

Pre-convention Bulletin #4 / November 18, 2013

for members only

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Inside This Bulletin

This is the fourth 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 a day off on that Monday 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 months in order to ensure the fullest and most democratic debate possible. Branches should hold discussions of documents and debates as necessary between now and the convention date.

All members who are in good standing are invited to contribute documents and/or resolutions to the pre-convention discussion bulletins. We will produce as many bulletins as necessary. 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.**

Please submit your documents and/or resolutions to bulletin@internationalsocialist.org and cc Sharon at the national office (sharon@internationalsocialist.org) if you plan to submit a document and/or resolution, so we can plan bulletin production. Thanks.

Documents

Why have we stagnated?

Instead of waiting to develop a fully formed analysis and thesis, I have decided to make this early contribution in order to stimulate feedback and debate. This document is a collection of my reflections on our recent experience and some initial guesses at where our difficulties come from. It does not rise to a comprehensive analysis that begins with the world and flows to organization conclusions. In fact, I don't have organizational recommendations right now. I expect to debate, learn, and alter my ideas during the pre-convention discussion, and I hope to develop organizational recommendations based on this collective process.

We have a problem

Frustration and disorientation are prevalent throughout the ISO right now and have been for a few years. There are multiple symptoms - the persistent difficulties maintaining SW tablins or a host of other routines (treasury, ISR, publicity); the need to repeatedly push for regular public meetings, many of which aren't all that "public"; the greater number and length of extended breaks or leaves taken by experienced members (particularly over summer). Much of our leadership spends much of its time propping up basic aspects of branch activity or trying to win frustrated members back to activity. These are the signs of malaise, not of vitality.

I'll add a general sense I have - that after a decade plus working alongside very dedicated and smart people, I don't think we're any more politically relevant in the Bay Area than we were when I started. I can't tell that my work week-in week-out is influencing or reaching meaningfully more people or making a larger impact. We may be slightly bigger or smaller numerically, and we're likely savvier, but we just don't seem any more significant than we used to be. Our neighborhood branches struggle to maintain political momentum, and our campus branches and bases come into and out of existence every few years. At a certain point, one grows tired of affirming "qualitative" and "internal" growth. And this isn't just a question of membership size – it's our ability to lead others, shape struggles, compete for ideas, influence the world – all the things we must actually do successfully in order to lay the groundwork for a political party.

It should go without saying that we've played an important role in a host of necessary and inspiring fights and campaigns over the last decade, and that we wish we could've been part of even more. We have consistently and openly tried to win people to socialist politics and organization. But all of that experience and effort has not turned us into a meaningfully more effective organization. The publications we produce and support (SW, ISR, Haymarket Books) definitely have a broader hearing, but we've struggled to parlay that into a more solid organization.

More to the point, we believed that the onset of the Great Recession opened up a new era of radicalization

in which we would have greater prospects for influencing struggle and strengthening our organization. In fact, many of us even felt that this moment would be a key practical test of our ability to make our politics and organization relevant. On the whole, I do not believe that we have risen to the political moment, and neither has the rest of the left.

What are we doing?

It has never been more clear to me that perspectives are as important to the health of a revolutionary organization as anything else. The National Committee Meeting Report emphasizes the importance of winning people around us to a Marxist worldview through sustained engagement. Yes, we must win people to Marxism – but what are we recruiting them to? Where are we steering this ship that we’re asking people to climb aboard, and are we heading in the direction of challenging and fruitful experiences or in the direction of further frustrations and the doldrums?

Ahmed Shawki’s presentation of “Perspectives for the Left” at Socialism 2013 was fantastic, particularly for its bluntness and openness. He related the reflection of a comrade whose paper once ran a headline that read “Capitalism Crumbling.” Instead, the comrade said, “WE crumbled!” Ahmed addressed the “glass ceiling” problem – that we can’t seem to grow beyond a certain size in any of the major metropolitan areas, even after years or decades of continuous presence. This is an important observation.

Reflecting upon our experience since the onset of the Great Recession – we identified that the recession marked the entry of world capitalism into a protracted crisis, a period of relative stagnation, recurrent and mutating slumps, and brief anemic recoveries. I think all of that is true, and that we’ve adjusted our analysis along the way. I also think that protracted crisis, stagnation, and brief anemic recoveries could describe the organized left and ourselves with some accuracy. I don’t think that we’re on the verge of crumbling or collapsing, but I think we’re heading in the direction of further stagnation and even decline. And I do not think that two of the major recommendations of the National Committee – reestablishing routines for the print Socialist Worker and honing our understanding of Marxism – are key next steps for getting our bearings. (The emphasis on an open and serious pre-convention discussion is right on though.)

Something’s wrong with the orientation and perspectives that we’ve come up with for the past few or several years. I’m not interested in a scriptural debate, so I don’t intend to point to this or that sentence or paragraph from prior documents. I think I can provide good-faith descriptions of our prior assessments and plans where needed, and I’m sure comrades will correct the pieces that I distort or misremember.

Where are we?

We should start with the fact that the objective situation is tough and that the left everywhere is having a hard time. Practically no organization or model has succeeded as a consistent challenge to the neoliberal order, and the most inspiring efforts in Greece and Egypt have stalled and been savagely turned back, respectively. The US working class is disorganized and reeling under blow after blow of austerity. The picture is defeat and flaming wreckage all across the front line, and, in Richard Seymour’s words, pointing to the example of “the CTU will not save us, comrades.” The American capitalist class has done pretty well under Obama’s leadership, and profitability is at record levels (though they’re not out of the woods of the Great Recession just yet).

So yes, the world is not making it particularly easy to build a revolutionary socialist organization at the moment (and perhaps for quite a while now). That also makes it more likely that we’re getting parts of our perspective and orientation wrong. We cannot allow reference to the objective conditions to become a block to self-evaluation, self-criticism, and change. And on the one hand, to say that objective conditions have been extremely difficult for the past five years does not square with our sense that the onset of the Great Recession would open a new era of radicalization that would allow us to operate more effectively and grow. Nor does it square with the advances in struggle in the Arab Spring and Occupy. Nor does it square with the assertion that there is a “continuing radicalization” going on right now.

The movements and struggles we’ve been a part of have been volatile, rising and falling, which is true – but

we've always said that one of the key roles of revolutionary socialist organization is to build some political and human continuity between the crests and valleys of movements, and I don't think we've made much progress on that front either. Occupy is the clearest example – the largest outburst of protest activity in the US against the corporate elites, in the midst of the Great Recession, yet we don't seem to have gained much strength from it.

I think it's a fair characterization of our organizational mindset to say that we've expected to be able to grow meaningfully (not double or triple, but more than a person or two here or there) every year for the past decade. And after years of saying we can grow and here's how, we have to look around and say "something's not working." (I have been part of the leadership of the organization at various levels, so I take my share of the accountability for this.) One place to start in trying to unpack some of our problems is to look at clear examples of what we have gotten wrong and see if taken together they reveal anything.

Perpetual radicalization?

