

Pre-convention Bulletin #2 / October 2013

for members only

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Inside this Bulletin

This is the second 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 2,000 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 so we can plan bulletin production. Documents themselves can be submitted to the same address.

Thanks!

Intersectionality, oppression, and Marxism

As we assess the ISO's past theoretical approach to women's oppression (and oppression more generally), many comrades have asked for clarification on the following question: Which aspects of the ISO's past practice should be rejected and which should be retained? In this document, I present my viewpoint on this question, while encouraging other comrades to do the same in the weeks and months ahead.

Our starting point in this assessment stretches back several decades, to the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which led the International Socialist Tendency (IST) beginning in the 1970s. The SWP leadership played a key role in politically training IST member groups, including the ISO. The ISO had begun to diverge from the SWP on a number of perspectives issues in the years before we were expelled from the IST in 2001,¹ but our approach to oppression largely mirrored theirs (albeit less stridently).

After our expulsion from the IST, we began to develop a critique of the political and organizational methods of the SWP, gradually shedding some of what we regarded to be the most misguided aspects of its practice². But while shedding our own former hostility to "feminism", we did so initially without confronting the underlying political and theoretical problems with the SWP's approach.

The passage of time had made certain weaknesses fairly obvious. For example, the meaning of the term "patriarchy" evolved from its use as a theoretical construct in the 1970s to a loose description of sexism by the late 1990s. Likewise, the vast majority of young women and men who want to fight sexism quite reasonably regard themselves as feminists.

In response to this material reality, our practice changed sooner than our theory, as it became more and more inappropriate to recycle old arguments against patriarchy and "feminism" in the more recent context. This led us eventually to confront the SWP's sectarianism toward feminism and also toward other theoretical contributions that it considered outside its tradition, which insulated the party from responding to crucial changes in the material world. Here I will focus on the SWP's approach to women's oppression, although I believe the effects of this insulation

are not limited to oppression.³

Breaking with sectarianism and reclaiming the Marxist method

In the early and mid-1970s, SWP members had participated enthusiastically in the women's liberation movement. But beginning in the late 1970s, the SWP leadership turned against feminism, suddenly directing hostility toward feminism as an entire body of theory and practice and moving to shut down *Women's Voice*, its women's liberation publication, against the wishes of many SWP comrades⁴.

To justify its sectarianism, party leaders invented a straw figure of "feminism"—which was in fact a caricature—composed of the highly unlikely combination of the movement's most bourgeois and separatist elements. This fictional straw figure was never intended to engage feminist theorists in constructive debate, but rather to shun them altogether. The party thus never challenged itself to grapple with the other wings of feminism, resulting in political *ignorance* of virtually the entire left wing of feminist theory (including the contributions of socialist- and Marxist-feminists, as well as entire schools of feminist thought developed by Black feminists and other feminists of color) over a period of several decades.

The SWP's hostility to this straw figure of feminism thus ignored the enormous contributions of the various political elements of the women's movement. This was done in the name of hostility to "cross-class" women's movements—as if a movement that seeks to combat women's oppression as a whole cannot *also* benefit working-class women. [The problems with the SWP's approach to feminism are outlined in greater detail in a *Socialist Worker* article by Canadian Marxist-feminist Abbie Bakan and Sharon Smith: "Marxism, Feminism and the Fight for Liberation," available at <http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/10/marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation.>]

This non-dialectical approach to theory has allowed the SWP today to continue to recycle the same old arguments against "feminism" and "patriarchy" it developed in the late 1970s and '80s without regard to their dramatically changed social context.

¹ Our most prominent disagreement was a rejection of the slogan, "The 1990s is like the 1930s in slow motion"—based on the fact that 1) the 1990s was marked by economic boom, not slump, and 2) what seemed to us to be an inflated set of expectations both for the scale of class struggle and the rate of membership growth of our respective organizations.

² This included, for example, a critique of the SWP's method of "instant recruitment," which based membership in a revolutionary organization as a process of signing a card rather than being won to a Marxist worldview.

³ The SWP has also, for example, retained its view of perpetual economic crisis since the mid-1970s, which likely played a role in its "1930s in slow motion" description of the 1990s, despite a significant economic boom.

⁴ It should be noted that the party shut down *Women's Voice* at roughly the same time that it shut down its Black newspaper, *Flame*, and its rank and file groups within most unions—as part of a larger argument that the class struggle was entering a "downturn".

The flip side of the SWP's approach resulted in effectively minimizing the degree of sexism inside the working class, by insisting on agreement that working-class men do not "benefit" from women's oppression. This insistence on describing working class men as having "advantages" (as opposed to "benefits" or "privileges") over working-class women became a political litmus test, resulting in a bitter, hair-splitting argument in the 1980s between revolutionary socialists who all agreed that socialism provides the path toward women's liberation. [See <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/31/marxism-feminism-and-womens-liberation> for a fuller description of that debate.]

A less sectarian approach would have been to de-emphasize word choice and emphasize the structural ways in which the capitalist class benefits from women's oppression under capitalism—and how a socialist society will create the material conditions for ending oppression, to the overriding benefit of the entire working class. What's more, placing the stress on the idea that "men don't benefit" turns on its head the classical Leninist approach to oppression: identifying first and foremost with the struggles of oppressed people. Working-class unity is not only possible on this basis but is also essential to building the strongest possible movement to fight against oppression.

This also requires admitting, however, that the victory of socialism, while creating the material conditions for ending oppression, will not automatically do so. Achieving genuine equality will require a continuation of struggle after the victory of a socialist society.

Correcting this non-dialectical approach to theory *requires a return to the Marxist method*. This, in turn, requires a deeper understanding of Marxism. This allows us to integrate those aspects of feminist theory, developed over the last four decades, that can help to further develop the Marxist method—without abandoning the centrality of the working class as the revolutionary agent in society.

Marxism is unique in identifying the revolutionary potential of the working class, as the only class in society capable of overthrowing capitalism. The revolutionary process is crucial in preparing the working class to run society in the interests of all of humanity. In Marx's words, "this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."⁵

Rejecting our past sectarian approach to feminism does not, however, mean embracing all forms of feminism. As Marxists, we remain strongly critical of mainstream feminism that functions as a wing of the Democratic Party, and also of separatism (including its current "Rad-Fem"

incarnation that actively embraces and enforces the oppression of trans people⁶).

Likewise, rejecting the SWP's litmus test described above, which insists on the use of the word "advantage" as opposed to the words "benefit" or "privilege" does not mean that it is appropriate for Marxists to now adopt various privilege theories—including "privilege checking." [For a useful critique of privilege checking, see Ryne Poelker, "Does it help to 'check privilege'?" <http://socialistworker.org/2013/10/15/does-it-help-to-check-privilege>.]

Key contributions of feminism to Marxist theory

My opinion is that there are two key developments in feminist theory that are most valuable in further developing our own theory on women's oppression today: 1) Social reproduction theory as developed by Marxist- and socialist-feminists in the 1970s, and 2) the concept of intersectionality as developed within the Black feminist tradition over a period of many decades.

Social reproduction theory has already been explored in two recent articles, one in *Socialist Worker* (Tithi Battacharya, "What is Social Reproduction Theory," <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/10/what-is-social-reproduction-theory>) and the other in the *ISR* (Sharon Smith, "Theorizing Women's Oppression, Part I", <http://isreview.org/issue/88/theorizing-womens-oppression-part-1>).

This document aims to explore the concept of *intersectionality* grounded in Black feminist theory and to contrast it with the notion of intersectionality that flows out of various theories based on postmodernism/post-structuralism.

Intersectionality is a concept that is widely accepted on the left today. It first developed from the Black feminist tradition, but more recently emerged in the context of postmodernism. Although Black feminism and some currents of postmodernist theory share certain common assumptions and some common language, these are overshadowed by key theoretical differences that make them two distinct approaches to combatting oppression. *Thus the concept of intersectionality has two different political foundations, one informed by Black feminism and the other by postmodernism*. [For more on the history and practice of Black feminism and its relationship to intersectionality, listen to the talk "Black Feminism and Intersectionality," by Nikeeta Slade and Sharon Smith at Socialism 2013 (available in both video and audio at www.wearemany.org).]

Below I will examine these contrasting theoretical

⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1845-46. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/>

⁶ See, for example, "Forbidden Discourse: The Silencing of Feminist Criticism of 'Gender', An open statement from 37 radical feminists from five countries." August 12, 2013 <http://www.pandagon.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/GENDER-Statement.pdf?f9e4e1>

approaches, while arguing that Black feminism, which emphasizes group identity and collective struggle, is far more compatible with Marxism than postmodernism, which stresses subjective identities, interpersonal relations, and discourse as the basis for mounting a challenge to women's oppression.

