



# The CPC-ML: The Party's Over

by Brian Topp  
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**Question: How many Albanians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?**  
**Answer: That's not funny. That's fascist.**

The fact that they have no sense of humour is one of the best reasons why few take the Communist Party of Canada Marxist-Leninist seriously anymore.

They also don't have very many members these days, and few ties to popular groups and organisations outside of their party. Interestingly, however, they still seem to have a lot of money and they remain visible: at McGill, for example, a group of CPC-ML members who sign their leaflets as either the Friends of Albania or as the McGill Student Movement have been trying all year to get attention for their party by making political hay out of the disarmament movement.

On the whole, the CPC-ML's half-dozen members at McGill have not been setting the place on fire, a pattern reproduced (most of the time) wherever else they are active across the country.

Not so long ago, however, the CPC-ML had to be taken seriously.

## The long march Revisited

The roots of the party lie in an important development within the political left in Europe and, sort of, in North America.

There was a great deal of disenchantment in the 1960's with what constituted at that time the "traditional left". Social democratic parties were in disrepute. When they came to power, as in Britain and West Germany, social democrats seemed more intent on managing capitalist economies efficiently than bent on dismantling them. The moves towards the centre which allowed moderate left parties to become serious electoral contenders discredited them in the eyes of many on the left. In Canada, the New Democratic Party was the object of this kind of disenchantment.

Traditional communist parties fared no better. Particularly after the Soviet Union crushed the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia with tanks in 1968, old-line communist parties were attacked for being tools of an imperialist power (it took a considerable effort of will to present Russia as the socialist fatherland after 1968) and generally for being hidebound, Stalinist, and internally undemocratic. The French Communist Party's repudiation of the

worker-new middle class uprising in France the same year did old-line communists no good, either.

There were a number of interesting consequences of this disenchantment.

In the late 60's and 70's the British Labour Party and the German Social Democratic party began to develop critical and increasingly effective left wings. The French Socialist party united and moved to improve its left credentials with a better programme and a *union de la gauche* strategy. Even crusty old-line Stalinists reacted, beginning to talk about Eurocommunism. In Canada, a group of academics put together the Waffle group and tried to build a left wing within the NDP: they were, however, quickly and efficiently expelled from the party.

More interestingly still, a great number of students and others in Europe and North America gave up on the traditional left altogether and began searching for a "new left". A small but influential number of these found their answer in Maoism.

The gentle reader will be spared a discussion of the elaborately embroidered dogma which made up the European-North American version of Maoism. For its proponents, suffice it to say, Maoism represented a perfect third option, replacing social democracy and soviet communism.

As originally conceived, western Maoism wasn't bureaucratic and mechanical, but spontaneous and human with lots of dialogue, self-criticism and mass popular action. And it wasn't just theory, so the theory went, because there was a pretty big country already practising Maoism, providing an example.

Building from these inspired beginnings, the Maoists made two long-term contributions to the search for a new left, one positive and one not so positive.

Their fundamental insight - shared with anarchists and trotskysts - has a direct application today. Socialism, according to Maoists, is not the inevitable grand tectonic shift for which everyone must wait, but rather a program they must bring about themselves. And Socialism isn't what you get inside a Russian government office building, but something human and perhaps joyful. These ideas have been picked up and are being applied by people, particularly in Europe, who are now taken very seriously indeed: the disarmament movement, environmentalists, feminists, the worker-self-management movement, and others in their various and many guises including the Green party in Germany. All owe an intellectual debt to the New Left of the 60s and 70s.

The second long-term effect of the Maoists is less positive. They didn't see themselves as merely an interesting school of

thought, but as serious, revolutionary communists who intended to act on their beliefs. Having worked out their politics, they began to organise political parties to apply them. The Communist Party of Canada (Marxist-Leninist) (CPCML) was the Canadian product of that resolve.

