadian influences and international developments. Written as memoir, but researched in archives and drawing on recent scholarship, the volumes are a hybrid: part recollection, part historical reconstruction. There is nothing quite like them in the existing library of commentary on and by the Canadian far left.

### **Irish Immigrant**

ERNIE TATE WAS BORN POOR and Protestant on Belfast's Shankill Road in 1934. Dropping out of school before his fourteenth birthday, he was headed for a life of dreary, non-union factory labour, in which the screeching announcement of a day of toil by insufferable mill sirens might be moderated by the illusion of athletically driven social mobility or the sociability of the pub. Tate devoured whatever reading material he could find. He looked to escape from the stultifying material and intellectual constraints of a rigidly class-subordinated, religiously segregated, God-dominated Northern Ireland. But it was tough sloggng. The lure of Canada offered him an apparent exit from this environment of limitation.



**Alan Harris, Hannah Lerner, Ernie Tate, l. to r., Toronto, 1957, on the occasion of the marriage of Lerner and Tate.**  
In possession of the author.

an almost instinctual attraction to the Soviet Union in a climate that attacked communism relentlessly and mercilessly. With his eye on Canadian dissidents and reports about them in the press, Tate was not exactly a “political greenhorn” before leaving Ireland, but he was understandably a neophyte as far as the left was concerned. About communism, either in terms of what the USSR actually was or what Marxist theoretical works suggested it could and should be, he knew little.

## **Encountering Ross Dowson: Canadian Trotskyism in the Aftermath of World War II**

THIS ALL CHANGED, HOWEVER, as Tate encountered Ross Dowson at the Toronto Labour Bookstore, located on Yonge Street just north of Wellesley. Dowson, along with his brothers Murray and Hugh, championed Canadian Trotskyism as its original founder, Maurice Spector, drifted further and further from the politics of the Left Opposition. The forces rallied around the Dowsons, in nascent party formations like the immediate post-World War II Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP) were, compared to the much larger Stalinist Communist Party of Canada (CP), small and seemingly inconsequential. But these dedicated revolutionaries had large ambitions.

Tate arrived in Canada in 1955. The times were anything but propitious. Jobs were few, and the cultural and political horizons of “Toronto the Good” seemed bounded by Victorian prudery and the Cold War containment of dissidents. The 21 year old immigrant landed his first waged work at Eaton’s because the department store favoured hiring those who, like its founder, Timothy, could trace their lineage to Ulster. Privileges of national favouritism, however, came with costs. Disgusted by a two-week paycheck of a paltry 60 dollars, Tate promptly quit, opting for the better remuneration of flour milling, in which he had apprenticed in Belfast.

If his inclinations ran in the direction of a politics of contrarian, populist antagonism to the rich and the powerful, Tate’s radicalism was anything but sophisticated. To be sure, he had

Animated by Trotsky's understanding of how the revolution had been betrayed inside the Soviet Union, these dissident communists called for workers to embrace revolutionary principles. They urged radicals to break from the ways in which Stalin had undermined the nascent revolutionary workers' republic in the USSR and subordinated struggles of the working class in distant lands to the needs of the increasingly bureaucratized state and Party apparatus, centred in Moscow. Their propaganda organ was a newspaper called *Labour Challenge*. Dowson and the small Canadian Trotskyist movement used it to build beachheads of alternative to other ostensibly socialist organizations in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and to run public campaigns at election times. Education forums were held, and socials brought comrades together. Trotskyists worked where they could: in trade unions, civil rights organizations, neighbourhood associations. In all of this, Dowson and his comrades sustained close and reciprocal relations with their fraternal organization in the United States, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) led by James P. Cannon.

This late 1940s variant of Canadian Trotskyism rode the crest of an impressive wave of class struggle, a labour upheaval in 1946–1947 drawing hundreds of thousands of Canadian workers



**Ross Dowson, Toronto, 1930s.**  
In possession of the author.



**York Memorial High School Spartacus Club, 1935, with future Trotskyist leaders Ross Dowson (top, centre) and Murray Dowson (bottom, right).**

Courtesy of the Forward Group.



**Dowson for Labour Mayor, Toronto, 1948.**  
Courtesy of the Forward Group.

into a strike movement that ultimately secured a modern collective bargaining regime. Formed in October 1946, the RWP, with Ross Dowson as its National Secretary, intervened in these momentous clashes of capital and labour where it could and campaigned openly as a revolutionary organization affiliated with the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI), established in 1938. Its supporters challenged both the

social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), within which they sometimes worked as a left-wing subject to caricature and expulsion, and the Stalinist CP, or Labor Progressive Party (LPP), as it was known in the 1940s and 1950s.

Dowson ran for public office in Toronto's mayoralty campaigns three years running, from 1948–1950, polling between 15,423 and 23,645 votes, or roughly 11–17 per cent of the ballots cast, the highpoint reached in 1949's January election.<sup>1</sup> His 1948 bid for election was waged under the banner, "Vote Dowson, Vote for a Labor Mayor, Vote for the TROTSKYIST Candidate."<sup>2</sup> *Labour Challenge* noted that both the CCF and the LPP masked their politics in this municipal election, with none of the Stalinist candidates proclaiming their party affiliation and only a few social democrats running openly as CCFers. Attributing Dowson's relative success to striking packinghouse workers and printers, whose workplace actions the Toronto City Council did its best to smash, the RWP insisted in its press that the solid Trotskyist showing at the

1. Ernest Tate, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir – Volume 1, Canada, 1955–1965* (London: Resistance Books, 2014), 41 refers to the 1 January 1948 election as the 1947 mayoralty contest, citing a vote for Dowson of 24,000, or 17 per cent of the total. I use the figures and follow the dating provided in Paul Kane, "11 % for Dowson in Toronto Mayoralty: Clairmont 4,593 for Board of Control," *Labour Challenge*, 6, no. 23 (Mid-January 1948), 1, 3. Tate may simply be confusing the 1 January 1948 vote with that of January 1949, where *Labour Challenge* reported the votes cast for Dowson to be 23,645. See "15,600 Vote for RWP Candidate: Labor-Vote Declines in Boss-Slate Sweep," *Labour Challenge*, 6, no. 78 (January 1950), 1, 3, which compares a January 1950 vote of 15,600 to the previous year's vote for Dowson, which was much higher.

2. Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 148.



Revolutionary Workers Party Leadership, Toronto, 1948: Murray Dowson (back row, glasses, inside right door frame); Hugh Dowson (back row, to right of door frame); Sonia Rosenthal (2nd row from back, centre); Verne Olson (back row, to the right of Hugh Dowson, behind and between two men in suits); Jeannette Dowson (2nd row, white blouse); Sadie Jourard (2nd row, middle); Ross Dowson and Joe Rosenthal (front row, middle).

Courtesy of the Forward Group.

polls was attributable to Dowson's revolutionary program, and the immediate task was to "build the party of the socialist revolution."<sup>3</sup>

### **Entryism and Premature Canadian Pabloism**

THE ENTHUSIASMS AND OPTIMISMS of 1948 notwithstanding, the 1950s ushered in a particularly difficult time for revolutionary Trotskyists. As the Cold War unleashed a rabid anti-communist assault, and as the prospects of socialist revolution receded, Trotskyists found it increasingly difficult to stay the course. Tate's volumes underscore the extent to which "entryism" was always a troubled terrain for Canadian Trotskyists to negotiate.

The tactic was developed by Trotsky in the 1930s. It aimed to allow small revolutionary Trotskyist organizations to have new opportunities to work within larger parties, where there were undeniably elements who could be

3. Kane, "11% for Dowson," 3.

considered genuinely revolutionary, and whose understandings of class struggle overlapped, in many fundamental ways, with those of the original Left Opposition. In order to expand the possibilities of activism by like-minded revolutionaries, as well as win recruits from other organizations, Trotskyist groups could enter into bodies, such as the French Socialist Party, work within them and, as the inevitable sharpening of political differences took place, consolidate those adhering to a revolutionary program within a revitalized Trotskyist organization.

Entryism was of different kinds, although the original Trotskyist conception tended to accent shorter time frames and the need to uphold some measure of revolutionary organizational independence within the party that had been joined. As time went on, and conditions worsened for Trotskyists in particular and the left in general, entryism was conceived more elastically: it could be more or less “deep,” which meant that it could take place to varying degrees. The deeper the entry, the longer was the duration of time proposed to stay in the organization, and the less likelihood there would be of Trotskyists maintaining their public face as a distinct revolutionary current. The danger, especially in times when the prospects of revolution seemed dim, was that entryism would lead to a liquidation of the essential politics of revolutionary socialism.