Black feminism and “the simultaneity of oppression”

The term intersectionality was coined by Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989⁷ but is a long-standing concept within the Black feminist tradition. Indeed, as Black feminist and scholar Barbara Smith (who helped to pioneer this theoretical concept) noted in 1983, “The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought.”⁸

Since the time of Sojourner Truth's famous “Ain't I a Woman?” speech in 1851, Black feminists have recognized that Black women's experience of oppression is a synthesis of multiple, interlocking oppressions. This recognition was originally based on the interlocking oppressions of race, gender and class, although left-wing Black feminists began to incorporate sexuality, disability and all other forms of oppression into this analysis in the 1970s.⁹

In the 1960s and 1970s, many Black feminists, Latinas and other women of color were critical of both the predominantly white feminist movement for its racism *and* of nationalist and other anti-racist movements for their sexism. This alienation from both feminist and anti-racist movements in this period led many feminists of color to form separate organizations that could address the particular oppressions they faced.

But when Black feminists and other women of color of that era rightfully asserted the racial and class differences between women, they did so because these differences were largely ignored and neglected by much of the women's movement at that time, thereby rendering Black women and other women of color invisible in theory and in practice.

The end goal was not, however, permanent racial separation for most left-wing Black and other feminists of color, as it has come to be understood since. Barbara Smith conceived of an *inclusive* approach to combatting multiple oppressions, beginning with coalition building around particular struggles. As she observed in 1983, “The most progressive sectors of the women's movement, including radical white women, have taken [issues of racism], and

many more, quite seriously.”¹⁰ Asian American feminist Merle Woo argued explicitly, “Today...I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands.” But, she added, “not all white women are racist, and not all Asian-American men are sexist. And there are visible changes. Real, tangible, positive changes.”¹¹

The aim of intersectionality within the Black feminist tradition has been toward building a stronger movement for women's liberation that represents the interests of *all* women. Barbara Smith described her own vision of feminism in 1984, “I have often wished I could spread the word that a movement committed to fighting sexual, racial, economic and heterosexist oppression, not to mention one which opposes imperialism, anti-Semitism, the oppressions visited upon the physically disabled, the old and the young, at the same time that it challenges imminent nuclear destruction.”¹²

This approach to fighting oppression does not merely complement, but also strengthens, Marxist theory and practice—which seeks to unite not only all those who are exploited but also all those who are oppressed by capitalism into a single movement that fights for the liberation of all humanity. The Black feminist approach described above enhances Lenin's famous phrase from *What is to be Done?*: “Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected — unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other.”¹³

The Combahee River Collective, which represented perhaps the most self-consciously left-wing organization of Black feminists in the 1970s, acknowledged its adherence to socialism and anti-imperialism, while also arguing for greater attention to oppression:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these

⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, pp. 139–167, 1989.

⁸ Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. xxxiv.

⁹ See, for example, the Combahee River Collective Statement, April 1977. Available online at <http://circuitous.org/scrap/combahee.html>.

¹⁰ Barbara Smith, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), p. xxxi

¹¹ Cherríe L. Moraga, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Toni Cade Bambara (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back* (Kitchen Table—Women of Color Press, 1984) p. 146.

¹² Barbara Smith, pp. 257–58.

¹³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement.” Lenin's *Collected Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), Vol. 5, pp. 347–530. (Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>)

*resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation... Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.*¹⁴

At the same time, intersectionality cannot replace Marxism—and Black feminists have never attempted to do so. Intersectionality is a concept for understanding oppression, not exploitation. Even the commonly used term “classism” describes an aspect of class oppression—snobbery and elitism—not exploitation. Most Black feminists acknowledge the systemic roots of racism and sexism but place far less emphasis than Marxists on the connection between the system of exploitation and oppression.

Marxism provides a framework for understanding the relationship between oppression and exploitation (i.e., oppression as a product of the system of class exploitation), and also identifies the strategy for creating the material and social conditions that will make it possible to end both oppression and exploitation. Marxism's critics have disparaged this framework as an aspect of Marx's “economic reductionism.”

But, as Marxist-feminist Martha Gimenez responds, “To argue, then, that class is fundamental is not to ‘reduce’ gender or racial oppression to class, but to acknowledge that the underlying basic and ‘nameless’ power at the root of what happens in social interactions grounded in ‘intersectionality’ is class power.”¹⁵ The working class holds the potential to lead a struggle in the interests of all those who suffer injustice and oppression. This is because both exploitation and oppression are rooted in capitalism. Exploitation is the method by which the ruling class robs workers of surplus value; the various forms of oppression play a primary role in maintaining the rule of a tiny minority over the vast majority. In each case, the enemy is one and the same.

The class struggle helps to educate workers—sometimes very rapidly—challenging reactionary ideas and prejudices that keep workers divided. When workers go on strike, confronting capital and its agents of repression (the police), the class nature of society becomes suddenly clarified. Racist, sexist or homophobic ideas cultivated over a lifetime can disappear within a matter of days in a mass strike wave. The sight of hundreds of police lined up to protect the boss's property or to usher in a bunch of scabs speaks volumes about the class nature of the state within capitalism.

¹⁴ Combahee River Collective Statement, April 1977. Available online at <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>

¹⁵ Martha Gimenez, “Marxism and class, gender and race: Rethinking the trilogy,” *Race, Gender & Class* (2001: Vol. 8, No. 2), pp. 22-33. Available online at <http://www.colorado.edu/Sociology/gimenez/work/cgr.html>

The process of struggle also exposes another truth hidden beneath layers of ruling-class ideology: as the producers of the goods and services that keep capitalism running, workers have the ability to shut down the system through a mass strike. And workers not only have the power to shut down the system, but also to replace it with a socialist society, based upon collective ownership of the means of production. Although other groups in society suffer oppression, only the working class possesses this objective power.

These are the basic reasons why Marx argued that capitalism created its own gravediggers in the working class. But when Marx defined the working class as the agent for revolutionary change, he was describing its historical potential, rather than a foregone conclusion. This is the key to understanding Lenin's words, above. The whole Leninist conception of the vanguard party rests on the understanding that a battle of ideas must be fought *inside* the working class movement. A section of workers, won to a socialist alternative and organized into a revolutionary party, can win other workers away from ruling class ideologies and provide an alternative worldview. For Lenin, the notion of political consciousness entailed workers' willingness to champion the interests of all the oppressed in society, as an integral part of the struggle for socialism.

As an additive to Marxist theory, intersectionality leads the way toward a much higher level of understanding of the character of oppression than that developed by classical Marxists, enabling the further development of the ways in which *solidarity* can be built between all those who suffer oppression and exploitation under capitalism to forge a unified movement.

Postmodernism

For both better and for worse, postmodernism marked a fairly decisive theoretical break with the past among radicals. [For a useful appraisal of postmodernism, listen to Tom Lewis' Socialism 2013 presentation, “What do Marxists say about postmodernism?” at <http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/what-do-marxists-say-about-postmodernism.>]

One aspect of this break marked an enormous advance: championing the fight against *all* forms of oppression as a political priority. British literary theorist Terry Eagleton described postmodernism's “single most enduring achievement” as “the fact that it has helped to place questions of sexuality, gender and ethnicity so firmly on the political agenda that it is impossible to imagine them being erased without an almighty struggle.”¹⁶

Although this process was set in motion first by the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, its progress stalled until queer activists, initially organizing around the AIDS epidemic, began to struggle militantly around the slogan “We're here; we're queer; get used to it” in the 1980s.

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), p. 22.

Likewise, beginning in the 1990s so-called “third wave feminists” began to thoroughly embrace the struggles of all those facing racial, sexual, and gender discrimination, including transgender people.¹⁷

Postmodernism both informed and was informed by queer, third wave feminist and disability activism, and its importance should not be underestimated. In this way, postmodernism helped to transform the character of activism in a myriad of ways—most importantly toward an *inclusive* approach to fighting oppression on every front. This includes the oppression experienced by those who suffer from disabilities or who face age discrimination and many other forms of oppression that had been neglected on the left.

Other aspects of postmodernism marked more of a retreat than an advance, however.

It is well known that the 1970s witnessed the launch of the decades long “employers’ offensive,” which later became known as neoliberalism. Because the neoliberal project has been bipartisan from the beginning, Democrats followed Republicans rightward beginning in the late 1970s, dragging liberal organizations with them. The decline of mass struggle starting in the second half of the 1970s was coupled with this sharp shift rightward in mainstream politics.

Whereas in the early 1970s, many radicals believed revolution would soon be on the agenda, by the end of the decade the political trajectory was swiftly moving in the opposite direction. The neoliberal era transformed the balance of class and social forces decisively in favor of capital on a global scale, returning class inequality to that of the Gilded Age. This anti-working class onslaught has been accompanied by attacks on all the gains of the 1960s-era social movements, along with open racism, misogyny and homophobia in the political mainstream.

