MEXICO'S COMMUNISTS

In the midst of the unfolding Central American and Carribean liberation struggles stands Mexico, an oil-rich country. Its anti-imperialist foreign policy combined with sharp repression at home is just one of the many paradoxes of the Mexican scene.

Mexico is also a country where the recently legalised Communist Party (PCM) is in the midst of a ferment of ideas and activity as it seeks to define its role in the 1980's. Recently this redefinition has included a dramatic dialogue with other political groups.

Two Australians, Barry Carr and Barbara Marsh, recently spent six months in Mexico studying the Mexican Communist Party. The author of several books in Spanish on the Mexican workers' movement and currently writing a history of the PCM, Barry Carr attended the 19th Congress of the PCM in March 1981 as an observer. Barbara Marsh and Barry Carr were interviewed for Australian Left Review by Philip Herington.

There have been some pretty dramatic events on the Mexican left in the past few months?

Well, the unbelievable seems almost about to happen; it looks as though most of the parties of the left for once are going to unite to form a single party. In the middle of August the four parties that form the Coalition of the Left, namely the PCM, the PPM, PSR and MAUS* agreed to merge with the biggest party outside the Coalition, the Mexican Workers Party, (PMT). The exact details of this merger are not clear yet.

Although there has been talk of forming a loose united party for the left in previous years there was nothing in the deliberations of the 19th Congress of the PCM, or for that matter in the life of the Mexican left as a whole earlier this year, that signalled how close such a dramatic event was.

What was the significance of the 19th Congress?

The 19th Congress is symptomatic of the tremendous changes which have occurred in the PCM since, at the 13th Congress in 1960, it turned its back on twenty years of crisis and disintegration. The 13th Congress took place when the party was underground and when the workers' movement as a whole was suffering tremendous repression. In 1958-9 there had been a wave of strike activity involving railway workers and telegraphists and the party was involved in some of these actions. In those days the party was so small that the 13th Congress took place in a private house in the southern suburbs of Mexico City without the public interest that surrounded the 19th Congress.

The 13th Congress was held in a former brothel which was one of the few houses that the PCM could rent for the Congress. Old timers recall the alarm caused by furious knocking on the door during the Congress proceedings. What could very easily have been a foretaste of a police raid turned out to be some clients of the brothel who hadn't realised that the premises were being put to a different use.

Contrast this scene with the 19th Congress?

STOP PRESS: A special Congress of the Mexican Communist Party was held in October to discuss a new political formation. As a result, the MCP dissolved and formed, with other political groupings, the united Left Party.

*PMT (Mexican Workers Party); PPM (Party of the Mexican People); PSR (Revolutionary Socialist Party); MAUS (breakaway from PCM).
which was held in the congress centre of a luxury hotel, the Hotel de Mexico, in the full glare of publicity, with observers from many areas outside the PCM able to attend virtually every session. This was a Congress with 290 voting delegates (plus hundreds more without a vote) representing some 15,000 members. The Congress debate was incredibly frank and lively with relatively few signs of that tradition of communist congresses where the issues are decided in advance by the leadership and where the Congress itself is relegated to a largely ritual role.

Anyone familiar with Mexican communism in the 1940s or '50s and '60s would be amazed at the CPM's current relationship with Mexican society as a whole. The party has a qualitatively greater presence in civil society. At certain times, if you turn on your radio or TV set, you are able to tune in to the party's programmes. They are jammed in between the sentimental soap operas and ranch-style music that fill the programming most of the time.

In the Chamber of Deputies, not a body with much political power in Mexico to be sure, there is an eighteen-member Coalition of the Left of which half the deputies are members of the PCM. The party was able to win three-quarters of a million votes in the national elections of 1979. So today you have a party which has inserted itself deeply into Mexican life and one which has also undergone a very major internal transformation, a real process of democratisation at a number of levels.

Until the mid-1960s the PCM was one of Latin America's most stalinised parties. Not only did it have an uncritical relationship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union but its internal structure was excessively centralised. Not even the Central Committee could exercise a decision-making role effectively. It was a party with a tiny membership of a few hundred, largely isolated from the working class and peasantry and with an unhealthy reputation for subservience to the state and to the ruling party in Mexico, the PRI. Its legality was always unclear and the party went through a long period of electoral abstentionism, arguing that the widespread political corruption and all encompassing power of the ruling party made electioneering pointless.

The PCM had suffered an incredible amount of political repression, which partly explains its relatively marginal status in the 1950s and early 60s.

