Pre-convention Bulletin #9 / January 2014

for members only

Inside this Bulletin

This is the ninth 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 (to request approval for guests wishing to attend the convention, contact the National Office at orgdept@gmail.com). 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.

The ASA BDS victory

The American Studies Association, an organization of 4,000 scholars, voted in December to boycott Israeli Universities: http://www.theasa.net/american_studies_association_resolution_on_academic_boycott_of_israel

ASA is the third and largest North American academic organization to support the academic boycott, the others being the Association of Asian American Studies and Native American and Indigenous Studies Association.

The ASA first began discussions about an academic boycott of Israel six years ago. The successful vote to boycott was the result of organizing work by a Caucus on Academic and Community Activism within the ASA. The Caucus, whose founders included members of the ISO, drafted a new resolution to boycott, conducted a tabling and signature campaign in support of the resolution at two ASA annual meetings, worked with members of USACBI (the U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel) on developing a strategy in support of the resolution, and pushed the ASA to conduct a membership vote in November that produced the winning result.

ISO comrades should use momentum from this recent victory to advance BDS and Palestinian solidarity work in the coming weeks and months. Israel is losing significant ground politically because of the BDS campaign. The boycott movement has advanced despite the deployment of high profile political figures in the U.S. (Lawrence Summers), the State of Israel and U.S. Zionists to oppose it. The ASA vote has helped to normalize criticism of Israeli apartheid on both University campuses and in the mainstream media.

Significantly, the most severe public attacks on the ASA

have come from U.S. University Presidents. Sean Decatur, at Kenyon College, and Michael McRobbie at Indiana University, condemned the boycott vote and unilaterally---without consultation with faculty---suspended their American Studies programs' memberships in the ASA. Presidents at Harvard, Purdue, Northwestern and UT Austin have likewise condemned the ASA vote.

But this has hardly been an one-sided battle. Faculty and students of some major universities have fought back against their own administrators, virtually their bosses.

21 faculty at Trinity College published an "open letter" to the President and Dean who opposed the boycott: http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15772/open-letter-to-trinity-college-president-and-dean

Eight scholars at three Indiana university campuses collaborated on a public response to the Presidents of Purdue and Indiana University: http://www.jconline.com/article/20131230/OPINION03/312300009/Guest-column-Purdue-IU-get-wrong-blasting-boycott-Israeli-universities

Meanwhile, student and alumni groups at both Northwestern University and Tufts University have published public statements attacking criticism of the boycott by their respective University Presidents: http://www.the-protest.com/?p=569

The strong fightback against media and University administrations is important for several reasons.

1. It exposes the alliance between the press and University administrations in defending U.S. imperialism in the Middle East and the "special"

relationship between the state and Israel.

2. It demonstrates the divide between our rulers and us on the Israeli occupation. As a result, the ASA vote has brought the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement closer to what Omar Barghouti calls a "tipping point" reminiscent of the 1980s campaign against South African apartheid. It has forced a public discussion of the Occupation into new realms of public discourse, and given renewed confidence and solidarity to Palestinian activists and Students for Justice in Palestine chapters across the country who have long-been in the forefront of BDS work.

3. Finally, the arrogance well-paid University Presidents have shown in "speaking for" faculty and students against the boycott shows how the neoliberal University seeks to run: a rich and powerful elite flexing its political and ideological muscle to render the majority impotent. The BDS fightback on campuses must broaden alliances with anti-racist, anti-pinkwashing and other activist groups fighting the administrative one percent both to widen the struggle against the Israeli Occupation and to rebalance political forces across the University

Below are some suggested steps for ISO members, especially those active on University campuses. Also included is a dossier of recent articles on the ASA campaign that could be useful in conjunction with BDS and Palestinian solidarity work.

1) Work with SJP chapters on your campuses or move to start one. The National SJP has released a solidarity statement with ASA available at its website. Each campus chapter should be made aware of the ASA vote and the support of the National if they are not.

Discussion with SJPs could include: i) how to support the ASA boycott; ii) planning a BDS meeting on campus; iii) writing letters to administrators asking them to support the boycott. In general, the ASA vote should be cast as a huge victory and a time to renew efforts to build Palestinian solidarity work on campus.

2) Engage with faculty who know might be sympathetic about the ASA vote. Encourage them to sign USACBI (United States Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel: http://www.usacbi.org/) and/or write letters to administrators asking for support of the boycott.

3) Schedule a BDS meeting on campus or in the community with ISO literature. This could be a community-wide meeting planned with Arab-American organizations or campus groups and SJP chapters. Perhaps make a discussion of Barghouti's *BDS* book from Haymarket a centerpiece. Also Adam Hanieh's Haymarket book *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States* can be a good meeting topic and

provide a launch point to talk about ISO's perspective on the centrality of working-class struggle in the Middle East to ending the Occupation.

4) Share news about the ASA vote with your American Studies or Ethnic Studies faculty. Encourage them to support ASA and start their own BDS initiatives.

5) Recognize that campus administrators are under pressure to condemn the boycott. Campus and community Zionist groups may be more active in the Spring against the boycott. It's important to try to contain the impact of their work through some of the steps above.

6) Create a BDS network where you live. At Purdue, we organized eight faculty from three campuses in Indiana to write an op-ed for the local paper after the IU and Purdue Presidents both came out against the boycott. From this effort there has now sparked off a wider conversation amongst this group about faculty governance and the question of democracy on campus.

The ISO as an organization has always foregrounded the question of Palestinian liberation in all our work, through difficult times when Palestine was regarded as the third rail of US politics. We have a political tradition and history to be proud of. Most importantly we now have the experience and members to push that politics onto a much wider canvas. Comrades should seize the ASA victory as the beginning of that process.

Dossier of related articles

http://mondoweiss.net/2013/12/association-campaign-discredit.html

http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/blowback/la-ol-israel-academic-boycott-blowback-20131227,0,4082285.story#axzz2orVfKDCp

http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15697/substantive-erasures_essays-on-academic-boycott-an

http://www.truth-out.org/speakout/item/20804-boycotts-backlash-authority-and-change

http://www.trincoll.edu/AboutTrinity/offices/president/letters/Pages/default.aspx

http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/12/bds-campaign-against-israel-reaching-turning-point-201312225320764121.html

http://972mag.com/the-worlds-blatant-double-standard-in-israels-favor/84499/

http://www.nopinkwashing.org.uk/

Bill M., West Lafayette, Ind.