In Canada, the entryism advocated by Trotsky for the French Section of the FI and by James P. Cannon and his comrades, who orchestrated an entry of American Trotskyists into Norman Thomas’s Socialist Party, was always controversial. Maurice Spector, for instance, opposed the entryist tactic in the United States. As various entries were made into CCF and CCF youth groups in the 1930s in British Columbia and Ontario, debate raged among Canadian Trotskyists as to the validity of such tactical moves, which were never made smoothly. While embraced by a majority of those within the nascent Trotskyist movement, these 1930s Canadian experiments in entryism always had their detractors. Exacerbating tensions within Canadian Trotskyism was the hard reality that in specific regions of Canada the CCF might react differently to Trotskyists, who were more likely to be expelled in Ontario than they were in British Columbia. But there is no question that Canadian Trotskyism was oriented toward the CCF, even as it criticized the social democratic party and sometimes operated in ways quite independent from it. When the first issue of *Labour Challenge* appeared in 1945, it was emblazoned with the bold headline, “FOR A CCF GOV’T” and the front-page article declared, “For Independent Labour Political Action: Vote CCF.”<sup>4</sup>

By the early 1950s, the particularities of entryism in Canada could not be separated from a general politics of liquidationism that was becoming increasingly prominent in the international leadership of the FI. Associated with the politics of Michel Pablo (Michalis N. Raptis), international secretary of the FI,

4. *Labour Challenge*, I, no. 1 (1 June 1945), 1.

this orientation abandoned fundamental Trotskyist positions in the climate of Cold War-induced revolutionary downturn. Pablo, convinced that the world situation was such that socialist possibility had receded (and that its realization could well take several centuries involving regimes transitional between capitalism and socialism), that war was increasingly likely, and that nationalist upheavals in the colonial world would precipitate conflicts, concluded that Trotskyists needed to reassess their orientation to what was claimed to be an entirely new situation. Stalinism, which Trotskyism had been born proclaiming could play only a counter-revolutionary role, was now, according to Pablo, likely to be forced to take positions and leadership stands that might well be progressive and contribute to revolutionary developments; Communist Parties might, in these circumstances, be entered by Left Oppositionists. In anti-colonial struggles, similarly, Pablo argued that Trotskyism must reassess its working relations with nationalist and other currents. And in those advanced capitalist political economies where social democratic parties constituted the dominant form of working-class political organization, Pablo argued that all Trotskyists must enter deeply, even possibly totally, into these bodies, which constituted, according to him, the environment in which mass radicalization and revolutionary developments were bound to occur for the foreseeable future.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1950 and 1953, Pablo consolidated support for these positions. In the end, those gathered around him in an International Secretariat of the FI (including Ernest Mandel and Pierre Frank) were opposed by an International Committee, the leading components of which were James P. Cannon and the United States SWP, embroiled in 1953 with an internal factional contest against a Pablo-like grouping led by Bert Cochran. The Americans rallied around them significant anti-Pablo support in the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, and Latin America. The FI thus contained, in the mid-1950s, two distinct currents. If Pablo's politics dominated, SWP criticisms that Pablo had abandoned fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles and renounced the essence of Trotskyism carried considerable weight in widening circles.

In Canada, this fracture in the FI was reproduced in an especially ironic manner. While the appetite for Pabloism in the Canadian section was whetted by the small numbers of Trotskyists and the attractions of entryism into the established and influential CCF, the historical and instinctual ties of the Canadian Trotskyist leadership were to Cannon and the SWP. Precisely because the American section was slow to resist Pabloite revisionism, Dowson

5. Some of this can be gleaned from Michel Pablo, "Yugoslavia and the Rest of the Buffer Zone," *International Information Bulletin* (New York: Socialist Workers Party, 1950). Discussions of Pablo's influence are invariably partisan and include Pierre Frank, *The Fourth International: the Long March of the Trotskyists* (London: Ink Links, 1979), 71–90; Tim Wohlforth, *The Struggle for Marxism in the United States: A History of American Trotskyism* (New York: Labor Publications, 1971), 113–132. Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 308–336 presents an accessible, if somewhat muted, overview.



and the RWP gravitated early to a Pablo-like embrace of the CCF, culminating in the dissolution of the Trotskyist organization in 1952, its members instructed to enter the CCF. As the SWP lined up support for its anti-Pablo International Committee in 1953, Ross Dowson sided with Cannon, at the same time as Pablo's Secretariat issued a communication declaring that the Canadian section of the FI was loyal to its leadership and condemned the "split"-advocating IC.

In actual fact, the Canadian section was irrevocably divided, on the one hand and, on the other, far more acclimatized to Pabloism than even ostensible opponents of Pablo, like Ross Dowson, appreciated. If a majority had indeed supported Cannon, the SWP, and their International Committee criticisms, a minority clearly did not. Dowson's brother Murray, and Ross's brother-in-law, Joe Rosenthal, aligned themselves with Pablo, whose policies they clearly thought their entryism was reflecting. Murray Dowson ended up in Paris, working for Pablo's Secretariat. Even as Ross Dowson sided with the anti-Pablo SWP, he had liquidated the RWP and conducted a fairly deep entry into the CCF before taking this stand. Murry Weiss wrote to Farrell Dobbs, National Secretary of the SWP, in 1954, reporting on a visit he had made to Toronto: "I am convinced that Pabloism, that is real Pabloism, has taken a deep hold in the *whole* organization up here. They don't fully realize it. They think they are all united in the work of the CCF. And they are, but on a Pabloite line I'm afraid. They have become infected with the terrible disease of thinking that everything can be solved with fancy endless maneuvers in the CCF, with 'deep' entry conceptions."<sup>6</sup>

## Ernie's Education

AT THE TIME THAT TATE encountered Dowson and Canadian Trotskyism, all of this had been playing itself out for half a decade or more. CCF entryism had not paid large dividends. Shunned by a red-baiting CCF leadership, Dowson and other Trotskyists were given a mid-1950s proverbial heave-ho from the social democratic party they had joined with such high hopes. The Pabloite split reduced the ranks of Dowson's Toronto branch significantly, and it resulted in acrimonious tensions. Ross went so far as to claim that Rosenthal's supporters inside the CCF blocked with the right wing to vote for the expulsion of Dowson and his comrades. Tate recalls Hugh Dowson telling him that Dowson family gatherings at Thanksgiving and Christmas were "uncomfortable affairs" orchestrated by a "fake cordiality" for the sake of Ross, Hugh, and Murray's mother.<sup>7</sup>

6. Quoted in *Workers Vanguard*, 29 March 1974, and cited in Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 149.

7. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 28.

The result was that the small core of Trotskyists around Ross Dowson and the Toronto Labour Bookstore were impoverished, marginalized, and reduced to a club-like status. Dowson himself lived in the bookstore in order to be able to keep this rallying point of his revolutionary forces an ongoing concern. As the club approached twenty members at the end of 1955, it branded itself the Socialist Educational League (SEL), a name suggested by Cannon, and Tate was now a member.

The first volume of Tate's memoirs provides an invaluable

insider's remembrance of Dowson's "party regime." Much was expected, indeed demanded, of the Trotskyist ranks. The SEL put out *Workers Vanguard*, the first issue appearing late in 1955. It ran candidates for election, utilizing these occasions to propagandize on all manner of issues. Working with other progressives, trade unionists, and civil rights activists, the SEL protested McCarthyism and racism and defended class war victims in the United States and Canada. SEL members tithed themselves rigorously to pay for all of this and were often fired from their jobs because of their visibility as agitators.

Throughout all of this, Tate was being schooled in the program and practice of Trotskyism. SEL educational forums were small events, but they profiled the organization and built the skills and knowledge of members. They promoted dissident causes and flew the flag of opposition. Recruits to Trotskyism learned the rudiments of revolutionary theory – Tate recalled stumbling through his assignment to introduce Engels' "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific," as well as organized discussions on Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, Marx's *Capital* and other such texts – and how to speak in public. Tate's primary tutor and taskmaster was undoubtedly Dowson, who could be a stern critic.

