

ORAL HISTORY T-0209
INTERVIEW WITH CHUCK AVERY
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NATIONAL OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY

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CHUCK AVERY: This is Chuck Avery, National Secretary for the People's Party. We have just completed our national convention—the People's Convention here in St. Louis, Missouri [July 26-29, 1972; the Gateway Hotel]. I'm going to attempt to give a rational view of what has happened in the last week. We crammed a three week convention into four days and very long hours; so, it's hard to remember exactly what has happened.

FIRST DAY OF THE CONVENTION: We had scheduled workshops on the platform, which were, unfortunately, not too well organized. Only those people who were self-starters got workshops going; about a half dozen got started. The rest of the people wandered in and out and waited for someone to say what was going to happen. Finally, a few people from California got together to call for a meeting of what National Committee representatives were there. We decided that we would cancel the reception scheduled for Wednesday evening in favor of an organizing meeting to call for workshops of committees on credentialing, rules, agenda, and convention officers. When we did that, it went pretty well; we broke up into those four separate meetings and came up what we were supposed to do. The Credentials Committee did some novel things. We decided to allow special interest caucuses to be represented with one-fifth of a vote per member. On the convention floor it was decided to allow the only interest group that did register to have four votes per member of their delegation—the Children's Liberation Caucus, which had three registered members of the caucus. All other members of the caucus being members of regular state delegations. The Credentials Committee, also, allowed for those people who support the candidates of another party to form a caucus and be credentialed with one-fifth votes. No one registered under that. We had been warned that there would be an attempt made by St. Louis County Township McGovern Clubs to pack the convention on the day we were to nominate our candidates. People's Party prior to now was a coalition of liberals, radicals, and revolutionaries. I think that it's fairly safe to say that the McGovern campaign is going to uphold most of our liberal support and with it most of our financial support, our potential financial support; we've had very little. I really don't think that the 'revolutionary' element is presently that large or likely to be that large. Most of these people are still turned off to electoral politics and are operating with groups like . . . , SDS [Students for Democratic Society], and God knows how many other groups' we've got a group for just about everybody we know, I think. At this point I think that what we're rapidly developing towards is becoming the Party of the Center of the Left, that's Finley Campbell's description, which means that we identify ourselves as simply a radical party, trying to maintain our credibility and our seriousness by rejecting . . . , structural devices and schemes. Such as, the idea of nominating two Vice-Presidential

candidates, one for the east and one for the west. Our candidates are all legally of age and qualified, better qualified than any other candidates, in my opinion to be President and Vice-President of the United States. We're not primarily a presidential party. Basically, this broad national coalition of independent, radical, political parties, ranging from the California Peace and Freedom Party thru the Arizona New Party, the Independent New Mexican Party, Montana New Reform Party, Michigan and Utah Human Right's Parties, the Liberty Union of Vermont, the DC Statehood Party, the Indiana Peace and Freedom Party, and so on. Since the last convention, which founded the People's Party, we also have Florida People's Party, Georgia People's Party, Illinois People's Party, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and so on. At this moment we have local candidates or national candidates on the ballot in fifteen states. We'd expect to have candidates on the ballot in 25-30 states, minimum for the '72 elections. The purpose of the National Campaign is not to try to get more votes than anybody else; we're not counting numbers. We're using the campaign to draw attention to the fact that community oriented groups can involve themselves in electoral politics raise issues that will be ignored by every other candidate. Issues such as repatriation of veterans . . . war resisters, of veterans; decriminalization of heroin, which is our newest thing and which probably is going to be hard for people to understand. It is not legalization, but it prevents the police from victimizing the victims of the drugs further. We do call for the legalization of marijuana, but I'm not sure what semantic terms we use there. Our affiliate in Michigan elected two members to the Ann Arbor City Council last spring and they have reduced marijuana to a misdemeanor with a five dollar fine. They have done a lot of fantastic things; that is our strongest local base.