We have consistently misestimated consciousness and radicalization. We have repeatedly pointed to the gap between consciousness and organization, which is right. We should consider the gap that exists between anger/discontent/despair and political or class-consciousness. In 2008, Sharon Smith (and other people too) argued that the enthusiasm for and election of Barack Obama reflected a surge in class-consciousness, which aligned nicely with the Republic Windows and Doors sit-down strike. There was a huge uptick in people coming to ISO events, particular West Coast Socialism in 2009. We were certainly hoping for a surge in class-consciousness. We (myself included) repeatedly argued that we should not be too angular in our critique of Obama because we needed to connect with people who were enthusiastic about him but who would radicalize in the struggles to come.

Subsequently, it's been very hard to see this surge of class-consciousness – which means something very specific in Marxist terms. Yes, working class people took to the streets in Wisconsin, then promptly took to the ballot boxes – and then went down without much of a fight at all in neighboring states that were once union strongholds. Occupy Wall Street was probably the key political event in the US since 2007, and it was beaten off of the streets by police violence, so it's harder to tell where that experience has left people – though the 99% vs. 1% dichotomy is part of the mainstream now.

But we do know that the story of consciousness is rather mixed. In opinion polls, Democrat-leaning voters have supported Obama on the drone strikes and the NSA spying scandal. If Obama can shift attitudes on imperialism ("foreign policy"), we should admit that he can shift attitudes on austerity ("domestic policy"), particularly in the context of the scapegoating of slightly-better-off sections of the working class, and racist stereotyping and attacks on social welfare programs. Obama intends to set the terms of the "grand bargain" that will cut key entitlement programs, and to make that discussion reasonable and mainstream.

I would guess that if the presidential election were held today, Hillary Clinton would win. Part of this is due to the ongoing demographic shifts in the electorate that will likely continue to undermine the Republican Party. Another part is that the American capitalist class is pretty happy with the Democrats right now. But it's also true that the Democrats have restored some of their credibility with the American electorate, and the two-party shell game seems to be working just fine right now. The current recovery/stabilization also has an impact on consciousness, for a few reasons: the ruling class feels emboldened; the system appears to be working again; the stabilization was largely based on beating down the living standards and expectations of the working class, and those defeats and the establishment of the "new normal" can blunt or deflate political consciousness.

The recent Gallup poll demonstrating record support for a 3rd party is an important counterpoint to this picture (I will hope that it's not just a temporary spike in the midst of the shutdown). But I think overall it remains the case that the "surge in class consciousness" has either rapidly ebbed, gone underground, or it was something else altogether to begin with.

Hoping against hope?

I think we've been expecting (really hoping for) the outbreak of a political movement that will transform ambient politics and make it much easier for us to lead struggles and to build our organization. Part of this expectation rests on a misestimation that projects anger/despair/discontent into political or class-consciousness. This expectation explains why we've had the habit of describing growing struggles as the "new X movement" and pointing to their potentially transformative impact, even though that hasn't played out in almost any case, perhaps with the exception of Occupy.

Occupy has almost certainly left behind thousands of people who will know where to go and how to set up spaces for public assembly and protest the next time mass struggle emerges. Short of Occupy and LGBT equality activism, though, I don't think any one of the recent "new movements" have left behind a political residue (in terms of activists or radical organizations) that will allow the next phase of struggle to start on a higher level.

I think we've expected that large liberal organizations (e.g., the NAACP) would move into activity in reaction to the crisis and in the political opening provided by a Democratic president. This has not been the case. We have in fact seen liberal organizations play up the merits of Obamacare, acquiesce as Obama puts Medicare and Social Security on the chopping block, praise Obama's warmongering in Syria, attack Cornel West and Tavis Smiley for discussing poverty, defuse the anger at the Zimmerman verdict, and beat Occupy off the streets (the liberal mayors).

We've also expected union leaderships to be compelled to fight. They were dragged into action around Wisconsin, but they barely even tried in neighboring states. The UAW meekly accepted terms that make union workers lower-paid than their non-union counterparts. Teacher's unions – the largest and last bastion of unionism – are being routed, and the AFT leadership is proudly cooperating in some of the most destructive initiatives across the country.

I don't think we should write off all of these forces for the rest of history. But I think an important part of our political outlook has been geared towards anticipating the next outbreak in mass struggle, and that these players may be leading elements in that next outbreak. We've told ourselves – "don't underestimate the ability of the Democrats to shift" to a more populist stance; or that "even a conservative bureaucrat like John L. Lewis could lead a shift in labor." While no doubt true in the abstract, these historical analogies haven't lined up with our lived reality for a good while now. Perhaps all of this is a hangover from the "1930s in slow motion" perspective of the British SWP (which we shared and subsequently broke with).

Don't we always have to be ready for the next outbreak of struggle?

There is actually a cost to "always being prepared" for the next big thing that may transform politics and us. It means that community branches (like the SF Mission branch) can go from quarter to quarter, year to year, without substantially deepening our roots in the city, and we can continue to hope to some day overcome this through an external transformative moment. What if, instead of going from year to year putting many (if not most) of our eggs into the "newest movement" basket, we had said ten years ago that "if we want to be politically relevant and rooted in SF, we have to relate to the Latino working class." What would that political practice have looked like? Would we still be a ragtag bunch of radicals today, or would we be something closer to the organization we aspire to be?

I am not arguing that this would have worked. It would have been extremely hard work considering our language limitations and the displacement, deportation, and intimidation of Latino workers. All I am arguing is that "being prepared for the next outbreak of struggle" is not the only political posture that we can take, and that that outlook may actually enable us to overlook serious weaknesses that demand remedying.

I am not arguing that we chase one movement to the next looking for recruits – that's false.

Comrades in the Bay Area have argued that I am falsely counterposing our implantation strategy to being prepared for the next outbreak of struggle, and that implantation is precisely how we should prepare for the next outbreak of struggle. I am not arguing that we have been sitting on our hands waiting for the world to

change – that's false. I am not arguing that none of our work has been consistent and strategic – for example, the work of our union comrades has been better structured for sinking political roots and gaining influence, and our comrades have worked very hard for that influence. I am arguing that much of our work has not been so consistent. Branch divisions of labor shift frequently from one emerging struggle to the next – the SF Mission branch has had more than its fair share of permutations of movement fractions. And this practice hasn't strengthened our “implantation;” it has left us rather less rooted than we need to be, and we have found ourselves somewhat rudderless on more than one occasion. Here I'll ask an open question: what if we thought of implantation less in terms of this or that struggle, and more in terms of social layers and communities? How would that change our ability to sink political roots? (Brian C.'s contribution to Internal Bulletin #2 is a great example of thinking hard about our community branch work.)

What should we do?

Is there any use in being more sober (pessimism/optimism isn't a particularly clarifying framework to me)? Doesn't it carry the risk of downplaying opportunities? I believe that what we've actually experienced is the fallout of misestimating far too many political moments in the opposite direction. We do ourselves no good if we try too hard to connect the dots between the Obama election night energy, Wisconsin, Egypt, Occupy, CTU, Quebec, Trayvon Martin, OUR Walmart, Fight for 15, and convince ourselves that consciousness and radicalization is deepening or pulsing from one struggle to the next (with some lulls). Yes, we see the connections, and yes, people within these struggles actively see them as reference points. But I do not think that the story of the last five years is a meandering arc of struggle, accumulating some strength and wisdom along the way. We are much better served, and much more effective, if we have an accurate view of the battlefield. The big picture of the class struggle is defeats and roll back all along the line, despair and some desertion. Here and there, somewhat at random, are pockets of people holding out and fighting back, heroically. Let's start from there.

