

# Pre-convention Bulletin #1 / October 2013

for members only

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## Inside this Bulletin

This is the first pre-convention bulletin to be published in preparation for the ISO's 2014 National Convention, which will be held in Chicago on February 15-17. (Please note that these dates are the Saturday, Sunday and Monday of Presidents' Day weekend, which will hopefully make it easier for delegates who have Monday off from school or work.)

The national convention is the organization's highest decision-making body. It is our main opportunity to generalize the experience of local branches across the whole organization, review and assess the ISO's work over the past year and map out our tasks for the coming year. The convention also elects the ISO's national leadership bodies.

Convention delegates are elected by local branches at a ratio of one delegate for the first five dues-paying members, and one delegate for every eight dues-paying members thereafter.

The convention is open only to delegates and invited guests, subject to approval by the steering committee. This is why the *pre*-convention discussion period is so important—it lays the basis for the discussion at the convention and gives all members an opportunity to contribute to it.

Every member should be involved in the pre-convention discussions that will take place in the coming weeks in order to ensure the fullest and most democratic debate possible. Branches should begin discussions of documents and debates beginning with this first bulletin. We will produce as many bulletins as needed as other documents are

received.

All members who are in good standing are invited to contribute documents and/or resolutions to the pre-convention discussion bulletins. Please try to keep your contribution to 1,000 words or less. We can make exceptions to this rule for documents on major political issues, but experience has shown that comrades are far less likely to read a longer document than a shorter one on most subjects. So the shorter your document is—and the sooner it arrives—the more likely it will be read and considered by the largest number of members.

Your branch can choose to hold pre-convention discussions at branch meetings or as events separate from branch meetings. **Please be sure, however, to limit all pre-convention discussions (and documents) ONLY TO DUES-PAYING MEMBERS OF THE ISO.** If you believe that close contacts will benefit from the pre-convention discussion, then encourage them to join the ISO and take part!

If you are planning on submitting a document and/or resolution, please send notification to [bulletin@internationalsocialist.org](mailto:bulletin@internationalsocialist.org) so we can plan bulletin production. Documents themselves can be submitted to the same address.

Thanks!

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## Perspectives

### Introducing the ISO Perspectives Discussion

This document is intended to introduce the pre-convention discussion on perspectives. The organization's perspectives are the touchstone for convention discussions and decisions about the direction of the ISO in the coming year. It is the distillation of our understanding of the answers to several questions: What is the economic, political and social situation? What is the state of the class struggle? What is the state of the left? And what is the state of our own organization and the ISO's place in relation to all these things?

Perspectives can also be seen as our understanding of the next steps the organization hopes to take. James P. Cannon, a leader of American Trotskyism in the middle of the 20th century, summed up the importance of this question in a quote we often refer to:

The fate of every political group—whether it is to live and grow, or degenerate and die—is decided in its first experiences by the way in which it answers two decisive questions. The first is the adoption of a correct political program. But that alone does not guarantee victory. The second is that the group decide correctly what shall be the nature of its activities and what tasks it shall set itself, given the size and capacity of the group, the period of the development of the class struggle, the relation of forces in the political movement, and so on. If the program of a political group, especially a small political group, is false, nothing can save it in the end.... On the other hand, if the group misunderstands the tasks set for it by the conditions of the day, if it does not know how to answer the most important of all questions in politics—that is, the question of what to do next—the group, no matter what its merits may otherwise be, can wear itself out in misdirected efforts and futile activities and come to grief.

Cannon's emphasis at the end here is on the problem of an organization that sets too ambitious a perspective, based on its size, the political moment, etc., with the danger that it will "wear itself out." But there is also a danger of an organization setting a perspective that is not ambitious enough—that misses the possibilities for taking part in struggle, or relating to an important political issue, or engaging with a movement that can make a contribution toward rebuilding the left, or preparing itself to do these things in the future. This is another way a group can "misunderstand the tasks set for it by the conditions of the day."

The perspectives for a revolutionary organization must steer between these dangers—over-activity on the one hand, passivity on the other. Thus, the answer to "the question of what to do next" isn't unchanging. Ahmed Shawki, in his Socialism 2013 presentation on "Perspectives for the Left" (this talk provides valuable background to the discussion of

perspectives in the ISO and can be found at [wearemany.org/v/2013/06/perspectives-for-left](http://wearemany.org/v/2013/06/perspectives-for-left)), describes perspectives as "a successive approximation of an analysis"—one that is continually assessed and adjusted based on "the widest possible inputs."

The test of perspectives is not whether it correctly predicts the future. What we say about the direction of the economy, for example, is ultimately a guess—one based on theoretical understanding, research and applied experience from the past, but it may turn out to be right or wrong or something in between that requires adjustment. And we know from our own experience, as well as the lessons of history, that some of the most important struggles and movements were entirely unanticipated, even right before they emerged. The goal of perspectives is to take account of what we do know to position the ISO to work on immediate opportunities—but also to be prepared to respond effectively, shifting gears if necessary, to unanticipated developments.

Perspectives can—and must—be adjusted, based on ongoing assessments. But there's no way to assess unless we've fully tried out the perspectives—unless the organization has committed itself to taking the "next step" we decide on. In this sense, it's better to have made a concrete judgment about the organization's next steps (rather than vague, conclusion-less generalizations) and find out they're lacking in some way and have to adjust. That means the organization will be trained to be forward-thinking and confident in a situation where our hopes for rising struggles *do* play out.

This document is only an introduction to the questions that must be answered in setting perspectives. Each element—the state of the economy and social conditions, the political situation, the character of different struggles, the strengths and weaknesses of our own group, etc.—needs to be discussed during the pre-convention period. The rest of this document, therefore, will attempt to open up the discussion about particular areas that are important to setting perspectives, without getting into much detail or necessarily drawing definitive conclusions.

### How to assess the period

Assessing the current political and economic situation requires not only recognizing what is taking place now, but seeing how it fits into a wider picture. The framework for fully understanding developments in the economy, political conflicts, the level of struggle, etc., should be five years, not five months.

In general terms, the last five months have been characterized by disappointments and weaknesses overshadowing the bright spots. The most obvious example is Egypt and the Arab Spring. We ended our Socialism conference on June 30 with a final rally that reported on the enormous demonstrations in Egypt, with millions of people marching behind the democratic demand for the resignation

of a president who won election only a year before. But these mass protests were exploited by the military to reassert its power and initiate a crackdown, with the support of a large section of liberals and the left.

Gilbert Achcar, in an interview republished at SocialistWorker.org, called this “the most ambiguous event [so far] in the whole process” of the Arab Spring: “a very advanced experience in democracy by a mass movement asking for the recall of an elected president who had betrayed the promises he made to the people” followed immediately by “the military coup and widespread illusions that the army could play a progressive role.” The support of liberals and sections of the left for the military’s power grab and attack on the Muslim Brotherhood was unexpected, at least in its scope—but it reflects the organizational and political weaknesses of the left alternative at this stage. As Mostafa Ali said in an interview with *SW*, many revolutionaries “have on principle opposed SCAF rule, military fascism and military dictatorship. But they say that the army is the lesser of two evils, compared to what they call religious fascism. So that’s why we find ourselves in this precarious situation.”

In his interview, however, Achcar goes on to make an important point: As demoralizing as the advances of the Egyptian military have been for supporters of the revolution, they are one part of a “long-term revolutionary process”—a process that has to be understood not as fleeting, but “rooted in the social reality of the region, characterized by many decades of stalled development” and the lack of democracy characteristic of Third World regimes allied to U.S. imperialism. In other words, this latest development isn’t the final word on the Egyptian Revolution—because the military’s reassertion of its power doesn’t resolve the underlying contradictions that gave rise to it.

Achcar’s point is valuable to remember more broadly. In the U.S., the ruling class assault on working class living standards has continued relentlessly throughout this year, without producing a substantial increase in struggle. On the contrary, the drive to impose austerity in the public sector is taking place at such a pace that even after the successful Chicago teachers’ strike a year ago, the city was able to follow up with mass school closings and more layoffs before the new year started this fall. There have been flash points of resistance in the past year, but these have been exceptions in a period characterized by a continuing low level of class and social struggle.

At different points this year, some political issues *have* intruded in mainstream U.S. politics: the environment, immigration and racism, to name three. This was in response to public discontent and to struggle, even on a modest level, forcing the questions into view. But during the fall, these issues have been forgotten as a result of the shutdown circus—a battle over the pace of the austerity drive, fought on terms set by the right wing.

At the same time, however, much deeper divisions and fissures remain below the surface, generating continued

class and social polarization. They are visible in a variety of ways—for example, the recent Gallup opinion poll showing that a strong majority of people thinks a third major political party is needed because the Democrats and Republicans do such a bad job. But the cracks below aren’t represented at all in mainstream politics at the moment—nor have they found expression in ongoing struggles.

The big gap between anger and action can obscure these underlying divisions and polarization, and make it harder to remember how they *have* found sometimes explosive expression recently, reshaping popular consciousness in various ways that continue today and—to come back to the question of perspectives—that have created new and ongoing opportunities and challenges for the ISO.

The bigger picture begins five years ago with the financial crisis on Wall Street and the onset of the Great Recession. We said this would be the beginning of a new political period of an extended crisis of the capitalist system, deepening class and social polarization, political volatility, a radicalization of working-class consciousness, and the emergence of class struggle. That description does fit with what we’ve witnessed over the past five years—we have to understand how what is taking place today fits into that bigger picture.

### **The Great Recession after five years**

It’s hard to underestimate the scale of the economic crisis that reached fever pitch in the fall of 2008, with the crash of the investment bank Lehman Brothers and a market meltdown that engulfed other big-name banks and financial firms around the world. This quote from the *Wall Street Journal* gives a sense of the panic in the ruling class at the time:

The U.S. financial system resembles a patient in intensive care. The body is trying to fight off a disease that is spreading, and as it does so, the body convulses, settles for a time and then convulses again. The illness seems to be overwhelming the self-healing tendencies of markets. The doctors in charge are resorting to ever-more invasive treatment, and are now experimenting with remedies that have never before been applied. Fed Chairman Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson...looked like exhausted surgeons delivering grim news to the family.

Accompanying the severe economic and financial crisis was an ideological crisis. The Wall Street meltdown in particular exposed the greed and arrogance of the bankers and corporate executives. It cracked the façade of neoliberalism—the accepted wisdom of ruling classes around the world, and their governments, whether center-right or center-left—and it caused masses of working class people to question the precepts and prejudices of free market fundamentalism.

This is what we mean when we say that one element of the new period is a radicalization of working-class consciousness. The idea isn’t that working people are

moving uninterruptedly and evenly to more and more radical positions on every political question, but that there is a qualitative difference from what came before in terms of working-class people seeing the source of economic and social problems as connected to the structure and operations of the system, rather than individual behavior or some other explanation.

In the first instance, the main beneficiaries of the ideological crisis opened up by the Great Recession, at least in the U.S., were the Democrats—even though they were wholly committed to neoliberalism, and would continue operating according to its dogmas. But in late 2008, with the crisis engulfing some of the biggest names in Corporate America, the candidacy of Barack Obama embodied for millions the hope of a different direction in Washington politics and in society as a whole.

Connected to this was an expectation, one that the ISO shared (though of course without the illusion that this was “creeping socialism” or anything other than an alternative policy for the ruling class), of a new direction for the system itself—that the capitalist class would adopt an alternative to neoliberalism, and that in U.S. politics, the liberalism of the Democrats in the 1930s and 1960s would experience a renaissance. *Time* magazine ran a cover that morphed pictures of FDR and Obama, under the headline “The New New Deal”; a *Newsweek* cover declared “We’re all socialists now.”

But in the event, after a brief period of classic Keynesian measures—in the U.S., for example, the \$787 billion stimulus law passed during Obama’s first month in office—neoliberalism remained unmistakably the dominant policy, ushering in an era of drastic attacks to shred the social safety net, alongside the intensifying assault by private capital. Rather than the reincarnation of FDR, Obama is likely to go down in history as the Democrat who offered to dismantle the *most popular accomplishment* of the New Deal, Social Security—in return for a “grand bargain” that Republicans have refused again and again.