Dowson also sent Tate and others on cross-country Canadian tours, putting young recruits and established leaders in touch with sympathizers from Toronto to Vancouver and throwing them into contact with everyday workers, to whom the Trotskyists talked, sold literature, and argued through political positions. Dowson, whose cultured appreciation of art, music, and wide reading could be tempered by an unduly parsimonious asceticism, thought these trips should be self-funded through the sale of pamphlets and subscriptions to the Trotskyist press. There was no thought of staying in hotels or eating in restaurants, with expectation that those on tour would live and cook out of their



**Ernie Tate on Tour.**  
In possession of author.

vehicle, often a truck refurbished to serve as something of what would later be known as a camper. Little attention was apparently given to how comrades, of different sensibilities and personalities, would fare travelling together under such cramped and trying circumstances. Trotskyists were always expected to put the revolutionary movement and its needs first, above all “personal” considerations. Tate describes his 1958 cross-country tour as “missionary work” for socialism. It was also an adventure, a “terrific education,” and a way in which radicals connected with workers and with the traditions of organizing and agitating that have always sustained the revolutionary movement.<sup>8</sup>

Tate also learned much from American comrades in the swp. If they often treated the Canadian sel like a branch of their United States organization, these seasoned Trotskyists had decades of experience in the revolutionary left behind them and could draw on lessons they had learned battling bosses, bureaucrats, and Stalinist betrayal since the 1920s and 1930s. Tate benefited greatly from his connections with these American co-thinkers, visiting New York, developing particularly close relations with some of the most dynamic swp cadre, such as Murry Weiss and Myra Tanner, attending the Party’s educational centre, Mountain Spring Camp, in New Jersey in 1957 and again in the early 1960s.

Oriented toward the working class as the fundamental agent of revolutionary social transformation, the sel necessarily directed its members toward union jobs and placed a high priority on the work that could be done within the labour movement. Tate provides an important outline of a hitherto little understood “Forward with Democracy” movement within Ontario’s International Brotherhood of Teamsters (ibt). As Trotskyists in the Teamsters tapped into an insurgent rank-and-file militancy, bred of opposition to Jimmy Hoffa’s high-handed bureaucracy, wildcat strikes and lockouts of thousands of truckers routinely tied up transportation in Ontario’s industrial-capitalist heartland between 1962 and 1966. By this time, the sel, uniting with Vancouver counterparts, had become the League for Socialist Action (lsa), and was well ensconced in Toronto’s powerful ibt Local 938. Tate’s comrade Harry Paine was elected chairman of the union’s powerful Strike Committee. As truckers joined the lsa the organization expanded to the point that it could establish its own equivalent of the swp’s Mountain Spring complex, Camp Poundmaker, near Orono in south-central Ontario.

Much Trotskyist activity in this era aimed at political regroupment, an effort to bring into common cause an assortment of leftists with the ultimate view to consolidating revolutionary politics, facilitating activism, and building mass organization. Tate was centrally involved in regroupment efforts almost from the time he joined the Trotskyist movement. In 1957, he was sent to New York to help in swp efforts to recruit a left-moving youth wing of Max Shachtman’s Independent Socialist League that included future Trotskyist leaders Tim

8. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 118, 123.

Wohlforth and James Robertson. Wohlforth and Robertson would later orchestrate an opposition group within the SWP, the Revolutionary Tendency, which developed positions critical of the Party's understanding of the meaning of the Cuban Revolution and its accommodation to Pabloism on this and other questions. Tate was also involved in discussions with people like Joe Salsberg and Norman Penner in Toronto and Guy Caron and Henri Gagnon in Montreal, all of whom were either on their way out of the LPP, as the CP was known in Canada in the late 1950s, or raising critical hell within it.

### **Cuba, The Meaning of Revolution, and the LSA Leadership of Canada's Fair Play for Cuba Committee**

A NOTEWORTHY PROPAGANDA initiative led by LSA members participated in by Tate was the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), organized in 1961. Tate provides a detailed account of Verne and Ann Olson (functionally members of the SEL/LSA for much of their most active involvement in the FPCC) and the Canadian Trotskyist movement's defence of the Cuban Revolution against the threat and assault of United States imperialism. One of the most successful solidarity committees in the English-speaking world, the FPCC suffered its good share of red-baiting abuse, but the Olsons and other LSAers refused to be browbeaten into silence. They organized mass meetings of 300 to 400 in Toronto that passed resolutions recognizing the "historical justification of the Cuban Revolution" and petitioned the Canadian government to "extend long-term, low-interest loans to Cuba for the purpose of greatly expanding Canada-Cuba trade." Verne Olson embarked on a western Canadian speaking tour that took him to Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton, and Vancouver.<sup>9</sup> The FPCC published statements on Cuba as well as reprinting speeches by Cuban leaders such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. The Olsons also organized trips to Cuba so that progressive Canadians, young students, and others unable to get to Cuba because of the American blockade could see first-hand that post-revolutionary Cuba was not quite the totalitarian nightmare it was being depicted as in the mainstream American media. The Committee rightly accented how the Cuban Revolution was providing the masses of the country with much better material conditions than had ever been considered possible in the *ancien regime*. Health care was making giant leaps forward, and the government was significantly invested in primary education, with illiteracy as a fundamental social problem beginning to be tackled. In this initial work, the Olsons cultivated broad, albeit uncritical, support for Cuba, joining with religious figures in the United Church such as the Reverend John Morgan, CCF, and New Democratic Party (NDP) spokesmen from Hazen Argue to Howard

9. Cynthia Wright, "Between Nation and Empire: The Fair Play for Cuba Committees and the Making of Canada-Cuba Solidarity in the Early 1960s," in Robert Wright and Lana Wylie, eds., *Our Place in the Sun: Canada and Cuba in the Castro Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 104.



**Verne and Ann Olson, 1960.**  
Courtesy of the Forward Group.

Pawley, social democratic academics like Kenneth McNaught (who would soon embark on a red-baiting attack, demanding of Verne Olson and other FPCC leaders a “loyalty test” with respect to their support for “the Queen and Canada’s established constitution”),<sup>10</sup> as well as trade unionists and radicals of various stripes.

Hounded by the RCMP, Verne and Ann Olson harboured an American fugitive, Robert F. Williams, a Monroe County, North Carolina advocate of Black armed self-defence against white racist attacks on African Americans in the South. Williams showed up on the Olsons’ doorstep in 1961, on the run from the FBI, which had designated him “armed and dangerous.” He hid out with the Olsons for six weeks, while they arranged for him to be able to abscond to Cuba. Once there, the Black Power militant set up his “Radio Free Dixie,” broadcasting into the United States and Canada his views on current events and the strategies and tactics of Black emancipation. The Olsons became the distributors of Williams’ magazine, *The Crusader*, mailing it to North American subscribers from their home, with LSA members gathered once a month to stuff and stamp envelopes, regarding this, as Tate recounts, as part of their basic duty to the struggle for African American liberation.<sup>11</sup>

10. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 163.

11. On Williams see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Almost immediately, the Cuban Revolution and its meaning were the subject of controversy in world Trotskyist circles. There had been debate about the 1959 Revolution from its inception, and this was not unrelated to the factionalism in the FI associated with Pablo and others who were prone to see any breakthroughs against the monolith of reaction and Cold War stasis in the most positive light. Those Trotskyists tending to criticism of the limitations of the regime that deposed Batista through a guerrilla-led coup, however much their critical support acknowledged the advances registered in this process, were a beleaguered lot. Their insistence that the trajectory of the Cuba Revolution was in fact determined by the non-proletarian forces heading the insurgency, and this leadership's development in ways that proved fundamentally incompatible with Trotskyist understandings of what was required if a healthy revolutionary state was to consolidate, seemed to offer little more than theoretical carping. Had not Castro, Guevara, and others actually toppled an imperialist puppet and driven the exploitative multinational corporations from Cuba, liberating the people of the island and allowing for a fundamental social transformation? Yet those Trotskyists who had the temerity to question the Cuban Revolution rigorously, and in ways that related the increasingly uncritical reception of the victory of the guerrillas of the Sierra Maestra to Pabloist revisionist concessions, scored telling blows. History has indeed absolved them. Tate does not see it this way. The immense value of his books, however, is that they present an honest accounting, which allows for much-needed debate and discussion to proceed.

In the 1950s, euphoria on the left arising out of a decisive blow struck against United States imperialism and the brutalizing dictatorship supported by it, was understandable. But the Pabloite instincts of the FI understated the significance of ignoring the price that would eventually come due by accommodating to a leadership that was not forged on the basis of a clear-cut revolutionary working-class perspective. The costs of suggesting, as Pablo did so forcefully, that Stalinism would not necessarily and inevitably play a counter-revolutionary role, would soon be revealed in the development of the Castro regime. And, indeed, within the FI, the attraction to the Cuban Revolution tended to consolidate a rapprochement with Pabloism at the very point that this political tendency was unable to sustain its authority, the mercurial tendencies of Pablo becoming evident to those who had accommodated to his positions in the early 1950s. As Pablo himself was losing his grip on the influential reins of the FI, it was, simultaneously, the willingness of Mandel in the IS and Joseph Hansen and other SWPERS in the IC to collapse their differences inward in a support of Castroism that revealed, by the early 1960s, that the FI was tending in the wrong direction.