Disorientation and eclecticism, or the growing pains of a developing membership? A Response to Paul D.

This document flows from disagreements we have with some of the conclusions regarding the state of the ISO and its membership in Paul D's document, "Theory, Cadre, and Continuity: Building Revolutionary Organization Today." We recognize that these disagreements flow from our experience here in Portland, our very limited knowledge of the experiences in other branches, and what we have read in Socialist Worker and in the Preconvention Documents. With that said, one of the main goals of this document is to initiate a debate and solicit additional information from Paul, the Steering Committee, and branches around the country in order to clarify the basis for the political conclusions in Paul D's document.

We want to start by expressing that we are in agreement with many of the specific points Paul outlines. These include:

1) The relationship between cadre and leadership

2) Opposing the attacks on the democratic credentials of our organization

3) The need to build a revolutionary organization that has a "common line" on the basic questions laid out in the organization's "Where We Stand."

4) The importance of training cadre to be able to think critically, provide leadership, and relate to changing circumstances

While we agree with Paul's specific points addressed to members of the ISO renewal faction (in particular Shaun J.), or to former members who have written various critiques of the ISO, we do not believe that enough evidence has been provided for the wider conclusion Paul draws that sections of our membership and cadre are questioning our "basic political assumptions," and that we are losing our Marxist/Leninist politics.

This conclusion is clearly articulated in Paul D's document in the section 'What to reevaluate?' (It was also re-affirmed in the NBC call on Leninism):

> *This has led to somewhat of a disorientation of the ISO--including of its cadre. The result is that some members are questioning our basic political assumptions. What is it that remains valid in our theory, our politics, and our practice? What should be questioned, what should be changed, what should be reaffirmed? What are the core features of our project?*

Paul explains that the recent crisis in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP-Britain) has been the main factor in the "disorientation" of our cadre. This crisis has occurred at the same time that we are reevaluating our theory on women's oppression, a theory we inherited from the SWP. Paul also adds that the "decline in the revolutionary left and the ongoing weakness of the organized working-class in the

advanced countries" have been the circumstances under which this disorientation is taking place.

The first issue we find problematic with this document is that it lacks clarity on what exactly is being questioned by our membership. We are told that it is our "basic political assumptions," but what do these constitute? Are they synonymous with the points stated in our "Where We Stand"? If so, what sections of the WWS are actually being questioned? Internationalism? The centrality of the working class? The need for a revolutionary party?

The second issue that we have with Paul's document is that it provides little evidence of the disorientation that he describes. The only instances of members challenging our theory and/or practice that Paul provides are two SW contributions (where it is claimed that the ISO is reassessing our stance on "patriarchy theory") and Shaun J.'s article describing his conception of cadre. If we are to have confidence that this disorientation is indeed a national phenomenon in the organization, it would be helpful to have more examples provided.

The third issue we find troublesome is the vague manner in which "eclecticism" is applied to our current situation. It is unclear if Paul is claiming that some of our membership are entertaining a theoretical eclecticism, because he merely warns of the phenomenon without actually providing any specific examples of members forgoing debate in favor of an acceptance, or tolerance, of contradictory ideas. Paul explains that various "new" ideas are now holding sway over sections of the left, while he seems to imply that layers of our membership may also be accepting these ideas[1]. They can include postmodern ideas, as well as anarchist, autonomist, identity-politics, etc. "New" ideas are valorized simply by their supposed novelty, while the "old" ideas are seen as outmoded in this period of left retreat. In the section titled "The Necessity, and Limits, of Theoretical Re-evaluation," Paul warns of an eclecticism which denies theoretical clarity for an acceptance of multiple, often contradictory, theoretical standpoints. Though he does not actually state that some members are developing a theoretical eclecticism, the fact that he is writing a document warning against the phenomenon would seem to imply, at the very least, a danger of our membership adopting an eclectic set of ideas that are not rooted in a firm understanding of Marxism. While we don't deny that many groups on the left are entertaining "new" ideas and a theoretical eclecticism, we do not feel that Paul provides any examples of this trend occurring inside the ranks of the ISO. Based on our experiences, we have seen little evidence to support the argument that our membership is losing its grounding in Marxism.

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[1] It would be helpful if Paul clarified whether or not he thought some of our membership were actually gravitating towards the ideas mentioned, and to what level this is occurring nationally.

We believe the debates being had out in Socialist Worker, at the Socialism Conference, and in our documents regarding women's oppression, privilege, and patriarchy are not occurring outside of, and in opposition to, a Marxist approach. It is useful to note that the two SW contributions that referred to a reassessment of patriarchy theory (referenced in Paul's document) also contained these phrases:

> *At a time when our organization is trying to redefine and expand the margins of our Marxist theory and practice, we should see how we can deepen our understanding of the dialectical relationship between race and class in all areas of our theoretical, political and organizational work. (Hector A.)*

> *In the coming months, as someone who has never quite understood the perceived incompatibility between the concept of white privilege and the Marxist theory of oppression, I hope to better engage those with this view. I do hope to gain a better grasp of the specific ideas being rejected and why, so that perhaps I and others can articulate just what about the notion of white privilege seems salient when we organize and analyze the world. (Haley S.)*

Far from throwing out the "old" and fetishizing the "new," it seems more like these members are trying to come to grips with, if, and how, concepts of privilege may fit into a Marxist framework.

We agree with what we take to be Paul's underlying point about these contributions to the SW debate: that they may not be as clear as they should be in regards to a "reassessment" of "patriarchy theory"--as a separate system of oppression--vs. a reassessment of how we relate to the terms patriarchy and privilege[2]. That said, taking a singular example (of what may have simply been a slip in terminology) and extrapolating it to mean that--as an organization--we are having unclear or eclectic debates not rooted in Marxism, does not provide an accurate picture of the organization as a whole. Are there other instances of our theory being challenged, and to what extent do they call into question our "basic political assumptions"? One of the purposes of the Steering Committee is to generalize across the entire organization, so it would be helpful for members to hear of other examples regarding our "basic political assumptions" being questioned if we are to have confidence that this is truly an organization-wide phenomenon. Without a broader sense of what is actually happening, it is very difficult to get a sense of what is going on and how to change or modify our practice in reaction to negative developments.