It used to have a very narrow vanguardist conception of its role and was never able to transform itself into a mass party. It also saw itself as the sole interpreter of marxist theory and practice in the country which obviously had a bad effect on its relationship with other sectors and parties of the left.

Yet in the last ten years the party has grown considerably and changed in the process.

**What are the consequences of this change?**

First, the party's attitude to other groups on the left has changed dramatically. The PCM no longer sees itself having a monopoly of marxism; it's simply one of a number of focuses of socialist action. This isn't just a change of style, but it's flowed through to the party's practice, its strategy of alliances and so on. Of course, most recently this has led to the proposal to form a single party of the left. It has also led to short-term agreements with the major trotskyist party, the PRT, although the current moves to consolidate the Mexican left don't seem to be receiving much support from this group. Still, in a country where Trotskyism has been so bitterly denounced (the PCM explicitly recognised its role in the persecution and murder of Trotsky in a book published by one of its great leaders, Valentin Campa, a few years ago), this is quite an achievement.

**What sort of presence does the party have outside of elections?**

Despite the major role the PCM played in worker and peasant organisation in the 1920s and 1930s, today the party's presence in the mass movement is rather weak. In the 1960s the party began to insert itself into university unionism. This is rather different from Australia. In Mexico, the university trade unions include academic, manual and
administrative workers. Outside of the university unions, the party has scattered pockets of support in mining centres, metal-producing works and in the railway system and among school teachers.

But the party’s influence has grown mainly among the intelligentsia, professionals, students and so on. This has given rise to quite a lively debate within the party over the last couple of years over whether the party is in crisis or not as a result of its changing sociological composition. There is talk of a ‘crisis of growth’ following the party’s legalisation in 1976 and ’77. A movement of ‘renovators’, questioning the party’s strategies, developed, at first in the Central Committee and then at lower levels within the party. The debate became public for the first time in November last year (1980) with the publication of a letter in a leading Mexico City newspaper signed by thirteen members of the Central Committee. The letter was titled ‘For the renovation of the Mexican Communist Party’.

Could you say something about the Congress; how it was organised; the main issues?

Well the first thing I should say is that there were no boring ritual discussions and no opportunities to fall asleep. The level of the debate was of a very high quality and everything was up for discussion. There were four committees to discuss the party’s statutes, programme, theses and the secretary-general’s report. The last two days were dominated by the plenary sessions which met to discuss the conclusions reached by each of the four committees. I suppose the main theme of the Congress was an unintended one — a struggle between different perspectives on the party’s future. Involved in this struggle were issues such as the legality of currents of opinion within the party, the scope of the Central Committee’s prerogatives as well as more general issues such as the party’s position on the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

What were the issues raised by the ‘renovators group’?

First, it’s important not to see them as forming a homogeneous grouping; there are differences among them on many issues. Broadly, though, they are critical of what they regard as the party’s uncritical embrace of parliamentarism which has led the party to divert resources from mass work. A second theme in the renovators’ platform is a call for greater democratisation in the party’s practice including a definition of the power of the Central Committee and the legalisation of horizontal contacts between different organs at the base level. Another theme is concern over the way in which, according to the renovators, the party has become a ‘party of opinion’ rather than a mass party. In other words that the party has used its legal status to influence public opinion, penetrate the daily press, etc., rather than involving itself more firmly in mass action. The particular criticism was linked with the renovators’ concern over the party’s very limited involvement with the Mexican working class and peasantry at a time when the country was going through a deep process of proletarianisation.

How did the leadership respond to these views?

It went more or less as follows. The renovators are said to be a minority of intellectuals guilty of a return to the antiparliamentarianism of the party’s past when anarcho-syndicalist views were much in evidence. The way they are emphasising the need for mass struggle, etc., is tantamount to the development of a workerist current which ignores the increasing importance of middle-sector groups, the intelligentsia, state employees, radicalised petty bourgeoisie, etc. Lastly the manner in which the renovators put forward their position raises legitimate fears of the emergence of factions within the party.

How was the debate resolved?

The renovators remained a minority both within the new Central Committee and within the Congress as a whole. However, on many issues the renovators were supported by delegates who were not identified with the overall position of the renovators. This meant, for example, that the Congress agreed to legalise horizontal contact in the party and
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the Central Committee lost its automatic right to vote in the Congresses. In the future, assuming that the PCM will still exist as a separate party after the ‘merger’ of the parties of the left projected for next year, members of the Central Committee will have a vote only when elected as delegates to the Congress by a basic party organisation. On the big issues of the day the relationship between the party and workers’ and peasants’ movement, the role of parliamentary work, the strategy of alliances with other groups on the left — nothing was really resolved mainly because the inner-party struggle diverted attention from these issues.

