

## **Engage!**

### **A Committee to Project and Protect the Voice of Bob Avakian**

January 2007

Greetings! friends of Engage!

On July 30th, a series of new and timely talks by Bob Avakian were posted online at bobavakian.net. Thousands around the country have begun downloading and listening to these 7 talks with Questions and Answers:

- Why We're In The Situation We're In Today ... And What To Do About It: A Thoroughly Rotten System and the Need for Revolution
- Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy
- Communism: A Whole New World And The Emancipation of All Humanity – Not "The Last Shall Be First, And the First Shall Be Last"
- The NBA: Marketing The Minstrel Show and Serving the Big Gangsters
- Communism and Religion: Getting Up and Getting Free – Making Revolution to Change the Real World, Not Relying on "Things Unseen"
- Conservatism, Christian Fundamentalism, Liberalism and Paternalism ... Bill Cosby and Bill Clinton ... Not all "Right" But All Wrong!
- "Balance" Is The Wrong Criterion – And A Cover for a Witch-hunt – What We Need is the Search for the Truth: Education, Real Academic Freedom, Critical Thinking and Dissent
- Question and Answer sessions

As you can tell from reviewing the titles, Avakian is speaking on burning questions of the day. He does it from a sweeping view of humanity-its history and its potential. He brings his unique analysis and vision to the broad range of questions covered in these talks and wrangles with the work of many academics, intellectuals and artists-there is nothing like these on the scene today.

In this Newsletter, we feature reports of how different people have been engaging with and taking out the new talks to others. Please write us with your own experiences, thoughts and comments about the new talks and let us know if these can be shared in the next newsletter.

From Engage! Organizer, Heriberto Ocasio, San Francisco:

Bob Avakian's provocative insights and analysis are opening up discussion and debate over critical questions facing humanity. One series of exchanges has been with a friend who is a leader in the African-American community about how people can be empowered to genuinely control their own destinies-and not just be pawns in another power game. We debated the role of elections under this system. Can elections serve to empower people, or do they only serve to disarm and demobilize them?

We discussed the great need for radical change-- change that is unlike anything that the world has experienced before. We wrangled over the nature and definition of true revolution -- the

question of what does that look like and how is it best brought about.

Avakian's new talks and recent works on the need and the possibility of bringing forward a radically new kind of state have been an important reference point.

Related to this, we've begun exchanging views on the talk about Bill Cosby and Bill Clinton and what Avakian says about the relationship between people transforming circumstances and transforming themselves. The new talks have sparked and informed some really important and thoughtful exchanges.

### **40th Anniversary Reunion of the Black Panther Party.**

Another recent experience in connecting the new talks with folks was when some of us from Engage! participated in the Panther Reunion in Oakland. The event drew hundreds of former Panthers, supporters, and others attracted by their revolutionary legacy. Speakers, workshops, and films filled three intense days in Oakland, birthplace of the Panthers. One of the films shown included Bob Avakian giving a fiery speech at the Panther May Day rally in San Francisco in 1969, where hundreds of people held up Mao's red book.

There were non-stop exchanges with people at the reunion about the new talks and what Avakian is bringing forward. People were angry and concerned about many things, like the war, the outrageous torture being carried out on prisoners accused of "terrorism," the Patriot Act, the treatment of political prisoners, the threat of war with Iran, the US bullying of people worldwide, and Katrina. There was debate and discussion over what is needed to change things, about resistance, and about revolution-over what it is needed and what is possible in a country like this.

A good number of people were intrigued and wanted to check out what Avakian has to say about these questions. Some knew of him or had heard him speak in the past and had a favorable view of what he had to say. A journalist who knew Bob from the days of the Panthers said that "Bob was like the Thomas Paine of those times"-referring to Avakian's relentless search for truth. We sold 80 sets of the seven new talks, some DVD samplers and a few memoirs and made many new contacts.

There was an interesting exchange in the Military Resistance workshop. The leader of the workshop, a veteran Panther sister, talked about the differences between the situation now and during the Vietnam War. Now, she said, the situation in the world is much more confusing and complicated. Whereas back then there was a clear side for progressive people to stand - meaning a just, and progressive, people's war against US Imperialism. But now it is not so clear-cut. What about Kim Jung Il (of North Korea) having a nuclear weapon and what about the Islamic countries' oppression of women. What do you do?

A Vietnam veteran who works with Engage! was at the workshop and united with her statement that the situation is quite different and that in order to make any sense of what the U.S. is doing in the world, we first have to see that the war that the US waging is not in essence a war against terrorism or to free women. It's a war for empire, mainly driven by the need for US imperialism,

as the sole remaining superpower, to forcibly extend their rule over the entire world. That this necessity is driving them, independent of their wishes.