Even though neoliberal policies were responsible for the 2008 financial meltdown that resulted in the Great Recession, neoliberalism has survived virtually intact—with austerity remaining the centerpiece of ruling class policy worldwide.

In the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal policy aggressively swept the globe via organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. Most radical activists and theorists who were forced to absorb this dramatic political and social transformation responded with a sense of pessimism, losing

¹⁷ “Third wave feminism” belies an easy definition. Many regard it as a generational conflict based upon age, identifying third wave feminists as “Generation Xers” who rebelled against their Second Wave predecessors. But Susan Archer Mann makes a political distinction, identifying the Third Wave as those influenced by post-structuralism. See Susan Archer Mann, “Third Wave Feminism’s Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* Vol. 4 (Spring 2013). Available online at <http://www.jfonline.org/issue4/pdfs/mann.pdf>.

confidence that revolution was possible. Most radical social theorists adjusted to the neoliberal reality by turning away from structural analyses altogether—and Marxism in particular.

Some of these academics were veteran 1960s radicals who had lost faith in the possibility for revolution. They were joined by a new generation of radicals too young to have experienced the tumult of the 1960s but who were influenced by the pessimism of its aftermath. Marxism was widely dismissed as “reductionist” and “essentialist” by academics calling themselves postmodernists, poststructuralists and post-Marxists who rejected political generalization, social structures and objective material realities (referred to as “truths”, “totalities” and “universalities”)—in the name of “anti-essentialism.” Postmodernists instead placed an overriding emphasis on subjective, individual and cultural relations as centers of struggle—including reclaiming or re-appropriating oppressive language as a tool to combat oppression.

While it flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, this fragmented and subjective focus of postmodernism effectively marginalized historical materialism. Within the broad theoretical category of postmodernism, “post-Marxism” provided a new theoretical framework for the practice of identity politics. Two of its key theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, published the book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*¹⁸ in 1985, which contains many of the themes underpinning a new concept of the politics of identity.

Laclau and Mouffe explain their theory as a negation of socialist “totality”, arguing, “There are not, for example, necessary links between anti-sexism and anti-capitalism, and a unity between the two can only be the result of a hegemonic articulation. It follows that it is only possible to construct this articulation on the basis of separate struggles... This requires the autonomization of the spheres of struggle.”¹⁹ Such “free-floating” struggles should thus be conducted entirely within what Marxists describe as the superstructure of society, with no relationship to its economic base.²⁰

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Laclau’s and Mouffe’s concept of the “autonomization of the spheres of struggle” is that *it does not even need to involve more than*

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, 1985). There are two useful Marxist critiques of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which help provide clarity to Laclau and Mouffe’s arguments. One appears in Ellen Meiksins Wood’s *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True’ Socialism* (London, 1986). The other is the chapter entitled “Post-Marxism?” in Norman Geras’s *Discourses of Extremity: Radical Ethics and Post-Marxist Extravaganzas* (London, 1990).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 178.

²⁰ While Marxists also recognize that there is no *automatic* unity between oppressed people, history has shown that solidarity is not only possible but also most effective at winning social change.

two people. They stated this explicitly: “[M]any of these forms of resistance are made manifest not in the form of collective struggles, but through an increasingly armed individualism.”²¹ In this way, interpersonal relationships can be key sites of struggle, based on subjective perceptions of which individual is in a position of “dominance” and which is in a position of “subordination” in any particular situation.

As British literary theorist Terry Eagleton described of postmodernism, “for all its talk of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions, with ‘difference’, ‘plurality’ and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other.”²²

Marxist-feminist Teresa Ebert has described poststructuralists, who she calls “ludic feminists,” as “caught in the contradictions between the political necessity of materialism and its displacement by the ludic priority given to discourse. They end up substituting discursive determinism for what they reject as an economic determinism in classical Marxism.”²³

Black feminism, post structuralism and Marxism

In this way, poststructuralists have appropriated the meanings of terms such as “identity politics” and “difference” that originated in Black feminism. When the Combahee River Collective referred to the need for identity politics, for example, they were describing the *group* identity of Black women; when they emphasized the importance of recognizing “differences” among women, they were referring to Black women’s invisibility within predominantly white feminism at the time. In contrast, the post-structural notion of “identity” is defined subjectively on an *individual* basis, while “difference” likewise can refer to any characteristic that makes an individual stand apart from others.

This emphasis on individualism has led some post-structuralists to object to the use of broad, “binary” categories such as “women” and “Black women”²⁴ — over the objection of many Black feminists, including Crenshaw. Crenshaw has taken issue with the assumptions of the “version of anti-essentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis, [which] is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, ‘Blacks’ or ‘women,’ and thus it makes

little sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them.”²⁵ She concluded, “At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for dis-empowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it.”²⁶

Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins has likewise formulated a strong challenge to postmodern assumptions. As she wrote in *Black Feminist Thought*, “Postmodernism... has been forwarded as the antithesis and inevitable outcome of rejecting a positivist science. Within postmodern logic, groups themselves become suspect as well as any specialized thought. In extreme postmodern discourse, each group’s thought is equally valid. No group can claim to have a better interpretation of the ‘truth’ than another.”²⁷ In *Fighting Words*, Collins wrote, “the postmodern rubric of decentering seemingly supports Black women’s long-standing efforts to challenge false universal knowledge that privileged Whiteness, maleness and wealth. However... current meanings attached to decentering as a construct illustrate how terms can continue to be used yet can be stripped of their oppositional intent.”²⁸

As feminist scholar Susan Archer Mann argued recently,

*both [Black feminist] intersectionality theorists and poststructuralists speak of "marginalized" peoples. Yet the former anchor this concept in hierarchically structured, group-based inequalities, while poststructuralists often are referring to people whose behaviors lie outside of or transgress social norms. This latter conception of "margins" includes a much broader swath of people where the normative structure rather than structural relations of oppression is determinate. Indeed, not all countercultural lifestyles and politics reflect the historical, institutionalized oppressions highlighted by intersectionality theorists.*²⁹

Postmodernism and “anarcho-liberalism”

Just as neoliberalism survived the global meltdown of 2008, so too has postmodernism. To be sure, the dramatic growth in class inequality since 2008 has led to a sharp rise in class-consciousness—most recently demonstrated by the popular identification with Occupy Wall Street’s “99% vs. the 1%” slogan. And there has been a corresponding shift in recent years back toward structural analysis and even Marxism among some left-wing academics.

But this class-consciousness is limited to anger at class and

²¹ Laclau and Mouffe, p164.

²² Eagleton, pp. 25-26.

²³ Teresa Ebert, “(Untimely) Critiques for a Red Feminism,” in , Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, Teresa Ebert and Donald Morton, eds., *Post-Ality, Marxism and Postmodernism*, Misonneuve Press, 1995. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/ebert.htm>.

²⁴ See, for example, Linda Martin, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

²⁵ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, p. 1296.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1297.

²⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 297.

²⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 127.

²⁹ Susan Archer Mann, *op cit*.

social inequality—without an obvious connection to a working-class strategy to transform society. This is completely understandable, since anyone in the U.S. who became politically aware after the mid-1970s will have had little to no opportunity to experience first-hand the solidarity engendered by an open-ended mass strike. Thus, while the misery perpetuated by the system is obvious to all those who are radicalizing today, the potential power of the working class to challenge it is not.

It is therefore not surprising that a postmodern, rather than Marxist, worldview can initially make more sense to those becoming radicalized in recent decades.

Moreover, the speed with which the Occupy movement fizzled in 2012, after having risen with such intensity just a few months earlier, highlights the lack of *sustained* struggle that has been an all too familiar characteristic of the current period thus far. Even the Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012, while providing a powerful glimpse of the possibilities for the future class struggle, was not able to turn the tide in isolation from the rest of the labor movement.

A mood of pessimism remains fairly widespread among many on the left—all the more so since the Arab Spring began suffering major setbacks. While we should not expect this to be a permanent state of affairs, this pessimism presently helps to maintain the influence of common assumptions of postmodernist theory on the broad left—even among many activists who have no idea what *post-structuralism* or *postmodernism* stand for.

Jacobin editor Bhaskar Sunkara has described this particular form of radicalism as “anarcho-liberalism”. He argues that it arose in the late twentieth century as a response to neoliberalism and the defeat of the Soviet bloc: “A crude overview, sure, but right in the broad strokes: the Marxist-derived Left was defeated, while social democracy reconciled to the neoliberal framework. ‘Anarcho-liberalism’ sauntered in a weird middle ground between both camps. Its representatives had the modest ambitions of the social liberals of the center Left, but the flair for the dramatic associated with the most militant anarchists of the far Left.”