What I think was most important was that this dispute was not resolved through expulsions and splits as has happened in the past. This is a tremendous achievement and so is the vigour and depth of debate within the PCM.

One remarkable aspect of Mexican society is the enormous interest in marxist theory and writings. What impact has this had on the debate in the PCM, and is there any reflection of the much discussed ‘crisis of marxism’?

There’s no doubt that the PCM’s enormous growth over the last five years or so has got a lot to do with the growth of marxism as a whole. Marxism is almost hegemonic among the intelligentsia. There are probably more marxist magazines printed in Mexico today than in any other comparable Third World country. The bookshops, even of a commercial variety, are chock-a-block with marxist literature, old and new. Of course since 1973 Mexico has become a refuge for thousands of exiled leftists from all over Latin America and this influx of talent has transformed the universities and public debate in the country. However, bourgeois ideologies, particularly notions of class collaboration and corporatism are still influential in the workers’ movement, still largely tied to the official party, the PRI, through a network of mass organisations which drastically curb working-class autonomy.

I suppose the ‘crisis of marxism’ is reflected in another sense too. The PCM’s rapid growth has meant that the party has had to assimilate very quickly a large number of people with very varying perspectives and relationships to marxism. The party’s ability to integrate all these people into its basic party activity has been limited, and the range of perspectives brought into the party is vast, contradictory as well as exhilaratingly unorthodox. So there’s both great intellectual excitement as well as intellectual and ideological diversity or what some people have called a tremendous intellectual ‘dispersion’.

Is there a conflict between traditional worker-based sections of the party and newer intellectually trained members?

So far I don’t think that this is the area of disputation except possibly on the issue of sexual politics. This is an area which is relatively new to the life of the PCM and in Mexico as a whole — certainly quite different to the situation in Australia.

Is the PCM the Latin American flag-waver for Euro-communism (EC) as is sometimes suggested?

I must say I am very sceptical; in fact I wouldn’t agree with that characterisation. First, it is very difficult to decide precisely what a Euro-communist party is. The differences between the Spanish, French and Italian parties are enormous. They reflect the different political histories of those countries and different social structures. I would say that the PCM is not a Euro-communist party because EC was an attempt to come to terms with the application of marxist political practice to advanced capitalist societies. It involved the questioning of models which had been uncritically assimilated from the experience of the Soviet Union and from leninist practice of a different era. For all its burgeoning capitalist economy, Mexico cannot be considered a member of the advanced capitalist ‘core region’ like France or Italy. It is not like these other societies for a number of reasons.

At the same time, if you look at EC as the sum of a number of characteristics then you certainly can find some of these features present in the PCM. For example, the
relationship between national communist parties and the international communist movement. There is no question that the PCM shares the Euro-communist position on the importance of autonomy and non-interference of the movement in the affairs of the national parties. This has been demonstrated time and time again — beginning with the Mexican party’s condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and more recently Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

There was a very vivid debate at the 19th Congress over the appropriateness of the concept 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. The arguments used in the debate were very similar to those used in Western Europe, but the resolution of the debate is somewhat different. At the 19th Congress the delegates very narrowly approved the leadership’s decision to eliminate the term from the party’s programme and it was replaced with a new phrase ‘democratic workers' power’. In other words the essential content of the term was retained. The change didn't have anything to do with the strong 'pluralist' tradition within the Mexican working class because such a tradition does not exist. It was dropped because of the unfortunate connotations of the term 'dictatorship' in a country with a very authoritarian political system. Since the PCM saw its role as being part of the struggle against effective one-party authoritarianism and for the achievement of autonomy for the mass organisations of workers and peasants, it was thought that ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ didn’t emphasise sufficiently the democratic character of the state in the transition stage.

In terms of internal organisation and structure, in terms of democratisation, the PCM does feed into a number of the currents active in EC. There is a much more authentic interpretation of democratic centralism, a rejection of vanguardist notions and a rethinking of the party’s position towards other left parties and groups. The logical extension of this last point is the recent decision to work for the formation of a new united party of the left, even if this means the abandonment of the party’s separate name and existence.

