

From Pabloism to the Greens

Peter Camejo dead at 68

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This past weekend brought news of the death of Peter Camejo, a leading figure in the US Green Party, three times its candidate for governor of California, and Ralph Nader's vice presidential running mate in his independent third party campaign for president in 2004. Camejo, 68 years old, had been stricken with lymphoma some 20 months ago.

In reporting Camejo's death, the Associated Press wrote, "Before joining the Green Party, he also ran for president as the Socialist Workers Party nominee in 1976." This bare mention of Camejo's relation to the SWP is misleading, and one suspects deliberately so. It suggests a political career similar to that of Nader himself, as an individual activist who threw his hat into the ring from time to time, using one party or another to gain ballot access.

In fact Camejo spent more than 20 years as a member of the SWP, the party founded by James P. Cannon and other American supporters of the Fourth International who fought the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution. Leon Trotsky worked closely with this party from his exile in Mexico in the period before he was assassinated in August 1940. The SWP played a leading role in the world Trotskyist movement through the 1950s.

In 1953, as a sympathizing section of the FI, the SWP helped to found the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world movement with which the Socialist Equality Party is in political solidarity today. The ICFI was established to defend Marxism against the tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, who abandoned the struggle to build independent revolutionary parties based on the working class, instead adapting themselves to "leftward moving" sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy, Social Democracy and the bourgeois nationalist figures of the

anti-colonial struggle.

While Pabloism was closely associated with conceptions like historian Isaac Deutscher's theory of the self-reform of Stalinism, this was only one expression of its all-encompassing rejection of Marxism. Its outlook was above all bound up with pessimism on the prospects for socialism and on the revolutionary role of the international working class.

When Camejo joined the SWP around 1960, pessimistic moods were already predominant within the party, notwithstanding its earlier struggles. It was well on its way, under the pressure of the postwar economic boom and the apparent strength of both imperialism and the Stalinist bureaucracy, toward reunifying with the same Pabloite opportunists from which it had broken in 1953. The party in which Camejo got his political education was no longer the one that Trotsky had collaborated with so closely. Camejo's subsequent political trajectory and his emergence in recent years as a leading "left" bourgeois politician was prepared in the period in which he played a leading role in the ex-Trotskyist SWP.

The reunification with the Pabloites came in 1963. Those who fought against this move were soon expelled and went on to found the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party.

While there were some within the SWP during this period who had misgivings about the rapid rapprochement with the same forces they had broken with less than 10 years earlier, Camejo was certainly not one of them. He was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the realignment.

This writer was among the first members of the Young Socialist Alliance, then the youth movement of the SWP, to meet Camejo before he joined the party. At first he expressed some hesitation about joining,

skeptical precisely of what he considered the dangers of “sectarianism,” by which he meant the defense of political principles. He distrusted the tendency to emphasize fundamental historical questions like the unbridgeable gulf between Stalinism and Trotskyism. After joining, he was undoubtedly pleased at the party’s rapid embrace of middle class protest and opportunism in the next few years. Within the SWP he quickly became a leading member of the youth leadership, replacing Tim Wohlforth and others who opposed the SWP’s turn to the right.

Camejo also played a prominent role in the SWP’s turn to Castroism and the orientation toward petty bourgeois radical nationalism in Latin America. He had been born in the US of Venezuelan parents, but spent much of his early childhood in Venezuela, and regularly visited the country through his teenage years.

Camejo generally could be relied upon to stand on the right wing in any political debate in the party. He was rarely at a loss for words, but most of the time this remained at the level of glibness and a kind of demagogic humor that corresponded with the opportunist content of his politics. Camejo’s political interventions evinced a general contempt for party history, and he was known for insisting with a clever turn of phrase that principles should never get in the way of immediate tasks and practical advantage.

Camejo finally left the SWP around 1980. He was expelled, but not because of any fundamental differences with the party leadership’s abandonment of Trotskyism, an abandonment that was made official with its 1982 denunciation of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution. Camejo’s differences were confined to tactics and tempo. He was already developing the orientation that would take him directly into bourgeois politics of the Green and left-liberal variety.

Camejo soon surfaced as an asset management specialist, a financial planner who boasted that his firm manages nearly \$1 billion in “socially responsible” investments.

In the 1990s Camejo became prominent in the California Green Party. He ran as its candidate for governor in 2002 and again in 2003, when he played a prominent role in supporting the right-wing recall campaign against Democratic Governor Gray Davis.

Ralph Nader issued a statement after Camejo’s death

calling him “a great American” and “a friend, colleague and politically courageous champion of the downtrodden and mistreated of the entire Western Hemisphere.” Camejo had an equally high opinion of his former running mate, in 2004 calling him “an historic figure in American history.”

According to one account, Camejo liked to call himself a watermelon, “green on the outside, red on the inside.” His “socialist” views were well hidden, however, including in his bids for public office. An advocate of what he called “fiscal responsibility and progressive values,” he was recognized by the bourgeois media and the entire ruling establishment as a respectable representative of middle class reformism, who posed no real threat to their interests.



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