The state of the U.S. economy deserves more discussion during this pre-convention discussion period. There are important developments to evaluate, including the emergence of a ruling class strategy to focus on resource extraction and energy exports. This and other factors underlie the likelihood that the U.S. economy will continue to show positive growth in the coming years, though not at the pace associated with previous recoveries. Real weaknesses remain, too—the financial system, for example, is hampered by problems from the 2008 crash, though they have been largely hidden by the government’s multitrillion-dollar bailout.

Overall, the world economy has resumed growth, but very unevenly. The U.S. has had one of the weakest economic recoveries after any recession since the Second World War. Europe, with the exception of Germany, has been “sinking into a protracted period of deepening poverty, mass unemployment, social exclusion, greater inequality and collective despair as a result of austerity policies adopted in

response to the debt and currency crisis of the past four years,” as the *Guardian* summarized a recent report from the International Red Cross/Red Crescent. As for the previous bright spots of the world economy, China, Brazil, India and other developing nations have encountered economic problems of their own, in part as a consequence of slow growth or stagnation in the U.S. and Europe.

The character of the U.S. and world economy will be taken up in future documents, but the point here is to stress that the main economic engines of the world economy in the postwar era—the U.S., Western Europe and Japan—face long-term stagnation. This will continue to generate social and political polarization, including both radical and revolutionary upsurges like the Arab Spring and Greece’s mass mobilizations and strikes, as well as the growth of far-right and fascist organizations, also seen most clearly in Greece, but visible elsewhere in Europe.

Another characteristic of the period has been volatility even in mainstream politics. To take one example among many, in France, the mass struggle against the right-wing Sarkozy government’s attempt at pension reform in fall 2010 failed to stop the law from going through, but the center-left Socialist Party was the beneficiary, leading to a big election win 18 months later. Now, after a year and a half of François Hollande’s government continuing policies of austerity and projecting French imperialism, the Socialists have lost a lot of ground—and Marine Le Pen’s far-right National Front is leading national polls for the first time ever, half a year ahead of May 2014 elections for European parliament. The key factor here, as in many other countries, is a deep-seated bitterness with the status quo that expresses itself in many cases as anti-incumbent sentiment.

Adding to the economic and political instability is a period of flux in imperialist rivalries as the U.S. winds down its occupation of Afghanistan following the pullout from Iraq. The long-range plan for retooling and reviving U.S. imperialism is a “pivot to Asia,” an effort to contain China’s rise by reviving and extending Washington’s Cold War alliances in the Pacific—from Washington’s links to the unreformed Indonesian military and the Philippines armed forces in the name of fighting Islamist groups, to backing Japan’s increasingly nationalist and militarist foreign policy. The proposed Trans Pacific Partnership free trade deal with Asian nations other than China is the economic complement to this military strategy.

The Arab Spring, of course, forced the U.S. to scramble to adjust its imperial policy in the Middle East. In Egypt, the U.S. has veered between relying on the Muslim Brotherhood as a counterrevolutionary force and maintaining its traditional support for the military. Washington’s watchword in the region is “stability,” which is why it withheld decisive support for the Syrian revolution and avoided a direct military intervention—not only because of domestic unease, but also for fear of bringing to power a militant Islamist group, or something more dangerous to U.S. interests: a popular-democratic revolutionary regime. However, if U.S. imperialist policy remains contradictory, it is still deadly. Drone strikes,

Special Forces raids and smaller-scale military incursions have now become standard.

Looming over all these elements is a continuing ideological crisis for the system. No one can mistake the fact that the economy has operated, since the crash, to make sure the profitability of Corporate America and the wealth of the super-rich is assured—while the living standards of working people have declined sharply, and show no prospect of anything better than stagnation in the coming period.

The best way to characterize the ruling class consensus at this time is “smash and grab”: take as much as you can, as quickly as you can, and resist even the slightest concession to workers. The American ruling class has turned the economic crisis into an opportunity, driving down labor costs—meaning wages and benefits—to such an extent that the U.S. can advertise itself as a low-wage haven among the advanced countries. The fledgling manufacturing revival touted by the Obama administration is based on low wages, cheap energy costs and low corporate taxes. And the administration wants to sweeten the deal by pushing through a “grand bargain” to cut Medicare and Social Security and reduce the social wage still further.

Certainly there is no longer any longer any expectation that the government will go in a new direction and even partially defend the interests of ordinary people against corporations and the rich. Even in Europe, where the welfare state was historically far more developed, it’s impossible to have the illusion that national governments will challenge the bankers—not after bankers were imposed as prime ministers, without the hindrance of a democratic election, in Greece and Italy after mainstream political parties became discredited.

Why has neoliberalism hung on despite the scale of the crisis? There are undoubtedly many factors involved—like the fact that the ruling class has known no alternative to neoliberalism in several generations and was therefore likely to fall back on its dogmas, even in the face of a crisis that seemed to demand something different.

But the most important factor comes down to the quote from Frederick Douglass: “Without struggle, there is no progress.” The bourgeoisie is under no obligation to change direction unless one is forced on it. No matter how discredited its bankers and senators and bureaucrats become in the eyes of most people, they can continue to operate according to the old ways—immensely profitable ways—until they face something that stops them.

The intensity of the ruling class offensive and the austerity drive has shown us starkly just what level of struggle will be necessary to truly turn the tide. In Greece, there have been two dozen general strikes, mass social movements occupying public spaces, and the rise of a radical left electoral alternative in SYRIZA that came within 131,000 votes nationwide of winning national elections. And still, none of this has been enough to force the ruling establishment to reject any substantial aspect of the austerity program.

That, obviously, is a daunting challenge ahead. But the other side of the picture is that the intensified neoliberal assault on the working class is only adding to a social pressure cooker. The pressures are unbearable in the worst-hit countries like Greece, but they are also desperate for millions of people in countries like the U.S. that are not suffering the same scale of crisis. This is creating a generation of workers who will have known nothing but stagnating or declining living standards.

Those subterranean social pressures will continue to find their way to the surface. We don’t know the form, and we don’t expect them to come in “one big bang.” There will be ideological fissures, sudden political eruptions, spontaneous and short-lived rebellions, and long-building campaigns and movements that go through ups and downs—all of which the ISO must figure out how to understand and relate to. What we do know is that the “smash and grab” bourgeoisie is continuing to create these pressures below them, and so the eruptions, in all their different forms, will continue to take place.

### **The level of the struggle**

We believed five years ago that a new period of protracted economic crisis and class and political polarization would lead to a rise in class and social struggle. Has it?

In some countries, we don’t even need to ask the question. Egypt, Tunisia and the other flash points of the Arab Spring, and Greece, Spain and Portugal in Europe are obvious examples. There are exceptions, too—Brazil, until the recent mass protests this summer, for instance. But in general, these five years of crisis and political polarization *have* produced an accompanying series of protest movements, working-class struggles, spontaneous outbursts and revolutionary upsurges.

In the U.S., too, the answer is yes, though a qualified yes. Qualified, because the scale of struggle in some arenas has remained uneven and underdeveloped, even stagnant. Organized labor, with some proud exceptions, has not reacted, as we’d hoped to see, to the intensifying assault on workers and their unions—on the contrary, the two union federations have continued to operate as adjuncts of the Democratic Party, even though the Democrats are the face of the austerity offensive. Stirrings of an alternative for labor, such as the movement of the unorganized in the Fight for 15 and OUR Walmart campaigns, do exist, but they remain in the early stages, as inspiring as they have been.

But despite these qualifications, over the past five years, we have seen important upsurges and movements develop in reaction to the crisis, and with a particular intensity around class questions. The ISO’s participation in them has made us stronger, more experienced and more capable, and put us in a new position of prominence on the left.

It’s important to draw our attention back to these moments, even though they aren’t so long ago. Less than three years ago, the ISO convention met in the aftermath of the Egyptian Revolution’s toppling of Hosni Mubarak in

February 2011. Our relationship with the Egyptian left, the product of many years of work by a few well-positioned members, gave us a unique and electrifying connection to the struggle.

Also at that convention, the delegates from Madison arrived late—because the branch was playing a central role in the occupation of the Wisconsin Capitol building. The upsurge in Wisconsin came in reaction to the overreach of a right-wing Republican governor voted into office months before in the 2010 GOP landslide. The speed with which it spread and the wide and enthusiastic support for it was a testament to how quickly class anger could turn to action, when given the opportunity. Wisconsin was about more than Wisconsin, too—like many other unionists and activists, our members from across the country traveled to Madison to take part in the protests and occupation, and then brought the message of resistance back home.

Later that year, as the discussion period began for the next convention, the entire organization was intensely involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement—which spread from New York City to other big cities, and then to many more towns, campuses and other locales. Like Madison, but on a national level, Occupy galvanized the radicalization of working class consciousness resulting from the crisis, epitomized by the slogan of the “99 Percent versus the 1 Percent.” It helped draw together the dispersed forces of resistance by giving them a common base that could bring together unionists, antiracist and community organizers, people concerned with any number of a range of issues, and left-wing organizations of different stripes.

It’s worth a digression here to make a point about adjusting perspectives. Very few people thought Occupy Wall Street would become what it did. Some members in New York City were involved in the organizing meetings for Occupy and aware of their importance, but in general, this was not a high priority for the district. Speaking for myself, I thought that after the similar “Bloombergville” initiative for an encampment outside City Hall to protest budget cuts, which never grew past the original core of participants, despite the best efforts of organizers, including ISO members, it wasn’t clear why Occupy Wall Street would be different.

But that analysis was proved wrong, and as soon as the importance of Occupy became clear, the ISO shifted very quickly to make it the center of our work. This didn’t happen without an argument, either, in some cases—the national office, organizers and other members persuaded comrades that it was necessary to set aside doubts about what Occupy would produce or genuine concerns about neglecting other areas of work, or we would miss an opportunity to relate to a critical national movement that was transforming the political discussion and contributing to important developments on the left.

One year ago was the Chicago teachers’ strike, one of the most important labor battles to take place in the U.S. in decades. Though the strike remained confined to one city—and the small number of teacher walkouts inspired by it to the Chicago area—it was another example of the

radicalization of working-class consciousness finding an expression in concrete struggle. The 30,000-strong Chicago Teachers Union was transformed into a politicized and militant fighting force. Equally impressive was how working class Chicago embraced the teachers’ struggle as their own—something that wasn’t a foregone conclusion, given the intensity of anti-teacher propaganda from the corporate school reformers.

These are some of the most important high points of the period, but there were many other examples of struggles breaking out—in new ways, around new issues, and with a different sense of purpose, outlook and confidence.

The passage of Prop 8 in California in November 2008 was met by a statewide and then a national rebellion that turned the political tide against opponents of marriage equality. A new movement took shape very quickly, producing one of the biggest single demonstrations of the recent past: the October 2009 march for equality in Washington, which was organized outside the channels of mainstream liberal organizations. Most tellingly, on this issue, our side eventually won concrete gains.

The environmental movement has emerged in a new form in response to the threat of climate change, and “is already considerably more sophisticated in its overall political understanding than it was a few short years ago,” as Chris Williams wrote. The Slutwalk demonstrations were a lightning rod for a generation of women and men who wanted to speak out against pervasive sexism and sexual assault—and in a different language that the ISO was challenged to understand and take up. The murder of Trayvon Martin produced an upsurge of protest and organizing that forced the issue of racism into mainstream political discussion with a prominence not seen since the 1992 LA Rebellion—and gave energy to existing and emerging struggles, particularly around questions of police brutality and the New Jim Crow.

Much more could be said about any one of these movements (and the discussion does continue below), but what about the question: Does this constitute an advance in the level of struggle in the new period? Certainly the movements listed don’t match, for example, the sit-down strike wave of the 1930s or the sustained mass mobilization of the civil rights movement during the early 1960s. But they are an advance from the previous period, emerging as a direct response to the crisis, and with a political character shaped by it, as well.

One further point: Just listing these struggles is to recognize how closely connected the ISO has been to them, with all their ups and downs. Our organization has been challenged to understand and involve itself in a whole variety of movements. We should be very proud of what we’ve contributed to them, whether at their high points or in between, and how they’ve transformed our organization.