But despite all these similarities with EC there is at the same time a profoundly held belief, and this cuts across the different currents of opinion within the party, that EC has limited relevance to Mexican conditions. This is not based on any purist prejudice about where EC has led some of the European parties but is based on an assessment of the differences between Mexican society and the structure of the advanced capitalist world. It is based on the fact that in Mexico the state, more obviously so than in Western Europe, exercises its authority through the use of violence than through a more broadly articulated hegemony in civil society.

Therefore some of the conceptions of EC, which are the result of a concrete analysis of the peculiarities of the state in advanced capitalist society, do not apply in the Mexican case. It is also based upon a characterisation of the nature of the working class and popular movements in Mexico. In Europe we have working class movements that are very old. They go back to the beginnings of the 19th century — movements that have struggled for over a century for the franchise, for democratic rights; movements in which the more progressive elements of bourgeois democracy have taken very strong roots as a result of the struggle of popular movements. In Mexico this is not the case. The popular movements of workers and peasants have never been successful in forcing the establishment of a regime of liberal democracy. On the contrary, as far as Mexico is concerned, the parliamentary system is synonymous with corruption, serious violence, manipulation and fraud.

There is no broadly based identification with parliamentary democracy. On the contrary the major concern of the popular movement is with much more basic issues such as a struggle for the autonomy of the trade unions and peasant associations, a struggle for union independence and democracy.

The third strand of the relationship of
Mexico to EC is to be found in the relationship between Mexico and the United States. In Mexico we are dealing with a highly dependent society, a society which like many other Latin American societies experiences imperialism in a much more direct and crude fashion than the more mature and somewhat more autonomous capitalist countries of Western Europe. In this context a radical break with capitalism in Mexico would signify a much more traumatic break with the inter-American socio-economic system than would be the case in Europe. Or at least, this is the assumption. And I think it would therefore provoke the kind of intervention by the United States that, directly or indirectly, Euro-communist strategy is least capable of dealing with. In other words, while it would be quite wrong to suggest that the PCM embraces a strategy of armed struggle — it is not a party that sees armed struggle as being on the agenda at the moment, far from it, it is a party in which people see the break with capitalism as involving a degree of violence which is qualitatively much greater than we could conceive of occurring or being necessary in the mature capitalist democracies of Western Europe. So it is for these reasons, that despite certain similarities in the programme and in the style of the PCM with some sort of model of EC, there are a number of elements that would clearly mark off the PCM from the Euro-communist parties. The leadership quite firmly abstains from any characterisation of the PCM as Euro-communist.

How does Mexico and the PCM assess the Central American and Caribbean liberation struggles?

Mexico has for a very long time had a foreign policy with a strong anti-imperialist flavour, at the level of rhetoric, largely speaking. Nevertheless, Mexico has been genuinely anti-imperialist and it is easy to see why, given the nature of Mexico's revolutionary movement and the nature of continuing relations between Mexico and successive United States' administrations. The discovery of new deposits of oil in the last four years has given this anti-imperialist element greater zap. This can be seen in the current administration of Jose Lopez Portillo, although it is generally regarded as a rather conservative government in terms of its domestic social and economic policies.

The most notable developments have been Mexico's support for the Sandinista struggle against Somoza and then for the Reconstruction Government in Nicaragua and more recently in support for the FDR in El Salvador. A short while ago the French and Mexican governments issued a declaration announcing their recognitions of the FDR as a 'significant political force' in El Salvador. The Mexican government has supplied oil and other resources to Nicaragua at quite reasonable prices by world standards, assisted with the literacy campaign, and in the diplomatic sphere it lobbies hard for the principle of non-intervention in Central American affairs. The ruling party in Mexico, the PRI, clearly sees itself as allied to the position of the Socialist International on most Central American issues.

I think that Mexico and the United States are bound to clash more frequently over Central America in the next few years. Its not only the anti-imperialist content of the Mexican revolution that’s at stake either. Mexico likes to think of itself as exercising a benevolent protectorate over Central America itself. This 'special relationship' of Mexico to the region is linked not only to history (the region was originally one unit in colonial times) but to economic questions — to Mexico's growing investment and trade with the region.

The PCM has always had a lively interest in, and concern with the countries of Central America. In fact the PCM itself helped create virtually all the communist parties of the region in the 1920s and 1930s and the party played an important role in assisting Sandino in Nicaragua during this period. Needless to say the party has argued consistently against imperialist intervention in the region, although its fair to say that there is such unanimity on this subject among all the nationalist and left sectors in Mexico that the party isn't unique in its position.