It is also worth mentioning that we take issue with Paul's response to Haley's and Hector's assertions around patriarchy theory. He argues that "[the ISO] 'came to grips' with patriarchy theory years ago, and largely what we wrote

[2] Terms that we have found may or may not refer to theoretical systems of oppression separate from capitalism, when used by activists around us.

about it then remains true today." While we agree with Paul's assessment on patriarchy theory, his approach to the issue works more to shut down discussion than to encourage it. If a member is questioning whether we should be reassessing our approach to patriarchy theory, they should be encouraged to write a document expressing their views. If enough members around the country resonate with the article, then a discussion around Marxism and patriarchy theory would probably be very clarifying for our membership.

In our experience, the members who most critically engage with ideas outside of our tendency oftentimes have the best arguments against these same ideas. We feel that engaging with these ideas is largely a positive phenomenon, one which will lead to developing the layers of critically-thinking cadre that are necessary for an effective revolutionary organization. It is useful to keep in mind that three years ago an ISO member could have confidently said that we had "come to grips" with women's oppression long ago, and they would have taken no flak for it. The ISO held a very narrow view on socialist feminism and Black feminism for many years, only to find a rich and vibrant source of ideas in both Social Reproduction Theory and Intersectionality. It seems to us a predictable outcome for members of an organization in our current situation to rethink other aspects of our theory. By stating that some aspects of our tradition have been already been "come to grips" with, Paul is implying that this discussion is off the table. But who gets to decide what discussions are *on* the table?

We support Sharon and the leadership's opening up of our ideas around women's oppression, but deciding our theoretical reassessments should not be the leadership's responsibility alone. We believe that cadre have a role in this too. While the leadership is composed of the ISO's most experienced and politically developed members, many layers of our cadre are also well-versed in the tenets of Marxism. To suggest that there is a general phenomenon where cadre are so disoriented that they are discarding their Marxism and/or Leninism comes across as somewhat patronizing, to be perfectly honest. Much of our cadre around the country are knee-deep in struggles and engaging with our allies about which way forward and what are the best ways to understand society. Many of them are engaging with theory--both new and old--to better understand the world around them, help to further struggle, and better develop revolutionary organization.

Our local involvement with anti-oppression struggles has prompted our membership to engage more deeply with issues of privilege, and this has started a discussion as to whether some of these concepts are compatible with Marxism. Far from throwing away our Marxism, we are looking to critically engage with our fellow activists' ideas to see exactly what they agree with and what they do not agree with, in regards to the politics of revolutionary socialism. From our experiences in Portland, we have found that creating straw figure arguments of what "privilege theory" is and is not does not help us in this process. We have also come to realize that the most effective way of

getting our periphery to take our ideas seriously is to treat their ideas with seriousness and respect as well. Of course we think that the ideas of revolutionary socialism are the most effective for changing society, and we are not bashful about explaining this to our periphery and our allies.

In response to the claim on the December NBC call that we are "losing our Leninism", it is also worth noting that the documents regarding Socialist Worker have mostly been rooted in trying to figure out ways to better utilize the paper, not arguments about abandoning it (*Socialist Worker: Not Just for Tablings* by David J. and Stephanie S.). Many comrades have been finding weekly paper sales demoralizing, and are therefore trying to figure out ways to make paper sales and the paper sale routines more invigorating--which in some cases has meant that a weekly street sale--as we have traditionally done in the ISO--may not make sense. This does not mean that we have abandoned the need for the paper, or that we are devaluing its importance. It means that comrades are thinking critically about the best way to utilize the paper as a tool for building a revolutionary organization.

Beyond the question of the paper, it is unclear what other elements of our practice are being raised that could be seen as a rejection of Leninism or our underlying political principles (with the potential exception of Dan R's document regarding an open preconvention period). The questions and debates currently happening also appear to fall well within the basic political tenets of our organization, as outlined in "Where we Stand." If there are debates taking place and questions being asked that are outside this realm, it would be useful to see concrete examples from either the Steering Committee or comrades in other branches.

To restate the three main weaknesses of this document which we have outlined:

1) A lack of clarity about what basic political assumptions are being questioned by our membership.

2) Little evidence provided for the political disorientation Paul describes.

3) Eclecticism vaguely applied to our current situation.

We believe these weaknesses may result in several unintended and undesirable consequences:

1) Most importantly, we believe this can have a stultifying effect on the critical engagement of larger sections of our membership, decreasing the number of voices added to debates as we attempt to develop perspectives that can inform our strategy and tactics. This may happen because of fear of appearing to have lost one's "Leninism" or exhibiting the "abhorred" un-Marxist characteristic of being eclectic if one engages with the debates under way. While some members may, indeed, be disoriented and developing a theoretical eclecticism, to apply

this phenomenon more broadly to the membership and cadre seems to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

2) It can unnecessarily counterpose the leadership to sections of the membership who otherwise agree with them. This is because of a lack of specificity of what Paul is actually criticizing and because the document in our opinion comes across as somewhat patronizing.

Conclusion

Paul's conclusion stresses the need to build "an organized cadre of revolutionaries no matter the conditions" through a process of "mutual training and debate around a common set of politics, based upon a freely agreed-upon discipline and mutual respect." We agree with this conclusion. Our question is: outside of the disputes with certain members of the Renewal Faction, where is this conclusion being challenged? If there aren't any set of examples worth generalizing as a organization-wide phenomenon, then it seems that a document more specifically focused on issues around this faction should have been written.

We understand that there have been unprincipled attacks on our organization and on the current leadership. Those who would like nothing more than to tear down the ISO have leaped at this opportunity. But the worst outcome of this would be to create a 'siege' mentality in the organization in which some of the positive changes that we have made as an organization are rolled back. Is our membership really losing its grounding in Marxism/Leninism, or have the growing pains of theoretical reassessment been exaggerated to the point where they fail to accurately depict the the true dynamics of our organization in this period? While we certainly do not believe that this was the intent of Paul or the leadership, we do have concerns that an incorrect assessment of our membership could have a negative effect on our efforts to build the ISO in the current period.