It’s important to recognize all this—a growing number of teacher members with a higher profile and some accumulated experience as left-wing and union activists;

organic connections to many more anti-racist struggles on the local level, along with deepened relationships with other activists; a new generation of members who have been through the experience, in Occupy, of relating to a rising mass movement and trying to make our politics relevant, theoretically and practically.

What we *have* achieved shouldn't be underestimated. If we feel more intensely the challenges and difficulties of where these struggles and movements are headed today, it may be because we are involved in them more directly than ever before in the history of the ISO.

### **From anger to action to organization**

There's a danger in assessing the level of social and class struggle with the answer of "high" or "low" or somewhere in between—either the struggle is on or off. This is insufficient for understanding the ISO's tasks in relationship to the opportunities for building the left and our organization. Even at the high points of all the struggles and movements mentioned above, we never lost sight of their political weaknesses, the challenges and pitfalls they faced, and contradictory patterns that held them back or would later slow or reverse them.

The CTU strike was so important precisely because it was exceptional in a continuing bleak environment for unions, as we pointed out again and again in *SW*. In Wisconsin, we didn't just cheer on the occupation in the Capitol. Our members were involved constantly in political debates. We were a main part of the effort to bring together left-wing union members and activists in the Kill the Whole Bill coalition, to resist the inevitable pressure for compromise as Democrats and labor officials scrambled to contain the struggle.

The experience of Occupy Wall Street was similar. Members around the country were engaged in discussions about the direction of the struggle—on different levels, from very practical to overarching goals—which required understanding what aspects of the movement needed to be strengthened or challenged, and then figuring out how to do so. *Socialist Worker's* coverage of Occupy not only reported on the inspiring spread of the movement, but analyzed important arguments—from naïve attitudes toward the police, to the question of prefigurative politics, to the problems with not making demands or with welcoming a "diversity of tactics" rather than unity in action.

When local governments, operating in coordination with the Feds, moved against the Occupy encampments, we recognized early on that this would take away one of the movement's greatest strengths—of maintaining a physical organizing space. Ultimately, as the pressure of repression, carried out by newly militarized police forces, increased, wider layers of support for the movement fell away, leaving a core of activists who were committed, in many cases, to anarchist politics and who too often misguidedly tried to substitute for the previous broader mobilizations with ultra-left actions.

This pre-convention discussion period should take up the lessons of Occupy in more detail—the organization has more to learn from assessing this experience. Here, we want to discuss how the Occupy movement, both its strengths and weaknesses, was affected by the state of the U.S. left.

The left in general—including the broad left that extends into the labor movement and liberal organizations; the radical wing of the broad left; and the socialist component within the radical wing—has been in decline and disarray since the retreat of the 1960s and early '70s social movements. There have been important developments during this time, of course. But by any number of measures—sheer size; rootedness in society; political strategy and confidence; theoretical understanding; experience in struggle—the trajectory has been downward.

In one sense, Occupy thrived because of its disconnection from liberal organizations and their practices—because it was marked from the start by a sense of spontaneity and unfettered experimentation. As Jen Roesch's recent *Socialist Worker* article described, even elements that would later become ineffectual, such as the consensus process of the General Assemblies and the refusal to settle on specific demands, had a positive aspect: They gave people flowing into the movement their first experience of democratic participation in struggle and a sense of genuine ownership. At the same time, as Jen points out, Occupy benefited greatly from its connections to existing organization as the struggle developed—especially unions, which undertook material support and the physical defense of Zuccotti Park at critical moments, in spite of efforts by leaders of unions such as SEIU to channel the struggle into safer activities, such as preparations for the 2012 elections.

Like any movement, the next step for Occupy after mass mobilization was to create forms of organization and political practices that would both retain the accountability of mass democracy and the spirit of innovation and flair, but sustain the movement over a longer period and prepare for future challenges. Here, the low political level and the U.S. left's lack of experience in struggle were big factors holding back Occupy. In fact, after its heady period of initial success, Occupy faced difficult challenges very quickly—above all, the ferocious repression unleashed by the state. The movement took important steps to confront the challenges. But in large part because of the lack of connection to a stronger left—and the history and traditions of the past struggles embodied in that left—the forces and individuals involved in Occupy, ourselves included, were unable to develop the organizational and political means to sustain the movement.

This isn't the result of some flaw peculiar to Occupy. The challenge of taking the next step toward organization and sustained activity is a test of every movement. Eruptions of struggle are the critical first step in turning anger into action—in bringing new people and forces into political activity and unleashing their energy and potential for changing the world. But the next step is to build the organizational framework, activist relationships and political practices that can rise to future challenges. This

remains a decisive question everywhere, in the U.S. and outside it.

It's important not to underestimate what *has* been accomplished toward rebuilding the left, as a direct result of the struggles of this new era. Occupy did bring together radicals, unionists, long-time community activists and more, creating new and ongoing political relationships. The success of the Chicago teachers strike depended on years of work by left-wing union members in building an opposition caucus that was able to win leadership of the local, and then to develop and politicize rank-and-file members in every school so the strike would be solid. The strike itself crystallized and expanded ties of solidarity, built up through years of effort, between the union, community organizations and left-wing forces, which have since been at the heart of further struggles for education justice.

We've been intensively involved in figuring out next steps in a variety of movements, and trying to take them as quickly as possible. But, through no fault of our own, *these efforts haven't happened quickly enough* to keep pace with the ferocity of the ruling class offensive or overcome the weaknesses of our side. Thus, with only a few and partial exceptions—in the area of LGBT rights, for example—we have seen more setbacks and defeats than we have advances and victories, even where the struggle has been the strongest.

The CTU strike last year achieved a victory—a contract that did take some concessions, but advanced teachers' interests and fighting capacity in other areas—that stands out as all the more impressive given the intensity of the corporate school deform onslaught. Yet even so, the teachers and their allies were unable to stop Rahm Emanuel from closing an unprecedented 50 elementary schools in one fell swoop earlier this year—and then inflicting budget cuts that led to another 2,000 layoffs, on top of the 1,000 that came with the closings.

This same predicament has presented itself internationally, in countries with higher levels of social and political upheaval. In Greece, for example, the mass struggle from below, embodied in strikes, public occupations, etc., has found a mass political expression with the rise of SYRIZA, the electoral coalition of radical left organizations, now constituted as a political party. No one has to tell comrades just how important this development is. Yet this radical left challenge has not been enough to stop the austerity offensive from advancing in Greece—and for the revolutionary left within SYRIZA, there are a whole new series of difficulties presented by the crystallization of a right and left within SYRIZA, with the left as a strong, but still distinct, minority.

The problem is evident in an even more extreme form in Egypt, where the revolutionary process since 2011 has seen the toppling of a dictator after three decades of rule, the discrediting of the military regime that followed him, and a massive mobilization against the first elected president who followed *them*—and yet, the military and remnants of the old regime are in the ascendency today. The revolutionary

left in Egypt has made spectacular, undreamt-of advances. It was directly and prominently involved in all phases of this revolutionary process, playing an especially critical role at moments where there wasn't mass participation and protest. But it's clear that the revolutionary left needs to be bigger and stronger still to meet the challenge of escalating repression by the military and the capitulation of liberal and some left forces.

At one level, this problem is easy to understand: We won't win until we win. It doesn't matter how far down the field our team has gotten if we don't score a touchdown, or at least settle for a field goal (having avoided a safety earlier in the drive). We have to recognize and celebrate any advances for the left—broad, radical and/or revolutionary—while maintaining the sober understanding that the real celebrating can only begin with real victories.

But from this side of those future victories, the tasks we face can be daunting, and the progress we've made can seem inconsequential. Once again, the challenge of this period referred to at the end of a previous section—just how far our side had to go to turn the tide—presents itself starkly.

And there's another factor involved: the corrosion of confidence and political understanding that takes place in the wake of defeats and setbacks. We believe we are still in a period of working class radicalization. But it's critical to be attuned to developments of consciousness within that—of retreats on particular questions in relation to others, of doubts about what's possible, of political and practical weakening. Above all, the *utmost patience* is called for in grappling with these corrosive effects—trying to understand them as part of the bigger picture and determining how they affect what we can do now.

This is the way we have to approach the immediate situation we face in the fall of 2013. We have to frankly recognize, as we have, the setbacks for the Arab Spring, the decline of the Occupy movement, and the continuing low level of struggle in a variety of areas—and also understand the further effects resulting from disappointment and disorientation.

Determining ISO perspectives right now means calibrating what we do in recognition of this objective situation. But perspectives also need to be shaped by the knowledge that the immediate situation won't stay the same forever. We can do our best to understand that situation and adjust ourselves to what it requires, but the best medicine for a phase of disorientation and demoralization is new struggles and hopeful political developments.

This doesn't mean that we are carrying on in perpetual anticipation that the next struggle or movement will be the "big bang" that changes everything. (Another digression: as Ahmed Shawki pointed out in his "Perspectives for the Left" discussion at Socialism, we used the phrase "big bang" to describe what we believed were the *mistaken* perspectives of the Socialist Workers Party-Britain when it claimed the 1990s were the "1930s in slow motion.") The history of the U.S. working class movement is, indeed, one

of sudden and radical explosions of militancy and struggle. But this doesn't imply that an explosion will follow *every* new struggle.

We don't know when the upsurges and political openings will come, and we don't know what form they will take, how dramatic they will be, nor how we will best be able to relate to them when they do emerge. But we do know that struggle and political eruptions are inevitable in some form because of the character of the economic and social crisis. In this particular moment, the question is what the ISO's current activity and practice—whether it involves activism beyond our members or the organization's own activities and initiatives—can do to prepare for the future when we have new opportunities that can move our organization and the left forward.

### **Patterns of struggle**

No one really believes that it's going to be “onward and upward” from the first protest or movement planning meeting. That caricature defies even a few days' experience as a socialist. But it's sometimes hard to shake the sense that a period of political unrest and polarization ought to have at least a general upward trend. The reality, though, based on the experiences of the past, is more complicated. Sometimes there are sharp and sustained breakthroughs, and sometimes there are a steady stream of advances. But there are also ups and downs in a struggle or movement, and in the midst of a down phase, it's not clear if or when the next up is coming.

Leon Trotsky used a metaphor to describe such patterns, comparing them to a person recuperating after a long illness. The first signs of recovery look very promising compared to the immediate past. But the patient almost never has a recovery to full health right away. They won't necessarily be up to more strenuous activity after exercising their muscles for the first time. Sometimes, a further period of bed rest is needed, or at least a good night's sleep. There are good days and bad days—on the bad days, it can look like the old health problems are back. It becomes clear, too, that particular kinds of rehabilitative therapy or exercise regimens are needed to prepare for the next bout of activity, and that it's better to spend some time training than find a new race to run.

We can put other countries at different points on the road to recovery—as for the U.S., we've seen struggles flex their muscles and show signs of unanticipated energy and strength in the past few years, but the period of the last year has been one of more setbacks than advances. In determining our perspectives, we need to recognize both the setbacks and the fewer, but still significant, advances—and figure out what we can do that will best contribute to rebuilding the patient's health.

This requires doing two things at once. We need to recognize the potential of the political activities and movements we're involved in, even if they are small and beset by problems right now. We need to see the possibilities for what we're doing right now to break

through in the right conditions. Otherwise, if we approach our practical efforts with resignation, we'll miss the opportunities ahead of us.

But we also need to do something else at the same time. We have to be clear-headed about the challenges and weaknesses of the struggles we're involved in and of the working class movement generally in this political period—so that we figure out how to confront them and convince others about what must be done to overcome them.

This is absolutely necessary when the struggle is rising so we can provide what lead we can in taking it forward. But it's important in a more contradictory period for a further reason—so the organization doesn't get pulled by the disappointments and disorientation that follow from setbacks. It's necessary in these circumstances to be even more insistent on facing the problems of the moment, not only to reinforce the confidence of our own members, but to persuade people outside the ISO who were drawn into action by struggle and are now looking for answers to their own questions.

We often quote the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci about the need for “optimism of the will” and “pessimism of the intellect.” We don't make any apologies about our optimism, especially when it comes in response to the struggles and movements this document has been talking about—some of the most important in the ISO's history.