Stalinist influence within the apparatus of Castro's government was evident quite early and affected the FPCC's work almost from its inception. In the summer of 1961, for instance, a scheduled tour was cancelled by the Cubans without explanation. Tate suggests that such a scuttling of the FPCC's plans,

while possibly a consequence of bureaucratic inefficiency in Havana, might also have been related to the growing influence of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), the Soviet-aligned Stalinist group in Cuba. These Stalinists treated the SEL-LSA figures in the FPCC with sectarian disdain. In explaining why the tour was called off, one insider suggested to Olson that “it was Stalinist sabotage ... short wave broadcasts from Cuba had been taking on more and more of a CP character.” Because the list of tour members provided in 1961 by the FPCC contained those of well-known Canadian Trotskyists, Ross Dowson and Pat Mitchell, and no CPers were present, the proposed trip was supposedly suspect. These kinds of machinations could take other turns. John Darling, a young SEL-FPCC member vacationing in Cuba at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 was actually picked up by Cuban security forces in a sweep of thousands of foreigners and Cubans suspected of being opponents of the Castro government. Held for three weeks in La Cabana Military Prison, without interrogation or explanation, Darling was eventually released and returned to Canada. There he faced rumours, suspected to have been circulated by Stalinists, that he had been “charged and found guilty of black marketing.”<sup>12</sup>

Castro, at this point, was often forced to publicly distance himself from the PSP, and attempts were periodically made to clean the government house of Stalinist personnel. This proved exceedingly difficult, however, as the PSP constituted roughly one-third of Castro’s newly constituted political party. The FI grasped at whatever seemed to be a breathing space, in the early-to-mid-1960s, for the ideas of Fourth Internationalists. Ernest Mandel took particular pride in being invited to Cuba in 1964, shortly after the publication of his two-volume treatise, *Marxist Economic Theory* (1962). Over time, however, the Stalinist influence within the Cuban Revolution increased, an understandable development in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the growing economic consequences of the American embargo, which left Castro dependent on the Soviet Union. The unstable Cuban regime moved more decisively into the Soviet Camp, a process that accelerated in the mid-to-late 1960s as Che Guevara (more inclined than was Castro to distrust the Soviets and also more open to dissident communists of Trotskyist and FI inclinations) absented himself from a leading role within the Cuban state.

Ostensible Trotskyists, with whom Castro and his immediate circle may have had some contact in the days of guerrilla struggle were, from the early 1960s, targeted by the new regime. The Cuban section of the FI, aligned with Pablo and revitalized by a former soccer player turned advocate of revolution, the talented organizer and charismatic adventurer from Argentina, Juan Posadas,<sup>13</sup> was small and inconsequential, composed of perhaps 40 adherents,

12. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 171–172.

13. On Posadas see Frank, *Fourth International*, 100–111 and Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 332–334, 659–665.

many of whom were in the rebel army and Cuba militia. With a precarious foothold in Havana, Guantanamo City, and Santiago de Cuba, the group known as the Partido Obrero Revolucionario – Trotskyista, or the POR(T), was sectarian and almost certainly bellicose in its politics of insurgency (the Posadas position was that world revolution would not be made in the highly industrialized, advanced capitalist nations, but rather in the colonial and semi-colonial settings of the developing economies of the global South). The POR(T) was often publicly attacked by the Stalinist PSP, and Communist civic officials closed down the organization's offices in Guantanamo City. PSP leaflets celebrating the Cuban 26 July Movement labelled Trotskyists as enemies of the revolution.

In 1961 the Castro regime got in on the act. It suppressed the weekly newspaper of the Posadas group, *Voz Proletaria*. The state also "intervened" in the forthcoming POR(T) publication of a Spanish edition of Trotsky's book, *Permanent Revolution*, destroying the typeface. The Cuban Ministry of Labor nationalized the print shop used by the Posadas people, refusing newsprint to them and forcing the POR(T) to resort to a mimeograph machine. A year later, in August 1962, as two Posadists distributed a leaflet attacking the lack of democracy in the Cuban labour movement and in the country's sugar cane cooperatives, the agitators were arrested. The final blow came in December 1963, with the arrest and imprisonment of the principal POR(T) spokesmen, who were tried and convicted, the questionable charges alleging distribution of an illegal periodical, criticism of Fidel Castro, and working to overthrow the revolutionary regime. Sentences meted out ranged from two to nine years. Regardless of the views espoused by the POR(T), which veered increasingly in ultra-left directions and could not be considered to be Trotskyist at the time that this heavy curtain of state repression lowered, and acknowledging that the Posadists lacked tact and judgement, their treatment by the Castro regime was abhorrent, as would be, in later years, the handling of other dissidents and those who, like gays and lesbians, offended the developing sense of so-called socialist morality. In any case, it was clear to all who cared to explore the political realities in post-Batista Cuba, that Trotskyism was increasingly regarded by the Castro regime as a scourge to be eliminated. The methods used in this repression were undeniably Stalinist. Castro took to the podium of the January 1966 Tricontinental Congress in Havana to deliver a violent denunciation of Trotskyism, tarring the entire world movement with a vitriolic brush against the Posadists and their Latin American influence. He also took a swipe at the United States radical publication, *Monthly Review*.

Tate's book recounts this history and relates it to the work of the Canadian FPCC, where the fallout from this Cuban animosity to Trotskyism, not surprisingly, reverberated. Verne Olson understandably found it increasingly difficult to simply let all of this pass within the FPCC. And as the situation worsened, another FPCC trip to Cuba organized by the Olsons and involving 100 students was abruptly and arbitrarily cancelled in 1965. Verne Olson flew to Cuba to seek out an answer as to what had gone wrong. Receiving no satisfactory response,





Verne Olson (crutches), Toronto, 1965, Fair Play for Cuba demonstration against Cuba blockade, US Consulate.

Courtesy of the Forward Group.

allegation of Stalinist sabotage. The Cubans offered a stiff rebuke, slamming Olson and Beckerman for bringing up the bogey of “factions, divisions, or groups within the Revolution,” likening such suggestion to the long-standing imperialist attempt to break “the stern unity” of steadfast Cuban revolutionaries.<sup>14</sup>

Things went downhill from there. An attempt was made to whip Olson into line by the SWP’s Joseph Hansen, who advised him, at length, to drop the dispute: criticism of Cuba from Canadians in the FPCC was not, it seems, something the SWP was interested in in 1965. The Cuban Ambassador to Canada, Dr. Americo Cruz, a longtime supporter of FPCC given to public praise of Verne Olson, initiated a whispering campaign behind his back, smearing Fair Play as a “Trotskyist organization using its influence to interfere in Cuba’s affairs.” The implication was that Olson corresponded with “dubious people (who are being watched),” and that Olson had sent “Trotskyist literature to Cuba,” bypassing official channels.<sup>15</sup>

By 1966, with Castro’s Tricontinental tirade, Olson was convinced that the Cuban Revolution was running in reverse. While Hansen and the SWP could take some solace, in the years to come, that Castro seemed to have backed off his public denunciation of Trotskyism (Ross Dowson attended the 1967 Congress of the Organization of Latin America Solidarity at the invitation

he co-signed a FPCC statement with another LSA member, Andre Beckerman, chairman of the Student Committee on Student Affairs at the University of Toronto, noting that four years of solidarity work on behalf of the Cuban Revolution had been jeopardized, “not by the external enemies of the Revolution, but by the arbitrary action of an institution of the Revolutionary Government.” There was a suggestion that the entire problem of the tour’s cancellation rested with “sectarian forces within the Revolution,” a veiled

14. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 190.

15. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 193.

of Cuba), Olson's views were ones that demanded sidelining in 1965–1966. Hansen wrote to Olson insisting that, "Our policy has been to strengthen the hand of those who incline in our direction, and particularly not to undertake factional moves that would make things difficult for *them*. That is one reason our rating with them remained high and why we have continued to be appreciated as a *force* in Cuba and not just a sectarian group." Olson saw things differently, raising implicitly a critique of the SWP-LSA position that Cuba was a workers' state: "An apparatus loyal to the Castro leadership is well on the way to being molded, and will inevitably – through gradual formulation of its own special interests – form the base of a privileged caste. ... At the present time Castro is able to make use of his anti-Stalinist past, and the confidence that the masses have in his leadership based on past performance, in order to institute Stalinist type practices and institutions."<sup>16</sup>

Tate's long chapter on the Olsons and their work in the FPCC honestly recounts the uncertainties and confusions that bogged down attempts to genuinely support the Cuban Revolution. It is a revealing chapter, rich in reflection. It holds fast to the position that animated the SEL-LSA in setting up the FPCC: "it was the first opportunity since the Russian Revolution to publicize and promote democratic socialism through a concrete example that was unfolding before our eyes."<sup>17</sup> And it forthrightly details Olson's positions, the FI's immediate and critical response to Casto's anti-Trotskyism statements in 1966, and Hansen's acknowledgement that in suppressing the POR(T) the Cuban state had surely gone well beyond what was necessary and violated basic revolutionary principles. For some who considered themselves Trotskyist this was a sufficient response. Yet it can certainly be argued that the failure of the FI was to adequately address what all of this actually meant in terms of understanding the nature of the Cuban regime. It is difficult to read Tate's account of Olson and the FPCC without questioning the extent to which Cuba was, indeed, an example of democratic socialism. Put alongside a recent academic treatment of the FPCC, Tate's chapter provides a compelling reminder of how any final assessment of solidarity work such as that conducted by Verne and Ann Olson depends upon an assessment of the political situation of the time that takes serious account of the meanings of Stalinism and the nature of the consolidating Cuban state.<sup>18</sup> And this approach to Castroism was also undeniably related

16. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 201–202.

17. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 158.

18. These are not issues tackled in Cynthia Wright's quite useful account of the FPCC, "Between Nation and Empire," 96–120. Wright points out that the Canadian FPCC has received little scholarly attention, and she offers some suggestions as to why this is the case. One reason for this neglect is not mentioned by Wright: the role of Fourth International-affiliated Trotskyists in the FPCC. This is almost certainly part of any explanation of why study of the FPCC has been truncated, for among left scholars attention to Trotskyism is routinely skirted or presented in a particularly skewed light. Wright is able to largely avoid the issue by addressing the Olsons in particular ways, which is understandable given the SEL-LSA politics of entryism,

to the emerging FI position on guerrilla warfare and the struggle for socialism, about which Tate has much to say later in his memoirs.<sup>19</sup>

Olson faced a conundrum. How could he maintain his position on the necessity of defending Cuba from American imperialism, highlighting the great advances registered by the Cuban Revolution, without suppressing his growing criticism of the Castro regime? In a way, Olson was hoisted on the Pabloite petard. He had enough Trotskyist background and insight to know that there were going to be inevitable problems as the Castro regime gravitated in the directions that it did, and for Trotskyists like Olson there was little likelihood of escaping the tar and feathering of a state moving unmistakably in the direction of Stalinism. Yet Olson was also initially given, as were so many in the FI of these years, to presenting the Cuban Revolution in ways that sidestepped discussion of its original shortcomings. A certain optimism of the will overtook the necessary pessimism of the intellect, especially (and perhaps understandably) early in Olson's involvement in the FPCC. He wrote to one supporter in 1961: "Many others who have been disillusioned with socialism as a result of the degeneration of the Soviet Union can be brought back into activity when confronted by the Cuban Revolution which is led by a native leadership in the finest traditions of the socialist movements of the world."<sup>20</sup>

Tate's important contribution is to provide a detailed explication of the complexities and strategic and tactical quagmires that ultimately overtook Olson and the FPCC in this period. This long chapter in Tate's memoir is based less on personal remembrance and more on research in the Ross Dowson Fonds, housed at Library and Archives Canada. It marshalls invaluable documentary detail about Olson's changing perspective on Cuba in the 1961–1966 years, outlining his growing concerns with the limitations of the Castro regime,

---

which made open identification of some members as Trotskyist unlikely. She refers to Verne and Ann Olson as "committed revolutionary socialists" (96) and notes that a core constituency of the FPCC was "the left wing of the CCF and people like Vernel Olson himself who were CCF supporters but whose own politics were closer to Trotskyist revolutionary socialism." She then adds, parenthetically: "Vernel had more than once been rejected for CCF membership presumably because of his former adhesion to Trotskyist groups." (105–106) Given the opaque nature of the sources, in which direct naming of the Olsons as members of the SEL-LSA would have been unlikely, this is understandable, but it necessarily obscures the extent to which Verne and Ann were functioning as members of the Fourth International. In a footnote, Wright notes, "The story of the Canadian FPCC is closely linked both to the tangled history of Trotskyism and to early debates within Trotskyist circles about the nature of the Cuban Revolution, a very important subject that I do not have the space to detail here." (118) Tate's account, developed as it is out of a political understanding of the LSA leadership of the FPCC, provides an invaluable broadening of our political understanding of this solidarity initiative.

19. A useful statement in understanding the pro-guerrilla war position of the Fourth International as it came into being in the late 1960s is Hugo González Moscoso, "The Cuban Revolution and its Lessons," in Ernest Mandel, ed., *Fifty Years of World Revolution, 1917–1967* (New York: Merit, 1968), 182–204.

20. Quoted in Wright, "Between Nation and Empire," 106.

evident in its willingness to suppress supposed Trotskyists and Trotskyism within Cuba and to scapegoat a loyal (if eventually critical) supporter abroad, like Olson. The unfortunate conclusion to all of this was Olson's resignation from the LSA caucus of the FPCC in 1966, Olson's loss of regard for the LSA and its revolutionary orientation, and Olson stepping down from the leadership role he had played in the FPCC from 1961–1965. FPCC continued to function into the early 1970s, with Verne Olson still involved. But the solidarity initiative never again achieved the level of effectiveness and activity that it had in its formative years.

### **Vancouver: Among Proletarians and Poets**

TATE HAD LITTLE FIRST-HAND contact with these mid-1960s, and Toronto-centred, developments, although he was active in the Vancouver FPCC. After a 1962 cross-country tour, Tate relocated to Vancouver to be with Ruth Robertson, who was pursuing a library science degree at the University of British Columbia. Soon they would marry and have a son. Ernie took up the branch organizer's post in Vancouver, charged with consolidating the local on the west coast. He was thus working away from Toronto as the Olsons shifted their orientation to the LSA and the FPCC.

In Vancouver, Tate did his best to reunite a local divided by personal animosities and long-standing divisions. Vancouver Trotskyism seemed fractured along distinct lines, with groupings associated with one or the other of the city's two leading Left Opposition couples, North Vancouver's Reg and Ruth Bullock or East Van's Bill and Lillian Whitney. Neither proletarian contingent ever really embraced putting the Trotskyists before the public in independent ways, considered their primary work to be within the CCF/NDP and were a perennial thorn in the side of Dowson and his Toronto supporters who, while working with and in the social democratic milieu when they could, also ran independent candidates in elections and took other stands of public separation, albeit increasingly limited. Tate struggled to bridge these chasms.

He also worked with artistic talents like the mercurial Milton Acorn, who joined the LSA in 1963. Another left-leaning poet, Al Purdy, was active in the FPCC. Purdy connected with the LSA on international campaigns, such as that spearheaded to free a Black South African FI supporter, Neville Alexander, imprisoned at the same time as Nelson Mandela. The LSA in Vancouver, under Tate's leadership, showcased radical poets like Acorn, Purdy, former Trotskyist Earle Birney, and former Communist Dorothy Livesay, as well as taking up the usual array of trade union and labour defence causes.

Tate's organizational abilities and resolve were clearly recognized among the leadership of the SWP and the LSA, which saw in him a committed and able organizer. With less than a decade of experience under his belt, Tate was nonetheless a trusted comrade who had proven, over time, to be both capable and rock solid in his judgement and willingness to sacrifice. But the Vancouver

branch was a taxing assignment: comrades walked out; disagreed over how to work within an NDP prone to expel LSAers at the least provocation; and the rough-and-tumble of British Columbia class struggle meant that arrests of comrades and left-wing activists was not uncommon. Tate himself received a suspended sentence for an “obstruction” charge arising out of a picket line altercation. The west coast left in the early 1960s was something of a hotbed of Maoist and Maoist-inflected politics and Tate’s interactions with organizations like Hardial Bains’ The Internationalists (later to be the Communist Party of Canada – Marxist-Leninist or CPC–ML) and Jack Scott’s Progressive Worker Movement were sometimes tense. All of this left Tate, now just over 30 years of age, burned out. The pressures of having a young son to support on an income that was irregular and inadequate made a bad situation worse, with the result that Ruth and Ernie were often arguing and finding it difficult to sustain a relationship. But with his acumen and mettle unquestioned, Tate was poised to play a decisively important role in the changing climate of the mid-to-late 1960s. Circumstances were such that it would not be in Canada.