He spoke to Bob Avakian's analysis of the "two outmodeds", (outmoded, reactionary and obsolete strata among the Capitalist/Imperialist ruling class versus an outmoded, reactionary strata among the oppressed (Feudal Islamic fundamentalists)-- neither representing the interests of the people-here or worldwide - and that siding with either one strengthens both and how there is a crying and urgent need for a secular, revolutionary force to break through the middle.

### **Engage! Discussions**

Following up on this experience, we decided to invite some of the people we had met at the reunion and other friends of Engage! to a group discussion at the Malonga Casquelourd Center, a center for African-American culture in Oakland. The discussion was quite lively and focused on the 2nd part of the first talk (about what the US is exporting around the world is not democracy, but capitalism/imperialism). There was a spirited exchange on this question and quite a bit of passion expressed about the horrors that youth in the inner cities are forced into, the violence and dog-eat-dog things they end up involved in. It put on the table for future discussions the critical questions posed in the talk on Bill Cosby/Bill Clinton: why are these the choices faced by people in the inner cities and what can we do about it.

After the meeting we got into a discussion with one of the people who attended and got into the history of Christianity and how it has been used by the slave masters in the US historically and the role of religion today, drawing from Avakian's talk on "Communism and Religion-getting up and getting free..." This was an important exchange of views on religion and on what kind of morality people need today to take on the injustices of this system.

This is the kind of the back and forth wrangling that has been provoked by Bob Avakian's new talks.

### **Taking Bob Avakian to the CMJ Festival (national college radio Conference):**

At the end of October, a team went out to the CMJ (College Music Journal) annual gathering in New York City. 15,000 college radio deejays came from all over the country... We took out packets... that included a CD of ready to air cuts from Bob Avakian's New Presentations and a letter to deejays (copies are available through [radioed2006@yahoo.com](mailto:radioed2006@yahoo.com).)

Everywhere, at panel discussions and concerts, we had just to scratch the surface to find a real hunger to get into the critical questions addressed in these presentations. World events have been weighing heavily on people's minds. Disgust, anger and fear over what would be happening in the coming months and years... there was a genuine welcoming of the whole way Avakian addresses the full scale and scope of the problem with clarity and depth of analysis linked to his profound arguments for strategic solutions - the possibility of making revolution and changing the whole way that humanity lives on this planet.

Rapper Chuck D Airs a cut from Avakian on Air America:

...bringing in Avakian's views on Bill Cosby's current campaign to "blame the people" broke open an important debate at a Major hip-hop panel. From there, Chuck D aired a cut from "Conservatism, Christian Fundamentalism, Liberalism and Paternalism...Bill Cosby and Bill Clinton... Not All "Right" but All Wrong!" on his national Air America show. A caller from Colorado stayed on the line the entire show to let people know how important it was for her to hear the cut - someone talking about revolution and how it really spoke not only to the oppression of Black people but the whole way a whole class is treated around the world.

...Hundreds of people left the conference with the talks and a significant number expressed a real desire to get into them and get them on the air... If you want to contact people working on this radiored project you can reach them at 323-683-0626 or email radiored2006@yahoo.com

Some comments on the talks received from another friend in the San Francisco Bay Area:

A distinguishing characteristic of Bob Avakian's talks and writings that appeal to me, and I think to others as well, is honesty. By "honesty" I mean the attitude of carefully listening to, and seriously considering objections raised against one's thinking. He doesn't offer prefabricated generalizations to dismiss and pass over real problems. He doesn't pretend to have all the answers. On the contrary, a good part of his works consist of posing questions and pointing out problems and shortcomings in communist theory and practice and inviting people to grapple with them.

He genuinely wants to engage people in discussion on key ideological issues, and he sees that back-and-forth struggle as essential in better understanding reality and changing it. So he makes me want to engage back.

His recent talks have given me the impetus to look into nagging questions about fundamental issues of outlook and methodology, science and religion, truth and reality, materialism and dialectics, freedom and necessity, democracy and dictatorship, dogmatism and relativism, etc. They make me re-examine long-held foundational views, and I like that.

*From someone who has been studying Bob Avakian's work for some time.*

In the last newsletter, we encouraged people to find new and creative ways to introduce Bob Avakian's Memoir and other of his works to broader audiences in different areas of the country. Here are some very interesting experiences:

On October 17 Michael Slate interviewed UCLA Professor Juan Gomez Quinonez and Lenny Wolff, long time follower of Bob Avakian, on the KPFK program "Beneath the Surface." Here is some of what they had to say:

Lenny Wolff: ... I think what people are facing now is a very difficult period. I think this book gives a model of somebody approaching today with utter realism about what's going on, about

the attempts that have been made to change the world, and an eyewitness account of how that's done -- and has still preserved his romanticism and hope for the future. And the basis for that in the actual world as it is. He's able to see that. He's able to see kind of walking you through his whole life and how that came to happen: the kinds of influences deeply in to that, and he's able to bring that out...