Thus, Sunkara argues, “The reconfiguration of the Left at the end of the twentieth century created a void. The ‘anarcho-liberal’ filled it.” Sunkara describes the “anarcho-liberal” as “the iconic actor in the ‘anti-globalization’ movement”—“a figure in flux between the historic positions of the social democratic and anti-capitalist Lefts.”³⁰

Sunkara notes that the key political characteristics held in common by this group of activists, which are shared with postmodernism, include “an *anti-intellectualism* that manifested itself in a rejection of ‘grand narratives’ and structural critiques of capitalism, abhorrence for the

traditional forms of left-wing organization, a localist impulse, and an individualistic tendency to conflate lifestyle choices with political action. The worst of both worlds, the ‘anarcho-liberal’ can neither manage the capitalist state nor overcome it, and aspires to do both and neither at the same time.”³¹

While the Occupy movement marked an enormous advance in class and social struggle in its short existence, it contained clear political weaknesses—anarcho-liberalism among them. The failed call for a “general strike” on May Day 2012 (which sidestepped most unions) was perhaps the most obvious example of the problems with this political tendency. The general strike call conflated ostensibly “militant” tactics with success—even when the tactics chosen at that particular historical moment limited participation to a small minority of activists already convinced of them and failed to achieve its stated goal: a general strike³². This tactical choice came at the expense of seeking to expand participation to include a broader layer of students and workers who, while in the *process* of radicalization, maintain some degree of faith in the possibilities for reforming the system.

The problems with anarcho-liberalism described above remain unresolved in the period of disorientation that has taken hold in the wake of Occupy.

Identity politics and privilege checking

Like anarcho-liberalism, identity politics and “privilege checking” are activist outgrowths of postmodernism, sharing many of its strengths and weaknesses. While rightfully emphasizing the fact that oppression is often expressed in the realm of personal relations, this approach unfortunately deemphasizes the *systemic roots* of oppression.

Institutional oppression and even the capitalist system are usually acknowledged by those involved in privilege checking, but these systems lurk in the background while the struggle takes place primarily through language and symbols—with a focus on individual experiences in which the site of resistance is interpersonal relationships.

Privilege checking originated with a 1989 essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” by Peggy McIntosh³³—and has been widely accepted among both

³¹ Sunkara. Eagleton, perhaps more sympathetically, characterized the contradictions of this postmodern approach to politics as “libertarian pessimism”: in which “the dream of liberation would not be relinquished, however much one would scorn the naivety of those foolish enough to believe it could ever be realized. It would not be out of the question to run across people who wished to see the Epoch of Man pass away, and voted Liberal Democrat.” Op cit., p. 4.³¹

³² See, for example, Elizabeth Schulte, “The workers’ movement that led to May Day,” *Socialist Worker*, March 6, 2012. <http://socialistworker.org/2012/03/06/movement-that-led-to-may-day>

³³ This essay appears in Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See*

³⁰ Bhaskar Sunkara, “The ‘Anarcho-Liberal’”, *Dissent*, September 27, 2011. Available online at <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/the-anarcho-liberal>.

leftists and liberals since. Privilege checking has become a primary form of political activity among many on the left, and if anything, has gained relative influence in the absence of sustained collective struggle that has characterized the current political period.

Privilege checking encourages activists to “call out” privileged people who appear to be unaware of or behave in ways that reinforce the oppressive status quo. Calling out racism, sexism, homophobia and other reactionary attitudes is obviously a necessary part of fighting oppression in daily life—and apologies from the offending parties are surely welcome—but this is also a far cry from what is needed to end oppression. *In reality, privilege checking does little to challenge the class and social status quo—despite the fact that most activists who engage in privilege checking believe that the status quo needs changing.*

Native American activist and scholar Andrea Smith recently noted this about the rituals of privilege checking:

In my experience working with a multitude of anti-racist organizing projects over the years, I frequently found myself participating in various workshops in which participants were asked to reflect on their gender/race/sexuality/class/etc. privilege. These workshops had a bit of a self-help orientation to them: “I am so and so, and I have x privilege.” It was never quite clear what the point of these confessions were. It was not as if other participants did not know the confessor in question had her/his proclaimed privilege. It did not appear that these individual confessions actually led to any political projects to dismantle the structures of domination that enabled their privilege. Rather, the confessions became the political project themselves. The benefits of these confessions seemed to be ephemeral. For the instant the confession took place, those who do not have that privilege in daily life would have a temporary position of power as the hearer of the confession who could grant absolution and forgiveness. The sayer of the confession could then be granted temporary forgiveness for her/his abuses of power and relief from white/male/heterosexual/etc guilt. Because of the perceived benefits of this ritual, there was generally little critique of the fact that in the end, it primarily served to reconstitute the structures of domination it was supposed to resist. One of the reasons there was little critique of this practice is that it bestowed cultural capital to those who seemed to be the “most oppressed.” Those who had little privilege did not have to confess and were in the position to be the judge of those who did have privilege. Consequently, people aspired to be oppressed. Inevitably, those with more privilege would develop new heretofore unknown forms of oppression from which they suffered. “I may be white, but my best friend was a person of color, which caused me to be

oppressed when we played together.” Consequently, the goal became not to actually end oppression but to be as oppressed as possible. These rituals often substituted confession for political movement-building. And despite the cultural capital that was, at least temporarily, bestowed to those who seemed to be the most oppressed, these rituals ultimately reconstituted the white majority subject as the subject capable of self-reflexivity and the colonized/racialized subject as the occasion for self-reflexivity.³⁴

Smith concludes, “Essentially, the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we may have. If we want to undermine those privileges, we must change the structures within which we live so that we become different peoples in the process.”³⁵

In addition, every individual is viewed as possessing both privileged and non-privileged attributes, so the balance of “privilege” changes depending upon the attributes of the participants in a particular personal interaction. A list of privileges that tip the balance in favor of an individual include, as described by the Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois in the document “Checking your privilege 101,” Class Privilege, Race Privilege, Educational Privilege, Gender Privilege, Gender identity privilege, Age privilege, Body size privilege, Able-bodied privilege, Life on the outside privilege, “Passing” privilege, Religious privilege and Sexuality privilege.³⁶

Thus, privilege checking places a disproportionate emphasis on the role of individuals in perpetuating oppression, when the root of oppression is systemic.

The second problem with this approach to combatting oppression is its subjective and individualized approach to “identity,” which is taken directly from postmodernism as described above. Identity politics in the postmodern era does not exclusively define “marginalization” as a product of systemic oppression shared by groups of oppressed people but includes individually and subjectively defined identities that merely set individuals apart from the norm.

This celebration of diversity ironically (and undoubtedly unintentionally) downplays the experiences of *genuine oppression*. This is perhaps most evident in the growing list of sexual identities attached to the “LGBTQ” label—which originally designated a shared experience of *oppression* among lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and queer people in society at large. The list has now expanded to “LGBTQQIAA” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, ally and asexual) with additional identities, including pansexual, omnisexual, trisexual,

³⁴ Andrea Smith, “The Problem with Privilege” blog post August 14, 2013 <http://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/the-problem-with-privilege-by-andrea-smith/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois, “Checking your privilege 101,” at <http://www.feminish.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/privilege101.pdf>.

agender, bigender, third gender and polyamorous, also gaining recognition.³⁷

While expanding sexualities is a welcome development in many respects, it also tends to bury the original purpose of the “LGBT” label, which was intended to include trans people as a recognized group of oppressed people—accompanied by demands for gender neutral campus housing, gender neutral bathrooms and gender neutral language which have been raised specifically to combat transgender oppression. *While those who choose to identify as “asexual” or “ally,” for example, should have the right to do so, social attitudes and institutional discrimination against these identities are hardly comparable to the enormous degree of oppression faced by trans people.*

The development described above is accompanied by an emphasis on appropriating and creating language that challenges social norms. Unfortunately, as the growing list of sexual identities described above demonstrates, access to rapidly changing terminology is limited to a relatively small number of people in society—primarily those *already* involved in radical activist communities. As Official Shrub.com advises,

Make an Effort to Learn the Lingo: Standard language just isn't equipped to deal with the concepts that non-privileged groups have to engage with on a regular basis. And why would it? The language we're taught is designed for the masses. But, just as you have to learn a bunch of new terms for things like science class, so to do you need to do so for non-privileged groups... There are also places specifically designed for those who have no background in the area. In some, but not all, cases starting up a dialogue around a specific term is fine. What's not fine, however, is telling a non-privileged group that their terms are wrong. You, as the privileged participant, don't get to define what is and is not appropriate usage in a minority space.³⁸

Finally, the practice of privilege checking relies on its own fairly rigid method of mechanical determinism. As noted above, this approach assumes that individual people each possess a unique combination of privileged and non-privileged attributes, such that “power” dynamics shift in every interpersonal situation depending on who is present. Moreover, privilege checking assumes that the assertions of a non-privileged person who calls out a privileged person (based on a particular comment, misuse of language or personal demeanor) cannot be challenged. Those who are privileged in a given situation can only offer support and apologies to the non-privileged by checking their privilege and calling out others who are privileged.³⁹

Oppressed people are, of course, in the best position to describe and lead the fight against their own oppression. But the privilege-checking approach described above, places its overriding emphasis on *who* is making a particular argument or accusation, rather than the *content* of that argument or accusation. In this context, moralism can supersede politics.