### **Foot Soldier of the FI**

AS A CONSEQUENCE of the factional differences in the FI in the 1950s, Trotskyism on the world stage was internally divided. Organizations that considered themselves Trotskyist aligned with either the International Secretariat and Pablo, Frank, Mandel, and Livio Maitan, or the International Committee, orchestrated by Cannon, Hansen, Farrell Dobbs and the SWP, Gerry Healy in the United Kingdom, and Argentina’s Nahuel Moreno (Hugo Bressano). The FI was becoming a house with many rooms. This confusing and unstable situation continued for the better part of a decade, but as more and more of the International Secretariat grew perplexed, tired and then antagonized by Pablo’s machinations, a unity movement emerged. Healy spearheaded a parity commission angling for unification of the two FI groupings in 1962–1963.<sup>21</sup> Mandel and Hansen co-authored a programmatic statement on the dynamics of world revolution in 1963. It staked out seemingly common ground on the nature and meaning of the Cuban Revolution and how to approach revolutionary struggle in colonial and Stalinist settings. Pablo’s leadership of the FI effectively ended with these developments, which would result in the Reunification Congress of the FI in 1963. Out of this came the United Secretariat, merging the previous International Secretariat and International Committee. As Pablo departed, Mandel was poised to become world Trotskyism’s principal spokesman.

21. Tim Wohlforth, *The Prophet’s Children: Travels on the American Left* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), 94–95 notes that the parity commission was originally the suggestion of James P. Cannon, and cites the importance of a 1960 meeting of the International Committee in Toronto, where the Canadian representatives included Dowson and Tate.

For all of this, it largely remained to reunite the fractured parties, tendencies, and split-off political formations that were, in most settings, the living reality of FI activism. Britain was a case in point. In 1963, there were a number of ostensible Trotskyist formations in the United Kingdom, but there had been no public, functioning pro-FI group since the 1953 divide. The Revolutionary Socialist League,



**Ernie Tate (sunglasses and headphones), Brussels, 1967, Youth Congress.**  
Courtesy of Jess MacKenzie/Ernie Tate.

led by Ted Grant and Jimmy Deane, was demoralized and had suffered a recent split, as a small contingent led by Ken Coates and Pat Jordan walked out, declaring themselves a transitional International Group, dedicated to provide a bridge to the creation of a fully functional FI organization. Healy's Socialist Labour League (SLL) aligned most directly with Cannon's SWP in the 1950s, but was developing an increasingly unhealthy internal regime. And there were other small and struggling tendencies and collectivities. Efforts to bring these bodies together in 1963–1964 failed miserably. Two LSAers had been seconded to Britain to help in this reunification process, but they had little success and were keen to return to Canada, having made and fulfilled a two-year commitment. The SWP sought out further aid from the LSA, and Dowson wrote to the Vancouver local to see if there was anyone willing and able to take up this new British posting. After some discussion, and one more cross-country tour, Tate, his relationship with Ruth finished and a new partnership with a comrade and FPCC activist, Jess MacKenzie, consolidating, found himself in Britain in 1965. The second volume of Tate's memoirs explores what happened in the last half of the 1960s.

It proved an auspicious historical moment. A momentous youth radicalization transformed the landscape of left politics. The war in Vietnam emerged as a decisive concern, culminating in mobilizations and protests that drew hundreds of thousands into stands of opposition. Marxism, demonized and marginalized in the 1950s, became the *lingua franca* of an entirely different political era, in which internationalism was the orchestrating impulse. Revolution seemed around the corner; "socialism in our times" was the slogan of the hour. Ernie Tate, who had left the United Kingdom as part of the Irish diaspora a decade before, a novice in the politics of the left, settled into London in 1965 as an experienced Trotskyist cadre, but not quite knowing what to expect. The latter 1960s would prove to be, in his words, "heady and optimistic times," and he concludes that, "There hasn't been a radical period like

it.”<sup>22</sup> Schooled in revolutionary socialism in Canada, Tate would contribute greatly to the explosive upheavals, street protests, and radical initiatives of the 1965–1970 years in Great Britain and Western Europe.

Setting up a bookstore in which SWP literature and other left material could be sold and distributed, Tate and his partner, Jess MacKenzie, struggled to bring the fissiparous forces of British Trotskyism together. It wasn't to be. Broadly stated, the divisions of 1953 were accentuated in the United Kingdom, with Pablo-inclined entryists buried so deeply in the Labour Party that there was little public Trotskyism to be associated with them, and the Healy-led SLL caricaturing the position of the SWP in a proletarian separatism that inevitably charted a politics of sectarianism.

### **A Rodney King for the Revolutionary Left**

TATE GOT THE BLUNT physical end of this Healyite stick on one unfortunate occasion. Selling copies of the SWP pamphlet, *Healy “Reconstructs” the Fourth International: Documents and Comments by Participants in a Fiasco* (a 1966 compilation of letters and commentaries detailing Healy's bureaucratic heavy handedness during a conference of groups interested in criticizing the direction the FI was taking on questions like the nature of the Cuban Revolution) outside of a SLL meeting celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution (1956), Tate was fingered by Healy, who appeared enraged. Healy's group had promised “to deal appropriately with the handful of United Secretariat agents” given to hawking the indictment of the SLL and its leadership “around the cynical fake-left in England.”<sup>23</sup> Immediately set upon by six or seven of Healy's goons, Tate fought back, but soon found himself on the ground, his glasses knocked off, his assailants kicking him repeatedly. Battered and bruised, his pamphlets scattered in the wind and rain, Tate beat a retreat.

As word spread of the thuggery, some left publications honourably denounced the SLL's behaviour. Yet other forums looked for ways to evade involvement. To his credit, Isaac Deutscher, who considered himself a friend of the left as a whole, insisted that Healy explain himself at Deutscher's home, with Tate present. Deutscher would not let Healy off the hook, called him to order, and then showed him the door. Tate provides a detailed account of the entire sordid event, including his reflections on how many on the revolutionary left simply accepted that Healy would behave as he did, instead of protesting this elementary attack on workers' democracy and the right to promote the free and open exchange of ideas and literatures. Tate publicized the attack, refused to be cowed by the suggestion that Healy would use the bourgeois courts to sue him for libel, and his comrades sold their literature at the SLL's next large meeting

22. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, I, 1.

23. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 60s: A Memoir – Volume 2, Britain 1965–1970* (London: Resistance Books, 2014, 172–173).

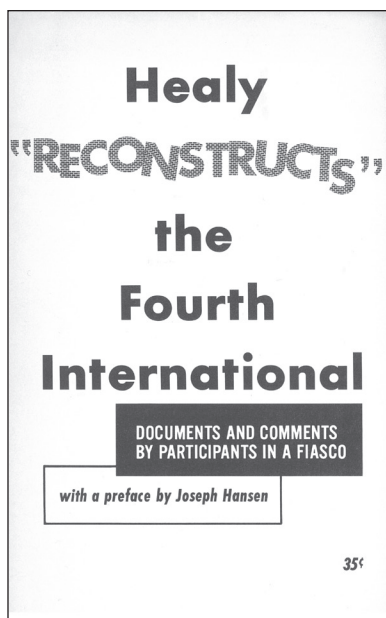
without incident. It was an honourable response to a dishonourable act, rightly earning Tate the respect of many on the revolutionary left.

### Anti-War Activism and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation

FORTUNATELY, there were ways that Tate could interact with the London left that did not leave him at the mercy of Healy's threats and violence. Ken Coates and Tony Topham, located in the Midlands, initiated a movement-like campaign that resonated in trade unions and universities around workers' control. Another of their comrades in the International Group, Pat Jordan, was a link between the dominantly "entry-ist" politics of this cohort and a 1963 publication, *The Week*, that provided a forum for other left forces, including those around *New Left Review*, to come together. Coates, Ralph Miliband, and

Peter Sedgwick of the International Socialists experimented with efforts to bring left ideas to the trade unions in the Centre for Socialist Education. And while the Labour Party was still in the iron grip of Harold Wilson's rightist bureaucracy (Coates was expelled from the Labour Party in 1965, the officialdom tiring of his criticisms and claiming that his writings in "Trotskyist" publications were just cause for turfing him out), there were campaigns and local developments where leftists could intervene. This was the sea in which activist fish like Tate travelled in their schools of agitation and recruitment.

The current that would prove most amenable to those on the revolutionary left was the rising crescendo of protest around the escalating war in Vietnam. Tate and most FI supporters were well aware that mobilizing opposition to the armed imperialist intervention in Vietnam was critically important. Before Tate arrived in Britain *ad hoc* committees against the war had been appearing, articulating a spontaneous, popular hostility to the war drive. Activists like Coates, publications such as *The Week*, and the CP-dominated British Council for Peace in Vietnam, headed by Fenner Brockway, had all been mobilizing anti-war sentiment and/or pressuring Wilson and the Labour Party to throw their considerable political weight into an effort to end the carnage in Indochina. Into this heady mix stepped Ralph Schoenman, the brilliant,



The pamphlet that launched a beating, 1966.  
In possession of the author.



indefatigable but headstrong and somewhat autocratic secretary of Bertrand Russell and a driving force behind Russell's Peace Foundation (BRPF).