We feel that the recent shifts in our theory and practice have been very positive for our organization, despite a level demoralization naturally arising from some of the serious setbacks experienced by our side in the past few years since the peak of struggle in 2011. We believe a greater theoretical engagement of larger layers of our membership; making our branch meetings the a political hub of our organizing and a welcoming place for contacts and comrades; an attempt to incorporate more alternative pedagogy into meetings and conferences; and a more open atmosphere of constructive debate are changes that will be critical to the growth and success of our organization in the coming years. There will be mistakes made in the process, but at this point what we need more then anything are more comrades who are not afraid to make mistakes. This is the sign--not of a disoriented membership, but--of a living organization which is attempting to grapple with the difficult conditions it finds itself in.

Andrea H., Neil L., Wael E., Portland, Ore.

Notes on method: Some lessons on admitting mistakes

A political party's attitude towards its own mistakes is one of the most important and surest ways of judging how earnest the party is.... Frankly acknowledging a mistake, ascertaining the reasons for it, analyzing the conditions that have led up to it, and thrashing out the means of its rectification – that is the hallmark of a serious party. —Lenin*, Left-Wing Communism*

The purpose of document is to lay out some lessons learned from recent experiences in the ISO's intervention in the United Federation of Teachers in New York and suggest how these could be applied that could be applied to our work more generally. It is not meant to be an overall assessment of our teacher work, which I will leave to other forums and documents.

In June of last year, a red-baiting attack was launched against us within the Movement of Rank and File Educators, the caucus of the UFT that we intervene in.

Initially raised over a dispute over the structure of internal email lists, the argument quickly connected to a wide series of debates with MORE over the social justice and anti-racist content of MORE's politics (and whether these "turned off white conservative teachers"). Linked to this was mistrust about an "ISO takeover," and a disagreement with our practice of having a fraction that met separately from MORE coordinated its intervention.

The ISO has had a strong position in MORE since its founding two years ago, and had at that time three members recently elected to a ten-person steering committee. But the caucus remains full of lively debate and politically heterogeneous and by no means dominated by the ISO or any of the other political forces and tendencies within it.

Despite the attack, we came out of the episode much stronger for two key reasons. First, we had won respect, including from people who disagreed with our politics and initially mistrusted us, because of our solid work in building and leading the caucus. Consistent political arguments, centered around what would help the movement grow and reach a wider (and more multiracial) audience of union members, mean that those who had not always been on our side were forced to publicly defend our participation in the movement. For example, we waged a fight for the use of the progressive stack in meetings alongside other activists in the movement (even though they were coming from an identity politics perspective). We had played a consistent role in pushing for a more outward perspective during and after the UFT elections.

But equally important was our willingness to admit that we had made some mistakes in the way that the fraction operated. Not that meeting as a fraction was inherently suspicious or undemocratic, but that at times we had not been as clear about when political interventions were specifically ISO positions and when they were not – which we pledged to do going forward. We did not apologize for recruiting within the movement, but did make it clear that we would refrain from, for example, selling the Socialist Worker at union meetings while wearing a MORE T-shirt or after having intervened as a MORE member – a practice we had slipped into that blurred the line between our organization and the union caucus.

Of course, we went into the situation from a position of strength both in numbers and political confidence, which are not always a given and helped to ensure a positive outcome.

But the overall lesson was that acknowledging mistakes did not mean throwing our politics and practices out the window. Furthermore, the experience for me underlined the positive effects of admitting and attempting to rectify political mistakes.

MORE came out of the episode, rather than weakened by infighting, with a stronger set of norms about mutual respect for different sets of politics and mutual assumptions of good intentions.

The positive results owed a lot to our leadership and the approach we took. Rather than responding to criticism from our allies with a defensive posture that simply stated that we were correct and pointing out the errors of those who attacked us, we chose to engage in a dialogue that helped to identify practices that could help move the entire group forward, and, in the process, solidified our position of leadership. Those that launched the red-baiting attack remained in MORE (despite initially threatening to quit) and now work closely with us, even if we still disagree at times.

In the current period, we have much to learn from this approach, both inside and outside the organization. While a revolutionary Marxist group is quite a bit different than a politically heterogeneous union caucus, some of the same lessons can be applied. First, it is important to critically self-reflect as to if errors were made and apologize for those errors and try to understand what is behind them. Second, we learned that rather than reacting with an assumption of bad faith, insisting on talking out and debating differences led to a better outcome and a healthier movement. Finally, to do either of the above does not require abandoning political principles but can be done in a context of defending a Marxist political intervention in the movement.

In his talk at Socialism 2013 on "Perspectives for the Left," Ahmed Shawki spoke of perspectives as a series of successive approximations of reality and to determine action necessary at a particular time. Crucial to this process is the recognition and analysis of mistakes. Our recent experience in MORE has reinforced this idea. Comrades will forgive a didactic digression into Calculus, but the efficiently and

accuracy of Newton's Method depends critically on having reasonable evaluations of the error in each successive estimate. If you a not sure how far off you are in each trial it takes much longer to arrive at a solution, if at all.

This is not a call for some kind of Maoist cult of self-criticism, nor a paralyzing culture of self-doubt. Analysis of mistakes cannot become all-consuming.

The point in encouraging and deepening a culture of scientific and collective appraisal of the occasional errors we make as an organization is to help improve and sharpen the application of our perspectives to reality.

In particular, we cannot react with an assumption of hostility on the part comrades who are trying to raise questions about the strength and direction of the organization, whatever the tactical disagreements we may have about how and when they are raised. The center of the debate must be one of the political questions that are addressed, not of the organizational details.

A process of assessing our mistakes is crucial to developing a strong cadre that can assess and judge events and actions independently. In a period that is marked by sharp shifts and confusing, contradictory situations, it becomes all the more important to be able to admit mistakes when they do occur – and be open to frank discussion of possible mistakes.

Peter L., New York City

Why the lack of assessments?

Assessments are a critical component needed to achieve consistent success in our work. Both the assessment and the process to develop it serve several roles. The assessment involves revisiting and elucidating the goals, strategies, and tactics for the work. It is also quite often the case that fraction members have various differences on the long and short-term directions of a fraction. A part of the assessment process is to get those involved to develop a common understanding of the work so as to work more effectively together. Of course a key part is to evaluate recent activity and to identify its successes, weaknesses, and continuous improvement.