If the privileged party objects to an argument made by a non-privileged person, the privileged person is automatically derided as “defensive”. It is easy to see how this approach can inhibit the free exchange of ideas—including necessary political debates—between and among those who are all committed to transforming society.

In this respect, privilege checking is a form of what is known as “prefigurative” politics, in which people attempt to behave in ways and exercise values that reflect their own vision for a future society—which is perceived as a way to help bring about that society.

But as Aaron Petkoff argued in his 2013 Socialism presentation, “Be the Change you Want to See? A Marxist Critique of Prefigurative Politics” (<http://wearmany.org/a/2013/06/be-change-you-want-to-see/>): “You can't prefigure or approximate an end to poverty, an end to the need for police and prisons, an end to homelessness. As George Orwell once put it, whoever tries to imagine socialism simply envisions 'a vision of present society with the worst abuses left out.'”⁴⁰

The revolutionary organization, as described above, is a necessary means for achieving the goal of a socialist society, based upon the self-emancipation of the working class. But, Petkoff continues,

The revolutionary party, therefore, does not prefigure the future socialist state...but is rather an organization specific to capitalism, meant to navigate the rocky terrain of contradictory class struggle in a capitalist society. Prefigurative politics urges activists to draw the means they use today from their vision of the future. However, means suited for the ideal circumstances and ideal people of the future, are not sufficient for revolutionaries who have to live in the present...

The tactics and methods we use in the movement, therefore, aren't determined by an abstract and eternal sense of morality, e.g., violence is always immoral, power is always oppressive, leadership is always abusive, regardless of circumstances, but are rather selected on the basis of what unites working class and oppressed people, what raises its political confidence, and builds its power to transform society.⁴¹

Solidarity and struggle

³⁷ See, for example, “Generation LGBTIA,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/10/fashion/generation-lgbtqia.html>

³⁸ “Check my what? On privilege and what we can do about it,” http://blog.shrub.com/archives/tekanji/2006-03-08_146

³⁹ Ibid. Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois, op cit.

⁴⁰ A written transcript of this talk is posted at <http://abetterworlddisprobable.wordpress.com/2013/07/01/be-the-change-you-want-to-see-a-marxist-criticism-of-prefigurative-politics/>

⁴¹ Ibid.

Anyone who engages in racist, sexist, homophobic or other reactionary behavior must be challenged whenever such behavior occurs, *including inside the movements*. At the same time, there is a vast difference between those who own and control the institutions that produce exploitation and oppression and those who do not. A clear distinction should be made between those seeking to uphold the system and those seeking to change it for the better.

As materialists, we also understand that it would be virtually impossible for most people living under capitalism to break with every manifestation of ruling-class ideology as long as the system of capitalism exists. This is the case even for those who are dedicated to fighting against oppression and exploitation.

While postmodernists tend to emphasize the *differences* that exist between individuals, Marxists strive to unite all those who face a common enemy into a single movement. If our goal is to build a working-class movement, it requires engendering *solidarity*, as expressed in the slogan “An injury to one is an injury to all.” Such solidarity can only be built through a common project and a common trust shared by all who are fighting on the same side of the class struggle.

While we need to shed the sectarianism of the SWP, this does not mean we should abandon any aspect of the Marxist method. On the contrary, we should further develop Marxist theory and practice to fit our present political circumstances.

Sharon S. for the Steering Committee

Concerns for the future of the ISO

It seems to me that the ISO may be at a crossroads—that a failure to grow in a particular way could seriously undermine its ability to become what it needs to be as it faces future challenges.

For a revolutionary organization there is, of course, always a need for growth in membership, and also growth in our understanding of revolutionary Marxism, as well as growth in the influence of our ideas within the broad and varied layers of the class that we are part of—the working class. There is also very definitely the need for the growth of our political experience in the struggles of our time, which helps us to translate ideas into reality while refining our ideas based on the experience generated by our activist engagement with that reality.

To facilitate all such growth, there needs to be a certain kind of organizational growth to which the National Committee report of September 2013 gives insufficient attention, in my opinion.

Context

The context in which we are operating needs to be weighed as we think through all questions of growth, including the one on which I want to focus here. The National Committee report provides a useful summary:

The present political moment is...one of disorientation and demoralization around us. Since we are a part of the left, this is bound to affect our members also. The political situation remains one of extreme volatility, with sharp ups and downs. This political juncture needs to be viewed as a phase in an ongoing radicalization and struggle in reaction to the global economic slump and its attendant increase in exploitation and oppression...[T]he radicalization continues, but not in the most ideal of circumstances. Most significantly, the unifying aspect of large-scale

class and social struggle is sorely missing. One need only compare the current atmosphere to that at the height of Occupy, when activists in Zuccotti Park and elsewhere were successfully mobilizing in large numbers to defend encampments against police attempts to shut them down. At this juncture, the radicalization is still reflected mostly at the level of ideas. When struggle presents itself, people respond. There just hasn't been sustained struggle.

There are positive and negative aspects to the situation described here. The negative aspects are obvious: disorientation and demoralization are never good things. On the other hand, these are related to fluctuations in a longer-term period of crisis and radicalization. This means, as Bertolt Brecht once said, “Because things are as they are, they will not stay as they are.” Because this is not an historical moment of mass upsurge, *we have time* (thank God!) to strengthen ourselves.

Of course, as we all must recognize, the International Socialist Organization, for all of its genuine strengths, is incapable—not only because of contextual realities but especially because of internal realities—of leading the revolutionary mass upsurges that are likely in the future. The National Committee report tells us that this is a time for “strengthening the Marxist foundations of the organization”—through stepping up our Marxist education in the form of internal classes, public meetings, and sales of the *Socialist Worker*. But this is not sufficient.

Strengthening material and structural foundations of the Marxist organization

I am basing these comments, in large measure, on my experience in Pittsburgh, which—among other things—includes a number of years in a relatively strong branch of the Socialist Workers Party (the U.S. SWP in its better days of the 1970s) and almost five years more recently in an ISO

branch whose fortunes have fluctuated but which is now a relatively weak branch.

Essential for both organizations is the notion of *cadre*. This means *experienced activists, educated in political theory, analytically oriented, with practical organizational skills, who are able to attract and train new recruits, who must also develop into cadre—capable of maintaining the organization while at the same time contributing to expanding efforts in broader movements and larger struggles.*

Cadre development does not take place naturally and spontaneously, or simply from reading books and talking about ideas and going to conferences. It is a process that requires sustained attention, buttressed by structures and resources. Without cadres it is impossible to sustain and develop either a revolutionary organization or a powerful and effective social movement.

In the branch of the Pittsburgh SWP (which was a fairly typical branch), there were 30 or so members, between a third and half of whom were cadre, plus 10 or 20 Young Socialist Alliance members (at least half also in the party). There was a local party headquarters which not only housed a bookstore but also a forum hall (there were weekly public forums), where weekly branch meetings also were held, plus educational classes. There was a paid organizer, plus a strong executive committee, as well as a network of committees and fractions (every comrade was a member of one or two of these) to carry out the work. Most members were in their 20s and 30s—with a few in their late teens and a few 40 years or older. There were also regional organizers who would come through every so often. The Pittsburgh SWP played a powerful role in social struggles and had a significant implantation in certain unions.

This would not have been possible, of course, without a very strong financial base. Each paid minimal dues—I seem to remember about \$5.00 a year. But there were also weekly “branch sustainers” ranging from \$1.00 or \$5.00 a week to, say, \$10.00 or \$25.00 or \$50.00 a week. This (plus regular fund-raisers) made possible the rental of our forum hall/bookstore and the payment of our organizer plus other expenses, and a portion of this would go to the National Office.

I am not advocating that we try to replicate the U.S. SWP of the old days (and there were also negative qualities that should definitely not be revived)—but this experience does influence my thinking on organization building, and there may be some clues and insights in it that might be worth considering. There was certainly greater attention in the SWP to providing material and structural foundations for a Marxist organization—and I do believe the ISO needs more of that.