Secondly, let's start by figuring out what methods and assumptions have led us to a certain stagnation over the last several years.

As I stated at the outset, I have no organizational recommendations yet. Through critique, feedback, and engagement with the pre-convention discussion, I hope to determine what parts of these initial thoughts are valid and how to locate them in a fuller understanding and analysis of the world. And on that basis I hope to contribute some organizational recommendations.

Sid Patel, SF

Some thoughts on the Socialist Outpost response

As comrades of the Chicago ISO are aware, an open letter to the ISO has been published and signed by seven former members of the Chicago ISO district, raising many criticisms and serious accusations about our current and past practice. Much of the letter's critique is aimed at "the highest ranks of the ISO's leadership" (we assume this refers to the ISO's elected national steering committee) but also contains points that the Chicago district committee would like to briefly address.

It is understandable, given the departure of these comrades from the organization (between two-four years ago respectively) that they would not be fully aware of the day-to-day organizing we presently engage in, nor the full content of our internal discussions and assessments. It is difficult to engage in comradely debate around vague or unsubstantiated accusations, so in an effort to move forward, we will attempt to avoid such methods. We will intentionally limit our response to the issues directly relevant to the political culture in the Chicago district of the ISO, and refer comrades to the response published in Socialist Worker for the broader issues not covered here.

On the matter of the comrades departure from the ISO, it is important to note that all signers of the letter left the group on their own, none was expelled or “forced out” and all would have been welcomed back into the organization as full members of the Chicago district if they had requested, with the rights and

responsibilities that would entail. We were saddened, (as we always are when comrades of longer or shorter standing make a personal decision to leave the group), when informed of their decisions to end active participation in the ISO but respected their decisions and maintained what we believed to be on good terms with all of them.

We were therefore surprised to read in their letter that they felt they were "treated in an uncomradely or undemocratic manner". The signers of the letter have been welcomed at various Chicago and national ISO events and have participated, at times, alongside us in organizing efforts in a collaborative and productive fashion. For example, Adam T. was invited and accepted the invitation to speak at the Socialism 2013 conference. . When Adam T. left Chicago and moved to Carbondale, Illinois, he invited members of the national leadership of the ISO as public speakers on the campus. It is difficult to believe that any of this would have been possible if he had been either driven from the organization or politically shunned into silence.

The charge of uncomradely and undemocratic behavior from Loretta C. is even more surprising. For the last three years, ISO members, including a member of the national leadership, have made up a substantial part of the core of a small solidarity committee to defend Loretta against the vicious attacks of the administration at Northeastern Illinois University. As part of the campaign, the International Socialist Review magazine and Socialist Worker ran an appeal letter in defense of Loretta (<http://socialistworker.org/2012/04/09/appeal-for-loretta-capeheart>) along with numerous articles, including a transcription of her speech at a movement forum. In the last several years Loretta has even invited comrades to speak at events on her campus, as recently as this past August. That Loretta would charge comrades of treating her with anything but the utmost respect and admiration is truly surprising.

Many of us were surprised and dismayed by Hector C.'s decision to leave the group. It coincided with the resurgence of the immigrant rights movement in Chicago that literally brought out hundreds of thousands of Latinos into the streets of the city. We needed and wanted Hector's leadership and comrades made attempts to convince him to return to active life in the ISO. He declined but comrades still reached out to Hector to continue his work on the *Obrero Socialista* and more recently encouraged his participation in the Chicago Occupy Labor Committee.

We were also surprised at Rosanna's charge of being forced out or subjected to uncomradely or undemocratic behavior. Comrades tried very hard to involve Rosanna in the district and for reasons that were described as having to do with her schedule it just didn't happen. But most comrades assumed we were on good terms because Rosanna often publicized the productions of her theater company on district list serves and offered tickets to any comrade interested as recently as this past May and June.

To be clear, there were some sharp disagreements with some of the former members including Bob Q, Sophie H. and Saman S., about the practices, but not the politics, of the ISO. Bob Q. disagreed with aspects of the district's perspective including our areas of work. At one point he was asked to write a document detailing the nature of his disagreement and his alternative perspective. He stopped attending meetings because of a dispute over this issue. Even though Bob Q. had long stopped attending meetings, he only canceled his dues this past September. So it is very surprising, again, to then see him describe his exit from the ISO as being forced out over a political disagreement.

Sophie and Saman were respected comrades in Chicago but they also regularly expressed frustration with new and veteran members of the various branches they were in. We assume that this is the reference the Socialist Outpost statement alludes to when it claim that the authors themselves have engaged in "uncomradely and undemocratic" practices in the past. Sophie and Saman were members at large in their own district because of their difficulties in collaborating with comrades who had not attained their level of political development, and if an 'uncomradely and undemocratic' climate existed in Chicago they were, in fact, central figures in bringing it into being.

It is also important to note that many of the signatories of the letter were leaders of the Chicago ISO which is why it is so disappointing to see them abdicate any and all responsibility for the "culture" of the ISO when they were leading the district. They passively blame the ISO national leadership for the problems

they experienced in the Chicago district with no real assessment of their role as leaders and thus people directly involved in shaping the atmosphere we were organizing within.

Despite these conflicts many of us have great respect, admiration and even affection for these former comrades. Because they have never expressed any political differences with the politics and principles of the ISO while at the same time professing loyalty to the ISO, we do not understand why they are outside of the organization.

These details are important not to settle some score or “expose” anyone, but the entire premise of the Socialist Outpost document is based on a falsehood—that the former members were “forced out” over political differences and thus they must intervene from without because there is no room for dissent within the ISO. We are disheartened by this intervention into our organization; not because we are afraid of debate with the politics and practice of the ISO, but because this debate has been initiated on a duplicitous premise.

Since it is not clear what “undemocratic” practices the comrades are referring to, we can only reiterate the principles we always strive toward regarding our internal organizational life, while recognizing full-well the potential fallibility of any individual and of our organization collectively. We always work to maintain the highest possible level of debate and airing of differences regarding our perspectives and practices, and encourage these discussions to make their way to the formal spaces created to collectively discuss these issues. Proposals or assessments of our work and perspectives, whether in agreement with the formal leadership or not, can, and should, be raised year round in the branch and district meetings, in our internal bulletin, the pages of Socialist Worker, and especially during our preconvention period and at the convention itself. We sincerely hope that more of our members (and in the case of SW, non-members as well) will continue to share relevant information and debate with each other in these venues. It is from these exchanges that we make democratic decisions on action and perspectives, and attempt to carry them out collectively.

Our assessment is that we are deliberate in our attempts to facilitate democratic decisions and debate within the district, but it is not easy, and mistakes are sometimes made, improvements can always be made, and assessments and adjustments must be constantly carried out. A comradely culture of debate and discussion is something one does not learn outside, but only inside, the framework of building a revolutionary organization attempting to influence struggle and spread socialist ideas. We have seen a growth in our ability to debate amongst ourselves as our district has grown politically.

We accept that to make an argument, in a formal setting, opens us up to being argued with, refuted, and challenged. We accept that at times, any member, fraction, or leadership body may raise a proposal and not win a majority vote. We take this as a given, and do not, as a matter of course, seek to intimidate or isolate holders of minority positions. It is true that debates or arguments can sometimes become polarized and overheated—not because the ISO has a culture that stifles debate and inquiry, but because comrades believe that their ideas and perspective matter and they are motivated to convince others. It is also the case that we are an organization of human beings and are prone to human shortcomings including making a bad argument, becoming defensive, or even being wrong.