The value of an assessment process is almost universally accepted and yet it is quite often not carried out. I have found this to be the case in multiple branches and over many years. The fundamental question is why would something so broadly acknowledged as useful be so rarely carried out? On the surface level there may be actual disagreements over the value of an assessment in making decisions. Let me identify one anecdote from LA on this point. Here in LA a major change of activity was taken in Fall 2012, where the branch activity in three areas of work was ended. Work around public education was redefined and restarted while the remaining 2/3 of the branch members became part of a branch building fraction. The branch explicitly avoided any assessment of the three areas of work before making this decision. I questioned several members on making such a decision while we clearly had no branch assessment and had very limited knowledge of the work that was occurring. The response had the general form of assessments are really good and valuable but that an assessment in this case would be time consuming and unnecessary because these areas of work were so clearly failing that they should be ended. It's true that these areas of work had few successes, but why? An assessment process provides the possibility to identify problems, causes, and a better approach to take. In this case LA skipped ahead and identified a new approach. By avoiding the assessment process it was ensured that each branch member had a different set of answers to the problems. This new direction taken by the branch fared no better than the previous.

In some cases the importance of an assessment is dismissed and this needs to be rectified. Its more likely that case that members across the organization generally do think assessments are valuable yet still rarely carry out an assessment. This may be because assessments take time and we are so often in a hurry to get on to new business. Planning for various up and coming activities generally takes precedence over assessing past work. I think this is partially coming from an expectation that there are big things around the corner and a need to prepare for them, while not wanting to dwell on the past, while opportunities await. Its almost like there is a fatalism that what we do doesn't really matter, like we are waiting for some external happening to provide openings for the work to flourish. The opposite is closer to the case. What we do is extremely important and getting it right needs to be given great emphasis. The only way to do this is to plan work, carry it out, and assess it. If we continue to not do these steps we are wasting our time. I expect some branches have had better success carrying out regular assessments of their work and I would be interested to hear stories about their assessment process.

Eric R., Los Angeles

Who won in Seattle?

The victory of the Sawant campaign in Seattle opens up a new situation for socialists. Since the campaign ran primarily on excellent reform demands ($15 per hour minimum wage; tax the rich; rent control), it creates a larger opening around these issues. Socialist Alternative is no longer just another small left group that we cooperate with when we agree, but with whom we have sharp political disagreements. They are now the spearhead of a larger reform current in Seattle—and to a lesser extent in at least some other areas. We need to relate to this current as we would other movements—being involved and supportive but also raising criticisms as necessary. Our involvement in the campaigns that come out of the election victory (at this point primarily the minimum wage campaign), should not be colored by our political differences with SA.

However, while being involved on these issues, we will as usual be trying to win people to revolutionary Marxism, and away from SA's essentially centrist politics. In order to do that, we need to have a clear understanding of their politics. SA is allied to the Committee for a Worker's International (CWI). The summary below is based on CWI as well as specifically SA writings.

I have also written a separate 6,000-word essay detailing our political differences with SA. Comrades are welcome to email me at sleigh1917@gmail.com for the full essay. Below is a very brief summary of our differences without citations.

1) **What is Socialist Revolution?** Ted Grant, the founder of the Militant Tendency out of which SA and CWI comes wrote in his pamphlet, Marxism and the State that there are two ways for a workers state to come about---either proletarian revolution OR complete nationalization of industry. This opened the way for SA to see not just Stalinist states as workers' states but for a parliamentary road to socialism. Their strategy to achieve socialism is centrist . It focuses on elections and the use of the bourgeois state to begin the transition to socialism ("nationalize the top 500 corporations under workers control"). They also, separately refer to the need to " smash the state". But this is a verbal gloss on a fundamentally reformist strategy. This is why they are Centrist--- revolutionary words, reformist deeds. SA also stresses that a mixed economy is OK, certainly for a long period after the "revolution". Finally, they say that a peaceful transition to socialism is possible

2) **Oppression** They focus on class-wide demands. They are of course anti-racist, anti-sexist etc. but also do not call for special demands for the oppressed. The Sawant campaign for example raised no demands around oppression. In certain circumstances, for example in Northern Ireland, they equally oppose "sectarianism" on both sides. They

don't have a clear understanding of the difference between the nationalism of the oppressed and that of the oppressor

3) **Labor** They do not have a well-developed theory of the need for rank and file movements. They criticize union leaders politically but do not necessarily see their conservatism as structural. Their support for rank and file movements is not theoretically based. Their teacher member in Seattle is not much involved in the vibrant rank and file caucus, Social Equality Educators that our members founded.

4) **Imperialism** They call for U.S. withdrawal from its occupations but did not support "victory to the Iraqi Resistance" on the grounds that they didn't like the politics of the resistance. They think that calling for withdrawal is the same as calling for victory . In 2006, they opposed both sides in the Israel-Hezzbollah war rather than support Hezzbollah as we did.

5) **Program** They make a fetish of Trotsky's transitional program approach. Instead of seeing the TP as a useful bridge between current demands of workers and the socialist revolution in a pre-revolutionary situation, they see it as universally applicable. This leads to them adopting long programs to foist on movements they are involved in, instead of looking for the next key step in a movement as we do.

6) **Israel** They see Israeil workers as the same as any other workers. Therefore they believe that the fundamental contradiction in Israel/Palestine is the class struggle rather than the national struggle between Zionism and Palestinian Liberation. They stress economic demands in Israel and do not call for the right of return for Palestinians. Their solution is "Socialist Apartheid" (my description, not theirs): two separate "socialist" states, one for Palestinians, one for Israelis. They put a formal gloss of " as part of a Mid-East socialist federation: on it.

7) **United Front** SA has a formally correct view of the united front. However, in practice, they consistently decide the basis of a supposed coalition on their own.. They invite others to join and fund the effort only after the politics, strategies and tactics have been worked out in advance. This was the case in both Sawant campaigns. They did not call a broad meeting on the left to organize the campaigns. Instead they ran the campaigns themselves and asked other people to endorse after. In spite of the breakthrough with the latest Sawant campaign, this limits the effectiveness of potential left campaigns. SA is only rarely involved in coalitions that they

didn't start and don't dominate. Their activity in
Occupy was the exception rather than the rule.