*Socialist Worker*; the ISR; members of the organization, young and old—all are guilty of having made overstatements at some points on the basis of optimism. Our first response should be that optimism about the Occupy movement at its height or the CTU strike or the Arab Spring is better than the alternative. Hard as it may be to believe, the ISO was criticized by other left organizations for overestimating the uprising in Wisconsin and Occupy Wall Street when they first emerged—not overestimating what they would lead to, but whether they were a significant development in the first place.

But having said that, it's also true that we've never been one-sidedly optimistic, about even the most inspirational events. And we can be equally proud of our record of having always reassessed our positions and attitudes, if and when we got it wrong.

Our participation in struggles or political discussions isn't based on whether we feel optimistic or not. As Sharon Smith wrote in a previous pre-convention period, “It is not the job of revolutionaries to predict or pronounce on what will happen next in any given struggle, but rather to be involved in, describe and analyze events, and if possible to argue a course that can advance the struggle.” Ultimately, the job of socialists, at all times, is to seek out all the political opportunities we realistically can, with the goal of advancing the struggle and strengthening the left and our own organization.

### **Identifying existing opportunities**

We need to do everything we can to help the struggles we're involved in today to break through and advance. But even if they don't, the work itself can be very important. Even if an activist initiative doesn't draw in as many new people or forces as we hoped, even if a big first protest isn't repeated, even if our public meeting doesn't get the large audience we expected, these activities can still yield valuable results in strengthening our organization and the left. They can build up our individual relationships with other activists and different left forces. They can introduce people involved in different issues to each other and establish or firm up ties of solidarity. They can contribute to our own organizing skills or deepen our political understanding.

In this respect, the ISO has had some very important experiences in the past year, despite the difficulties of the objective situation.

One obvious example: Our last convention took place the same weekend as the mobilization of tens of thousands of demonstrators in Washington, D.C., to protest the Keystone XL pipeline. We had a substantial participation in the protest itself, but were also instrumental in initiating an ecosocialist contingent, organized jointly with other left groups. This effort continued into the spring, with the organizing of an ecosocialist conference in New York City—another was held last month in Los Angeles—and the later establishment of the System Change Not Climate Change network. This initiative has helped to organize the left wing of the movement at a time when there is more interest in environmentalism and a radicalization in the character of activism, even though the level of struggle remains modest, at least in relation to the goals. As it is, the ISO's activity around this initiative specifically and the issue generally is still uneven. The pre-convention discussion should help us develop a strategy for increasing our involvement.

Another area where our involvement has been uneven, but promising, is the Fight for 15 activities to organize low-wage workers. The importance of this upsurge of the unorganized is obvious, despite the many obstacles it faces. As anyone who has read the discussion at *Socialist Worker* and elsewhere knows, there are important debates about this activism, including its relationship to very top-down unions like SEIU. But Trish Kahle made the right point about the necessity of being involved in the struggle when she wrote, "The best place to push for the kind of union we want is from inside of it." This is another arena of work where there is room to grow in many branches and districts.

Probably the most systematically applied area of activism for the ISO this year was anti-racist organizing. The Zimmerman verdict produced another burst of protests across the U.S. and reconnected people who were part of organizing a year before, after news of Trayvon Martin's murder emerged. Those 2012 protests gave a new energy and prominence to ongoing and emerging campaigns, especially against police violence and the New Jim Crow. One product of this was the incredible evening plenary session on police violence at Socialism 2012, featuring family members of police victims from all parts of the

country.

Comrades made an attempt at forming a national network that could tie together these local struggles and possibly look forward to national action. That goal wasn't achieved, largely because of the inherent difficulties in creating a national profile for activism that is so rooted in local cases. Nevertheless, the fruits of our concentration on anti-racist organizing can be seen in many branches around the group where we are at the center of struggles and organizing against police violence and other issues—involvement on a stronger basis than before.

In New York City, our involvement in specific police murder cases and our connection with activists like Jazz Hayden connected us to the associated upsurge of opposition to the NYPD's "stop-and-frisk" racial profiling policy. Both the sentiment and the activism were further propelled when the NAACP took up the issue. The protests are a big reason why a federal judge ruled that stop-and-frisk violates the constitutional rights of its thousands of victims per day—a decision that has left a signature policy of Michael Bloomberg discredited as he scuttles out of office.

This was the context for the mobilization for the March on Washington this summer, called to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the famous civil rights movement demonstration, but which took on a new dynamic in the wake of the anger over the Zimmerman verdict. There has been a controversy over our mobilization, debated in SW and on the Internet. That discussion should be taken up in more detail in pre-convention discussion—but we think our approach to the march and our understanding of the opportunities it represented made sense.

We hoped that the Zimmerman verdict would produce a bigger march, giving us the chance to meet more people politicized around opposition to racism—in particular, from parts of the African American community that we don't have regular contact with. We hoped the mobilization would draw more people who had been involved in disparate local struggles to Washington, where they could make connections and advance the left's discussion on this issue. This seems to have happened.

We *didn't* expect that the liberal speakers and organizers of the march would offer a radical lead or challenge the Obama administration, and we didn't think the audience as a whole, given that the politicization around this issue is at an early stage, would necessarily be protest the politics expressed from the front. But setting those unrealistic expectations aside, the March on Washington was a positive step, and we think we were right to have placed importance on relating to it as we did.

All told, we had a good turnout of members from East Coast and Midwest branches, and of our allies in different struggles. We were successful in being a left-wing pole of attraction, with our contingent in the march, and later, by building a successful evening meeting sponsored by Haymarket Books, with Cornel West, Gary Younge and

Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor.

At the 2012 convention, the ISO voted to put a renewed concentration on education and activism around the issue of racism, because we felt that the organization had lost its intensive connection to this crucial issue in the American class struggle. Our focus on learning the history and politics of the Black struggle and the efforts of branches around the organization to relate to every possible opening to organize have increased our experience and political depth—and put us in an ongoing relationship with other activists and political figures who will be part of the struggle over the long term. This seems to us to be a good example of how the organization can set perspectives which—even in a period where the general level of struggle is lower than we'd like—identify opportunities and take important steps toward rebuilding the left and preparing the ISO for future upsurges of struggle.

### Strengthening the ISO

Much of this document has been focused on factors that we don't control—the economic and social crisis, the low level of struggle in the U.S., the crisis of the left. One thing we can control is our own organization. Especially at a moment when the demands of the struggle beyond us are lower, we have the opportunity to concentrate resources on building our political and organizational strength. We always place a significant emphasis on training a new cadre in Marxism, even when the struggle is demanding, but there are greater resources for this right now.

This focus is all the more important given the setbacks of the current moment, where demoralization and disorientation exert a pull that is necessarily felt within the ISO, too. These influences are compounded by a generalized prejudice on the left toward any organization committed to Leninism, which has dramatically deepened as a result of the crisis of the Socialist Workers Party-Britain.

The counter to these effects, short of the emergence of new struggle, must be building a stronger cadre, with confidence in our politics and in Marxist theory. Projecting this confidence will have an impact beyond our own members—at a time when broader movements and struggles such as Occupy have declined, there is a layer of left-wing activists who will be looking for answers to their frustration at the lack of advance and the low level of struggle.

For the past several years, we have put a stress on opening up a discussion to deepen our theoretical understanding—on questions of oppression and our approach to Leninism, in particular. We've always made a major effort to project our politics and theory on the left—our connections to Haymarket Books and the *ISR* have helped us make big strides in this direction. We should carry through on that commitment—the report from the National Committee's September meeting proposed Marxist day schools this fall, rather than more broadly oriented conferences, with a specific focus on issues of oppression and Leninism. The

overriding aim is not to advance in purely academic terms, but to prepare the organization for future struggles and activities by strengthening our knowledge of Marxism and the history of the revolutionary tradition.

In general, we have an opportunity to re-center the organization, at a time when there's no central and national movement carrying political activism and discussion forward. In a disorienting period like today, and with an organization that has been involved in so many political and activist initiatives, it's natural to feel centrifugal pulls in different directions. One way of resisting those pulls is to put a special emphasis on making ISO activities the center of branch life.

In addition to Marxist day schools, the NC discussed a campaign over the fall to re-motivate the use of the paper edition of *Socialist Worker* and rebuild a routine around *SW* sales; as well as an effort to strengthen the financial commitment of every member through dues.

Further, in a climate in where there is continuing bitterness and anger about the effects of the crisis and growing social inequality, but no sustained movement to give expression to these sentiments, ISO meetings can be a place to attract those interested in hearing a political alternative on any number of pressing political issues.

These events won't do the job if they're done in rote fashion. Building exciting public meetings that can attract the radicalizing minority requires flair and systematic organizing. But when done right, they can have a very important function in a period of a low level of struggle—of reaching people who are becoming politicized around an issue like education justice or anti-racism; and of bringing together activists and organizers to deepen their commitment and understanding. Indeed, there are many examples of such meetings taking place around the organization that every branch can learn from—we hope the pre-convention discussion contains reports about these successes.

These are some of the proposals put forward for our work during the fall, and they will no doubt play a part in our future perspectives, but all this and much more about our work should be part of the discussion leading to the convention in four month's time. The aim of this document has been to describe the elements that go into the development of ISO perspectives, respond to some of the questions about the period we have been through in the last five years, and introduce the issues we need to examine from here. Though the last year has been characterized generally by a low level of struggle and stifled political developments, the ISO is stronger and more experienced today than it was at the start of this period. That depth and maturity will be an asset in carrying through a discussion on perspectives that comes up with answers to the challenges we face today.

**Alan M.** for the Steering Committee

## ***Socialist Worker***

### **Putting Socialist Worker at the center**

Radicals and radical movements are tied together in history with their newspapers. The revolutionary era of the abolitionist struggle against slavery was launched with the establishment of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. Frederick Douglass' political training came through *The Liberator*—when he broke with Garrison to promote a different political strategy, he did so using his own papers, including *The North Star*.

The Black Panther Party had *The Black Panther*; the founders of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement took over the Wayne State University student newspaper *The South End* and turned it into an organ of the struggle. The *Appeal to Reason* was the best-known voice of the working class movement in the heyday of the U.S. Socialist Party, with three-quarters of a million subscribers; during the French Revolution, the radicals associated themselves with Jean-Paul Marat's *L'Ami du Peuple*; when Occupy Wall Street emerged two years ago, it threw up—despite coming in the “new era of the Internet”—movement newspapers in several cities.

And that's not to mention the revolutionary socialist organizations committed to Leninism that have seen the revolutionary newspaper as a central and indispensable tool—in Lenin's famous words, the “scaffolding” for building and sustaining socialist organization—dating back to the many papers of the Russian revolutionaries, starting with *Iskra*.

Revolutionaries of any era need a way to promote their ideas, analysis and vision to wider numbers of people, so the appeal of newspapers, as the main form of popular media during the past two centuries, is obvious. But the experiences of the struggles of the past teach us that the revolutionary newspaper is very important in organizational terms. The act of producing, distributing and making the paper the center of political discussion has a unifying effect that can't be underestimated—it ties together groups of socialists in different parts of a large country, operating in different circumstances, by giving them a common identity and a common political framework.

*Socialist Worker* has been central to the ISO from the start—its first monthly issue was printed the same month the ISO was founded in April 1977, and it has appeared regularly, without a single gap, ever since. *SW* was a monthly paper until 1994, when it went biweekly. In 2001, we went to a weekly publication schedule, supplemented by a website updated after each edition. In 2008, the website took the lead, going to daily publication (during the week), with the paper edition reduced to a biweekly and then a monthly. The increasing prominence of *SW* to the ISO has

taken place in opposition to the longstanding trend on the left of retreating from a party publication, and a revolutionary paper in particular.

Obviously, the Internet has had a transformative effect on *SW*, just as it has for the rest of the left and independent media, and for the mainstream. In many ways, the Internet has been an incredible boon. On many days, SocialistWorker.org has as many readers in a single 24-hour period as our total circulation for most editions of the weekly, biweekly or monthly newspaper throughout our history. *SW*'s reach and profile has increased dramatically, with obvious benefits for the organization—a number of people who have come around the ISO first encountered us through the *SW* website.