DAN BROGAN: If I could get back to your kind of exclusion, well not necessarily exclusion, but your policies toward other, what you would call 'revolutionary' parties or groups. I thought that the convention was opened to all left groups and when I got there I found that they were trying to kick out or that you did kick out the Communist Party.

CHUCK AVERY: No, that's not true. What happened was the Socialist Worker's Party came and set up a bookstore in the main hall. A lot of our people were uptight about that, because they're various fronts, the National Peace Action Coalition primarily, have either excluded Peace and Freedom California from similar tables or charged them. The amount that was charged is unknown to me; I've heard up to one hundred dollars, but I don't think that was serious enough. What a number of people were uptight about and being there period felt that a party that is running in opposition to us, that has falsely claimed that we are a pro-capitalist party in their publications and has misrepresented our position several times, and, also has its own candidates, had no place at our convention. Several people came to the Convention Coordinating Committee and demanded that it be removed or that they pay. What we determined was that so long as they were selling a product, book, newspapers, whatever, then since we had to pay for the hotel and we're not selling anything, we didn't think that it was inconsistent to ask them to pay ten dollars a day or twenty-five dollars for the whole convention fee. They paid that promptly, not necessarily happily, but promptly. Then it was brought to our attention by them that someone from the CP [Communist Party] was there, also, selling literature. The exact wording of the resolution was that any group that is selling something should pay the fee. So, we called the representative of the CP and said, "If you want to give away literature and set up a table in the hall for free, it's fine. If you're going to sell something, that rule covers everybody; we're not giving preferential treatment." Members of SDS participated in our Racism Workshop and, I believe, in the entire convention.

Members of WAW [Vietnam Veterans Against the War], quite a number of leftist groups were participating throughout. So far as I know, there were never any challenges made to anybody except on that financial basis of selling a product. That was the only exclusion made there. The only other thing, that comes along in that line, is the resolution that said in order to be a member of the People's Party, a group could not support the candidate of another party. This became, in essence, an attempt to ... down a purge of the Kentucky delegation, which was urging us to support George McGovern. I stayed up with them until 3:30 in the morning after that happened . . . [interruption]. I feel that the Kentucky delegation was split within itself by the time this came up. Some of them, obviously, felt that they could no longer participate and left the convention. Others, as leaving the State Chairperson several key people, that I was aware of before, stayed as long as they could, until their rides left and said they'd talk it over when they got home. They felt that the Kentucky People's Party would remain in the National Party. I think that it's crucial that they do so and not withdraw. I think what they're going to do is go through a period of change with their liberal supporters, actually dropping out of the active party participation and working for McGovern and his organizations. The group that's left will then be free to explore the more radical alternatives and I think we'll take a step further towards radicalization. We're not, any of us, iron clad whatever we are; we're all moving in one direction or another. I think that everybody who's involved with the People's Party at all is daily moving, a little more to the left. We thought, during the convention, that the McGovern thing was a serious challenge. We were told that St. Louis Township McGovern Clubs were going to pack the floor on the day of the nominations and force us to either not to nominate or to endorse McGovern, or whatever; we were very uptight about that. We were talking to a CBS newsman, who asked me how much support I thought the McGovern people had. I said that I heard the media was saying it was about three to one, [Dr. Benjamin] Spock over McGovern, and that I thought it was a little bit higher than that. He told me that he thought it was about ten to one. It turns out that he was at least right; it might have been fifteen to one. The presidential campaign of the parties is going to be used to raise issues, to campaign hard on things like the bombing of the Dikes, decriminalization of drugs, withdrawal of the military establishment overseas, withdrawal of our economic establishments overseas and dismemberment of much of it locally, breaking it down into bite size chunks that people can live with and not be crushed under. We took a stand on busing that largely determined that it's a community issue. Those communities that want to bus can do so at public expense, but if the majority of the people don't want to bus, then busing could still be done at private expense. That's what I think it all meant, it's all unclear until we get the notes cleaned out and typed out and distribute them. It, also, called ... to bring the parents of the community into meetings, like the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association], to make those decisions and not just count on your middleclass parents, who . . . the governing body of the schools just like we do everything else, but to get the poor parents' vote. Our campaign can force McGovern and [Richard M.] Nixon to recognize issues like re-patriation, like abortion, like gay rights, women's rights, all of these other issues that they're running away from as fast as possible—anything controversial loses votes.