Steve L., Seattle

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Towards a program for the neoliberal era

The purpose of this note is twofold. First, it is to encourage
a discussion of program within the ISO. Second, it is
intended to frame the discussion in the light of the current
neoliberal conjuncture[3] within which we live and function
politically. To connect these, my focus within neoliberalism
is on its program, rather than, for example, its history,
ideology, economic theory, or organizational forms[4].
Understanding neoliberalism programmatically can be a
tool to aid us in the development of our own, yet to be
determined, socialist program.

What is the neoliberal program?

Neoliberalism is a set of ideas and practices employed by
capital to increase its rate of profit and strengthen it class
rule globally. This entails an interlocking practice, which
we can think of as the implicit program of neoliberalism. I
am using the word program somewhat loosely here, since
there is no one organization that has explicitly produced or
embodied such a program. In addition, there are, of course,
a range of views within the neoliberal universe.
Nevertheless, most of what we recognize as neoliberalism
shares a common core of programmatic features, and these
are what I have tried to enumerate here. This core includes
privatization, globalization, financialization, an assault on
working class, the role of the state, and the hollowing out of
representative democracy.

• **Privatization** - Private ownership of the means of
production, and its ideological expression as market
fetishization, is the essence of neoliberalism. From the
standpoint of program, this entails the privatization of
public services whenever feasible (including services like
education, healthcare, and pensions, but extending even to
the military). This results in political momentum to reduce
state expenditures and lower taxes (thus benefiting primarily
the rich), shifting to market-based services for those who
can afford them. This dynamic has several consequences.
More of the social product flows into private coffers (thus
increasing profits) and less into the hands of working people
(the reduction in both the direct and the social wage).
Ideologically, neoliberalism attempts to explain economic
crises as a force of nature, outside of conscious control.
That is, a financial crisis is portrayed as rather like a
hurricane, something we can neither control nor predict. Of
course, this is false both for financial and so-called
"natural" disasters, but for capital, it a useful fiction
nevertheless. As a result, the role of the state is (ostensibly)
to get out of the way and let the (illusory) natural power of
the market heal itself, e.g., via austerity, with some obvious
exceptions when, for example, the banks are in need of
bailouts.

• **Globalization** - Globalization under neoliberalism is
different from the previous period of classical imperialism
that existed prior to World War II. Neoliberal globalization
is focused primarily on liberalized capital and commodity
flows across borders, rather than direct political and
economic colonial control. This entails the national and
international (IMF, WB, ECB) structures required for its
realization. Globalization has been made feasible through
technological advances, especially in communication,
information technology, and transportation. Particularly in
the US, the imperial hegemon, a strong central state
apparatus is required to carry out this program.

• **Financialization** - As David Harvey emphasizes,
neoliberalism means the financialization of everything[5].
Financialization is a process though which almost any
transaction may be used as the basis for a loan, derivative,
or other instrument, from which financiers and speculators
may profit. For example, education has been financialized
in the neoliberal era through the widespread necessity of
borrowing through student loans. Like mortgages, these
loans may then be packaged in the form of derivatives.
Financialization and privatization together mean that we
now pay the banks for things like education, that once were
seen as social (i.e., public) investments. Since finance is
prone to crisis, state intervention becomes more critical as
the financial sector grows in relative terms.

• **The attack on the working class** - As Marxists, we
understand that surplus value, the source of profit, arises
from the unpaid portion of working time. Thus (leaving
macroeconomic considerations aside), the less you pay your
workers, the more you have left over for yourself, assuming
you are a member of the capitalist class. Since the point of
neoliberalism is to increase profit rates, it is not surprising
that income inequality has increased substantially during the
neoliberal era. From 1979 to 2004, for example, income of
the top percentile increased by 167%, but only by 6% for
the bottom quintile[6].

Obviously, the weaker the workers movement, the cheaper
will be the cost of labor. The direct attack on unions, going

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3 I do not wish to take up here the debate on whether
neoliberalism constitutes a new period in the development of
capitalism, although this is a view to which I subscribe. See N.
Davidson, The neoliberal era in Britain: Historical
developments and current perspectives, International Socialism
139, 2013; http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=908#139davidson_68
4 N Davidson, op.cit., and D. Harvey, A Brief History of
Neoliberalism, Oxford, 2005, are both useful sources on the
history and ideology of neoliberalism.

5 D. Harvey,op. cit., p33.
6 A. Aron-Dine and A. Sherman, New CBO Data Show
Income Inequality Continues to Widen, 2007,
http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=957

back at least to Taft-Hartley (1947), has made it increasingly difficult for workers to organize, for unions to gain formal recognition, and for workers to strike and win. The trade union leadership has become part of the the neoliberal process, in large part by embracing the reliance on the Democratic Party as a (failed) lifeline.

The prison system is an integral component of the attack on the working class. The neoliberal era produced a 450% increase in the US incarceration rate from 1970-2000, after holding approximately steady for the previous 50 years[7].

• **The role of the state** - The role of the state has been reshaped, rather than weakened, as a result of neoliberalism. For neoliberalism, the role of the state is principally to create the conditions under which markets, and thus profits, can flourish. In parallel with privatization, this has led to well-known retreats in social programs. Free market fetishism has replaced Keynsianism, leading to a relative withdrawal of the state from macroeconomic management. This has led to both centralization and decentralization, depending on the needs of capital.

To some extent, neoliberalism has led to a devolution of state power in the US from the federal to state and local levels. The resulting regional competition has led to a variant of variant of intra-US globalization, i.e., the movement of industry out of the traditionally unionized north into the so called "right to work" states of the south. The anti-union drive has spread to formerly pro-unions states like Wisconsin and Indiana, where the attack on public sector unionism has been particularly vicious. As part of the drive to increase profit rates, taxes on the wealthy and on corporations are driven to the lowest possible levels, resulting in a systematic attack on public workers.

 At the same time, the centralized state has proven essential for the stabilization of capitalism as it undergoes inevitable crises, as shown by TARP, for example. Strong, centralized state powers, especially in the US, are critical for the success of globalization[8].