But there are also challenges presented by the Internet. The vast majority of our website audience is anonymous—according to our site statistics, at least half and probably closer to three-quarters of readers each day are seeing the website for the first time, most of them won't return, and it's difficult to break through that anonymity and connect readers to the site and the organization. Readers typically don't see SocialistWorker.org as a coherent whole, representing a socialist message on a range of issues and questions—this is all the more so in the era of Facebook and Twitter. Discussions of political questions can end up taking place in different corners of the Internet, fragmenting the debates that a revolutionary newspaper aims to bring to the fore.

In short, as positive as the rise of the Internet has been for the profile of Socialist Worker, there are counteracting dynamics that pull against the important role of the revolutionary newspaper needs to play in unifying our organization and helping it to grow.

*SW* has been through different formats and now different mediums, but we have always maintained the idea that it is the “scaffolding” of the organization, and judged its effectiveness, whether the website or print edition, by this standard. So if there are questions about the usefulness of producing a paper edition today or who the website is aimed at, they need to be answered based on an understanding of what the ISO needs as a “scaffolding” in the current situation.

The use of Socialist Worker, both its paper and its website, is very uneven right now. In a number of places, though not all, use of the paper edition has broken down, with members either voting with their feet and giving up most routines around selling and using the paper, or allowing the existing routine to become a rut that yields little positive for the branch. The *SW* website is clearly of central importance to members, but its use can also be haphazard—some articles

get read and discussed, others don't; the site sometimes seems like it is just one source of left news and views among many others available on the Internet.

We believe we can confront and solve these problems, and that the process of putting Socialist Worker back at the center of the ISO will be helpful, particularly in a challenging political period in which the tempo of struggle has been sluggish, punctuated by some steps forward as well as some bitter setbacks—and in which the crisis of left-wing politics and organization has continued.

We think the SW website will continue to be a central tool for the organization, but also that the paper edition, published monthly, still has an important role to play in building and strengthening the ISO—particularly in ways that the website can't. Clearly, the print media at every level, from commercial to alternative, has been in decline for some years. But it's not like we're selling eight-track tapes or Beta videos (apologies to comrades who aren't sure what a Beta is...). For now, print newspapers are still alive, even if they have changed in appearance, content, etc.

In the context of political movements and struggles, we have even seen print newspapers thrive unexpectedly—the Occupy papers launched two years ago. They have declined since then with the decline of the movement, but at the height of Occupy, they exemplified the continuing instinct for organizations and movements to represent their politics in print. The point applies more broadly—while it may be harder, though not impossible, to sell a monthly print newspaper in non-political public settings like a public tabling, the reception at political events shows the paper edition still is relevant to our audience. Think back to the popularity of the papers with the Trayvon Martin case on the cover when a new surge of anti-racist activism developed in 2012.

The pre-convention period will be a great opportunity to discuss Socialist Worker and its uses. All views on the question, including those that differ with this perspective, should be raised. But we do want to underline the importance of the resolution passed by the National Committee at its September meeting, which called on branches to hold discussions motivating the use of SW and re-establishing a routine around using the paper edition, in particular. This is necessary to have a constructive discussion of Socialist Worker leading up to and during convention—we can't come to any conclusions about the potential for using the paper in the coming year if we don't have enough experiences of using it now.

### What do we mean by “scaffolding”?

Most members of the ISO have probably heard the phrase “scaffolding” in relationship to the revolutionary paper. It comes from a 1902 article by Lenin called “Where to Begin.” No one needs to say how different the circumstances of Tsarist Russia at the turn of the 20th century are from the U.S. today. But it's still incredibly helpful to read Lenin's case for producing a revolutionary

paper while thinking about the current questions and challenges regarding SW, both the paper and the website:

In our opinion, the starting point of our activities, the first step towards creating the desired organization, or let us say, the main thread which, if followed, would enable us steadily to develop, deepen and extend that organization should be the founding of an All-Russian political newspaper. A newspaper is what we most of all need; without it we cannot conduct that systematic, all-around propaganda and agitation, consistent in principle, which is the chief and permanent task of Social Democracy in general and, in particular, the pressing task of the moment, when interest in politics and in questions of socialism has been aroused among the broadest strata of the population... Our movement suffers in the first place, ideologically, as well as in practical and organizational respects, from its state of fragmentation, from the almost complete immersion of the overwhelming majority of Social Democrats in local work, which narrows their outlook, the scope of their activities and their skill in the maintenance of secrecy and their preparedness... The *first* step towards eliminating this shortcoming, toward transforming diverse local movements into a single, All-Russian movement, must be the founding of an All-Russian newspaper.

Lastly, what we need is definitely a *political* newspaper. Without a political organ, a political movement deserving that name is inconceivable in the Europe of today. Without such a newspaper, we cannot possibly fulfill our task—that of concentrating all the elements of political discontent and protest, of vitalizing thereby the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. We have taken the first step, we have aroused in the working class a passion for ‘economic’ factory exposures; we must now take the next step, that of arousing in every section of the population that is at all politically conscious a passion for *political* exposure. We must not be discouraged by the fact that the voice of political exposure is today so feeble, timid and infrequent. This is not because of a wholesale submission to police despotism, but because those who are able and ready to make exposures have no tribune from which to speak, no eager and encouraging audience, they do not see anywhere among the people that force to which it would be worthwhile directing their complaint against the “omnipotent” Russian Government. But today all this is rapidly changing. There is such a force—it is the revolutionary proletariat, which has demonstrated its readiness, not only to listen to and support the summons to political struggle, but boldly to engage in battle. We are now in a position to provide a tribune for the nationwide exposure of the tsarist government, and it is our duty to do this. That tribune must be a Social Democratic newspaper...

The role of a newspaper, however, is not limited solely to the dissemination of ideas, to political education, and

to the enlistment of political allies. A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organizer. In this last respect, it may be likened to the scaffolding around a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organized labor. With the aid of the newspaper, and through it, a permanent organization will naturally take shape that will emerge, not only in local activities, but in regular general work and will train its members to follow political events carefully, appraise their significance and their effect on the various strata of the population, and develop effective means for the revolutionary party to influence those events... This network of agents will form the skeleton of precisely the kind of organization we need—one that is sufficiently large to embrace the whole country; sufficiently broad and many-sided to effect a strict and detailed division of labor; sufficiently well tempered to be able to conduct *its own* work under any circumstances, at all “sudden turns” and in the face of all contingencies; sufficiently flexible to be able, on the one hand, to avoid an open battle against an overwhelming enemy, when the enemy has concentrated all his forces at one spot, and yet, on the other, to take advantage of his unwieldiness and to attack him when and where he least expects it.

The first point to emphasize is the stress that Lenin puts on the revolutionary paper being the chief tool for presenting a principled set of socialist politics—the paper centralizes and crystallizes the full range of those politics. As Lenin says, promoting those politics is the task of socialists at all times, regardless of the ups and downs of particular struggles or movements, and all the more so in times when anger at the system in general opens people to a broad discussion about the socialist alternative.

Presenting this full range of politics is especially important given the pulls on socialists toward what Lenin calls “local work,” to the exclusion of broader political questions. At the time he was writing, Lenin was concerned about the tendency toward “economism” within the Russian Social Democrats (which had not yet split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks)—to focus on “‘economic’ factory exposures,” meaning agitation around workplace issues, while neglecting other questions.

To sink into localism is not only problematic for socialists themselves, because they don't learn how to respond to other political questions, but it neglects the critical step of training a working class audience to have “a passion for political exposures”—that is, to respond to and resist all instances of oppression and exploitation.

Hopefully, comrades will see the parallels with the ISO's situation today and the importance we lay on resisting “movementism”—of our members becoming so focused on specific political activities or struggles that they lose their identity as a socialist, committed to building revolutionary

organization.

Socialist Worker, both the website and especially the paper edition can help in this. For one thing, it is a ready-made tool for giving our allies and sympathizers within different struggles a sense of how we see that struggle as connected to others in society, and to wider political questions. With its “all-around propaganda and agitation,” SW is a natural tool for generalizing.

Moreover, SW has the effect of disciplining ISO members to defend socialist politics on a range of questions, even if the reception among coworkers or other activists might be neutral or hostile. An ISO member who is selling and using Socialist Worker at organizing meetings and actions and in broader discussions can't stay hidden—if they use the paper, comrades involved in union work, for example, will be associated for anyone who reads the paper with the struggle for LGBT equality, and members involved in an LGBT struggle will be known for their insistence on the importance of the class struggle.

This *isn't* to suggest that it's the duty of ISO members to raise every political question at every meeting. We believe it is important for members to discuss what they raise and how they raise it—even to decide what *not* to raise for tactical reasons. But Socialist Worker is a central way for members to promote and take pride in our commitment to a full range of revolutionary politics, and avoid the natural pull toward narrowing their activity to “local work.”

Obviously, the SW website has a whole range of articles on it, but the paper has a special role to play on this last point of disciplining members to represent the full politics of the organization—since you can't sell or share just the page of the paper about a particular struggle, but have to sell the whole thing.

Lenin also puts a lot of stress on creating an “all-Russian newspaper” as a means of tying together socialists isolated in different areas of the country, and giving them a national face. The parallels for the ISO are, again, obvious.

We may have a lot of members compared to other revolutionary organizations, but we are spread across a very big country. One consequence is that members often have very different experiences from branch to branch, even when they are organizing around the same issue. One value of Socialist Worker is how it can generalize for members in different places—not only with articles that are meant to express the national perspective on some issue, but even more importantly, through the local reports that give an on-the-ground account of struggles, specific conditions, political questions, etc.

The local reports at the SW website—only a few can fit at full length in a paper edition published only once a month—are hit and miss. Most branches can do better at making sure reports get written and sent in to SW (some can do a LOT better).

But even so, the local reports that do appear should be a source of huge pride. There is really nowhere else to turn for such a rich reporting of the experiences of political activists all around the country. We want to make sure there's a culture in the organization where members feel like they should be reading every article at SocialistWorker.org, or at least as many as they can--and definitely *not* ignoring certain ones that don't "apply to them" based on their activism or political interests.

Knowing the incredible work that our comrades are doing around the country can be a real boost when we face challenges locally. Plus, SW's reports are very important in generalizing the experiences of ISO members from place to place and helping us figure out how to be more effective in organizing everywhere.

Lenin continues to draw out this last point in the section where he uses the "scaffolding" comparison--the paper "facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organized labor." This is one way that the paper acts as a "collective organizer"--in other words, producing it, distributing it and making it the center of political discussions gives rise to routines and structures and methods that help a socialist organization to cohere and grow, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

This is another area where, while we should think systematically about how we can use the website so that it acts as a collective organizer, selling a paper edition, face to face with an audience, involves things that can't be duplicated in cyberspace (at least not yet).

For example, Lenin says that the using the paper "will train members to follow political events carefully, appraise their significance and their effect on the various strata of the population." This last point is an important aspect of selling SW in public sales that isn't always appreciated--we learn what different layers of people think about politics and our ideas, in ways that we can't when we're only seeing the response of fellow activists in meetings, or of our circle of Facebook friends and Twitter followers.

Public street sales, sales on campuses, workplace sales, etc., are often most helpful for the conversations members have about politics, not for the large numbers of papers we sell. That's information which needs to flow back to the branch and to the paper itself, so we can figure out how best to relate to a political mood or potential opening for some kind of activity.

This last point should be considered more generally. One of the roles the paper can play is of bringing discussions and debates that take place in various areas of work or at different meetings or on different forums on the Internet back to the branch as a whole. We want ideas, observations

and disagreements to get the attention of all members--figuring out how to use branch meetings to continue discussions of articles or evaluating experiences of using the paper is one way to do that.

Lenin ends with the idea of how the paper produces a "network of agents" with the means of reaching out to allies and supporters, judging their level of agreement and sympathy with our politics and bringing them around the organization, ultimately as members. Selling the paper--and then using tools such as SW discussion groups before or after sales or with regular readers--not only helps organize ISO members to maintain relationships with people who are allies or sympathizers or future members, but it gives a concrete shape to that audience as well.

For the Bolsheviks, the newspaper was the most important means of winning a periphery around the party and eventually convincing them to be part of it. Bolshevik cadre who built a regular group of readers around them created a core of allies in workplace struggles—as well as a group of people, already partially educated in socialist politics, who would join the party when the struggle picked up.

