



Members of the women's panel at the conference on anti-communism, (L to R): Rosalyn Bazandall, Margaret Randall, Angela Davis and Amy Swerdlow

Cambridge conference chronicles anticommunism

Forum addresses domestic and international red-baiting but fails to take on homophobia

By Wickie Stamps

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Over 1000 journalists, academics, and individuals representing a broad spectrum of political positionings met Nov. 13 to explore how "...anticommunism, like sexism and racism has come to serve to everyone's detriment." The



conference, titled "Anticommunism and the U.S.: History and Consequences" was organized under the auspices of the Institute for Media Analysis, an educational organization committed to combatting mis/disinformation and broadening progressive political/cultural exchange.

Anticommunism was given a personal face as individuals blacklisted during the McCarthy purges shared their stories. The denial of visas for Nicaraguan delegates (whose colleagues were similarly denied access to the August 1988 National Gay and Lesbian Health Care and AIDS Forum in Boston) and Cubans spoke to the present power of anticommunism to silence unpopular voices.

Three days of workshops, lectures, art shows and plenaries explored the use of anticommunism to censor and split individuals and movements. Some forums looked at the red scares that swept this country during "McCarthy era" in the 1950s; others sessions delved into the Nazis' assault on communists. Radical academic Howard Zinn's quip that the U.S. is "always ready to kill people to protect them from communism" capsulized many presentations that examin-

ed U.S. international and domestic aggression (cloaked as jingoistic anti-terrorism) against progressive movements and governments. Rainbow Coalition representative Jack O'Dell argued that one of the price tags of the U.S. military buildup is a lack of health care in poorer communities — which include a disproportionate number of people of color. Other conference participants cited the barrage of race and red-baiting tactics hurled against the Jackson presidential campaign as evidence of the strategic relationship between racism and anticommunism. Many panelists concurred that the baiting of Dukakis as a "card carrying liberal" signalled a rightward shift in the U.S. political climate. Many said they felt that under Reagan's conservatism the "C" word of the '50s has been usurped by the "L" word in the '80s.

Women's movement panel addresses les/gay history

On day two the systematized homophobia historically accompanying upsurges in anticommunism was raised — albeit slightly. Initially, academic and author Blanche Weisen Cook and members of the women's movement panel dotted their talks with pieces of gay and lesbian history and struggle. Much of the more detailed analysis and complexities between communist purges and homophobia were deepened through the poignant queries and comments during the audience participation. This was the first and perhaps only time that the communist underpinnings of the Mattachine Society were addressed at the conference. Cook and Rosalyn Baxandall, a prior member of Red Stockings and New York Radical Women,

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acknowledged gay people were included not only on the infamous McCarthy "deviants" list but also as one of Hitler's categories of "lives not worth living." Both women put forth that the New Right's agenda continues to categorize and devalue the lives of those it considers "expendable."

Radical activist/author Margaret Randall and Baxandall addressed the anti-gay underpinnings of the New Right's pro-family super-nationalism. They later criticized the conference itself for perpetuating a homophobic concept of the family by failing to address lesbian and gay issues.

Angela Davis, Black activist, communist and author of *Women, Race and Class*, acknowledged the power of the Oct. 11, 1987 D.C. demonstration for lesbian and gay rights. She said the March and other mass mobilizations like it are potential sources for building a united front among progressive movements. Reflecting upon the link between anticommunism and anti-gay forces she emphasized the need for activists to "explore our common roots ... and the impact of homophobia on society..." and to look "to who it was that used (anticommunism and homophobia) to prevent us from standing together against McCarthy...."

What was not discussed at the conference was as significant for many as what was. With the exception of the women's panel and closing plenary criticisms there was a deafening silence on the anti-gay/anticommunism link. For example, nowhere was there an assessment of the Right's moves during the AIDS crisis to formally resurrect its assault on those who threaten or tax U.S. interests. Failure to address international or domestic AIDS policies (such as immigration laws, threatened quarantine or skewed funding priorities) is a weakness any analysis of anti-communism cannot afford.

The void of discussion of gay/lesbian history was not from lack of effort on the part of several conference planning committee members. Since the inception of the committee 11 months ago, they advocated for not only the inclusion of the anticommunist/homophobia link but also for a broader representation of domestic social movements. Organizer John Demeter, one

of the individuals who advocated for increased inclusiveness on all fronts, told *GCN*, he felt that "...all the social movements were absent...there was a lack of creative analysis in understanding the various forms that repression and social control can take... [T]he right recognizes the power of the new social movements (civil rights, gay/lesbian and the women's movements) ... and actively works to dismantle them." Demeter continued, "[W]e must look to expanding the movement, making the connections ... for when they come it will not be just for the communists alone ... The lack of representation of women (70 percent of the panelists were men) was "deplorable," according to lesbian activist Leshe Cagan who also works on peace and disarmament issues.

The conference on anticommunism is significant for what it raised: an examination of anticommunism domestically and internationally as a central weapon of the Right used to destroy individual movements and revolutionary governments. But the conference should also be held accountable for what it deleted. It was fraught with missed opportunities and riddled with silences. Minus the politics surrounding AIDS, the history of the New Left, feminist, and the gay and lesbian movements, any emerging strategies for social change will clearly be weakened. Cagan summarized many of the conference's strengths and weaknesses: "It [the conference] was important ... [because] progressive movements need to understand the history and present reality of anticommunism and anti-leftism.... [Y]et there were serious weaknesses ... such as the inability of the conference organizers to integrate the link and history of anticommunism to homophobia.... [T]he organizers are to be congratulated for resurfacing anticommunism, but the analysis brought forth must be deepened by [inclusion of the] women's, gay/lesbian and the Black liberation movements."

The anticommunism conference was a place to step back and assess the role that anticommunism has played in destroying those who threaten U.S. interests and values. It was an arena where we could glance backward and strategize against further losses. It was most assuredly — as the Institute's own mission statement declares — "only a beginning."

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