DAN BROGAN: The party's position is that there's, basically, no difference between McGovern, Nixon, right?

CHUCK AVERY: Well, very little difference. A friend of mine in the gay movement once said that he could tell the difference between pork and bacon, but they both come from the pig and that's pretty generally our view of the Democratic and Republican candidate. We feel

that they're basically, two wings of one party, the Capitalist Party. In most instances there's no appreciable difference. In the case of Nixon vs. McGovern there is a difference. Nixon is, clearly, more conservative than McGovern. This doesn't mean McGovern is liberal: this means McGovern is a middle of the road moderate . . . decided he wanted to be a god, he had a 43% . . . rating . . . democratic actions hardly a radical organization. This year McGovern, still, rates below Senator Muskie as viewed as a centrist candidate. McGovern says that if he puts out . . . about that. The clear difference that we feel between Nixon and McGovern is that so long as Nixon stays in office there will still be that liberal hope that someday their prince will come and save them all with liberalism. If McGovern is President, they'll see that the liberals aren't going to do a damn thing for them and that's going to be the death of liberalism and that's when the bulk of the American Left is going to swelled more radical people. He'll find out that a President committed to the current economic over-lords, as McGovern says he is committed through his Wall Street Journal ad, can't effect any real changes. So, we would like to see McGovern elected, because he might be a little bit easier on people in some areas. I'm not convinced he would end the war. I think that anybody who believes anything he says is a fool. He, clearly, is an opportunist and will compromise anybody, anytime, anyplace to get a vote; but I can't conceive of anybody being worse than Nixon. But, basically, I would like to see McGovern President in order to radicalize the masses of the American people, to make them give up on their . . . so that they can realize that the only way to change America is to get off your ass, stop smoking dope for 24 hours a day, and go out there and . . . you can take over your own communities, because they are your communities, they don't rightfully belong to the owners, they belong to the people who live in them. We've seen a campaign for mayor of Terre Haute, Indiana. That's been an extremely corrupt city. A twenty-one year old student announced for mayor on the Urban Reform Party ticket and member of the Indiana Peace and Freedom Party. He spent a total of 500 dollars on a six-month campaign that was largely depending upon five key people with 20-30-40 hangers on helping him out. They took their campaign to the Senior Citizens' communities, had concerts for them, raised issues of urban decay, of rats all over the city. . . . got 6% of the vote for mayor and a candidate on his ticket for City Council got 10%. I think that if we could have had fifty people, we could have done much better. In Ann Arbor they had 500 people working on their campaign for City Council this spring. They defeated all five Democratic candidates; largely, because last year Ann Arbor elected a Liberal-Democratic mayor who proceeded to be just as oppressive as everyone else, to push the white man's freeways through the black community, destroying what economic oasis there was in the black community in Ann Arbor. They put literature for the Human Right's Party campaign in every - home in Ann Arbor six times during that campaign, like hand literature for the People's campaign. The Democrats spent a fortune on one man for postage. People are poor, they don't have General Motors to give them money, they don't have ITT [International Telephone & Telegraph]; so, they have to count on what they do have and that's a lot of other people, and they get off their asses, so they can start changes. That's what we're all about—people feeling for themselves what needs to be done; everybody knows what needs to be done in their own community, whether it's rats or transportation crisis or whatever . . . {interruption}. The first plenary session of the convention started off rather well and actually managed to adjourn on schedule and do everything it was supposed to, which is rather a novel thing to have happen on the left these days. We felt pretty good about the way things were going right to the time we got into our platform debates. We learned that in the future we should not have platform workshops, debates, plenaries, and all that in the same convention when we're also working on structure, nominations of candidates, and everything else. Those four days were packed full of enough