It's harder to do this with the audience for the SW website, compared to the paper edition, but we need to develop routines around the website that go further in this direction--for example, being systematic about all the ways we can distribute as many SocialistWorker.org articles as possible to the people we know and work with, and then figuring out ways to continue political discussions raised with that audience, both individually and at meetings with others, face to face.

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There are many other questions that we want to take up: What, more precisely, has been the impact of the decline of the print media on the relative importance of the SW website and paper edition? What about social media in relation to the website? What have we said about how public sales of SW should be organized, and do we need adjustments? Can we use the paper edition differently in particular settings, like campus organizing or movement activities? How are we using the website to promote political discussions with a readership that we know, and how can we do this better?

We will take up these questions in a second document on Socialist Worker in the next pre-convention bulletin. Hopefully, this document, by re-motivating the case for why we produce Socialist Worker in both a website and newspaper form, and how we use it, can serve as the backdrop for discussing those specific questions.

**Alan M.** for the Steering Committee

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## Zinovievism vs. Leninism

### Leninism and Zinovievism

A tragedy of 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism was that Stalinism was able to present itself as the continuation of Bolshevism, to draw upon the confidence that the world working class placed in the Russian Revolution, and so to be able to redefine socialism as state nationalization of the means of production, and not as workers power. Stalinism used the Bolshevik legacy to betray and destroy revolutions internationally as well as to corrupt the politics of its victims, namely advanced worker militants from the 1930s to the 1980s.

Ideologically, the left was further confused when liberals, social democrats and anarchists joined bourgeois academics in agreeing with the equation of Stalinism with Bolshevism, or its slightly more sophisticated variant, that Leninism leads to Stalinism. Large numbers of radicals, rightly disgusted by bureaucracy, fell for these historical myths, accepting the “common sense” of the political consensus. For many years, those of us in the Internationalist Socialist tradition were isolated. To defend the first successful proletarian revolution, as well as the idea that other revolutions would not inevitably lead to bureaucratic societies, we had to fight without any accommodation to the left around us, to defend Leninism from opponents as well as some would-be “friends.” We also had to sharply delineate our revolutionary opposition to Stalinism from the prevalent reactionary, Cold War anti-Stalinists, and their liberal and social-democratic camp followers.

The unique, complicated, perplexing historical process of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, which nevertheless maintained the nationalized property forms that arose from the revolution, confused even Trotsky and led some revolutionary opponents of the bureaucracy to accept Stalinism as a poor, second-rate, distorted but living continuation of the workers’ state. We had to overcome this morass and to face the reality that the Russian Revolution, the Communist Parties that initially developed to spread the revolution, and the workers’ state had all been destroyed by the Stalinist counterrevolution.

Lack of clarity extends even more to Zinovievism, the process by which the strangling of workers’ democracy in Russia was spread into the Communist International. Some of the confusion arises because Zinoviev was the president of the Comintern in its heroic, democratic, revolutionary years from 1919-23, as well as its years of deterioration from 1924-27, but not in the years of the total Stalinist consolidation in 1927-29. Zinoviev’s bureaucratic politics and methods were originally accepted as necessities due to civil war conditions, and then later justified as virtues. They continue to bewilder revolutionaries who can’t fully separate Zinovievism from the Leninism that it was gutting or from the Stalinism that destroyed it.

The so-called “Bolshevization” campaign, Zinoviev’s seminal policy to squeeze the life out of the norms of

proletarian democracy, was introduced in the Communist International (Comintern) at its fifth congress in June 1924. It took more than three years to fully implement and to transform the Communist Parties (CPs). Internationally, the campaign represented the process of transition between the revolutionary workers’ parties of the early 1920s and the Stalinist CPs from 1929 on, when they were controlled as foreign-policy pawns of the Russian bureaucracy. Transition is not the same as completion. Like Russia in the 1920s, Zinovievism represented a deteriorating revolution becoming less democratic, less socialist, less proletarian, more bureaucratic—but not yet the full Stalinist counterrevolution, which raised the bureaucracy to independent class power and rule, requiring the destruction of the already bureaucratized Bolshevik party and all of its wings.

Zinovievism is often used as a term of abuse in the revolutionary movement—to condemn undemocratic and bureaucratic practices—without necessarily specifying the exact content of the distortions of workers’ democracy for which Zinoviev was responsible. Our anti-Zinovievism, like our anti-Stalinism, is opposed to those who want to equate it with Bolshevism. Our critique is from the vantage point of Leninism, the defense of the politics, practices, norms and organizational functioning of the communist movement before its Zinovievist degeneration or its Stalinist destruction.

Adequate history of the day-to-day organizational life of the Leninist parties in their revolutionary proletarian years is thin. Nor could there be any recipe book for Leninist party functioning, which was a dynamic, evolving interaction of revolutionary organization with the constantly changing demands and consciousness of the working-class movement in struggle. Leninist norms were passed onto us in a few, revolutionary histories and memoirs, as well as in the oral history and traditions of revolutionary communist survivors of the 1920s who were the crucial link to revolutionary organizations, including our own, from the 1930s into the 1970s. This helped maintain proletarian democratic practices within some sections of the Trotskyist movement, while people who were originally partisans of Zinoviev in the Communist battles of the 1920s and accepted his bureaucratic methods as genuine Leninism went on to lead some other Trotskyist groups. It is to reassert authentic, revolutionary, democratic Leninism that we draw the contrast with Zinovievism. Our aim is to eliminate those aspects of the degeneration of the Russian revolution that continue to influence parts of the revolutionary movement.

### Leninist Politics, Workers’ Democracy and World Revolution

Organizational concepts serve political purposes. All political parties are organized around class political goals. For Leninism, the theory and practice of proletarian revolution, the politics organizing the Bolshevik party, were workers’ democracy and world revolution. More than any

other organization, the Bolshevik Party unified theory and practice with the day-to-day, partial, limited, reformist struggles of workers with the revolutionary goal of taking state power, to raise the working class to the position of ruling class, through conscious, democratic collective control of the state and the economy. Lenin, more than any other Marxist theoretician, elaborated the essential character of a workers' state, and the internal democratic life of the Bolshevik workers' party was in harmony with that goal.

Lenin's famous arguments that a cook can govern and that workers must control production and distribution came from the conception of Soviet (workers' council) power, the destruction of the old state and of all repressive apparatuses—police, army, courts and bureaucracy—over the working class. An armed working class would make and enforce all laws through the active, direct democracy of workers' organizations—workers' councils, factory committees, unions, red guards, militias, political parties, and organizations of the oppressed. The basis for the privileged bureaucracy was to be eliminated: all officials would be elected and recallable, with none earning more than a worker.

To emancipate itself, the advanced, conscious, revolutionary layer of the working class had to organize itself as a party, capable of providing leadership to win over the majority of the working class for revolutionary action in the process of its becoming fit to rule. This took years of party-building—to develop the revolutionary program, strategy, tactics, leadership, cadres, political cohesiveness, disciplined collaboration, loyalty, and party roots in workplaces and workers' organizations; to gain the confidence and trust of workers based on deeds, not just words; and to merge with the masses in unleashing their creativity, genius and capacity for self-organization in a mass revolutionary upheaval from below.

The perspectives of the Bolsheviks were that all of Europe was on the verge of socialist revolution. The Russian Revolution was the first, the initiator, of the world revolution. While Russia was ripe for socialist revolution, it was not ripe for socialism. Backward Russia could only come to socialism with the support and cooperation of a few advanced industrial socialist countries. In Lenin's words, "The Russian proletariat is following events [in Germany] with the keenest attention and enthusiasm. Now even the blindest workers in the various countries will see that the Bolsheviks were right in basing their whole tactics on the support of the world workers' revolution."

The Bolshevik's perspective was proven correct in practice. Revolution broke out in Austria, Hungary, Germany, Finland, and Italy, while pre-revolutionary situations developed in much of the rest of Europe from 1917 to 1923. Soviets, workers' councils and factory committees sprang up in most major European cities; soviet republics briefly took power in Hungary and Bavaria. The working class was ripe for revolution but lacked the leadership and political organization necessary to take power. Worse, its old leaders and organizations, the social-democratic parties, allied with

the capitalists in putting down proletarian revolution in blood.

### **Isolation and Degeneration**

The isolation of the revolution in one underdeveloped country meant it could not survive. The course of the destruction of the revolution is well known in our movement: civil war; the invasion of Russia by 14 imperialist countries; the collapse of industry by more than 80 percent; two-thirds of the 1917 industrial proletariat gone by 1921; famine and starvation; desertion by the urban population of Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities; epidemics of typhus and tuberculosis; and forced grain collections leading to peasant revolts, including Kronstadt. One political party after another was declared illegal as they supported or collaborated with the counterrevolution. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik party was transformed as its members were incorporated into command posts in the Red Army and assimilated into state and economic administration.

These conditions were not an ideal school for workers' democracy, but they were the reality the Party faced in 1921 as the Civil War ended. At the 10th Party Congress in March 1921, the Party was bitterly, factionally divided over the results of the collapse of the country and War Communism. The divided Party would not be able to continue to hold onto power under these circumstances. The solution reluctantly accepted was the adoption of the New Economic Policy. All factions accepted this restoration of aspects of the capitalist market as a necessity to restore peasant grain production and industry, and all factions eventually voted for Lenin's proposal that without party unity it would be impossible for the working class, and the Bolsheviks as their political representatives, to hold onto power, and therefore it was necessary to temporarily ban factions.

When Riazanov proposed that factions be banned permanently, Lenin argued against that proposal and won, on grounds that if a fundamental political question arose, similar to the internal struggle over the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty, it would be necessary to go back to factions and elections based on factional platforms. Lenin stressed that the ban on factions was a temporary measure only, necessitated by the dire situation in Russia, which could be rescued by the German Revolution, which was to be expected, Lenin declared, in the next months. Nor was the banning of factions an attempt to end political debate or dissent: All major factions—Trotsky's, Bukharin's Workers Opposition, Democratic Centralists—were elected to and represented in the new Central Committee.

Notwithstanding these intentions to limit the unavoidable, temporary incursions into democracy, the unintended consequence of the 10th Congress was the stranglehold that the bureaucracy was able to quickly impose on the Party. Factions were never again legalized; the ban, never lifted, became permanent. Nonetheless, despite the bureaucracy's control, the whole history of 1920s Russia is one of factional struggle by different social classes that penetrated

the Bolshevik Party (which became the only legal political space as other parties were banned for their support for the counterrevolution). Despite the legal ban on factions, they continued to exist, but since they were not “legitimate,” their democratic rights were severely curtailed whenever they challenged the party bureaucracy. In March 1921, there were 600 party full-timers; in 1922 there were 15,325 full-timers, and when Stalin was elected general secretary that year, he moved rapidly to gain tight control over the expanded party apparatus.

In banning factions, the Bolsheviks were extending the substitutionist practices that arose, of necessity, from the civil war. The first step was the banning of other parties that supported or tolerated the counterrevolution, fighting the revolution not through democratic debate, but by means of assassinations, attempted insurrections, military battles, and imperialist support. Banning counterrevolutionary parties was unavoidable, but the unfortunate consequence of a single legal party was the decline of political life in the soviets—in effect, the substitution of the only legal party for the representative body of the working class. This process was inadvertently expanded by the banning of factions—substituting the leadership, soon to be replaced by the emerging party apparatus, for the working-class ranks of the party.

The Bolsheviks were not conscious of the process in which they were involved. They had no experience of Stalinism; they were unaware that they were helping to lay the groundwork for the rise of the bureaucracy and the destruction of the revolution by Stalinist means. They thought they were hanging onto power until the European revolution could rescue them from the situation forced upon them. This road, Lenin declared, represented a retreat from democracy and a retreat from socialism—but a necessary, temporary measure.