Recent examples of comradely debates within the Chicago district are numerous and varied—from what to emphasize during the CTU strike to what kind of fractions we should establish and how they should function, to what our posture should be toward the upcoming municipal elections in Chicago—and we continue to welcome more input from all comrades on questions big and small as we engage in our preconvention discussion period.

It will come as no surprise to any member of the ISO that the severe crisis inside the International Socialist Tendency, as well as that of the revolutionary left more broadly, has raised many questions for the ISO that we have been attempting to grapple with for some time. We feel well equipped to carry out these discussions internally, and though we appreciate the concern of ex-comrades, we do not think publishing a letter with vague and unsubstantiated charges that questions the democratic culture of the ISO or equates our practice with that of the British SWP is either helpful or constructive. The letter insinuates that we in

the ISO cannot think critically for ourselves because our national leadership will not allow it. This passive, if not clueless caricature of an approach to politics described by the ex-members will seem completely foreign to most members of our district. The ex-members presume that they must intervene in our organization to tell us how we should organize as well as how to assess the political dynamics of the current period—as if those issues are not already being discussed and dissected among members of the group. This isn't to say that we have it all figured out and that we don't make mistakes. We have made several mistakes and will continue to do so because that is the price of the ticket for engaging in revolutionary politics in the US. We try to minimize those mistakes with a vigorous regime of reporting on and assessing our political work to constantly readjust our local perspectives and practices for the never-ending challenges that face revolutionaries today.

It is very easy to offer answers and prescriptions when you are not actually engaged in the very difficult project of trying to build an organization under the complex conditions we face today. We have enough humility to know we don't have all of the answers, but we remain committed to and active in the messy project of building a revolutionary organization in the center of global capitalism.

Current and former members of the Chicago District Committee: brian b., Becca B., Rachel C., Mark H., Eric K., Dennis K., John M., Melissa R., Kirstin R., Keeanga T.

Theory and practice in the ISO: Critical notes on a public polemic

One of the best things a political activist can do, if things seem not to be working out well in the revolutionary struggle, is to contribute to a thinking-and-discussion process about what is happening and why, with a goal of understanding and overcoming problems. There are no guarantees that the initial analysis and solutions will be adequate, but the effort is to be welcomed, in my opinion, especially if offered from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism. Such an effort is attempted by six comrades who recently left the International Socialist Organization, in “Theory and Practice of Idealism in Trotskyism and the ISO,” published in the on-line journal *Counter-Punch* (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/11/08/theory-and-practice-of-idealism-in-trotskyism-and-the-iso/>).

A bitterness animates what the six comrades say, and this seems to cut them off from the ISO for the foreseeable future. Perhaps if they join together with other like-minded activists to test out their ideas, they can accumulate useful experience enabling them, us, and others to learn something useful. Perhaps we will re-unify in a larger organization “down the road a piece.”

Their stated goal is “to take a sober and critical look at both of the state of our [revolutionary socialist] project and the organizations attempting to lead such a project,” with the purpose of helping to overcome “an overall crisis in the revolutionary socialist left.” I agree that there is such a crisis, and that the ISO is not immune from it.

But the polemic is disappointing in more than one way. Of all the organizations in the United States, they only look at the ISO, and also – for all their emphasis on the need for a “materialist” approach – they give minimal attention to the context within which the ISO functions. This undercuts their ability to offer a useful analysis of what's what. Another limitation involves the employment of theoretical categories – materialist, idealist, class struggle, Marxism, etc. – whose meaning is assumed rather than clearly presented, giving the polemic an appearance of greater political weight than is actually there.

What the Comrades See as Problems and Solutions

This hardly means that what they write should be shrugged off. As the six comrades note, they are part of what appears to be a political trend of people who have recently left the ISO – they themselves are from San Francisco, there is another grouping from Chicago, there appear to be others from elsewhere. This very fact raises questions for our organization. Despite differences, similar criticisms are voiced by all.

1. The ISO has not experienced significant numerical growth.
2. The ISO has been opportunistically “tailing” liberals and labor bureaucrats.
3. The ISO has time and time again over-estimated radicalization in the popular consciousness and radical potential in one or another struggle that it has chased after – only to be disappointed time and time again.

The first point is basically on-target, I think, and definitely merits serious and critical discussion (one aspect of this is addressed in my “Concerns for the Future of the ISO” *Pre-Convention Discussion Bulletin #2*). On the other hand, I think some of what the six comrades put forward gets in the way of a clear understanding of this particular problem.

I think their second point is definitely *not* on-target, and I have offered my thinking on that in my contribution to *Pre-Convention Discussion Bulletin #2*, “Revolutionary Strategy and the ISO.”

The third point seems problematical to me, at least in the way the six comrades argue it. That is what I want to address that in this contribution. It intertwines with two other features in the comrades’ polemic – a surprisingly flat analysis of class struggle and radicalizing consciousness, and a sweeping condemnation of the Trotskyist tradition as being irredeemably infected with theoretical “idealism.”

The six comrades conclude with “organizational conclusions for the ISO” (which might make more sense if the comrades had remained in the ISO to argue for them): 1. *the right to form permanent factions*; 2. *elected District Organizers*; 3. *all debates to be aired in public in the Socialist Worker, instead of using “internal bulletins”*; 4. *end the slate system for electing the Steering Committee*; 5. *elect a new Steering Committee (because the six comrades deem the current members as “unfit to lead”)*.

Setting aside the highly-charged and destructively-articulated point #5, it seems to me that points #2 and #4 might contribute to a strengthening of the ISO, while points #1 and #3 might contribute to a weakening of the ISO. But I fail to see how any of these “organizational conclusions” flow naturally from the problems the six discuss in most of their polemic. Perhaps these will be questions to address further elsewhere, but here I will focus my comments on the third aspect of the comrades’ critique, having to do with what Trotskyism is and how to use Marxism in making sense of U.S. realities. Before moving on to that, however, there is a final point I want to make about the specific “organizational conclusions.”

I do not know these comrades, though I am impressed with their self-descriptions. It seems to me that they have made contributions to the revolutionary movement and that they have more contributions to make in the future. Based on what they say and how they say it, however, I must confess that I do not have confidence in their judgment on how to build a durable revolutionary organization. In part, this is related to what seems to me to be their relative lack of appreciation for the achievement that is represented by the existence of the ISO as a revolutionary socialist organization of 1000 members, an even larger periphery, and a number of outstanding resources that it has helped to sustain over a significant period of time.

The fact that the ISO is the most substantial socialist organization in the United States is a sad commentary on the incredibly weak and shredded condition of the U.S. Left. We definitely need something much bigger and much stronger than the ISO – and one of the great strengths of the ISO is that this very fact is recognized by our organization. We are committed to being part of a process, which will necessarily involve other people and groups, crystallizing into something approximating the mass socialist organization we need.

At the same time, all that we have been building up is too valuable to risk undermining or fragmenting. But these critical comrades *seem* inclined toward tearing apart the ISO in order to rid it of leadership comrades they deem guilty of “ongoing hostility to criticism” and of “behind-the-back slander and outright lies.” Along with this, I am concerned that some of their proposed organizational and strategic solutions, based on speculation more than practical experience, could inadvertently be destructive as well.