In the Pittsburgh ISO since I joined, unfortunately, there has been only one cadre, and he is in his 60s. In order to facilitate the development of the branch (most of whose members have been under 30), he has pulled back from any formal leadership. While the branch grew to about 15 at one

point, after an ill-fated division in hopes of building a campus branch, exacerbated by some personality issues, there was a dramatic decline—we now have about 5 active members. Despite certain strengths of excellent comrades, there is a high degree of experience and skill neither in regard to sustaining a socialist organization nor in regard to effective participation in social movements and struggles. There have, of course, been a number of classes and public meetings—but also a certain disconnect between these and the larger political and social context in which we exist. My perception is that the Pittsburgh situation may be similar, in one way or another, to that of the ISO in some other areas. I imagine that where there is a concentration of comrades (such as New York, Chicago, the Bay Area) the reality is different—but my reality is Pittsburgh.

What is needed?

The National Committee proposals for stepping up our Marxist education in the form of internal classes, public meetings, and sales of the *Socialist Worker* do not strike me as, in and of themselves, being able to provide a solution for the dilemma facing the Pittsburgh ISO. We need a process that will facilitate cadre development in Pittsburgh, and I suspect that is true elsewhere.

The process of cadre development may be advanced, I think, through a combination of regional organizers, regional structures, and cadre schools. This can only be achieved, however, only if we are prepared to allocate the resources necessary for its being accomplished.

One of the big pluses in the National Committee report is this: “We need to put the ISO on a much firmer financial footing...The ISO has greatly increased its geographic spread, but this must be consolidated and expanded upon. Financial commitment is key to this process.”

Unfortunately, this is fairly general—not only in terms of specific amounts and targets, but also in regard to what the hoped-for increased revenue would be spent on. We should also examine our current allocation of resources and consider shifts to facilitate the kind of organizational strengthening I am suggesting here.

Regional Organizers. One of the most helpful things the national ISO has done involves the dedicated, skillful, cadres sent to our branches, for short but productive periods, as regional organizers. The consultation, mentoring and training they provide—with the branch as a whole as well as one-on-one with individual comrades—can be invaluable.

Given their importance, however, I think we need to frankly acknowledge that our regional organizers are not fully “dedicated.” While *they are absolutely dedicated to the socialist cause, their time is insufficiently dedicated to functioning as regional organizers.* They generally do double-duty, triple-duty, quadruple-duty, etc. with other major assignments. They are so busy that they rarely come into places like Pittsburgh, although they try to make up for it with long-distance guidance via telephone conversations. Telephone conversations can be helpful, but they only go so far.

Also, regional organizers are mortal—which probably means they are getting older and some day they may even pass on to their Great Reward. I do not know of any younger comrades being developed in the wings to take over. Really, we could use more regional organizers—with other comrades assisting and learning the ropes (more on assistants below), who will be prepared to take over when that makes sense. Maybe there could be three substantial visits a year to each of the branches. (In addition to this, we should shift some tasks off of their shoulders in order to facilitate greater attention to their servicing the branches in their regions, which suggests at least a slight increase of staff in the national office.)

Regional Committees. Another assist to the development of branches might be provided through the development of regional structures, made up of representatives from all the branches in the specified region. These regional committees could identify weaknesses and problems in the branches, determining how the collective resources of the branches in the region can be used to addressing them.

Coordinated political and education efforts would make obvious sense as a function for such regional committees. Through collective evaluation and coordinated efforts, they could also help all branches develop more effective organizational structures and norms in each locality. And the regional committees could also, quite naturally, through their consistent functioning, facilitate cadre development among comrades throughout the region.

If we are to maintain regional organizers, rather than replacing them with regional committees (to be clear, I am in favor of maintaining regional organizers and expanding their number in addition to developing regional committees), then it is obvious that the deliberations and efforts of the regional committees should be done in collaboration with the regional organizer, and the already-

alluded-to assistants to the regional organizer would logically be provided by the regional committee.

Cadre Schools. While I believe this can and should be approached experimentally, I believe the ISO would benefit from the development of cadre schools. I envision this as an intensive learning experience lasting for a couple of weeks, one week, or even a long weekend, perhaps for one or two dozen comrades.

Perhaps it could be organized for a single branch under the leadership of the regional organizer. Perhaps it could be organized for several branches in a region, under the leadership of the regional committee (and in collaboration with the regional organizer). Perhaps it could be organized nationally, in collaboration with the various regional committees and organizers.

While the cadre schools might utilize the reading and discussion of Marxist texts, their primary purpose would be to help participants develop a better understanding and ability to utilize practical political techniques and organizing skills: how to make a leaflet; how to utilize internet resources; how to organize and conduct a meeting, a forum, a class series; how to help other comrades develop their skills; how to size up a political situation and help other comrades think through what to do about it; issues of contact work, recruitment, and helping new comrades become more experienced and durable comrades; etc.

Conclusion

This contribution is not meant to provide a blueprint but, hopefully, to initiate a discussion about crucial tasks that must be wrestled with if the ISO is to live up to its potential.

Paul L., Pittsburgh

Pedagogy and organization: The case for alternative formats

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire defines and critiques the “banking method” of education. In banking education, the teacher is the source of all knowledge and the students are empty vessels waiting to be filled (if you would like to read more about this, check out the chapter on Freire in *Education and Capitalism*). The way that this philosophy of education is most commonly expressed is through the lecture: one authoritative person speaking to a more or less passive audience and then taking questions. This is the standard format for most of academia. It is also the standard format for ISO conferences and day schools.

Freire promotes an alternative format, what he calls dialogic education, in which acquiring knowledge is a dynamic process that requires activity on the part of students as well as instructors, assumes that students enter all learning

situations with pre-existing knowledge and expertise, and creates space for more voices and greater engagement.

We believe that different people process information differently, and that for many, because of socialization, the banking method may not appear at all problematic. We are not saying that this format should never be used, but we want to challenge its naturalization as the only or best way that information is presented within the organization.

We believe that adopting alternative formats is consistent with recent shifts in our theory and practice. As we emphasize the importance of the engagement of the entire organization around feminist politics, we should think about whether our routines promote that engagement. Rather than just enforcing a progressive stack, how can we build the

speaking skills of comrades of color and women? Are there ways to structure discussions that will make it easier for those who are systematically silenced to find their voices?

What is an alternative format?

While many people may agree with the ideas behind the previous paragraph, figuring out how to structure a presentation in an alternative format is not trivial. First off, there are potentially infinite alternative formats. In order to plan a session effectively, one needs to take into account the nature of the information, the likely size and knowledge/experience level of the audience (which can only be guessed at in a conference environment), and the various modes of absorbing and processing information.

Anyone attempting an alternative format is taking on a certain level of risk, and should expect surprises, mistakes, and disappointments. However, we believe that diversifying our conferences so that they support multiple means of learning is worth some trial and error.

One of the key elements in conceptualizing an alternative format is formulating a clear set of goals. What are we trying to get out of a particular session? Rather than just focusing on how to fit the required information into the required time allotment, attention needs to be put on what the audience might hope to get out of the session. The speaker can either come up with goals ahead of time, which works better when one has at least some knowledge of who will be attending the session, or simply ask the audience members what their goals are: why did they come, and what do they hope to learn? The latter requires significant preparation and flexibility on the part of the speaker and can be quite challenging. One must be willing to acknowledge gaps in expertise and allow audience members to fill them if possible.

In addition to taking a more conscious approach toward goal-setting, designing an alternative format requires us to attempt to predict who might be in the audience: do we expect mostly new people, mostly students, mostly women, etc.? Identifying the audience helps us to consider the ways in which participants' experience might add to the discussion. How can we best activate that experience? Finally, using alternative formats suggests that we reconceptualize how we measure the success of a conference session, assessing not only the quality of the presentation but the level of engagement of the audience, the number of voices heard, and the variety of opinions expressed.

Why is this important right now?

We are looking to build the organization in a context in which critical thinking skills have been systematically removed from public education curriculum. Working class people are taught to be passive and underconfident about their ability to think independently, and this message is broadcast even louder to people who struggle against intersecting oppressions. In order to attempt to counter these trends, we need to provide space for newer people, especially people from oppressed groups, to participate

actively in discussions around subjects about which they may have little background knowledge, such as Marxist theory and US and world history.

Responding critically—and by critically we don't mean negatively but actively—to an authoritative lecture requires a much higher level of confidence than most new members command. Opening up spaces that encourage inexperienced speakers to participate actively will increase democratic engagement and help to provide a sense of ownership over the conference, the political direction of the organization, and the development of revolutionary theory. One thing that has become very obvious in the past several years is that we need more people contributing to the development of Marxist theory to keep it alive and breathing.

Alternative formats may also have the added benefit of challenging longer-standing members to recognize the ways in which they can learn from less-experienced members. In this way, we can promote a more collaborative and diverse concept of leadership.