If the Bolsheviks had opened things up and lost power, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, which were the parties of the petty bourgeoisie, and the capitalist democrats were too weak to hold power. The only other social force capable of taking power was the counterrevolutionary white guards, which the Bolsheviks had just defeated in the civil war. The Bolsheviks could not ignore the consequences of opening the road for the counterrevolution to come to power. When the Soviet republics in Hungary and Finland fell, the White Terror had carried out mass murder of communists and other working-class militants as well as their families. In Germany in 1919, some tens of thousands were killed by the social democrats-Freikorps alliance in the civil war. In the Ukraine during the civil war, the Whites had engaged in a pre-Holocaust murder of 100,000 Jews, indiscriminately killing men, women, the elderly, and children.

The idea of hanging onto power in less-than-democratic conditions with the hope that the German revolution would bail them out “in a few months,” in Lenin’s words, seemed a much better proposition than exposing the entire Russian population to White terror and massacre. Nonetheless, the measures required to retain power, and their unintended

consequences, aided the rise of the bureaucratic apparatus over the Bolshevik Party. That apparatus would eventually destroy both the Bolshevik Party and revolutionary possibilities throughout the world.

### **Zinoviev and the Destruction of Leninism**

Zinovievism was the initial ideological assault on Leninism that the rising bureaucracy used to housebreak and destroy the Comintern as a revolutionary threat to its rule. Stalinism was then able to build on the groundwork prepared by Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Stalin collaborated in inventing a “cult of Lenin,” whose tenets were designed to eradicate the real Leninism.

Zinovievism as a distinct political tendency existed for a few years, from 1924-27, and as a loose underground network for a few more years. Its origins were shaped by three historic forces: the bureaucratic apparatus that emerged from the degeneration of the Russian revolution; the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923 (undermining both the perspectives of world revolution and the substitutionist policies they justified); and the death of Lenin. The latter opened up the succession struggle of the troika of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin against Trotsky—representing the class drive of the bureaucracy against the remaining control and power of the working class over soviet institutions and life.

These historical events and trends produced the political program and organizational changes adopted by the Comintern at its fifth congress in June-July 1924. That congress argued that world capitalism had stabilized itself and that world revolution was no longer on the immediate agenda. In place of world revolution, the congress adopted the theory of “socialism in one country.” This Zinovievist invention was the policy that Stalinism would expand as its ideological foundation: socialism could be developed in isolated, backward Russia, coexisting with world capitalism by avoiding threats to capitalism and making alliances with capitalist countries, with the support of foreign communist parties. The role of the CPs was no longer revolution in their own countries, but defense of the Soviet Union, its foreign policies, and its bureaucratic leadership.

The fifth congress also adopted an early, primitive version of the theory of “social fascism,” which was later to prove so destructive to the German labor movement and helped grease the wheels for Hitler’s triumph. The resolution reads, “All bourgeois parties, particularly social democracy, take on a more or less fascist character. Fascism and social-democracy are two sides of the same instrument of capitalist dictatorship.” The resolution continues, “social-democracy has been caught up in a process of change; from being the right wing of the labor movement, it is becoming one wing of the bourgeoisie, in places even a wing of fascism.” The French CP went further and declared that anarchists were also fascists.

The congress overturned the policy on united fronts with reformists—one of the great lessons that had been fought for and won by Lenin and Trotsky at the third and fourth

congresses to help overcome the infantile leftism of many of the newly formed Communist Parties, teaching them how to win mass support. Hereafter, there could be no united fronts based on agreements with social-democratic organizations or their leaders. United fronts had to be under Communist leadership; in essence, Communist fronts were to replace agreements with reformist or syndicalist organizations for joint, if limited, activity.

The Bolshevization campaign declared that struggle had to be conducted against the most dangerous ideological deviations from Leninism, which were defined as Trotskyism and Luxemburgism. Zinoviev invented both, as he later confessed to Trotsky, although they took on a life of their own in the revolutionary movement. The Theses on Bolshevization during the Fifth Plenum of the Comintern Executive in April 1925 declared: “Trotskyism is a particularly dangerous deviation from Leninism; it is a variety of Menshevism combining European opportunism with left-radical phases which frequently conceal its politically passive character... a years-long system of struggle against Leninism... To achieve Leninism in the Comintern means to expose Trotskyism in all parties and to liquidate it as a tendency.” The anti-Trotsky campaign embodied the troika’s fear of Trotsky becoming Lenin’s heir and was the key to the entire Bolshevization policy.

Also introduced in the same Theses was the myth of Luxemburgism, a concept previously never mentioned. The Zinovievist leaders of the German Communist Party (KPD) created this myth to expel from the KPD the democratic ideas and cadres developed by Rosa Luxemburg and her disciples. The Theses on Bolshevization attacked “also the errors of Rosa Luxemburg. The closer these political leaders stand to Leninism, the more dangerous are their views in those respects in which they do not coincide with Leninism... Among the most important mistakes of the Luxemburgists of practical significance today are: the unbolshevik treatment of the questions of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘consciousness’ of ‘organization’ and ‘the masses.’ False ideas on this question prevented them from appraising correctly the role of the party in the revolution.” This Zinovievist creation, totally alien to Lenin’s view of Luxemburg, was codified into the revolutionary canon, and the myth is still accepted, taught, and repeated, as if it were the truth by many unsuspecting revolutionaries.

The real deviation from Leninism was that all Communist Parties internationally were instructed that they had to follow the only “fully Bolshevik party, the Russian Communist Party,” and to be in truth, subordinate to its Politburo, which was now controlling Comintern policy.

### **Zinovievist Organization**

Until 1924, the Communist International and its affiliated CPs were open, democratic, contentious, rambunctious, and full of disagreements—but able to function as cohesive, collaborative bodies. The organizational conclusions of Zinoviev’s Bolshevization campaign were an attempt to end this lively, democratic independence and collaboration and to turn the CPs from vehicles of revolution into foreign

policy pawns of the Russian CP—in Trotsky’s words, from “vanguards of the revolution into border guards of the Russian bureaucracy.” The organizational methods to accomplish this goal, which would take another four years to finally complete, began the process of stamping out workers’ democracy from the Communist Parties. The measures themselves were the opposite of the Leninism that had existed until then. They included a monolithic party; the banning of factions; banning of public debate in the communist press; bureaucratic centralism in place of democratic centralism; political differences decided by “surgical” means through splits and expulsions; a change in the culture of the communist parties; and a change in what leadership and cadre meant.

### **The Monolithic Party**

The concept of a monolithic party in which all members agree, without differences, was introduced at the fifth congress. Prior to 1924 the concept of a monolithic party had never been proposed, in fact had never been heard of, nor appeared in any written form in communist discussions or literature. The very fact of it being raised, let alone accepted, was a reflection of how far degeneration had proceeded. It was a giant step toward the ideas of a monolithic society and a totalitarian state, in which the working class would not have any rights to disagree with the decisions of their rulers. The idea of a living, revolutionary organization that does not have disagreements is impossible—total agreement exists only because of repression or unthinking passivity. The political life of this graveyard produced parties incapable of organizing or leading a tumultuous revolutionary upheaval from below. Ideological cohesion based on shared acceptance of the principles and program of the party was replaced by ideological unanimity, defining dissent as heretical deviation, effectively banning the right of the membership to think.

### **Factions**

Prior to 1924, factions existed in all communist parties. The whole history of Bolshevism included internal struggles between different trends, currents, factions, political evaluations, and left and right shades of opinion, including the impact and influence of working-class experience and consciousness on the Party. This was true prior to the revolution, during it, and after the victory of soviet power, although in attenuated form after 1921. Internal struggles were carried out publicly, including factional organizing when necessary. It was not Leninism, but the social-democratic parties that had banned factions, most notably the German Social Democratic Party prior to the First World War. Rosa Luxemburg and German revolutionaries were prohibited from factional organization and activity by the discipline of the SPD, which would have isolated or expelled them. This inability to have an organized left beyond a loose network prior to the start of the First World War is what retarded the development of German revolutionary organization before the outbreak of the revolution.

The banning of factions was the logical extension of the concept of a monolithic party. Prohibiting disagreements led to the outlawing of efforts to organize over disagreements. Importantly, the ban on organizing for its own point of view applied to the membership only; the leadership was never banned for organizing for its point of view. In a healthy revolutionary organization, the leadership is the concentration of the organization's highest political consciousness; it is charged with raising the rest of the organization to that level. Its role is to initiate policies to strengthen the organization and to carry those policies in struggle in the outside world. Its job is to fight for its point of view.

In contrast, the banning of factions means banning the right of the membership to organize for any point of view that is not of the leadership. It means that the membership does not have the same rights as the leadership. The membership can only accept, and may not oppose, that which the leadership presents. A bureaucratic leadership that can't be challenged replaces a revolutionary one. A revolutionary leadership must prove, under democratic control from below, that its policies, initiatives, actions, propaganda and practice are the best alternatives for the organization. Revolutionary leadership is rendered impossible by the bureaucracy's goal in banning factions, which is the creation of a pliant, docile, passive membership incapable of challenging the leadership.

The right to form factions is a basic democratic right in any socialist organization. Without it, the membership is denied the right to think, to dissent, and to come up with alternative policies. It is precluded from presenting new ideas or new leaders. It is denied the ability to correct errors. Without the right to dissent, the membership is denied the right and necessity to bring the ideas and living experience of the rank and file and their connection with the working class and social movements into creating, developing, extending, and correcting party policy. If workers cannot control their own party, they will not become fit to rule, to run society. It is in a revolutionary party that working-class consciousness is developed so that workers can control society. Without workers' democracy, there is no revolutionary workers party, no matter what the pretense.

Upholding the right to form factions does not mean encouraging factions, faction fights, or a factional culture—any more than supporting the right to self-determination means a call for separation and the breakup of existing countries. The contradiction in the right to form factions (between a democratic and a factional culture) is overcome, as with the right to self-determination, not by banning these democratic rights, but by a political policy designed to overcome the necessity for their exercise—through the fullest internal democracy, the prizing and defense of democratic control, and the protection of minority rights.

In healthy Leninist parties, when differences lead to factions, the factions are expected to be temporary, ad hoc, for specific questions, and normally dissolved when the question is decided (although new information or new conditions can reopen the question for further discussion,

including, if necessary, factional organization). Contrast this healthy handling of factional differences to groups that claim to allow such differences, but whose leadership is allowed to think and organize for its point of view at any time, while the membership is only allowed to think or organize for its thoughts during some limited time and space designated by the leadership.

Within a vibrant culture of revolutionary democracy, what is not healthy or welcome is when distinct political questions are bundled together into factional alignments. For example, one group of members might have differences regarding race and oppression, including a new theoretical or tactical idea, a second group of comrades might have a difference on war policy, and a third on trade union practices. Each of these groups must have the right to present its views, to organize for them, and to receive support, resources, and comradely respect from the organization in order to try to convince the membership.

But when a faction attempts to form around all three of these generally distinct matters, however, we enter another, potentially dangerous political situation. The three questions may be joined together by a clique, by power politics, or by back-scratching deals common in bourgeois politics (where I'll support your cause not on its merits but in return for you supporting mine). Or this bundling may be the prelude to the creation of a separate tendency that may or may not threaten to become a separate organization.

A healthy democratic culture often avoids the need for factions. It strives to avoid a factional culture, divisive faction fights, and their typically toxic consequences—distrust, hostility, the replacement of joint outward activity and combat by inward struggle and orientation, and the breakdown of comradely feeling and relations of mutual loyalty. The way in which a healthy, democratic revolutionary organization precludes these poisons is by creating a culture in which minorities have every democratic right—so that there is no feeling that they have to organize in a fashion that leads to factionalism and splits.

There is a difference between temporary factions that come and go based upon different, specific political questions; and permanent factions, which often represent unprincipled cliques, personal loyalties, or potential splits. Even permanent factions cannot be banned without violating the democratic rights of the membership to think and organize for dissenting views. But not banning is not the same as welcoming permanent factions, whose loyalty is to the faction, not the organization. There is no basis for maintaining a permanent faction except for distrust of the organization and its politics, democracy, and leadership; and unwillingness to take responsibility and discipline for the entire organization. The potential divisiveness of an environment of permanent factions can create a political culture lacking in trust, loyalty, and comradely relations, and one that raises the threat of possible splits.