“Idealism” vs. Marxism

The centerpiece of the six comrades' polemic, at least in the beginning of what they write, is the Original Sin of Trotskyism. They tell us that "theoretical errors lead to ongoing mistakes in practical work," and that "the root of the problems in the Trotskyist tradition are to be found in an idealism that Trotsky introduced into Marxism."

They quote Trotsky in order to clinch their argument: "We work with the most correct and powerful ideas in the world, with inadequate numerical forces and material means," he wrote to James P. Cannon. "But correct ideas, in the long run, always conquer and make available for themselves the necessary material means and forces." The six tag this "an idealist conception of both how a party relates to the class and how ideas develop within the class."

But there were two other "idealist" culprits who wrote that Communists (no more numerous in 1848 than were Trotskyists ninety years later) "are on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement." Marx and Engels, like Trotsky, believed that by *sharing such ideas* they could advance their aims: "formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat." Does this mean that Marx and Engels were really "idealists"? They didn't think so, going on to explain (as Trotsky was also inclined to do) that Communists "merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes."

Under the spell of their presumed "discovery" of Trotskyism's Original Sin, the critics assure us that "this idealism finds its clearest expression in Trotsky's 'The Transitional Program' in 1938." They offer us a fragment from something they tell us is the *Transitional Program* in order to make their point – although the quote is not from that document, but instead is wrenched out of the transcript of a discussion between Trotsky and his comrades as they were developing the *Transitional Program*. Someone asks: "*Isn't the ideology of the workers a part of the objective factors?*" *Trotsky's response is worth considering more fully than the six comrades seem to have patience for. In this longer quote I have placed the fragment they utilize in bold print:*

For us as a small minority this whole thing is objective including the mood of the workers. But we must analyze and classify those elements of the objective situation which can be changed by our paper and those which cannot be changed. That is why we say that the program is adapted to the fundamental stable elements of the objective situation and the task is to adapt the mentality of the masses to those objective factors. **To adapt the mentality is a pedagogical task. We must be patient, etc. The crisis of society is given as the base of our activity. The mentality is the political arena of our activity. We must change it. We must give a scientific explanation of society, and clearly explain it to the masses. That is the difference between Marxism and reformism.**

The reformists have a good smell for what the audience wants as Norman Thomas [a prominent Socialist Party moderate] – he gives them that. But that is not serious revolutionary activity. We must have the courage to be unpopular, to say "you are fools," "you are stupid," "they betray you," and every once in a while with a scandal launch our ideas with passion. It is necessary to shake the worker from time to time, to explain, and then shake him again – that all belongs to the art of propaganda. But it must be scientific, not bent to the moods of the masses. We are the most realistic people because we reckon with facts which cannot be changed by the eloquence of Norman Thomas. If we win immediate success we swim with the current of the masses and that current is the revolution.

What Trotsky has to say here is far more complex and interesting than the six critics allow. What's more, I think this is Marxism, not "idealism." Of course, Trotsky should by no means be above critical scrutiny, and the same goes for Lenin, Luxemburg, Marx and Engels. But for me, the nature of the attack on

Trotsky's ideas raises a question about the quality of the comrades' own Marxism. This question is sharpened when I see how they discuss the class struggle in the United States in our own time.

Radicalization and Class Struggle

One reason that I joined the ISO is because I am convinced we are in a long-term period (with ups and downs) of capitalist crisis and of radicalization within the working class that opens up possibilities for organizing a mass socialist movement.

The six comrades seem to question this, perhaps seeing it as an "idealist" illusion. They explain: "Historically, class consciousness has been measured by the unionization rate among workers, the total number of days workers have been on strike, the character of those strikes (economic or political), the size of the revolutionary organization within the class, and the breadth and depth of the implantation of that organization (generally measured through membership size, the class character of the organization, and paper circulation)."

This is, of course, true of the first half of the twentieth century. Even then, however, viewing things in this manner tends to skew things toward the industrial work place and the trade unions. Even back then, the point that my Socialist Workers Party mentor George Breitman made in 1970 was crucially important:

The radicalization of the worker can begin off the job as well as on. It can begin from the fact that the worker is a woman as well as a man; that the worker is Black or Chicano or a member of some other oppressed minority as well as white; that a worker is a father or mother whose son can be drafted [to fight in Vietnam]; that the worker is young as well as middle-aged or about to retire. If we grasp the fact that the working class is stratified and divided in many ways – the capitalists prefer it that way – then we will be better able to understand how the radicalization will develop among workers and how to intervene more effectively. Those who haven't already learned important lessons from the [1960s] radicalization of oppressed minorities, youth and women had better hurry up and learn them, because most of the people involved in these radicalizations are workers or come from working-class families.

Breitman's insight has no less relevance now. The polls showing a pronounced leftward tilt in the thinking of so many people in our society have been dovetailing with my own observations and experiences in Pittsburgh – whether in regard to the organized labor movement or in regard to the G-20 protests, the Occupy movement, and more. The need to understand class struggle in ways that are not constrained by the parameters of workplace and trade union is further highlighted by such valuable works as *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* by Paul Mason, *Beyond Capitalism? The Future of Radical Politics* by Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy, and *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* by David Harvey.

This certainly does not mean that we are in a period of never-faltering class-consciousness and uninterrupted proletarian insurgency. The realities of consciousness and struggle involve complex, contradictory, uneven ebbs and flows. Activists like ourselves are part of the chemistry, and it is crucial that we play the role that must be played if the revolutionary potential is to be realized. Over the past few years, as these developments have been unfolding, the leadership of the ISO has been emphasizing – over and over again – the exciting patterns and potentialities of our time. The six critics, disappointed that it all has not turned out as they hoped, are able to smash optimistic bits and pieces out of several years' worth of analyses and resolutions, stringing the fragments together like colored beads in garish necklaces that presumably prove how "unfit" that leadership really is. Far be it from me to suggest that anyone, even the ISO leadership, is perfect. Yet it seems to me that a greater sense of perspective than is provided by the six critical comrades can be found in what Rosa Luxemburg wrote from her prison cell to Mathilde Wurm (February 16, 1917):

There is nothing more changeable than human psychology. That's especially because the psyche of the masses, like . . . the eternal sea, always bears within it every latent possibility: deathly stillness and raging storm, the basest cowardice and the wildest heroism. The masses are always

what they **must** be according to the circumstances of the times, and they are always on the verge of becoming something totally different from what they seem to be. It would be a fine sea captain who would steer a course based only on the momentary appearance of the ocean's surface and did not understand how to draw conclusions from signs in the sky and in the ocean's depths.

While it should be understandable for experienced Marxist activists that, as Luxemburg points out, there are always contradictory dynamics at play in the consciousness of the working class, I was not entirely prepared for the contradictory dynamics in the polemic of the six comrades. There seems to me to be a lack of sure-footedness in regard to understanding the class struggle.

