This year the seventieth birthday of the famous Mexican painter and revolutionary David Alfaro Siqueiros will be celebrated throughout the world.

Tom Morris, editor of the Canadian Communist youth journal SCAN, taped this interview with him last July.

Morris: What are your ideas about the mural?

Siqueiros: I am now working on three murals at the same time. The mural you saw in Cuernavaca, another in the Chapultepec Castle and one in the centre of the old section of the city. The mural in Cuernavaca shows the march of humanity, especially in Mexico and Latin America, the misery in our countries. In Chapultepec it is about patriots and the enemies of the motherland. It is the history of the Mexican Revolution from 1906 to 1913. This was the most bloody period of Mexico’s fight. It was at the same time the period of the best direction of the Revolution, with anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and communists leading the strike. Many Americans were with us. Americans who worked in the mines joined together with the Mexican workers and fought against the American and Mexican armies together when the Americans crossed the border to aid the dictatorship of Diaz.

Another thing is important: there are now sixteen young artists working with me in a collective effort from different parts of the world—from Israel, Paris and Italy. The Italian artist was nominated by the Italian communists who helped in a financial way.

The mural being painted in Cuernavaca is the largest mural ever painted. It covers more than 4,500 square metres.*

M: Will the theme of the mural The March of Humanity begin from early man?

S: It will begin from the primitive tribal life in Latin America up to the time of the first industrialisation. That is the first part of the mural. The second part is the real revolution that is

*It will take about 60,000 man-hours of work, use up about three tons of paint and 12,600 quarts of solvent.—Ed.
coming now—that is in the process now. This is divided into two periods: from the beginning of the Mexican Revolution to the present and then to the new social era of humanity.

It will be in the hotel Casino de la Selva in a room used for conventions. There are sixty-four large panels each weighing 550 pounds, made from asbestos cement. We are working with acrylics produced by ourselves. I began to paint with this new modern medium in my workshop in New York in 1934. This mural technically is following the process that we began in the United States.

M: Are the young artists working with you learning this process?

S: The young artists are helping in complementary things, because one man must have the general direction. This is tremendously different from easel painting. In easel painting each painting has its own isolated problems. In mural painting all the problems blend together and can be directed like an orchestra.

M: What are the main problems in a mural of this size?

S: They are optical problems. In easel painting, the viewer is 'static'. That means he looks at the work from the front and doesn't have to look from one side to the other. In mural painting this is impossible. The paintings you saw this morning in Cuernavaca should be viewed from a distance of seventy yards.

M: And the ceiling?

S: You can imagine! The ceiling is more than 1,700 square yards. It is tremendous!

M: What about the floor?

S: The floor will also be decorated. People will be able to walk on it because of a new medium, a type of glass that needs resurfacing each two years.

M: What groups of artists have influenced you most in your lifetime?

S: Well, you know that I have painted in the United States. I have painted murals in Mexico from 1922. Then in Argentina and Chile. I've painted small murals in Cuba. I have painted in many countries. That means the artists of each country have helped me. Our Mexican movement of mural painting grew and first went to the United States. Diego Rivera painted in the States* as did many others.

* Rivera painted murals in San Francisco, Detroit and New York between 1930 and 1934. Those in New York were later destroyed because they were said to contain communist ideas.—Ed.
There is something very important for the American artists and the American people to understand. The Mexican movement of mural painting is a tremendous revolution against the historical position of art in Europe and the United States. Because mural painting is a collective form, a social form of art and has disappeared from the last periods of renaissance to today. Today painting is only easel painting, to be placed on the walls of the rich apartments and homes. Little by little this social reality determined the form of art.

Mural painting as developed in Mexico for the first time in our era must be close to the human problems. We cannot go to abstraction like the abstractionist himself. The centre of our painting needs to be Man and the problems of Man.

M: Is this the reason that murals are painted on public buildings in Mexico?

S: For that reason! Do you know that most of the artists who started the mural painting in Mexico were soldiers in the revolutionary army? In my mural at Chapultepec is the story of the Revolution. I met most of the people painted there. In three months I will reach seventy years of age. I was an officer in that army as were most of the people in the mural. The Mexican movement of art is the only movement linked with the people. It is a revolutionary movement not only because its theme is revolutionary, but because it uses the walls—large murals—that is art of masses. These are not paintings that a rich man can take to his apartment to show only to his beautiful lady friends.

M: Are there a new group of Mexican mural painters growing?

S: There are many young artists, yes. In the last period for political reasons the Mexican government hasn't helped mural production the way they helped before. And when they do help they force the artist to paint 'dark', subjective works. But, in my workshop at Cuernavaca we are going to bring the young people again to the murals; to explain directly with physical arguments that mural painting is in reality the most powerful form in art for the future of the world.

M: Do you find an interest developing in mural painting in other countries?

S: Very little. Under our influence it developed earlier in the States. But after the Roosevelt period the government stopped helping the mural. Many of the artists who worked with myself and with Rivera were forced to go to easel painting as their only means of livelihood.