Tate developed a close and productive working relationship with Schoenman and the BRPF, throwing behind the Foundation and its strong anti-war positions the support of the FI, such as it was. If his fundraising efforts on behalf of Schoenman and the BRPF often came to naught (he struck out with Vanessa Redgrave, for instance), Tate obviously proved himself an able organizer; his dedication to the anti-war cause was unquestioned. But he was running himself ragged. Without waged employment, Tate was rapidly descending into financial insolvency, he and Jess dependent largely on what the bookstore could generate in sales.

Schoenman offered Tate an administratively loose, but politically and economically attractive, offer. The BRPF was by 1965–1966 inundated with requests, mostly from socialist societies on university and college campuses, to provide speakers for public rallies and forums opposed to the Vietnam War. Schoenman simply could not keep up with this correspondence and its demands on the BRPF, which were backlogging on his desk. He suggested that Tate take on the responsibility of handling these pleas for information and coordination of anti-war speakers. As compensation, Tate would be provided with a car by the BRPF and allowed to keep whatever monies the socialist societies and other organizations provided in terms of speakers' fees and subsidies for travel, food, and lodging. This revealed a financial side of Schoenman – which had nothing to do with corruption but was *ad hoc* and arbitrary to a worrying degree – that would later create problems in terms of economic accountability and transparency, but to Tate it was a godsend. Not only might this arrangement lift him out of his state of impecuniousness, but he was given access to a growing anti-war movement that was springing up throughout the United Kingdom. Tate could now travel, unimpeded, meeting with leftists and making new contacts with anti-imperialist students and local peace activists. What could be better?

This was also before the mass youth radicalism explosion of the later 1960s, and it thus placed Tate on the ground floor of one of the most momentous happenings in the history of the second half of the 20th century. Soon, Tate was debating the war at the Oxford Union, befriending leftists like David Horowitz (who would eventually abandon his 1960s politics to become an ideologue of ultra-conservatism) and, most importantly, playing influential roles in the formation of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (vsc) and the establishment and functioning of Russell's International War Crimes Tribunal. It is impossible to adequately summarize everything associated with Tate's whirlwind activities around these developments, which involved debates and discussions of the anti-war movement's tactics, convoluted relations among those involved in the Russell Tribunal, and the fallout from Schoenman's loose organizational methods. These led to charges of financial malfeasance and Schoenman's

eventual sad break from Bertrand Russell. All of this is chronicled in Tate's chapter on the crisis in the Russell Foundation, along with the ways this imbroglia led to difficulties, allegations, and FI discipline against Ken Coates, whose taste for "deep entryism" had led him to develop particularly close relations with the BRPF.

### **Isaac Deutscher, Tariq Ali, and the Protest Mobilizations of 1967–1968**

THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS and personalities that Tate developed working and often close relationships with as a consequence of his organizational labours for the Russell Tribunal provide some of the most fascinating commentary in these memoirs. One of these figures, Isaac Deutscher, has already been mentioned above, and is discussed at length by Tate, who reveals sides of the principled Polish revolutionary unappreciated in both mainstream and left accounts. Another, Tariq Ali, whose almost celebrity-like status on the left today began with his rise to prominence as the public persona of the vsc, owed his prominence in the anti-war movement to the diligent background work of committed Trotskyists like Ernie Tate. Although Tate is never carping in his commentary on these often larger-than-life individuals, many of whom occupy iconic, indeed reverential, status on the left today, it is difficult not to read between his lines to see in the self-importance of figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir a tendency to prima donna-ish kinds of behaviour.

The culmination of Tate's impressive work in the anti-war cause of this era was the progression of protest demonstrations in 1967–1968. One critical event was the pitched battle between demonstrators and police at London's Grosvenor Square, ostensibly the inspiration behind the Mick Jagger/Keith Richards anthem to the moment, "Street Fighting Man": "Ev'ry where I hear the sound/Of marching charging feet, boy/'Cause summer's here and the time is right/For fighting in the street, boy." Finally, there was the massive rally at Hyde Park, 27 October 1968, in which Tate joined Tariq Ali, Pat Jordan, and others on the speakers' podium. The sprawling crowd exceeded 100,000, with some estimates of its size climbing to 200,000. In its sheer magnitude, it was an inspiring event. Along the way, Tate helped to consolidate the International Marxist Group (IMG) which drew Tariq Ali, among others, into a tighter, pro-FI organization, if only briefly. There was even a unity proposal offered the IMG by Tony Cliff of the International Socialists, but it led nowhere. Tate was in favour of the regroupment, but it seems rather unclear how such a unification of left-wing forces could have held together. One suspects it would have had a better chance of success had Tate remained in Britain, but by this point Ernie and Jess had decided that they would be returning to Canada.

## Return to Canada and the Rocky Road of Reintegration into the LSA

THE REVOLUTIONARY COUPLE had been in Britain four years, considerably longer than anyone had anticipated. Tate had a son in Canada, and had been unable to provide any support for his upbringing, except through funds he had borrowed from an LSA comrade, Richard Fidler, whom he desperately wanted to repay. Worn out and living on the razor's edge of poverty, Ernie and Jess needed to extricate themselves from the endless round of political responsibilities and self-sacrifice that had been their daily routine for so long. The couple's health had been sacrificed in this constant wear and tear. The only option seemed to be to return to Canada and find some kind of secure, paid employment. Staying in London was not really feasible.

Tate never managed to truly reintegrate into the Canadian LSA. The organization had grown significantly since his departure in 1965, with membership approaching 300. There were signs, moreover, that the youth radicalization of the later 1960s was about to bring dividends to the revolutionary left. But Tate's contribution to the LSA in this period was, unfortunately, to be acutely constrained. Dowson, who had apparently not been all that keen to see Tate depart for Britain, was now of the view that he should remain there. Tensions soon separated the old mentor from his now long-graduated and accomplished pupil. Clearly Tate and Dowson did not mesh well together after Tate's return to Toronto, and Ernie provides his perspective on the breach. Eventually tiring of his marginalization, Tate resigned from the Political Committee of the LSA and, while continuing to be a member of the organization, concentrated on work in his union, having secured employment at the Canada Packers' plant in Toronto's west end. He remained connected, as well, to the FI, where he held important posts. But it was clear, in hindsight, that Tate's days as a member of the LSA were numbered.

The 1970s were somewhat anti-climactic for Tate, a denouement given his powerful and salutary presence in the 1960s. Indeed, the LSA as a whole found the post-1960s a difficult political time. Dowson concluded that the group's criticisms of the NDP leadership were "unrealistic and exaggerated," and he and a score of supporters left the organization in 1974, citing differences around the Canadian national question and how to work within the mainstream organization of social democracy. Eventually this Dowson breakaway formed the Forward Group. Pabloism seemed to have stalked Dowson from 1950 into the 1970s, although this is not Tate's view. He thought Dowson's split from the LSA "unprincipled," and was saddened to see Canadian Trotskyism's leading figure "throw away his hard won legacy so readily."<sup>24</sup>

Tate remained active in the LSA and played a role in its "turn to industry," on which he reflects with some cognizance of the errors involved in this strategy. But he was increasingly disaffected from the political orientation of the

24. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, II, 335.

LSA and the SWP, the latter exercising more and more of an influence over its Canadian section. The American SWP newspaper, *The Militant*, became the publication of record in Canada, the LSA changing its name to the Communist League, ceasing to put out its own press. By this time, the Trotskyist Party of James Cannon was long gone, Jack Barnes had succeeded Farrell Dobbs as the head of the SWP, and the political adaptation to Castroism that had begun two decades before had run its course. The SWP leadership essentially renounced Trotskyism and turned away from the very possibility of working-class revolution. Remnants of the Cannon-founded Party were ultimately purged. Ernie and Jess eventually left the organized ranks of the tradition that they had done so much to build and sustain, but they remain, to this day, committed revolutionary socialists.

### The Path to Revolution

TATE ENDS HIS SECOND VOLUME with two chapters that do not rely on his memory of events so much as they address the politics of the FI at the end of the 1960s. Drawing on documents and a published study of the sorry fate of rural insurrection in Argentina,<sup>25</sup> Tate concludes his account of revolutionary activism in the 1950s and 1960s with a critique of the FI's embrace of guerrilla warfare as a decisive means to socialist revolution, an orientation that would, in time, fade as the SWP and its major theoretical voice, Joseph Hansen, bent the stick away from adventurist insurrectionism toward a more accommodating social democratic politics of constitutional reform. Tate is rightly repelled by the fallout from the mid-to-late 1960s uncritical reception of guerrillaism, taken up by the FI under the leadership of Ernest Mandel and Livio Maitan. "I could understand Tariq Ali's support for the guerrilla line," Tate writes. "He was new to the organization and politically inexperienced, and very much influenced by the ultra-left mood of the times."<sup>26</sup> But Tate is obviously less comfortable with the willingness of elder statesmen of the FI to take up the adventurist politics of the moment with such enthusiasm. That the Europeans and Latin Americans seemed strongest in this turn to rural insurrection, while those less swept up in the moment tended to be from the American and Canadian sections, no doubt factored heavily in Tate's ongoing adherence to the politics of the SWP in the 1970s.