As many readers must have noticed, part of their article denounces the Trotskyist tradition, seeking to prove with quotes from Trotsky and Trotskyists that here is the Original Sin that explains the problems afflicting the ISO; yet later they seek the authority of quotes from Trotsky and Trotskyists to score other polemical points. Insisting that there is considerably less class consciousness than claimed by leading ISO comrades, they later denounce Lee Sustar and Jesse Sharkey (clobbering them with quotes from Trotsky and James P. Cannon) for not urging the Chicago Teachers Union onto a more militant trajectory than that represented by what is – by most accounts – a fairly militant and class-conscious leadership. “We believe extending the strike was the right thing to do and would have produced a better outcome for the CTU workers and the class overall,” they assure us. But aside from old quotes from a very different context, they offer little to demonstrate how and why this would have made sense. What kind of Marxism is this?

This sharpens one of the questions that kept coming into my mind as I read their polemic. *Why are these six critics – who seem to have been good comrades, and each of whom was in the ISO for ten years, more or less – saying what they are saying?*

Marxism, Social Struggle, Organization-Building

Even though I have been a Marxist and a socialist activist for many years, and in one way or another have had some connection with the labor movement and the class struggle for most of my life, I have been in the ISO for only several years. This makes it difficult for me to evaluate the reasons (the reasons the comrades themselves give, and other possible reasons) for the kind of polemic the six comrades have written.

There is the important question that the comrades are wrestling with: Why has the ISO not been able to grow more than it has grown? Their frustration over this strikes me as understandable and in some ways quite healthy. At the same time, there is a troubling disconnect between their Marxist ideas and the actual social struggles of our time – and this impacts negatively, it seems to me, on the way they understand and utilize Marxism.

This poses questions regarding cadre development. The disconnect of theory and practice – and perhaps certain limitations on consistent practical political experience – are matters that may need more attention within our organization. For those of us who remain committed to the ISO, and to the basic revolutionary Marxist orientation that it represents, it seems to me that we have our own challenges to face. More attention needs to be given to creating structures and practices that will facilitate the interplay of Marxist education, activist experience, and cadre development.

While the public polemic of the six comrades provides a methodology, analysis, and proposed “solutions” that are highly problematical, the deeper challenge posed by what they say is something we must engage with to help make the ISO what we want it to be.

Paul L., Pittsburgh

Thoughts on collaboration and a more public convention process

This is not (yet) a document with a proposal but a call for collaboration on one that would argue that our convention (including pre and post-convention) should be seen as a more public affair.

One argument (though not the most convincing or compelling) is simply that no information distributed to hundreds (and hopefully many more) of decentralized listservs and email addresses (such as our pre/post convention bulletins) can really be considered 'private' in any meaningful sense of the term - particularly if our enemies are determined to get them. What is said in a closed room is easier to secure but can easily be recorded, reproduced, etc. as the number of participants grows. Ultimately we shouldn't be saying anything in these forums that we wouldn't want other people to hear.

More importantly, however, I believe that we should see our pre-convention discussions as something our allies and the broader working-class *should* be interested in and by treating it as such we will make our debates and organization more accessible and relevant to potential members.

In short I am arguing that we have more to gain by having 'internal' debates in view of those who care to observe than we have to lose from those who might use them to undermine us.

I am not arguing that non-members should be allowed to *participate* in convention. It is absolutely essential to the democratic function of our organization to make sure that convention prioritizes the participation of our membership and encourages others to become members if they want to participate. I am also not arguing that all of our communication should be public; ie. that we should transcribe and publicize minutes of discussions, etc.

Please contact me if you are interested in discussing and developing a formal proposal regarding this question.

Collaboration, efficiency, and democracy

Thinking about this proposal has raised other questions for me, such as how to be as 'efficient' as possible with pre-convention *in order* to make it as democratic as possible. I think we want as many comrades as possible to participate in formal pre-convention debate (both in branches, districts, and in bulletins) but that we should also strive for as much informal collaboration as possible to limit the number of documents that all comrades have to try to read and which the Center has to compile and distribute.

If some of us across the organization have similar ideas we should find ways to discuss and refine our proposals, solicit endorsements, etc. *before* submitting them to pre/convention.

I had initially planned to make this particular call for collaboration via Facebook and was encouraged by other comrades not to do so. While I see no harm in taking advantage of any means of facilitating collaboration - including Facebook - these should be used to bring debates back into formal organizational channels. Utilizing informal spaces to initiate or develop documents and proposals - be they conversations in person or using electronic/social media - will be important to making our formal discussions (which are inherently quite limited in nature) as productive and democratic as possible.

Dan R., Berkeley, proletariandan@gmail.com

For a structure and culture of frank criticism

Democratic centralism in a nationwide revolutionary organization (1) places the most politically developed, tested leaders at the center, while (2) facilitating debate from below so that local experiences, including negative experiences, sharpen and evolve the national perspective. This combination of principles, in permanent mutual tension, is necessary to maximize political effectiveness at all levels. The ISO is insufficiently developed in (2), due to weaknesses at both the Steering Committee and local

leadership/membership levels.

The channels to facilitate input, feedback, and debate between membership and leadership exist: Convention, NBC calls, the revived Internal Bulletin, and direct lines of communication with individual SC members. But my observation is that these fail to channel the full range of our political experiences into the collective assessment of our work and the re-formation of perspectives.

For example, on a recent national fund drive conference call, the San Diego comrade (not this author) detailed the Branch's efforts to raise funds. The comrade concluded that, as had been shown in previous fund drives, virtually no opportunity existed locally to gain large individual donations except by going to Branch members. Succeeding speakers offered suggestions about how to change this. This would have been welcome, except the result seemed to be that the political conclusion suggested by this comrade (based on years of experience) was ignored. The facilitator of the call did not ask if others had similar experiences. Possibly- indeed likely, in my opinion- others learned (or re-learned) that offering this type of input would be futile. In this sense, the channel for feedback to the organization appeared to fail.

Another example: the 10/18/13 ISO Notes call for the submission of success stories around SW sales, for generalization during the Convention period's assessment of SW work. But submitting only success stories produces one-sided assessments. Especially when the object of study- SW sales- is not some new experiment. Framing discussion this way also encourages members to respond to negative examples as individual problems to be fixed, rather than as potential evidence of a wrong perspective. This method creates stagnant debates and assessments that, over years, become rituals.

These examples are small in themselves, but they are part of a pervasive pattern that adds up to a stunted democratic culture.

The problem of insufficient debate needs remedy from above and from below. My limited view of the organization, from San Diego, does not allow a comprehensive understanding of its causes. But for a start I make the following suggestions.

1- Don't start perspectives from scratch. The Steering Committee should organize discussions, including but not limited to the Convention, around empirical assessments of previously adopted perspectives. We should say: "Last year we predicted we could do 'x', what we actually did was 'y'". Or, "Last year we had around 800 members, this year we have (some other number)". Or, "we said we could find big donors on campus, but experience has repeatedly shown we cannot". Overall data, with categories of local experiences, should come from the Center, while local Branch members should bring out exceptions and greater detail. This should not compete with, but rather strengthen the formation of conclusions. Empirically grounding an evolving perspective will empower all members to independently analyze the data, in light of their own typical or exceptional experiences. Obvious as this may seem, it is not in fact our usual practice.

2- Invite and specify a range of dissent. The Steering Committee should clarify the parameters of discussions, especially on NBC Calls. In an organization based on Leninist unity in action, members tend to withhold criticisms so as not to bog down or sabotage ongoing work. This is healthy, but my observation is that members default to the "unity in action" footing where it is inappropriate. Was the NBC Call referenced above one in which critical assessment of the work was welcome? What types of criticism- total and fundamental, or something short of that- fit into the purposes of a given discussion? When the range of useful criticism is specified in advance, comrades don't hold back or waste time speculating about whether "now is the time" to speak up.