...this is a book that's full of humor as well. It's full of anecdotes. There's a way in which he's maintained both his sense of humor and his sense of purpose throughout his life...

...There are portraits painted of people with a tremendous generosity and a tremendous sense of the openness of Bob to these people that he's met, and yet and still a real perspective. Going further there's his whole life in leading a communist party for 30 years, and a very honest and unique account of what that's been and where he's taken that. So I think all that's surprising. I think you're going to be surprised by the compassion of this person and the ways in which he gets into the different relationships that have influenced him and the different people that have been in his life.

Juan Gomez-Quinones: The clip that you were presenting is evidence of what I very much have in mind when I ask people to read the book and to get in synch with the experiences of a young person as they grow into maturity as a critical thinker. That is that he presents the incidents of his life in a very straightforward way without trying to be half smart about them, since he's looking in the direction of his past with the benefit of hindsight, and that is that he gives meaning to even anecdotal events that many of us might have lived. And that is being at school and not having neither a lunch nor money for lunch and learning about human beings and even having to take action and take a stand about not having lunch but also drawing the lesson of why that stance is important.

...It's really a memoir for people that are activists and want to find arguments and reinforcement emotionally to continue their activism. And Bob Avakian is somebody who grew up in this society, in these times. not far away. As I said, he doesn't guild his recollections. He makes them immediately accessible.

If they have contradictions, if they have the showing of faults as well as the showing of developing strengths, so be it. 'From Ike to Mao,' there's implied a tremendous journey, not only in terms of politics, but also in terms of cultural situating of an individual.

MS: Juan, you actually wrote an open letter to youth and students around this book. I wanted to ask you a little bit around that... you've written a particular thing to youth and students about why you think they should be reading this book, right?

J.G-Q: Because it tells you how a person lives his situation and comes to understand that the world is a mess, and that one needs to be responsible for helping set it aright. There's something that is deeply humanistic, even though I know that word is now not correct, but I'll use it. There's also something that is very familial. Bob Avakian never lets you forget that he grows and does his political practice within the context of family relations, relations of friendship, onerous tasks

and liabilities of organizing and why is he doing it?

Well, as he tells you, both at the beginning and at the end, that the world has to be changed. I find that, as I've said on some other occasion, much in this narrative that rings or that resonates with what I know about the art and practice of storytelling amongst Native Americans. Part of that means that you distill moments of your life, not because you're just merely appreciating or enjoying the memoir, but that you are drawing strength from that past situation, that past incident, to help you deal with the present and forge the future. I think that's what's in this book.

...The Bob Avakian narrative is both un-apologetic but also equally challenging. It's a very straightforward book.

Other comments we have received:

A Latin-American Immigrant from South Central LA said that that as a young person himself, "I naturally identified a lot with the part on his early years." But he said this whole book is about "his life and our lives. "There were many things that "surprised" and interested him in reading the Memoir. One was learning about Bob Avakian's father's family as immigrants from Armenia. He said he had never heard of Armenia before and said it was striking "how different the experience of immigrants has been coming from different places" and in this case how they fell out around the issue of racism in the U.S., identifying more as white people, and how Bob Avakian dealt with this contradiction. He also said he was surprised by Bob's account of growing up in a segregated environment in the late 50's and then "crossing over" and sharing his life with Black people.

Another Immigrant said the memoir gave him a picture of Bob as a "regular guy... someone who liked sports," etc. He said he liked (and identified with) Bob's description of how his "proudest achievement" in high school was being listed as "Teachers' Trial." and how Bob saw himself as a rebel against "arbitrary authority."

Willie "Mobile" Shaw, an RCP comrade who passed away this past year had said this about Bob Avakian: "This system makes people do what they want them to do. In the new society you might only work for four hours and then you do art, science, crafts, or whatever. The masses out here think they are in control of the drugs but the system puts the drugs out here to keep us from thinking and acting in a revolutionary way. People look at the new society like that is unbelievable. But we have the right person to lead us there. There is enough people around the world that if they got a hold of the Chairman and took him up it would be a cold revolution. People need to know that they have a person like the Chairman on their side and they need to stand up for him."

### **How Berkeley Can You Be?**

Hundreds of people lined the streets for Berkeley's annual parade and festival, "How Berkeley Can You Be" a celebration of Berkeley's wacky, irreverent, radical and daring character. Creative art cars full of wild colors and designs delighted the eyes and rode by to applause. The East Bay

Atheists passed out a pamphlet called, "What God Has Revealed to Man," which opened to reveal blank pages.