If we want to incorporate these kinds of alternative formats into our conferences, we must begin to try them out in our local, weekly routines. In addition to enhancing the developing of our members, the introduction of alternative formats may make our meetings more attractive to people outside our membership who may for good reason have an aversion to top-down educational forms. We recognize that this work has already begun in many places, partially in response to suggestions from the national office. We do not believe that we are initiating this trend but rather encouraging its further development.

Assessment of alternative formats that we have used at Socialism Conference

At Socialism 2012, one of the authors of this document led a session on What Marxists say about Education. The topic made it easy to project that many of the audience members would be educators. With this knowledge in mind, the speaker structured the session around the assumption that the audience members would have a wealth of practical experience that they may or may not have theorized. Therefore, she introduced, one at a time, a series of theoretical "ideal" practices as formulated by Marxist educational theorists and asked the audience to imagine how they might apply to their classrooms and constituencies. The speaker spoke on each topic for 5-7 minutes, allowed for 3 minutes of small group discussion, and then asked for volunteers to share their ideas with the whole group. Consequently, audience members were speaking with each other or had the floor for a large proportion of the allotted time.

Together, the one hundred or so members of the audience shared the real limitations of applying radical pedagogical strategies in classrooms under capitalism. The democratic and concrete nature of the discussion led very naturally to an emphasis on the necessity of organizing strong unions and building toward socialism.

In a similarly structured session at Socialism 2013, on Marxism and Morality, one of us challenged the audience to consider whether they believed that there was a significant moral component to Marxist practice. Through an “ice-breaker” (breaking the audience into small groups and giving them time to speak), the speaker also asked audience members to consider the ways in which morality played into their political radicalization. Some audience members shared that their moral opposition to things like the death penalty and bullying brought them into arenas in which they were exposed to Marxist politics.

One measure of success was the level of debates that were brought to the fore: for example, does Marxism move toward a working class or universal morality? What aspects of bourgeois morality should be preserved and which should be discarded? The session was also successful in that it encouraged the engagement of new people who had not spoken at other sessions and facilitated their ability to exchange ideas directly with those who had more experience.

A shortcoming of the session (see practical implementation below) was that it was too short. Important debates came out near the end and were not discussed fully because time ran out.

This was also true of the session that the other author of this document gave this past conference on Lenin and the right of nations to self-determination. The session began with a “sponge activity”: while a soundtrack of indigenous liberation songs and a video about the Hawaiian sovereignty movement played in the background, participants were given handouts that allowed them to match photographs of movements for self-determination with the dates and places they occurred or quotes from well-known revolutionaries on self-determination. This activity allowed audience members to interact around the topic before the speaker even started and emphasized the enduring significance of the ideas.

The speaker had one main goal: to impress upon the participants the importance of their mastering the theory and being able to wield it themselves. This broad goal was then broken down into three smaller, more specific goals: 1) to convey the sense of Lenin’s theoretical writings on the subject; 2) to review the history of the Russian Revolution by having audience members examine for themselves how and whether the theory was put into practice, and 3) to give the audience space to apply the theory to current geopolitical events. The speaker provided handouts for each topic outlining the most important points of the theory, the relevant historical events, and the current struggles for self-determination. The only way to accomplish these goals was to turn the majority of the session over to the activity of the audience. Unfortunately, there was not enough time to get to the last goal, which was arguably the most important and certainly the most popular.

What we learned

People enjoy sharing their experiences and connecting them to political theory and history and they also enjoy listening

to a wide variety of perspectives. This was obvious in the high level of engagement and energy in all of these sessions. In many cases, the audience didn’t want the small group discussions or the session itself to end. Many commented on their having lost track of time.

Some people need some prompting—both specific questions and dedicated space—to get over their reluctance to speak. This was evidenced during both sessions when new members approached the speakers and said that they appreciated the non-intimidating environment the speaker had created. Crafting provocative questions produces/requires a deeper understanding of the theory and encourages versatility. A drive toward succinctness has the same effect: one must figure out exactly what needs to be said and how to say it simply.

Importantly, we learned not to take on too much and more importantly we learned that even if we don’t take on too much, we still need more time. Allowing audience members to participate in the formation of useful and relevant conclusions (as opposed to just having the speaker hand them out) requires more time. It may be worth considering a two-hour time slot at conference devoted to these sorts of sessions. The time slot could consist of Marxist fundamentals or controversial current topics for which the organization does not have a line. This would allow time to not only fully engage (we feel like we have that down) but to go on to fleshing out arguments and debates that arise.

An easy way to get people engaged is through visual aids or handouts that can help the audience to follow the main points. Many people have difficulty retaining all the main points of a lecture, especially if it consists mostly of new concepts. By the time the discussion starts, they may appreciate a concrete reminder, in the form of a handout, of what is most important.

One form of media that definitely merits more exploration is video. Many young adults receive the majority of their education, news, and entertainment through video. A seven-minute youtube clip, preferably with music and interesting visuals, can convey complex ideas succinctly and accessibly to our audience and give them background for understanding the more sophisticated points of the lecture that follows. These could include videos of picket lines, factory conditions, antiwar protests, obnoxious politicians, the Daily Show, works of art, MLK speeches, etc.

We also ran up against the challenge of how to record these alternatively formatted sessions for wearemany.org. This requires at the very least pre-meeting and strategizing with the chair and may require an audiovisual team to accomplish effectively; for example, videotaping the session not from a single, still perspective but with someone moving around to capture individual conversations. Doing so raises a number of questions (do people need to sign a release?), but given the importance of wearemany.org, it seems worthwhile to figure it out.

Jessica H.-W., Berkeley, and **Elizabeth T.**, San Francisco

Revolutionary strategy and the ISO: Response to “A Critique”

A few days ago a friend who is not a member of the ISO sent me an internet link to a critique of the ISO by someone who appears to have been a member of the ISO until recently. This was entitled “A Critique of the International Socialist Organization” on a blog site to which no person’s name seems to be attached--<http://victortoils.wordpress.com/2013/09/29/a-critique-of-the-international-socialist-organization/>. Here was my initial response to my friend:

Thanks John. I hadn't seen it. At some point I'll want to read it more carefully than I can now, having given it only a quick scan.

It looks interesting, though some of it strikes me as inaccurate (for example, contrary to one generalization, in Pittsburgh we helped to initiate and participate in an act of civil disobedience in the PPT [Pittsburghers for Public Transit] struggle). Also, I'm not sure the author has any clear notion of what a revolutionary strategy would actually look like, which weakens the critique of the ISO's approach to revolutionary strategy.

I should confess, too, that since I don't think a socialist movement can actually be built by free-floating critics, I do feel an element of impatience with the author for not remaining in the ISO to share his-or-her critique with comrades in an effort to make the organization what it needs to be.

On the other hand, the difficulties in building a strong ISO branch in Pittsburgh makes me want to take more time with the critique in hopes of finding helpful insights.

I have now had an opportunity to do a serious read of the critique. My feeling remains that it is unfortunate the comrade did not remain in the ISO to argue for his perspective.

I think it would have been quite useful for the comrade to raise his challenge in this particular pre-convention discussion, and I think this is also an appropriate place to take up that challenge. In any event, I think comrades should read what he has to say and discuss it. Here I will briefly summarize what I think is the major gist of his argument, then share what I think is wrong with it. I will not take up every point that he makes, and it seems to me there may be some useful criticisms in his polemic, but I think the basic argument he puts forward is seriously flawed, and that is what I want to focus on here.

The basic argument

The basic point the critique advances is that the ISO is so focused on recruitment that it panders to idealistic but inexperienced college and university students (presumably freshmen and sophomores most of all) who are interested in talking about revolutionary ideas but are not inclined to get into trouble (for example, not inclined to get arrested). Seeking to recruit primarily from this milieu, because it is so easy to recruit from, the ISO tailors its strategic orientation to broad, peaceful demonstrations and rallies – which makes the ISO “a group with interesting ideas and seemingly sane strategy and tactics in a safe and interesting space to be political with a low likelihood of arrest.”

Yet this opportunistic approach to recruitment and strategy ends up aligning the ISO with liberals and union bureaucrats. In fact, “this approach leads the ISO to ally themselves with liberals and against radicals, not just occasionally but consistently and our habit.” Members should not go along with this but should instead ask: “Why aren’t the [ISO] organizers doing something more militant?” This is especially true because the ISO claims to adhere to the notion that it is necessary “to have an organization sufficiently large, experienced, sophisticated and rooted in the working-class in order to help shape and organize the vanguard as it is created and launch a vanguard party in the future.”

Yet the ISO recruitment strategy and political strategy generally tend to recruit “not the leading activists in struggles and, in fact, all too often the ISO finds itself at odds with other radical activists.” That is, those recruited to the ISO “are not the leaders in movement work,” but rather those whose inexperience makes them lacking in “the militancy and sophistication that comes with that experience.” Instead, we are told, the ISO focuses on recruiting “less sophisticated people away from other radical activists, who are often hostile toward the ISO’s practices” (with the ISO seeing the more sophisticated and radical leading activists as “anti-Leninists” or “sectarians”).