There is probably more that the Steering Committee, District leadership, and local leadership should do, but the problem also demands that the whole membership grow politically. In fact my individual interactions with Steering Committee members, as well as the West Coast Regional organizer, suggest an exemplary national leadership culture of openness and engagement with debate. If anything, I find that they bend over backwards to listen, understand, and accommodate disagreement in action, without withholding their views. (I don't believe this is evidence to disprove the structural criticisms above, though.)

For a fuller sharing of experiences, more members need to break with veiled, overly deferential, or compromising debate methods. As a former rather frustrated dissident member of the San Diego Branch, I can say that tenuously holding back on differences, for fear that they won't be heard or understood, becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of futility and frustration. Watering down criticisms holds the danger that the most powerfully persuasive points of an argument get left out. Packaging differences as mere questions fails to set the stakes high enough. Comradely frankness, I eventually found, works more often than I would have thought.

ISO members are rebels, and share anti-Stalinist consciences. In the established culture, where debating the leadership meets subtle structural obstacles and doesn't happen often enough, comrades' differences build up over time. They then tend to explode in critiques that unhelpfully lump together the substance and process of a given discussion. Often these criticisms fail because they develop isolated from feedback during prolonged incubation. My observation is that this has fed a dangerous despair about the possibility of successfully debating leadership.

The Steering Committee has already led a process of self-critical democratization over the last year, with initiatives like our engagement with Marxist Feminism. The ISO's greater implantation and experience in the Great Recession era has matured and made comrades and branches less insular, with greater capacity for independent thinking. I believe a breakthrough toward a more rounded, broad, and deep process of assessment and perspective formation can now succeed, given action from the center as well as the localities. This is necessary to steel comrades nationally for political combat leadership on the level of the CTU strike and up.

Avery W, San Diego

Documents with resolutions

For An ISO Electoral Strategy

During the 2013 pre-convention period I wrote a document that appeared in Bulletin #2 entitled similarly "For An Electoral Strategy in 2014". I phrased that document not as a resolution, but more of the suggestion for a possible approach and discussion. But now I feel in light of the recent election successes by Tyr Moore and Kshama Sawant of Socialist Alternative, its time to return to this point more seriously.

We are in period where the ideological radicalization and political opening for socialists occurring is also coupled with a ubiquitous ruling class offensive and political disorientation on the left. Almost very single struggle since the start of the Great Recession has ended in either brutal defeat, partial failure, or at best whatever victories have occurred failing to spark wider and sustained fight-back. A whole generation has matured politically knowing nothing but defeats and disappointments, while surrounded by generalized economic misery. The political class is the most discredited and hated in living memory, with some commenting on how a 9% congressional approval rating seems rather too high. Yet even the NSA revelations and government shut-down have failed to create any great increase in mass struggle.

The question for us is how to make the most of this situation. The ideas of Alan M. and Paul L. for deepening our Marxist education I feel are good starting points. But I feel there needs to be a broader strategic side of this discussion of how we can relate to and even help foster struggle.

The Sawant and Moore campaigns in part show one potential way forward. As was said in Socialist Worker [<http://socialistworker.org/2013/11/14/election-breakthrough-in-seattle>] on November 14th,

“The Sawant campaign has already accomplished an enormous amount by proving that there is a thirst for an alternative to the status quo--and that socialists can confidently put forward a different vision for society, knowing it will connect with the aspirations of more and more people.”

I agree wholeheartedly. Socialist Alternative has been able to find a way to engage with the general mood of dissatisfaction with the status quo and turned it into game changing political campaigns, and we should take note.

On November 6th Socialist Alternative website posted an article [<http://www.socialistalternative.org/news/article22.php?id=2226>] entitled ‘Election Victories for Socialist Alternative—Huge Opportunities for Working-Class Politics Must Be Seized’ which in part says;

“We urgently need a party of working people, connected to social movements, fighting unions, community organizations, Greens and socialists. As a concrete step to get there, we should form coalitions throughout the country with the potential to come together on a national level to run 100 independent working-class candidates in the 2014 mid-term elections.”

The figure of 100 candidates is certainly overblown and unrealistic, but I feel the overall call for an electoral coalition must be seriously considered by us. In a variety of forms the call for “left unity” has come up repeatedly since the defeat of Occupy. Many of these calls for the arbitrary cobbling together of all existing socialist organizations are certainly colored by a real naiveté, if not other ulterior motives. But many come from an honest place of desperation and recognition for the need for unity amongst the left. There is a spirit there that we should be relating to, even if not the actual program of “left unity” itself. It is better for us to be in the thick of these discussions and debates than risk being left behind by them.

In my 2013 document, I concluded with the suggestion for a potential strategy being:

“In the midterm future we begin to reach out in a serious and professional way to other Socialist and far-left groups in this country with the idea of collaboration for the sole purpose of running distinctly socialist candidates in local election. The purpose of this would not be to lay the groundwork for any kind of “fusion” but rather for us to work together in a non-sectarian, united front fashion in these election campaigns. That we as a alliance of groups investigate and decide upon a handful of localities where such campaigns are most likely to be successful and to run candidates on purely local seats such as city council and at most state legislature. Not every branch, or even a majority of branches, should be expected to engage in this activity, rather it would be for those places and those local seats which seem the most efficient uses of our time.”

I still agree totally with this overall approach. And with the experience of System Change Not Climate Change under our belts, I feel there is already an established precedent of working within coalitions of other socialist groups and independent socialists for definitive ends. The exact form by which this electoral work will take shape is to be discussed and decided, but I feel it is now the right time for us as an organization to commit to this project.

It is for all of these reasons that I propose the following resolution:

That the Steering Committee be empowered with the task to reach out to other socialist organizations and groups on the left for the purpose of forming an electoral coalition for the 2014 elections and beyond.

Ben S., NYC

Dues document and resolution

Being a socialist is hard work. For all the satisfaction we may experience from having figured capitalism out, organizing for the revolution is difficult. It is time-consuming, sometimes demoralizing, and best of all,

it's unpaid. Strictly speaking, we are infinitely exploited while laboring to eliminate labor exploitation. The dues-collectors of the ISO are fully aware of the further irony that we're asking activists, who have dedicated their lives in the hopes of creating a world without money, to then pay money for the luxury of what is ostensibly an unpaid Marxism internship of indefinite duration.

We all know why, of course: any organization has operating costs, and there is a conspicuous shortage, at least in my branch, of billionaire Marxist philanthropists. We have no alternative but to fund ourselves.

To that end, it's important that all members pay dues, and for fairness, the dues amount be according to a scale that is progressive, is not overly burdensome, and is uniform across the organization. But let's be honest: the dues scale is kind of confusing, and a lot of members don't pay to scale. In this document I want to do two things. I want to first address why many members don't pay to scale and motivate comrades do so where they can, and secondly I want to propose changes to the dues structure that will make it more progressive, less burdensome for low-income comrades, and also easier to figure out what is actually owed.