There was a contradiction in the way the Maoists organised their parties. Their principal contribution to politics was to reject old-line communism and introduce some fresh air into the extra-parliamentary left. Having done so, they proceeded to set up parties along strict stalinist lines, quickly setting their ideas into strict, and increasingly irrelevant, doctrine.

Just as the Waffle movement was the pale Canadian shadow of the re-animated left wings of the British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, so the CPC-ML was a pale - and twisted - shadow of similar formations elsewhere.

It was founded in 1970, in Montreal, by a long-winded and rather peculiar man named Hardial Bains. Maoist-new left intellectuals across Canada joined the party in the hope they had found the instrument for applying their beliefs.

## Politics by two-by-four

Things began to go terribly wrong with the CPC-ML almost immediately. Its first order of business was to

consolidate the entire left and working class within itself, mainly by eliminating other left groups. This it proceeded to attempt to do with crude violence, quickly eroding the party's support.

In February 1970, party members appeared at an anti-Vietnam War protest on Parliament Hill, and attacked other demonstrators with two-by-four boards. On May 20, 1971, party members provoked what one observer remembers as a "purposeless, bloody riot" with Montreal police. All through those months, members were actively attempting to break up meetings of other left groups, disrupting speakers at universities and elsewhere, and engaging in strident verbal assaults on opponents.

The crudeness of the CPC-ML's tactics and political line led to a major split within the party. In 1972, a group of Montreal members broke off to found the Quebec Revolutionary Student Movement (MREQ in French), in 1975, the MREQ would join with the staff of a CPC-ML bookstore and other groups to form the "Ligue" (CCL-ML), subsequently the Workers' Communist Party—which would in turn become a considerably more formidable organization than the CPC-ML, with a history all its own.

Meanwhile, the CPC-ML refined its tactics. In plain violent, physical assaults on the memof enemy left groups, the party embraced a more conventional strategy of infiltrating CPC-ML members would be parachuted into organizations, work to take them and then parrot the party line or destrem. If infiltration failed, parallel fronts would be set up.

Student organizations were prominently targeted. Its first major success was to build the Association Nationale des Etudiés du Quebec (ANEQ), a federation of students' associations which had self-destructed in 1969. CPC-ML members were able to refloat the federation and secured a great number of CEGEP and university students' associations to join. For a while, it was extremely useful for the party, though it, students' unions were being encouraged to pick up and repeat CPC-ML campaigns on campus, across the province. ANEQ's papers and publications reflected CPC-ML politics.

An turn refloat La Presse Etudiante (NatiPEN), a francophone student press newsletter with a history going back to 1944, had gone down with ANEQ in 1969. The new PEN ("Bedard-PEN" as it came to be known, in honour of its CPC-ML president), the party was able to get a foothold in Quebec student newspapers, a few of which were also controlled by the party.

It was to an end in 1976, when a well-organized group of left-wing Pequist student groups decided to have the entire ANEQ excommunicated.

## Infiltrating "les hosers"

Things went poorly for the party in English Canada. There, the targets were the National Union of Students (NUS, with about 300,000 members in 1975) and Canadian universities (CUP, with about 60 affiliated student newspapers at that time). NUS and CUP offices at that time and enjoyed a close relationship. Taking control of one of the organizations could plausibly have led to controlling the other: the CPC-ML targeted CUP easier nut to crack.

In summer of 1976, some of the CPC-ML's best remaining English-Canadian members infiltrated the *Chevron*, student newspaper at the university of Waterloo in Ontario. They succeeded in getting themselves elected to the paper's key editorial position (which featured full-time salaries) after luring the student editors into leaving paper.

The CPC-ML *Chevron* then provoked a bitter fight with the Students' Association at Waterloo, and successfully demanded solidarity and financial support from the CUP executive and from member newspapers. The next act was supposed to be that, riding on a wave of support, the CPC-ML editors of the *Chevron* would get themselves elected to the executive of CUP. At CUP's annual meeting in December 1976, however, doubts about what was happening at Waterloo were already high enough to allow a slate of student newspaper staffers to defeat the CPC-MLers during the elections for CUP's executive. Beaten back from CUP, the *Chevron* was eventually thrown off campus by an overwhelming vote in a student referendum.