This may seem an odd set of concluding chapters for volumes such as these. But, in fact, the animating political issue for Trotskyism throughout the 1950s and 1960s was precisely the question of strategy and orientation that emerged in the 1953 disagreements in the FI. Was Trotskyism going to adhere to notions of building revolutionary working-class organizations or was it going

25. Daniel Gutman, *Sangre En el Monte, la increíble Aventura del ERP en los cenos tucumanos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2010).

26. Tate, *Revolutionary Activism*, II, 296.

to liquidate its public activity in deep entryism into other organizations, be they social democratic or Stalinist? Was the task of revolutionaries to build tendencies, groups, and parties in which a politics of socialist revolution could be spread throughout the unions and mass organizations, culminating in a regroupment of the revolutionary left, or could small, clandestine cells of armed guerrillas spark popular insurrection or effect coup d'états and seize power in the name of the dispossessed? Was the crisis of humanity, as Trotsky proclaimed at the time of the birth of the FI, really a crisis of proletarian revolutionary leadership, and all that this formulation entailed, or could capitalism's exploitative and oppressive essence and imperialism's deformations be transcended through the sheer will of exemplary Guevara-like campaigns, one outcome of which was surely evident in 1967, with Che's bullet-riddled Bolivian corpse.

These are, in effect, Tate's questions. They demand nuanced reflection, of course, since no Trotskyist has ever dismissed the possibility that guerrilla warfare in colonial settings might contribute to socialist possibility. But neither can it be a substitute for building mass organizations of resistance under the leadership of those who have developed a revolutionary, proletarian perspective. To suggest, as was done in the discussions of the Cuban Revolution in the FI, that Castro and his comrades were "unconscious Trotskyists" is to vacate the critically important question of what constitutes revolutionary leadership, which can surely never develop unconsciously. This inconsistency in approaching revolutionary leadership led the United Secretariat of the FI on all manner of ill-advised, often quite tragic, excursions into support for questionable quarters over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

The issue of Castro/Guevara insurgency may no longer exercise the revolutionary left as it did at the end of the 1960s. There is no denying, however, that interrogations of like tendencies in our time are needed as well, especially given the attractions of anarchism and "exemplary acts" to some on the left. In a benign way, the episodic rise and fall of the Occupy Movement of 2010–2011, and the more tragic and bloody fate of the Arab Spring of 2011, both of which promised so much and heartened so many on the revolutionary left, pose these same questions yet again. So, too, do the sometimes exhilarating G-8 and G-20 protests, which reveal a willingness on the part of many to confront constituted authority, but a failure to sustain a successful, long-term organized means of resistance.

### **The Decimation of the Contemporary Revolutionary Left and the Subjective Factor**

THE TRAGEDY OF OUR TIMES is that the revolutionary left has been devastated in the decades reaching from the 1970s to the present. As an organized presence, revolutionary socialists have never been weaker in the period reaching from 1900–2014 than they are at the present time. Each year sees this

fundamental erosion continue. Precisely because this revolutionary left has historically interacted with trade unions and social movements to strengthen the resolve and fighting appetite of such bodies, it is also the case that these broader organizations, coalitions, and mobilizations are also weaker. This holds for the trade unions especially, which have been decimated by the long march of capitalist retrenchment and state assault since the 1970s. The leadership of the trade unions, for instance, is more ossified, bureaucratized, and ineffective than at any point in the 20th century. But this is also true for a variety of other movements, including those associated with feminism, reproductive rights, solidarity campaigns, and civil rights, none of which, today, are leavened by the revolutionary politics that were so vigorously present in these areas in the 1960s. There is no doubt that there are those who can and will point to this or that exception to this bleak generalization, but on balance the trajectory of our times, from the vantage point of fundamental social transformation, is undeniably tending in the wrong direction.

All is not lost, however. Things politically did not look very good for the revolutionary left when a 21 year old Ernie Tate found himself outside the Toronto Labour Bookstore in 1955, attracted to what he saw in the window. He joined the revolutionary movement, not in a moment of upsurge, but in a decided downturn. Schooled in a climate of Cold War containment, Tate's choice to be a revolutionary in the worst of times meant that when the best of times appeared, he was there to make a difference, and what a difference it proved to be.

It is impossible to read this memoir and not appreciate, profoundly so, what Tate sacrificed for the betterment of humanity: to build a revolutionary left, Tate gave up secure employments, family life as it is generally understood, relationships and friendships, various comforts and possessions, his immediate body, and his long-term health. Harassed by police on both sides of the Atlantic, viciously beaten by Healyite thugs, chased down London alleyways with Tariq Ali by bellicose racists and anti-communists, starved by his political handlers, who never quite managed to come up with the funds they had either promised or at least slyly suggested would be coming Tate's way, as a revolutionary Ernie did what he could with what he had, even if it was seldom enough. Clearly, he would do it all again, albeit sometimes in ways that might offer some chance to alter this or that decision or action.

There is, refreshingly, no bitterness in this memoir and no regrets. Tate is even-handed, perhaps unusually generous, to many of those whom he could rake over the coals of burning resentments. To be sure, Tate does sometimes settle some old political scores, as is both expected and understandable in books such as these. But Tate's treatments of those with whom he interacted in his days of revolutionary activism in the 1950s and 1960s are remarkably balanced.

Tate's portraits of personalities are, for the most part, respectful and fair-minded; his appreciation of the landscape of politics judicious; and his

abstracts relating to revolutionary orientation sober and insightful. These are volumes, then, that should be read and thought through in our difficult times. Their message is clear. A revolutionary left can be built, even in the most inauspicious of circumstances. A revolutionary left must be built, if we are not to slip further into the barbarism that is unfolding all around us in our contemporary world. A revolutionary left, however, needs revolutionaries, those able to follow the course of principle and its difficult demands, refusing the easy errors of the past. Such revolutionaries need the organization, structure, and leadership – the politics of Trotskyism – that these foundations of revolutionary activism provide.

The revolutionary left has always been a collective endeavour, and it always will be. Indeed, one crucial, if unstated, theme that runs through these two volumes is how dependent the health of the revolutionary left is on a leadership able to develop its human cadre in effective ways, accenting the differentiated positive contributions individuals in its ranks can make and minimizing the negatives that are always a part of particular people's makeup, and which dissidents cannot help but bring with them into their movements and activism. Revolutionary organizations, perhaps even more so than other institutions in capitalist society, are necessarily made up of headstrong and oddly constituted individuals. Maximizing the good work that can be gotten out of each and every revolutionary dissident, and minimizing the damage that might be coming from them to organizations and causes, is a good part of what leadership of the revolutionary left entails. Thus, handling the human revolutionary material of any serious socialist organization is an important component of leadership, a critical complement to the ability to chart new theoretical territory or develop an acute sense of strategic direction in specific circumstances. Precisely because few individuals combine this array of skills, the leadership of the revolutionary left, as well as its activist base, relies on collective rather than individual strengths. Reading Tate's volumes reminds us how difficult this can be, even how often revolutionary leadership has come up short in these challenging departments.

Being of and in this revolutionary left thus demands patience, a capacity to stay the course through times stingy in their offerings and stubborn in their building of barriers to human advance. As James P. Cannon once remarked, recalling how things finally came together for his Trotskyist comrades in Minneapolis in 1934,<sup>27</sup> when they led one of the most significant class battles in the history of the American labour movement, "Fortune favors the godly. If you live right and conduct yourself properly, you get a lucky break now and then."<sup>28</sup> Cannon's tongue-in-cheek reference to godliness aside, revolutionaries

27. For a recent treatment see Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014).

28. James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Trotskyism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pioneer, 1944), 144.

do indeed need the odd piece of luck; they also need to make the most of their circumstances when they do catch a historical break.

There was much luck in Ernie Tate arriving in Canada in 1955, and the Canadian revolutionary left benefitted greatly from this good fortune. Similarly, there was a measure of luck in Tate appearing in London, England, when he did in 1965. No individual, and no political organization, could have created the conditions and developments he encountered. But Tate made the most of them. As bad off as we in the left currently are, we can be thankful for this. We are lucky to have these volumes and the history Tate made and recalls for us here.



**Jess MacKenzie, Sirio Di Giuliomaria (leader of Italian Section, Fourth International), and Ernie Tate, Italy, 1969.**

Courtesy Jess MacKenzie/Ernie Tate.