Every signal under capitalism drills into us that we are consumers, and should get as much as we can for as little money as possible. This combined with stagnating or falling wages and constant increases in basic cost of living (despite the official inflation rate being nothing) makes it almost an absurdity for people who earn a modest living to pay money to receive nothing tangible in return. For low-income comrades, the dues should certainly not come at the expense of eating or keeping the lights on (a motivation for making the scale more progressive), but we still need everyone to contribute something, if they can. Comrades who make enough to afford a horrible Michael Bay film every now and again nonetheless have trouble parting with money when they don't physically have to. The psychology of this is not trivial, and even revolutionaries who feel that the ISO is one of their most important priorities are not immune.

We may buy coffee before work every day ($\$2 \times 5 \text{ weekdays} \times 4 \text{ weeks} = \40 a month), we may have cable tv (national average $\$70$ a month), we may go out to eat after ISO meetings ($\$15 \times 4 = \60 a month) or have a few drinks on the weekends ($\$5 \times 4 \times 4 = \80 a month), but when we see that the dues scale says we should pay $\$50$ a month into the great void for this abstract concept of "The Center" -- and we don't even get a tote bag -- it simply doesn't compute. While we shouldn't have to give up all entertainment or social interaction to pay dues, it is also the case that money tends to disappear when we don't pay attention to it in a society where there are opportunities to spend around every corner and manipulative advertising along every line of sight.

It should be said that the above exercise is very common in advice from personal finance gurus, who are steeped in the disgusting ruling class ideologies of 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' and 'personal responsibility'. While we naturally gravitate away from these ideologies, it is nonetheless true that being mindful of spending and getting on a budget actually work to make the most of limited means under this irrational system. I would therefore encourage comrades to hold our noses and follow some of this advice, so that we can fund our socialist project -- creating a world free of the bonds of money and debt.

I see two issues with the dues scale and rules as they are: 1) that the scale is not progressive enough, and 2) that it's obstructively unclear on what is "Monthly Net Income".

Let's take the second issue first. Many comrades I talked to thought that "Monthly Net Income" was income after all necessary expenses like food and rent, while others thought it was simply whatever your paycheck is. These are significantly different. I asked the Center to clarify and here was their response:

"The term "net income" refers to income after paycheck deductions (taxes, healthcare, union dues, etc.) The dues rates are based on self-reporting from members – and are open to negotiation based upon the expenses of each member."

I think that this is a good start, but considering the wildly differing costs of health care among different jobs, and other varied expenses comrades face, we should put the following language in the member packet:

"Monthly Net Income (MNI) shall be calculated as the income after deductions for taxes, retirement contributions, union dues, and all health care, educational (including student loan payments, tuition, books & supplies), and childcare expenses. This amount shall be divided by the household size, which includes all income-earners, all adult dependents and children."

This way of calculating net income would better show the ability of a member to contribute, and would allow us to use one scale for everyone, including those with children and other dependents. Of course, as before, if the dues were still an unfair burden, comrades could negotiate a lower amount.

To make the scale more progressive, I propose calculating dues this way: the scale begins at the federal poverty rate for an individual, net \$800 per month, and dues are 1% of MNI. The dues rate increases linearly to 5% at the median national wage of net \$1,800 per month. Thereafter, the rate continues to increase, but logarithmically, such that it reaches 10% at double the median, net \$3,600 per month. Those of you making \$1,000,000 per month would be paying 50% (boo hoo). Up until \$1,800 net income, the proposed dues are lower than the current scale. After \$1,900, the proposed dues are higher than the current scale.

There is an argument that says the dues structure should be higher than we really expect members to pay, and lucky for us when the most dedicated members pay to scale. I think this way of operating is patronizing and elitist. We are not consumers being tricked into buying crap by putting it 'on sale', and the current structure is extremely burdensome for low-income comrades. We should have a scale that represents what members can actually pay, and then expect that we will.

Current Dues Structure

Proposed Dues Structure

| Monthly Net Income | Members w/o Children | Percent | Monthly Net Income | Dues Amount | Percent |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------|--------------------|-------------|---------|
| \$500 | \$20 | 4.0% | \$500 | \$5 | 1.0% |
| \$600 | \$25 | 4.2% | \$600 | \$6 | 1.0% |
| \$700 | \$30 | 4.3% | \$700 | \$7 | 1.0% |
| \$800 | \$35 | 4.4% | \$800 | \$10 | 1.0% |
| \$900 | \$40 | 4.4% | \$900 | \$15 | 1.4% |
| \$1,000 | \$45 | 4.5% | \$1,000 | \$20 | 1.8% |
| \$1,100 | \$50 | 4.5% | \$1,100 | \$25 | 2.2% |
| \$1,200 | \$55 | 4.6% | \$1,200 | \$30 | 2.6% |
| \$1,300 | \$60 | 4.6% | \$1,300 | \$40 | 3.0% |
| \$1,400 | \$65 | 4.6% | \$1,400 | \$50 | 3.4% |
| \$1,500 | \$70 | 4.7% | \$1,500 | \$60 | 3.8% |
| \$1,600 | \$80 | 5.0% | \$1,600 | \$70 | 4.2% |
| \$1,700 | \$90 | 5.3% | \$1,700 | \$80 | 4.6% |
| \$1,800 | \$100 | 5.6% | \$1,800 | \$90 | 5.0% |
| \$1,900 | \$100 | 5.3% | \$1,900 | \$100 | 5.4% |
| \$2,000 | \$110 | 5.5% | \$2,000 | \$120 | 5.8% |
| \$2,100 | \$120 | 5.7% | \$2,100 | \$130 | 6.1% |
| \$2,200 | \$130 | 5.9% | \$2,200 | \$140 | 6.4% |
| \$2,300 | \$130 | 5.7% | \$2,300 | \$160 | 6.8% |
| \$2,400 | \$140 | 5.8% | \$2,400 | \$170 | 7.1% |
| \$2,500 | \$150 | 6.0% | \$2,500 | \$180 | 7.4% |
| \$3,000 | \$190 | 6.3% | \$3,000 | \$260 | 8.7% |
| \$3,500 | \$220 | 6.3% | \$3,500 | \$340 | 9.8% |
| \$4,000 | \$260 | 6.5% | \$4,000 | \$430 | 10.8% |
| \$4,500 | \$300 | 6.7% | \$4,500 | \$520 | 11.6% |
| \$5,000 | \$340 | 6.8% | \$5,000 | \$700 | 12.4% |
| \$6,000 | \$410 | 6.8% | \$6,000 | \$900 | 13.7% |
| \$7,000 | \$490 | 7.0% | \$7,000 | \$1,100 | 14.8% |
| \$8,000 | \$560 | 7.0% | \$8,000 | \$1,300 | 15.8% |
| \$9,000 | \$640 | 7.1% | \$9,000 | \$1,500 | 16.6% |
| \$10,000 | \$710 | 7.1% | \$10,000 | \$1,800 | 17.4% |

Dues amount lower than current ----->
 Dues amount higher than current ----->

The equations would be:

\$800 or less - Dues = 0.01*MNI

\$800 to \$1800 - Dues = MNI*(0.01+0.04*(MNI-800)/1000)

Over \$1800 - Dues = MNI*(0.0721*ln(MNI/1800)+0.05)

A dues calculator tool based on this scale can be downloaded here for comrades to see what the dues would be like:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1HWNbyGFzeijd0a2RWWE9IQ2c>

Alan P., San Diego

References for economic data:

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