meetings to last us for three weeks . . . The final day of the convention they actually began a plenary at 9 a.m. on Saturday which did not finally adjourn till 7 a.m. on Sunday. We're going to know better than to do that the next time. McGovern people were obviously a small factor there. Someone placed McGovern's name in nomination for President on our ticket. One of the convention's rules was that there be an indication that a candidate nominated would accept that nomination. They were then given five minutes to call somebody from the McGovern campaign and say, "Do you want to be called a radical from the left like you're being called a radical from the right?" Obviously, if we were to even critically endorse McGovern, we would be playing right into Richard Nixon's hands. McGovern is not a radical, he's not even a liberal. We shouldn't allow Nixon to have that option to red baiting again like he's red baited everybody else in his career and destroyed people. I don't think McGovern would destroy people ... or not directly. While they were doing that, someone placed the name of the Socialist Worker's Party, Linda Jeness, and they were given the same chance to contact the people and find out if he would accept. Since the Socialist Worker's Party had a table there, they made the statement that they were not interested in that, that we were a different party and that we should go on with our campaign. The guy came back, supposedly with either acceptance or denial from the McGovern people, and went on to a tirade about why no money should be spent on the People's Party campaign, all money should be spent on McGovern--clearly, an emotional trip that didn't understand any of what we were trying to do, and wants to be saved— maybe even a Jesus freak, I don't know, a McGovern freak. Doctor Spock was the only candidate who accepted or allowed his name to be placed in nomination. He's been our provisional nominee for many months and has been traveling the country and is ... the only person who has seen a large block of the people. He's been in 27 states campaigning on a far more rigorous schedule than any other Presidential candidate, running on his own, largely ... campaigning with people. He's been arrested two or three times this year for civil disobedience, and sit-ins, and so forth. I've never heard of any other Presidential candidate getting arrested; for that matter, any Democratic or Republican Senators who were willing to be arrested for peace, even in a liberal demonstration. Both of our national candidates have been arrested frequently for one reason or another—Julius Hobson has been arrested for refusing to pay arbitrary bus . . . that are illegal and has proven that twice, that they were illegal, and has been arrested a lot. We feel that this is further indication of their commitment to what their ideas are; they're not just saying they're committed, they're proving it. When Spock was nominated, a very long and noisy popular demonstration sprang up. People were excited and cheering and happy; overjoyed and making all the noise they could; TV cameras were flashing all over the place and all that. At the end of the demonstration, one of the delegates ask if we should now be accredited as members of the Screen Actors' Guild, because all the cameras were there—it was fun. Hobson's renomination forced us to deal with the question of having two Vice-Presidential nominees. We decided to stick with one—I'm glad we did but I'm not terribly overjoyed at what happened, how it went. The people who wanted two nominees wanted it because Julius is dying; he has . . . , which is a bone cancer. He's very ill, he can't campaign vigorously, his mind . . . around. The people who were supporting the idea of two candidates just couldn't stand up and say, "Julius can you be a candidate, are you going to be healthy enough." In essence we're coping-out, in my opinion. I have been told that Julius is recovering. The doctors have checked his disease and in a month he should be able to campaign again. So, I think we're going to have a good national campaign . . . saying things . . . local groups and not ... the candidates of these local groups—both electoral candidates and non-electoral activities, like free public . . . offs and all the other things-strike of the garbage workers of