The job of the leadership and membership is not to accommodate to oppositional views they consider wrong, but to argue for better politics, using patient explanation and

education with the same respect we would be expected to show collaborators in the outside world. It is even more important that this be extended to our own comrades, where we do not draw the Zinovievist conclusion that the closer they are to us, the greater the ideological danger. We want, without being pollyannas, to treat oppositional comrades with respect, loyalty, and comradely feeling, laying the groundwork for overcoming factional heat and for mutual collaboration.

A sophisticated leadership and organization cannot have a similar reaction to every factional fight. It has to be able to understand the difference between loyal and disloyal factions. The strongly held views of loyal factions do not undermine mutually collaborative and comradely dedication. Disloyal factional oppositions, by contrast, value their disagreements as more important than political collaboration, and are willing to disrupt the work, discipline, and unity of the organization based on their disagreements. Only precise and sensitive political judgment can determine which situation prevails, but it is imperative not to repeat the sectarian and Zinovievist method of “surgical” response to dissent and factions—expulsions for political differences and splits. At times, splits are the only way the movement can remain true to its principles or advance, but more usually splits are extremely destructive. We must work, as much as politically and humanly possible, to avoid developing a factional atmosphere leading to expulsions and splits.

### **Public Discussion and Debate**

In the 1920s, prior to Stalinization, minority views were often presented in the public press. We, the communists, wanted the working class to understand, to be sympathetic to, to take an interest in, to be involved with the discussions that we were conducting, to take seriously and to make their own our debates in order to develop our political program and organization. We had nothing to hide or be ashamed of in the political debates and political life of our organization. We normally draw a distinction between private discussions over personnel, internal problems, security, organizing for external combat and not allowing our opponents to see our plans, and what was open for public discussion and view. Our politics, including disagreements, were public, and were debated in front of working-class opinion in our press. At times in the Russian CP, this extended to minorities even having their own newspapers. This sort of open debate could only occur in a party that had strong political cohesion based on mutual agreement on firm principles, and the acceptance of loyal, disciplined cooperation and trust.

The right to public disagreement does not mean that any question, disagreement, or constant re-discussion of settled questions by any group of members had to be immediately debated either internally or in the public press. The majority has its right to set priorities and activity, including when, where and what is open to debate. If it is democratic and sensitive to minority rights, it is highly unlikely that the membership will tolerate this being questioned.

### **Democratic Centralism**

Zinovievism was the replacement of democratic centralism by bureaucratic centralism, of discipline based on political conformity to the decisions made by the leadership that could not be challenged by the ranks. There is of course no necessity for discipline if there are no disagreements. Democratic centralism is centralized, disciplined action despite tactical or political differences inside the membership, which is democratically decided on. Likewise, there is no real need for democracy in a discussion group, which can endlessly re-discuss, and need not come to any conclusions or engage in any action. Our democracy is an active one, designed to reach decisions that enable us to engage in collective action. There is no democracy without centralism, the responsible implementation of decisions made by conventions, branch meetings, or democratically elected and responsible leading bodies.

Leninist parties were organized to provide political combat for revolutionary politics against other policies and ideologies, to fight to raise consciousness within the mass organizations of the working class and the oppressed, and to meet the centralized, disciplined power of the state and the employers with a centralized, disciplined opposing force. Like all dialectical conceptions, democratic centralism is concrete. What is democratic centralism in one set of concrete circumstances can be its opposite in another set of circumstances. Correct, disciplined activity can only be justified by the correctness of the policies, not by a rulebook, or a bureaucratic order from above.

The amount of discipline required depends on circumstances, timing, and the relationship between leadership and ranks: command in a situation when we enter combat, totally free discussion in the absence of immediate action, and a looser, more patient attitude toward new members, but continued tighter discipline from older comrades charged with the political integration of new recruits and keeping the organization on an even keel. In other words, democratic centralism requires different things of different individuals at different times in the interest of an expanding conception of responsibility and discipline alongside an overall expansion of consciousness and commitment. It was this deeply, unruly revolutionary communist culture of an activist, anti-elitist democracy from below, that Zinovievism wanted to replace with a pliant membership ready to obey commands from above without question.

### **The Culture of the Organization**

At its best, the culture of the organization consisted of open, democratic discussion and debate, a respectful attitude toward differences, a comradely collaboration, a lack of personalism, moralism and individualism; a division of labor in which everyone has a respected part to play, necessary for the effective functioning of the whole organization; a constant education and training to raise the political level and leadership potential of the whole membership to develop everyone to their maximum potential for leadership in the outside world; an agreement with and commitment to the basic traditions, political program, and theory of the revolutionary movement; and a

loyalty to their comrades, collaborators, and political organization. This culture of the revolutionary communist movement in its best days was destined to be destroyed by the bureaucratic centralization. It took years to wipe it out. In Germany, 30 percent of the members belonged to the Left Opposition, and there were still ten factions in 1927, but by 1928 the overwhelming majority of the membership of 1923 had been expelled. In France, the Bolshevism campaign of 1924 led to a 70 percent turnover in membership by 1926.

### Leadership and Cadre

Leninism places tremendous emphasis on the subjective factor. Under specific historic circumstances, when objective conditions for revolution are mature, the subjective factor is decisive. Twentieth century revolutionary history confirmed that the key to success is a politically experienced revolutionary party with mature leadership and a disciplined cadre capable of providing leadership. That still remains true as shown by the outcome of the working-class upsurge in Egypt and Greece. Working-class revolution is dependent for success on the development of revolutionary organization, leadership, and program.

Zinoviev's Bolshevization campaign was a wrecking operation on the subjective factor: the new, promising, but far from mature 1920s Communist worker parties. Zinoviev's assault on party democracy was the prologue that made them ripe pickings for Stalinization. Leninist norms of leadership, as well as its extraordinary emphasis on worker-Bolsheviks as the cadre key to party building, were lost in the crackup of the Comintern, only preserved in small groups on the margins of the radical movement.

Zinoviev made and replaced leaderships at will, through overseas decisions based on sycophantic, personal, careerist loyalty, not competency. Purges and expulsions for dissent created a submissive membership trained to accept without thinking the changing twists of CP politics, no matter how bizarre. Despite this dismal record, Zinoviev's methods died hard in the fantasy imitations of the Comintern. In our own experience more than a decade ago, the ISO was expelled from the International Socialist Tendency (IST) on perspectives, not principles. In dispute was that our membership and leadership should decide our political line, not directives from the Central Committee of the British SWP. It was reestablishing this fundamental principle of Leninism—the necessity for a revolutionary group to stand on its own feet, to be able to think for itself, to make decisions, and when they are wrong to have the honesty and intelligence to correct them—that led to our reexamining some Leninist norms lost by the SWP.

A leadership and cadre lacking independent thought and action and a membership without democratic initiative and control never develop the capacity for revolutionary leadership. Leninist leadership is selected for being the most advanced, politically conscious, active, aggressive fighters for our political principles and program. For us, effective leadership requires a collaborative collective with a division

of labor, drawing upon different individual strengths and talents, but taking collective responsibility for the organization and the leadership team. Leninist leadership is not based on seniority, sycophancy, personal friendships, personal loyalty, or how eloquently it talks, but on how it performs, i.e., whether the policies, perspectives, initiatives, and activities it proposes and takes responsibility for carrying out are proven correct.

The leadership is charged with organizing the group for external combat, to change consciousness, to provide leadership in struggle, including ideological struggle, as much as our size and the state of the movement makes possible. Without correct political lines and actions, confidence in the leadership, in the organization and in its politics are questioned and undermined. Confidence in the politics and leadership of the organization is a necessity for an organization based on a high level of discipline in action. A general hostility to leadership often masks a lack of confidence in the politics, perspectives, and initiatives of the organization, and can undermine group cohesion, discipline and activity, and create an unwillingness to take responsibility for the policies and activity of the group. It has the possibility of repeating the middle-class personalist and individualist hostility to leadership that makes effective organization impossible. We think that leadership is a good thing, and we aspire to it. There is no collective action without leadership—just as there is no revolution without leadership. Our job is to make leadership democratic, responsive, and held to the standards of revolutionary theory and practice.

Internally, the leadership is charged with raising the political level of the organization, to bring about its highest potential expression. It is tasked with educating and training a cadre in the politics and tactics of revolutionary Marxism, of passing on the rich political capital of the movement to a new generation of fighters, and avoiding repetition of the old and costly errors of the past. Deviations, concessions, revisions, and distortions (of which Zinovievism is one) took place among radicals around us, some of which, whether we knew or liked it, had its impact on us. Despite this, we have kept alive and defended more than any other group, with our share of mistakes and errors, the continuity of the revolutionary movement, its program, history and traditions. The leadership is delegated the responsibility to preserve and develop the organization around these past conquests in order to pave the way for new achievements.

The role that the university plays for the bourgeoisie, of educating cadres and developing leaders, is the role that the Leninist organization plays for the working class and oppressed, educating and training people to become fit, combative, and aggressive leaders for our side. Leninist democracy depends on a membership that is active, anti-elitist, politically conscious and dedicated, unlike the political passivity of capitalist society. We train people for decision-making, to be part of a group of organizers reaching out to, involving, giving confidence to, and helping to sustain broader layers of fighters. We try to develop comrades to be effective leaders externally. All of us have to be given the confidence that we can lead, not necessarily

on every question, not necessarily with masses of people, but each of us is in advance of people around us, and our job is to contribute and lead on the basis of what we know. We teach people how to collaborate effectively in a disciplined fashion, despite disagreements, which are a normal and necessary part of any living democratic organization, in order to be the most effective we can be and in order to overcome the individualistic, personalistic “star system” of reformist and petty bourgeois organizations. We try to find a role for every member and to value and respect them for the work they contribute to the division of labor in the organization as part of an organic whole.

The cadres have the responsibility of integrating the new members, educating them on the movements’ politics and traditions, training them on revolutionary functioning, giving them the confidence to overcome doubts, confusion, and demoralization in a non-revolutionary period. The cadres have to win new members to long-term commitment and activity, particularly in a confused situation in which despite crisis, austerity and at times explosive resistance, there is a lack of sustained movement struggle.

The cadres have to place their disagreements in context, overcome personal difficulties, and engage in a collaboration that is open, expanding, and inclusive. The cadre has higher standards for itself, higher responsibilities, and a greater sense of discipline. It is the political development, maturity, commitment, consciousness, and discipline of the cadres that allows for the organization to make sharp turns without undue internal strife and factionalism. Without this, we cannot take advantage of the rapid shifts necessary when people go into motion. It is the strength of the cadre that can keep the organization from going up and down with each instance of movement success or setback. It is the cadre, its expansion, its collaboration, its collective role nationally that decides the health of the organization and determines its success. The concept of the Leninist cadre is the keystone of building a revolutionary party.

### Liquidate Zinovievism

The defeat of the German Revolution and the degeneration of the Russian Revolution were carried over into the Comintern by Zinoviev’s “Bolshevization campaign” of 1924. It did immense damage to the Communist parties as well as to the theory and practice of Leninism. Zinoviev finally recoiled from his own creation and joined Trotsky to form the United Left Opposition in 1926. When he was murdered by Stalin, thousands of Trotskyists and other oppositionists in the Russian concentration camps held strikes, demonstrations, and protests in honor of their fallen comrade. Nonetheless Victor Serge was right when he observed, “Zinoviev was Lenin’s greatest mistake.”

We are partisans of the Russian Revolution as the greatest act of working class self-emancipation and human liberation in history. We understand and sympathize with the revolutionary movement and the heavy and tragic decisions it had to make during the civil war, and its commitment to keeping workers power alive while waiting for relief from the European Revolution. Zinovievism was both product and ideology of the degeneration of the revolution, prior to its final defeat by the Stalinist counter-revolution.

There is no reason today to defend the process of degeneration, or as Lenin called it, “retreats from democracy” and “retreats from socialism” that resulted in the gutting of the revolution and the gutting of Leninism. We stand for the most democratic revolution possible, the “revolution of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority.” We have the most democratic organization that exists in the image for which it is created. We want to reassert Leninism as the guide to that revolution and organizational practice. We want to liquidate any barriers to that, and we want the revolutionary movement internationally to liquidate Zinovievism and any lingering remnants from the period of degeneration in order to return to a genuine, democratic Leninism.

**Joel G., Chicago**

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