Right in the mix of all this was our Bob Avakian float, highlighting the new 7 talks, the Revolution DVD and From Ike to Mao and Beyond. Red streamers flew in the breeze high above the float as we held a large banner that read, "Bob Avakian, a Voice that Should be Heard." Parading up the street, we heard people asking, "Who's Bob Avakian?" while others answered and many snapped photos. We got a raised fist from someone wearing a t-shirt saying, "People's Republic of Berkeley."

We sold many sets of the talk and got into some great conversations. Some people were proud of the fact that they remembered, or even knew, "Bob" "back in the day". Others were just hearing of him for the first time and wanted to hear more. We met high school students who have read some things about communism and want to take on the view that communism equals totalitarianism. They told us of their concern about the war and torture and an openness to hearing Avakian's views- why he thought revolution was necessary, how it could happen, how to evaluate the socialist experience, and what to do about the direction this society is going.

**The following are excerpts written from Professor who has been using Preaching From a Pulpit of Bones: We need Morality but not Traditional Morality by Bob Avakian for several years. The full text is being sent out as an attachment:**

We teachers are always looking for new material that will challenge assumptions and bring students to think about the world in creative and unaccustomed ways. I am suggesting to you that Preaching From a Pulpit of Bones: We Need Morality but not Traditional Morality by Bob Avakian is one such text...

...The book steps into this burning question, the moral crisis in the U.S., a crisis tearing at the fabric of society and threatening to convulse it, from Avakian's own revolutionary communist perspective. From there, he gives a nuanced identification of the terms of this crisis and situates it in contemporary history - the unresolved conflicts of the 60s, the new demographics, accelerated globalization... the book traces the dynamics that have brought the country to this polarized, tense, uncertain place, and moving in a disastrous direction...

Students are challenged to make decisive theoretical distinctions, to do materialist historical analysis, and from there, to draw practical conclusions. Avakian surprises them with the assertion that the problem of morality is not a loss of spiritual moorings, as with Wallis, but in the capitalist system itself. These kinds of conflicts in position represented by Wallis and Avakian encourages the students to think through, formulate and express their own positions, including doubts, misgivings, uncertainties. Where do moral norms come from, anyway? Who says we are at a turning point in history? How can you know anything with any certitude?

Students like the way Avakian extends the discussion, as he argues his position. They make comments to the class like, "The Avakian reading was very thought provoking." And, "Reading Avakian's views on revolution along with reading the NY Times coverage on the North Korea

has made me think a lot about the role of government and the people who own these nuclear weapons."

...The book is a pedagogical assist to combat the double cultural plague of on the one hand, dumbing down content, and on the other, lowering sights about possibilities. The injunction given to them to not even think about the possibility of a different world. But there is another, contradictory mood that is afoot, expressed by a student this way, as she reflected upon Pulpit: "Everyone I talk to can feel it in the air. Something big is on the horizon, and a lot of people want to be a part of it." The conversations in the classroom, their speeches and writings, based upon different and conflicting readings, elevate the level of discourse...

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On May 3rd a crowd of over 100 students, professors, and others, gathered at the Barnes & Noble DePaul Center in Chicago for a presentation and discussion of Marxism and the Call of the Future: Conversations on Ethics, History and Politics, a book by Bob Avakian and Bill Martin. Featured speakers were philosophy professor Bill Martin and Maoist political economist Raymond Lotta.

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### **Reading of Bob Avakian's From Ike to Mao and Beyond: My Journey from Mainstream America to Revolutionary Communist**

The venue was the large Woodson Regional Library, part of the Chicago Public Library system. The Woodson has a distinguished history as a center for Black history and culture.

The readers included: A reverend and community leader from the South; an ex-resident of Cabrini Green housing project; a former member of the Illinois Black Panther; a professor from Morocco; an Iranian activist; an immigrant from El Salvador; a college student; a young political activist; a social science professor; and supporter of the RCP and an activist from the South Side. June 17, in the heart of Watts, Alma Reaves Woods Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library A standing-room-only crowd included students, teachers, janitors, ex-prisoners, artists, activists, librarians, revolutionaries and grandmothers. They came to meet and learn about Bob Avakian through the pages of his memoir, and they weren't disappointed.

Readers: poet Ben Valentin, Luciente Zamora, Clyde Young of the RC tour, and poet/playwright/director reg e. gains.

July 24, New York City

Reading:

Aladdin, comedian and playwright

Herb Boyd, Journalist, Amsterdam News

Gamal Abdel Chasten, playwright, performer w/ Universes

Rev. Earl Kooperkamp, St. Mary's Episcopal Church

Lara Stapleton, writer

Tevin Thomas, musician, educator