Louisiana, many members of our convention came out and demonstrated at the City Jail in St. Louis protesting the conditions there. We're not a traditional party by any means. One newsman interviewing me said that we hear that you're a different kind of convention, but we look around and it doesn't look that different. I had to respond that we still need chairs; we still need microphones; we still need four walls, a roof and a floor-how different do you want it to look; I don't know. The difference is in what we're saying and the degree of seriousness with which we're saying it. We may be fighting over what would seem insignificant details to the majority of the people that are sitting on their asses, but the people who are fighting over that don't view it as insignificant details and they are not, in fact, insignificant—they are very important matters. We believe in what we're doing. Many of us are committing our lives to what we're doing; it's not a hobby, it's not something we do in our spare time, like a bridge club; we're not financially rewarded for what we're doing. The rewards are few. The biggest rewards are coming together at a convention and seeing hundreds of other people, whose heads are in similar places and whose hearts are in similar places, who are doing these things. Sometimes I just wish we could move all of us into one area and take that area; I just don't see how we could be help if we were all in one area. I'm very happy to be a member of this party; very happy with the candid that were nominated; very happy with the clearly radical positions, not rhetorical positions, that were adopted. I'm very happy that the people from SDS participated. I'm very happy that VVAW asked for our assistance with their current problems. I'm very happy with La Raza Unida of Texas, who asked us to endorse their candidate for Governor and we did. I was surprised to learn that La Raza Unida means the United People's Party and that they are welcoming the participation of non-Chicano peoples in their party. I'm hoping that means we can move toward a really united People's Party, I'm confident that the National Democratic Party—both by the Credential's Committee and by the convention itself, has elected county officials—policemen, police chiefs, sheriffs, judges, etc.—is going to move towards affiliation with us. Their platform has nothing to do with the Democratic Party, it has a lot to do . . . I think that five organized states on the ballot a year ago to twenty-five or so we had this year is a great base to go on to the municipal elections of the United States next year, congressional elections in '74, and by '76 I think a simple, functional, representative structure that we adopted—I think we're going to be a major course, I think we're going to be bigger than the American Independent Party was in '68, and I think that by that time we're not going to have one city council member address our convention—we're going to have hundreds of elected people. Our highest elected personnel is a mayor in a small town in California; who was unable to attend because they're in the process of firing a police chief. I call him a police chief, that should give . . . reason enough to fire him. We're building—we're getting there and . . . paying for this convention. I'm not sure if less or more painful than the last convention, because at the last convention I was an outsider coming in and raising hell about the . . . still painful—the work was hard. This time I was a member of the establishment, but it's not a bureaucratic establishment, it's not an authoritarian establishment, and unlike before it's now an establishment that can be replaced immediately by the local orders. Before national officers were elected until the next convention and when one of them went off completely on his own ego trips and . . . the papers ranging from pinning a button on Gene McCarthy's coat to endorsing McGovern without any reflection on how this would go over with the party or what political indications of what he was doing—that person couldn't be replaced in time. Now all of us can be replaced. We're going to be going into this campaign with a strong ticket with state parties that feel better about the national parties, who now have direct representation in the national party. We're now going to have Dick Gregory who says he's

going to give us money and campaign for us and help us raise money. We've got the advantage of having been on national television for the first time during our convention, we've got the advantage of getting very good press coverage overall—all across the country; now millions of people know that we exist, before only the few thousands that we could contact personally knew about it. I think that our lean period is moving to an end. I think that we go to get or 2% national vote this year, we're going to have to influence local elections, we're going to deny some people election, we're going to elect some of our own people to office, and at the very least we're going to make people aware of what's really happening in America—of how they can do something for themselves. We're going to force McGovern to either acknowledge that he's a moderate or move him to the left. If he acknowledges his moderacy, if he continues to seek the support of the right-wing labor unions and the corrupt politicians--those with pledgings for the McGovern volunteers, to every Democratic candidate including the southern racist, the northern ... When the people who originally supported him see that, I don't think that in November Dr. Spock is going to have to answer the question, "Why don't you support McGovern?" I think the question then is going to be, "How can anybody on the left support McGovern?" We've already seen McGovern try and co-opt us; in his acceptance speech he used half of our ... just as peace and liberation. He's a little scared with liberation ... At least he's promising jobs in justice. His volunteer organization is planning on publishing a newsletter called Grass Roots—which is the name of our newsletter; these rip off politicians, you've got to watch them all the time. I think that's all I have to say.