The rise of the surveillance state has become an integral part of this centralizing process. The nationally coordinated crackdown on Occupy in 2011 is almost certainly a harbinger of the mechanics of future repression.

• **The hollowing out of democracy** - Ellen Meiskins Wood characterized succinctly the two-part strategy of neoliberalism to curtail democracy: "One is to find electoral processes and institutions that will thwart the majority in one way or another. The other—and this is ultimately the most important—is to empty democracy of as much social content as possible"[9] The unlimited use of PAC money in election (exemplified by *Citizens United*), along with the abrogation of voting rights are two of the clearest, relatively

recent examples of this process.

The role of the Democratic Party in the US (and the social democrats elsewhere), has been to provide a veneer of social progressivism to the neoliberal program. These more-or-less reformist parties also buttress the apparent inevitability of the whole project, since no fundamental alternative to neoliberalism is available with the conventional political system.

What is our program?

In 1977, the ISO emerged in the context of the same objective forces that gave rise to the the neoliberal program, albeit on the opposite side of the class divide. While the "Where We Stand" statement does a fine job of articulating our basic principles (and has required only modest changes over the years), it suffers from a high level of generality, lacking the specificity that could be provided by a program. Unlike a statement of principles, a program offers concrete answers to the questions of the day. A program needs to address the specifics of its historical conjuncture. As Max Shachtman (while he was still a revolutionary) stated with admirable clarity, "Only those political parties merit support that stand upon clearly-defined, publicly proclaimed and firmly defended basic principles, and put forward a program for the organization and reorganization of society."[10]

In effect, the ISO program has been both implicit and improvised over time. We raise demands, often in the form of slogans, that match the needs of the moment. While this can be tactically useful, I think there are times when this method fails. In particular, the ISO is now considering initiating election campaigns, after the success of Kshama Sawant. While there is much to be said in favor of electoral work, I find it difficult to envision how we can run a candidate for office without a program on which to stand. It is precisely our program that we should be using to clarify our views to potential voters. In fact, that seems to be the main (if not entire) purpose of a revolutionary socialist running for office. The time to develop a program is before we being an election campaign.

There have been several reasons that the ISO has avoided the question of program, I believe. First, the Trotskyist left has often fetishized program, especially the Transitional Program. This is linked to the problem of sectarianism, where the "correct program" has been a wedge that divide tiny groups from one another. I also believe that program has been postponed by the ISO to some future period, when we can move from being an organization to becoming a party. According to this view, parties need programs, but pre-party formations do not. While there is some merit in each of these views, it is also possible to use the process of developing a program, if done properly, to overcome isolation and sectarian divisions.

7 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_incarceration_rate
8 L. Panitch and S. Gindin, The Making of Global Capitalism, London:Verso, 2012, is a very useful account of the role of the US state in the rise of globalization.
9 Wood, 2006, quoted in Davidson, op cit.

10 M. Shachtman, The Fight for Socialism, New York:New International, 1946, p 7. http://marxists.org/archive/shachtma/1946/ffs/index.htm I recommend this as an exemplary, accessible, exposition of socialist principles.

**Towards a revolutionary socialist
program for the neoliberal era**

For a program to be successful, it must address the realities of its time. The goal of a program is principally to make concrete our social and political vision, and in so doing, to provide a sense of real possibility for its implementation. The absence of this sense of concrete attainability limits our influence outside of narrow, already socialist, circles. Concrete attainability should not be misunderstood as equivalent to the limitation of program to readily attainable reforms. While these are important, we need to assimilate the experience of the early Comintern (and also the Fourth International) in using the transitional method. Since we live in a period qualitatively distinct from either 1921 or 1939, we need to adapt these methods to the problems we face under the neoliberalism..

The one rather general idea that I would like to get across is this: a program for the neoliberal era must counterpose itself concretely to the neoliberal program, but it must also go beyond this. That is, it must make clear our claim that the escape route from neoliberalism leads to socialism, or if we fail, to something even worse than neoliberalism (Engel's and Luxemburg's famous dichotomy[11]). Pointing to the socialist goal remains an abstraction, however, if we cannot also point to a feasible solution to get from our current weakness to some hoped-for future strength. To use the conventional jargon, our program needs to integrate minimal, transitional, and maximal components.

Here then is a brief sketch to help contribute to a discussion of program for the neoliberal era. It is neither complete nor elegant, and reads something like a shopping list of demands and slogans. It may, however, be serviceable in helping to find a starting point for further development. The main topics parallel the principal components of the neoliberal program, as defined previously, and then go beyond them.

• **Socialization, not privatization**[12] - Defend public education and the social wage, including pensions, social security and medicare. For free quality healthcare for all, and for affordable housing and other social services. The large corporations should be socialized under workers control.

• **No to Financialization, socialize the banks** - We call for canceling student and household debt and socializing the banking system under the control of workers and users.

• **International solidarity, not capitalist globalizatio**n - We oppose trade agreement like TPP, which serve profits over people. Freedom for people to cross borders, but not for capital. Full citizenship rights for all foreign workers.

We oppose US intervention and wars for empire. We make common cause with those, like the people of Palestine, who fight for their national rights.

• **End the attack on the working class** - We need to rebuild our unions, beginning with a defense of the right to organize, including card check union recognition. We need to defend our jobs, using tactics like sit-ins, plant occupations, and secondary strikes and boycotts, especially if the bosses threaten to move production. Replace austerity with good jobs at union wages for all. Funding for jobs and education, not for incarceration.

• **Defend our democratic right**s - End government surveillance. Socialize and subsidize the communications media (TV, press). Defend net neutrality. Take the money out of politics – repeal Citizens United, public funding for political parties and election campaigns, including free access to TV and other media. End the district-based "winner take all" system of two-party electoral representation. Build a new workers party that stands for a workers government. For full equality across race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality divisions. Abortion is a women's right

• **Beyond neoliberalism, beyond capitalism** - Climate change is a global existential crisis brought upon us by the capitalist mode of production. Its solution lies in a democratically planned global economy, socialism, that can yield both the widest prosperity and the deepest sustainability.

For a continuing discussion over program

My hope is that we can continue a discussion over program both within and outside of the ISO. The vehicles to do this exist. They include internal discussion bulletins (both before and after the national convention), the readers' comments section of Socialist Worker, articles in ISR, educational meetings at the branch level, and panels at Socialism.