Yet these more sophisticated and militant activists, presumably, are hostile to the ISO because of its opposition to genuine revolutionary action. Instead it prefers the “symbolic protest” of “well-organized marches and rallies” which “have very little effect on the powers-that-be.” The author exclaims: “The ISO knows full well that far more will be required to win serious demands, and yet the world the ISO lives in seems to be ruled by symbolic protest and panel discussions.” Over and over, it takes up the cudgels for “less radical demands” and “against the movement taking on too radical a posture.” This is because “the ISO believes that the particular features of US politics require revolutionaries to build United Fronts with liberal Democratic politicians.” This results in the organization “positioning itself in the left-wing of liberal

and pacifist activism, rather than relating directly to the growing radical and revolutionary left.”

“The members are committed to revolutionary struggle,” the author acknowledges, “they just never consider the contradictions between their revolutionary theory and their moderate practice.” Even in movements where they play a leading role, “they generally do not spend much or even any time organizing direct actions or other non-symbolic protests.” Driven by its long-standing recruitment strategy and the opportunistic habits this has inculcated, the author concludes, that the ISO now faces the challenge of “whether it will be a force for radical action or merely continue as a machine dedicated to its own self-reproduction.”

What’s missing

One of the reasons the basic thrust of the critique seems off-target to me is personal – it doesn’t correspond to my own experience. Like any good debater, the author is quite willing to concede that there are exceptions to the generalizations he is making, but the fact remains that I am the kind of person the critique says the ISO generally doesn’t recruit, the kind of experienced activist who will be rubbed the wrong way by the ISO’s political practice – yet here I am. Of course, there are many experienced radical activists who have not joined, and I have worked very hard to persuade some of them to follow my glowing example. I think it is important to recruit such people, but nothing the author actually puts forward would persuade the sophisticated militants I know to join the ISO. Quite the opposite.

It also seems to me that there is only a rhetorical concern with the fundamental Marxist notion that the working class is the force that can bring about genuine change. At one point, it is true, the polemic warns that the ISO’s orientation “has a detrimental effect on working-class struggle.” Yet this rings hollow in the face of the author’s dismissive attitude to the Wisconsin workers’ occupation of the state capital (terming as a “starry-eyed assessment” the observation that this remarkable struggle showed that “workers can fight can back”). Noticeably absent, too, is any reference to the struggles of the Chicago teachers. Perhaps we are dealing here only with a poorly thought-through formulation and an inadvertent absent-mindedness. But such lapses certainly weaken the polemic.

And the fact remains that the critique’s author is awesomely vague (to put it politely) about what a *revolutionary strategy* would look like. There are repeated references to “radical action” and a “radical posture” and “radical demands” – but no clear definition of what makes something *radical*. At a couple of points one is given the impression that getting arrested is an indicator of something being “radical,” and there is the assertion that it is preferable to engage in “organizing direct actions or other non-symbolic protests.”

What is meant by *direct actions*? During the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, this referred to picket-lines and marches (as opposed to court cases or electoral politics), and especially to massive non-violent civil

disobedience that would often result in arrests, sometimes on a massive scale. More recently, it has been utilized – particularly in certain anarchist circles – to describe “property damage” (such as breaking windows) and street fighting with the police. Generally speaking, civil disobedience is no less symbolic than a legal mass action. If we are talking about actually bringing about a desired change, property damage and street fighting do not really go beyond the frontiers of “symbolic” protest.

Turning our attention back to the history of the civil rights movement, it is simply untrue that mass demonstrations had no effect on the powers-that-be. Considering such “symbolic” protests as the Montgomery bus boycott (and the mass rallies that accompanied it) or the Greensboro sit-ins (and the nationwide picket lines that came in their wake) or the 1963 March on Washington (incredibly well-organized in a manner not true of its 2013 counterpart), their cumulative effect was to cause the powers-that-be to say “yes” when they would have preferred to say “no” (to paraphrase Martin Luther King in his discussion of what constitutes *power*).

The question crying out for an answer is, precisely, how do we get from the oppressive *here* to the hoped-for *there* – what is the strategic pathway that will be moved along by a set of tactics, and what are those tactics? Effective tactics are not designed simply to enable a radical few to express their own frustrations and rage and dreams. Effective tactics serve to communicate the vision of a better future to more and more people in ways that make sense to them, and to draw more and more into mobilizations and struggles that actually have a capacity to bring genuine improvements in the short run, finally culminating in a more thoroughgoing liberation.

Revolutionary Marxist strategy

This is related to the strategic orientation advanced by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, and by many who followed in their wake – such leading personalities as Rosa Luxemburg, V. I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, and so many others. (The strategic orientation they represented, briefly sketched below, is presented at greater length in my book *From Marx to Gramsci*, which provides plenty of detailed reference notes and documents.)

Class struggle is the touchstone for us. Since the rise of civilization, social-economic systems have involved powerful minorities enriched by the exploitation of laboring majorities. But sometimes the oppressed laborers fight back and demand a better life – more food, genuine community, freedom – with their exploiters striving to keep them in their place. Capitalism’s distinctive economic expansionism naturally transforms a majority of the people into workers, who can make a living only through selling their ability to work (labor-power) for payment from the capitalist employer, but whose labor creates the actual wealth that makes society possible and whose life-activity allows for the functioning of society.

Marxists naturally see this working class as being the key to creating a socialist future. The working-class majority must organize to make it so: build large, inclusive trade unions for better wages and working conditions; build powerful social movements to bring changes for the better (reforms); build political power of the working-class majority “to win the battle of democracy” and bring about a transition from capitalism to socialism. The revolutionary Marxist relies on the developing consciousness and power of a mass working-class base. To struggle successfully for reforms can help pave the way for mass socialist consciousness and a socialist future. The key is to build social movements and struggles that are capable of making sense to, and drawing in, more and more of those who are part of our multi-faceted working class.

Many sincere liberals are inclined to rely on “lesser-evil” politicians rather than on the pressure of mass action because they don’t have confidence in the activist potential of the working class.

In a different way, some of the more militant activists in the anti-capitalist movement seem to share this lack of confidence in the potential of the working-class majority. Sometimes scoffing at what they dismiss as “the numbers game,” they reject building mass struggles of working people. Instead they are inclined to engage in their own militant actions in ways that preclude broader participation. Sometimes such actions confuse or alienate broad sectors of the working-class majority.

Such actions on the part of relatively small groups are different from militant actions, nonviolent civil disobedience, etc. that are engaged in by large numbers of working people or that are organically connected to broad struggles involving representative strata of the population. But to substitute for such mass action one’s own militant actions (involving, for example, property damage, street fighting, etc.) not only makes activists vulnerable to victimization by the authorities but can also cut across the need, and the possibility, of effectively reaching out to, and drawing into the struggle, those whose numbers can actually help to win the struggle.

I believe that potentialities exist in the United States that in the foreseeable future could crystallize into a mass socialist

movement. This definitely requires the kind of *united front* that the critic of the ISO is so critical of – which seeks to draw together massive numbers into broad actions, under certain circumstances allowing for a Democrat (sometimes a Republican) to speak. The key is to build social movements and struggles that are politically independent of any pro-capitalist politicians. While some members of such movements will, in fact, support such politicians, the movement as a whole will need to remain independent in order to remain effective in being able to pressure all politicians.

There is a broad array of forces that could be drawn into the struggle: working-class Democrats, Republicans and independents who want a fight-back alternative to capitalist austerity measures (whether sponsored by Republicans or Democrats), radicalizing trade unionists, Green Party supporters, veterans of the Occupy struggles, assorted left-wing groups, activists against various forms of racism and bigotry who see links between human rights and economic justice, people who are tired of spending on militarism and military adventures that draw resources away from human needs, and others who are frustrated and furious over economic injustices that are coming down on them. Given the actualities of capitalism and the dynamics of the struggle, Marxists conclude with Rosa Luxemburg that mass struggle for social reforms is the means for bringing socialist revolution.

The strategic orientation of the ISO does not flow from some flawed recruitment strategy but from the fundamentals of revolutionary Marxism. It is always possible, of course, that new realities require major changes in what has traditionally been advanced by revolutionary Marxists. But the author of “A Critique of the International Socialist Organization” is not arguing that the strategy associated with the Marxist tradition must be superseded by something better. If he believes this to be the case, of course, it would be helpful for him to say that. In any event, it will be important for this comrade – and for all of us – to reach for greater clarity and seriousness as we wrestle with the question of how to most effectively advance our strategic approach for a socialist future.

Paul L., Pittsburgh
