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THOMAS DEFENDS C.I.A.-AIDED WORK

But Ex-Socialist Head Denies
He Knew Source of Funds

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

Norman Thomas, the former Socialist Party leader, defended yesterday a program under which Latin-American politicians of the democratic left were trained largely at the expense of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Mr. Thomas was chairman of the Institute of International Labor Research, which ran schools in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic and a publishing house in Mexico between 1957 and 1965.

J. M. Kaplan, former president of the Welch Grape Juice Company, disclosed last week that the foundation bearing his name had channeled about \$1-million in C.I.A. funds to the institute. Neither Mr. Thomas nor anyone else connected with the institute knew the source of the funds, Mr. Kaplan said.

The J. M. Kaplan Fund was identified as a conduit for C.I.A. funds during a Congressional investigation in 1964.

'What We Did Was Good Work'

"I'm not ashamed of what we did," Mr. Thomas, now 82 years old, said in a telephone interview. "What we did was good work, and no one ever tried to tell us what to do. I am ashamed we swallowed this C.I.A. business, though. If I had a choice I would never have accepted C.I.A. support. That would have let them crush the project at any minute or made us persona non grata in the countries we were working with."

Mr. Thomas said he had "heard rumors" that the money came from the C.I.A., but "they were always denied when I asked Mr. Kaplan about them."

"I ought to have been more curious," he said. "I'm not trying to save myself from justified criticism. I ought to have known, but I didn't."

Mr. Thomas said the institute was the "brainchild" of Sacha Volman, a naturalized citizen from Rumania who had once worked for Radio Free Europe and had spent more than seven years in Nazi and Russian concentration camps.

"Volman came to the conclusion that nothing was being done successfully in Latin America to find an alternative to the Communists or the military oligarchies," Mr. Thomas said.

Organized 17 Parties

Mr. Volman then organized 17 left-of-center political parties throughout Latin America to oversee a leadership training school in San Jose, Costa Rica, Mr. Thomas said. The institute was formed in 1957 to provide funds, and Mr. Volman became director of the school, which was called the Institute of Political Education.

Funds were scarce in the early years, and Mr. Thomas approached Mr. Kaplan for help in 1960. According to Mr. Kaplan, the first grant of \$35,000 was not C.I.A. money. Shortly thereafter, he said, the C.I.A. asked him if it could make "substantial contributions" to the institute through the Kaplan Fund.

The school in Costa Rica ran 10-week sessions with about 50 to 60 Latin American politicians in each group. According to Mr. Thomas' financial adviser, many American Senators, Representatives and educators lectured in Costa Rica and later in the Dominican Republic.

"We were teaching people how to run a country," the adviser said.

The faculty also included Juan Bosch, later president of the Dominican Republic, and Jose Figueres, former president of Costa Rica. The two men have been among the most prominent democratic leftists in Latin America since World War II.

Moved to Santo Domingo

The school left Costa Rica in 1963 when the Kaplan Fund said it could not contribute directly to political parties—which controlled the school—and retain its tax-exempt status.

The school was moved to Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, where Mr. Bosch had become president. It was reorganized as the Inter-American Center of Economic and Social Studies. In addition to its classes, the center also conducted the first economic survey of the Dominican Republic.

The Institute of International Labor Research also started a publishing operation in Mexico under Victor Alba, a writer on Latin American affairs. It published scientific textbooks and training manuals for use in the school and throughout Latin America. The proceeds helped defray the costs of the school in Santo Domingo, according to Mr. Thomas's adviser.

Produced Literacy Films

In another enterprise the center, known as C.I.D.E.S., joined with the Parvin Foundation of Santa Barbara, Calif., and the National Association of Broadcasters to produce films to teach literacy to the Dominicans.

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, a board member of the Parvin fund, became a board member of the center, which was to administer the literacy project in the field.

Justice Douglas said yesterday he was unaware that the center had received most of its funds from the C.I.A.

The literacy project and the center's training school were abandoned when Mr. Bosch was overthrown by a military coup late in 1963. "Mr. Volman had to hide out for several days before he escaped from the country," Mr. Thomas said.

"This C.I.A. thing is the strangest thing I've ever heard of," Mr. Thomas said. "When Bosch was overthrown we always thought the C.I.A. was fighting against us."