CPC-ML activity was relatively low-key for a while after that, especially on university campuses. Party front groups remained, members still passed out leaflets and newspapers, the party kept holding congresses to listen to Hardial Bains and CPC-MLers kept showing up at demonstrations to wave banners at television cameras. There were no more great coups, however, until an opportunity presented itself in British Columbia in 1980.

Many farmworkers working in B.C. are East Indians. Their hours, housing, pay and working conditions are extremely poor, and in 1980 they started to do something about it by organizing a union, the Canadian Farmworkers' Union. The situation—an increasingly militant group of workers, but a still fledgling and weak union—looked promising to the CPC-ML, and the party moved members into the area to set up a rival union, the "General and Allied Workers Union." This new CPC-ML counter-union quickly secured certification from the Labour Relations Board, and competed directly with the Canadian Farmworkers Union for members. CFU organizers, fortunately, were able to forestall any serious loss of members to the CPC-ML's front.

Stymied, the CPC-ML tried to generate some enthusiasm for itself among the East Indian workers by intervening in a campaign against a branch of the Klu Klux Klan, which had recently set up shop in the province. The party repeated its tactics against the Farmworkers' Union: it set up a front group (the "Peoples' Front Against Racist and Fascist Violence") to compete directly against the legitimate popular organization (the British Columbia Organization to Fight Racism) and, in flashback to its early days, physically assaulted members of the other group.

This attracted plenty of media coverage which depicted the attacks as clashes between "two rival anti-racism groups" without identifying the CPC-ML. The coverage partially discredited the legitimate anti-Klan committee and disrupted the campaign.

## And lately ...



Judging from the material being distributed at McGill, the party is now very interested in hitching itself to the disarmament movement. This confirms a pattern that Manjit Singh, connected to the Canadian Farmworkers' Union, described as the party's "modus operandi."

"Wherever there are popular movements based on the real needs of a community and wherever these movements show signs of being effective, members of the CPC-ML force themselves to the forefront," he writes.

"Using their placard sticks as clubs, clearing or bullying their way to the head, waving their huge banners at the T.V. cameras, they grab the microphone away from designated speakers and scream their extremist epithets instead. Two of their recent victims are still in hospital in Vancouver—one with serious brain damage. Two others were released with broken arms.

"If through these tactics the cult is able to wrest the leadership of a given movement, the movement quickly collapses under the weight of extremist rhetoric and provocative actions. The CPC-ML then withdraws, seeking newer territory to infiltrate."

This pattern has led a number of activists at the receiving end of various CPC-ML campaigns to speculate that the party is being funded and perhaps directed by the R.C.M.P. Certainly, if the CPC-ML didn't exist, it would be in the government's interests to invent it. The party's functional role is to divert, divide and destroy the left at its grassroots, meeting by meeting, group by group. The party doesn't do a very good job of it, but doesn't lack for enthusiasm.

And the party doesn't lack for money. It maintains adequate offices on Amherst street in Montreal. When the *Chevron* was kicked out of Waterloo, it was equipped with a full typesetting shop and published weekly for two years without any visible financial support or advertising. The B.C. union scam cost a lot of money. The party prints a lot of material. Where does the money come from, given the CPC-ML's tiny membership?

They are, in any event, still present on Canadian campuses, with names such as the McGill or Dalhousie Student Movement, or Friends of Albania. (Why Albania? Well, China has gone capitalist, see. Albania is now the only country in the world which is really Socialist.)

There aren't very many of them and they don't have a sense of humour, so they will probably never be very dangerous again here. Maoism doesn't pulse very strongly in the veins of the Chinese anymore, and it doesn't pulse in the veins of young Canadian intellectuals anymore, either.