M: How do you connect your work with your political ideas?
S: You know that I was an officer in the revolutionary army. Before that I was involved in the art students' strike in 1910 and 1913 and made my first connection with art and with political ideas. The art students' strike was a student strike with labor demands—not only demands for ourselves as artists, but demands for Mexico. We spoke for the first time about the nationalisation of railways. They laughed. This was in our program and many things of this kind. That means in reality my life in the revolution comes from the strike in 1910. That means in the period of the dictatorship of Diaz. And after, in 1913, in the period of the tremendous repression I escaped from the school of art, as did most of the students, to become soldiers and then officers in the revolutionary army of this time.

After, I was sent to Europe as Military Attache in 1919-20-21 where I met socialists and anarchists in Catalonia because I lived in Barcelona. There I helped the workers with money.

When we began the movement of painters in Mexico in 1922 we had ideas. Not complete ideas, mind you. In 1924 I joined the Communist Party. The Communist Party was founded in 1922 but was then only a small theoretical group. The first real newspaper of the Party was founded by the painters—El Machette. That means I have been a communist for 42 years.

M: Were you in Spain during the Civil War?

S: I was a brigade chief there. I was there during most of the war and commanded various brigades and a division. My brigade was the 74th Motorized Brigade, and we fought all over Spain.

M: Do you have any advice for young artists who are beginning?

S: My advice is this: If you stay in the land of easel painting little by little you are going to become ideologically and aesthetically a part of the bourgeois class. Your mind is going to be the mind in aesthetics of the bourgeois class, even if you have some political and human conscience. I think that you need to fight in the future for mural painting because it is the only form to socialise art, that means to produce art for everybody.

You know, when you paint for the rich, whether you wish it or not, little by little you will take the aesthetic road of the rich.

M: We would assume that all the possibilities exist in the socialist countries for a social form of art. Has mural painting caught on in these countries?

S: I can give you a copy of a letter I wrote to the Soviet artists seven years ago. I also pronounced my theme in Leningrad
in which I made a comradely criticism, not a negative criticism, but very strong. I asked why they have not developed mural painting.

To understand this problem it is not enough to be a communist. It is necessary to be a great artist. That is to say, their artists who started to paint large panels in my opinion, were not artists with a great emotion. They supposed the only problem was one of theme—that is to paint workers, or rich people, a beautiful lady or a peasant. That is not the problem, you know. The problem is one of style, of conception and monumentality. In painting we can apply dialectics like we do in politics.

When the Soviet revolution started most of the good artists were in Paris. They were interested in abstractionism and the Paris currents. The Soviet government was forced to put the academic artists to work. That was one reason. The other is this: any society, as deep and profound as is the socialist society, cannot create its aspiration of art in ten days. Culture is the cream of a society.

In the USSR it is coming. It isn’t possible to produce art by decree, by passing a law. Instead of painting bourgeois themes you paint working class themes and have a good painting—that is not enough, not enough. I want to say that not all socialist paintings are bad. No. There are very important and interesting works. My criticism is of the current altogether, the idea they have. That means their present opinions of what realism is. I think their artists have taken a very academic and rigid conception of what realism is.

Realism is not simply to reproduce something seen through the eyes. It is something more complicated than that. It is not only to take a model and to copy it. The first thing is to relate current realism with the tradition of realism, to be more realistic than were past realists. That means to discover the elements of a new realism that belongs to a new society.

There is also the problem of the connection between the man who commands a painting and the artist. A man can be a wonderful leader, member of the Soviet government; at the same time have a poor idea of art. And if he applies his ideas he will destroy the possibilities for art and the artist himself. In saying this I don’t want to suggest that formalists have the right to protest against the Soviet government because they don’t accept formalism. The art that is going to be in the USSR is not the ‘academics’ nor is it the formalism of today’s Europe. Both sides are bad. There will be a new development. This cannot appear in a few days. Look how the different styles and periods of art have been developed. The Italian renaissance took ten centuries to develop—
to arrive. At the beginning they copied the Roman painting and sculpture.

It is not possible to ask of a revolutionary artist to immediately find the forms. We need to fall down and walk and fall down and walk again. It is not a question of two, five or even forty years.

M: Why were you imprisoned?

S: I was in jail four years because I defended the line of my party, the Communist Party, and the Mexican political prisoners. I attacked the Mexican Government during a large meeting for these repressions. Also because I attacked the position of the Mexican Government concerning the Mexican revolution and its present policies in lectures at Caracas, Venezuela and Havana, Cuba.

When I returned they mounted a tremendous campaign and put me in jail. After, the Government was forced to apply a law which says that a man who has served his country could be freed. They condemned me to eight years in prison, but by this law we forced them to cut the sentence in half. Because I was an army officer and a well-known artist they could not deny me liberty. I want to make clear that this was a legal victory for us and not a concession they gave.

M: Did you paint in jail?

S: Yes, I painted many little paintings. I built my new studio in Cuernavaca with money earned from these paintings. Many were bought in Canada, the States and Europe. I painted two hundred small canvasses. These small paintings were at the same time studies for my mural.

M: While in jail did you hear about the activity of people for your release?

S: Oh yes! The activity of my party was tremendous. And the people of Mexico tremendous. All over the world, too. I visited Europe last year to thank the French and Italians. I haven't visited the USSR, Germany and the USA because I must spend time working.

I received thousands of letters. The international movement in favour of my liberty and that of my comrades was one of the most tremendous movements that has been carried out. The Sacco and Vanzetti campaign was the same. But perhaps today due to the modern methods of communications we were able to involve even more people. It was incredible!