In Alan M's Perspective document, he quotes American Trotskyist James P. Cannon as follows:

"The fate of every political group—whether it is to live and grow, or degenerate and die—is decided in its first experiences by the way in which it answers two decisive questions. The first is the adoption of a correct political program. But that alone does not guarantee victory. The second is that the group decide correctly what shall be the nature of its activities and what tasks it shall set itself, given the size and capacity of the group, the period of the development of the class struggle, the relation of forces in the political movement, and so on. If the program of a political group, especially a small political group, is false, nothing can save it in the end...."[13]

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11 "Friedrich Engels once said: 'Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.'", R. Luxemburg, The Junius Pamphlet, Ch. 1, 1916,
12 Olivier Besançenot makes the useful distinction between socialization and nationalization in From Paris to New York, ISR 82, http://isreview.org/issue/82/paris-new-york

13 James P. Cannon, The Dog Days of the Left Opposition, 1944, marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1944/ht02.htm, quoted in Alan M. Perspectives, Pre-convention bulletin #1, 2013

Curiously, Alan focuses his subsequent comments principally on the second of these questions (regarding activity and tasks), but does not address the first (on program). I, for one, would also like to see Alan (and others as well) to address the relation between program and activity.

I believe Cannon is correct on both counts. We need to create a reciprocal dynamic between program and practice, but that requires that we have a program in the first place.

Rick G., San Diego

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An assessment of the Atlanta branch in light of the Renewal Faction documents

The following document was written in preparation for the Atlanta ISO's December 10 perspectives discussion meeting. The document lays out my analysis of current problems within both the Atlanta branch and the national organization. In preparation for publishing the document in the national pre-convention bulletin, I have made a few minor adjustments to the original text that I sent out to the branch on December 7. With the exception of one minor factual correction, these changes are exclusively stylistic.

Despite the centrality of this claim to the Renewal Faction's appeal, the observation that the ISO is currently undergoing a period of crisis is by no means universally accepted within the organization. This said, a number of recent decisions by the organization's leadership seem to indicate that there is significant disillusionment within all ranks of the organization. For one thing, the leadership has (correctly) asserted that there exists a world-wide crisis in the revolutionary Left. To a great extent, however, the ISO has adopted a defensive approach to trying to understand this problem. This seems to have been the basis for the organization's decision to call for replacing the fall regional conferences with regional "day schools," which centered on reading of a series of well-known texts from the ISO's established canon of Marxist literature.

In the context of this confusion, the Renewal Faction's documents have provided clear evidence that an organization-wide crisis is, in fact, taking place within the ISO. While some of the specific information cited in the group's documents appears to be factual imprecise, the general assertion that, since 2009, a number of debilitating conflicts have taken place in branches across the country is indisputable. As examples of this, the Renewal Faction cites a series of major conflicts that have taken place in the Bay Area, Chicago, New York, Washington D.C., and Boston. Most of these conflicts have resulted in splits or resignations of multiple comrades. In addition, the Renewal Fraction asserts that a number of branches have, in recent years, entered into a period of stagnation and disarray. The cases of Los Angeles, Seattle, and Texas are cited specifically.[14]

Unfortunately, until recently, no one has attempted to explain or understand these developments. The ISO's leadership, it seems, has been inclined to view these events as the result of disparate, local problems. In other incidents, the organization seems to have concluded that this internal conflict is the result of a period of widespread "demoralization" following the demise of Occupy Wall Street. At this point, however, this explanation is wholly inadequate. Continued attempts to deny that the ISO is in crisis have the potential to be catastrophic to the organization.

So what's the cause of the current crisis within the ISO?

The Renewal Faction argues that – among other interrelated causal forces – a primary source of the ISO's recent problems hinges upon the organization's current perspectives analysis, which implies that the 2008 economic crisis marked the start of an "upturn" in class struggle. As part of this claim, the organization has come to argue that the Great Recession and the ruling class's ongoing austerity agenda has triggered a period of "ideological radicalization." The insinuation is that this growing trend appears likely to manifest itself in the form of mounting class struggles.

The problem with these arguments is that, for one thing, they are out-of-touch with reality. There has not, in fact, been an "upturn" in class struggle since the onset of the crisis – particularly not in the United States. What's more, the concept that we are undergoing a period of "ideological radicalization" without a concomitant rise in class struggle is in contradiction with core aspects of dialectical materialism. The Renewal Faction implies that these arguments – as well as other interrelated factors – have contributed to the exacerbation of a number of (previously non-prominent) problems within the organization: a tendency toward idealism; a short-sighted and, at times, volunteeristic approach to movement work; a disinclination to conduct systemic analyses of concrete reality; and a growing detachment from real-world developments.

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[14] ISO Renewal Faction, "The organizational crisis and its political roots." External Bulletin website. The Renewal Faction's claims regarding the ISO branch in Austin, Texas appear to be exaggerated. In their assessment of the recent crisis in the ISO, the group asserts that, "Most of the Texas branches have shrunk significantly or collapsed. In Austin, the oldest Texas branch with the most cadre, a dozen members

have been lost in the last few months." This claim has been refuted by Austin branch member Snehal S. (his Facebook name), who asserts that – in reality – just two members of the Austin branch have actually quit the ISO. (Presumably others have moved away from Austin but retained their membership in the organization). Despite this factual distortion, the Renewal Faction's basic assertion that the Austin branch has recently experienced decline – albeit of a more moderate variety than otherwise claimed – is still true.

As a final note, in contrast to a recent critique written by a group of ex-ISO members from the Bay Area and published in *Counterpunch*, the Renewal Faction upholds the correctness of the ISO's political and theoretical tradition.[15] Thus, they imply that the political degeneration that has taken place recently constitutes a break with the organization's previously sound Marxist underpinnings. This degeneration needs to be corrected.

Crisis in the Southeast

In their exposition of the crisis in the ISO, the Renewal Faction does not make any mention of branch-level conflicts and crises in the Southeast. Nonetheless, the current organization-wide strife has clearly manifested itself here as elsewhere. This was evident at the Southeast regional meet-up during this summer's Socialism 2013 conference in Chicago. During a round-robin discussion session, comrades from a majority of Southern branches implied that they were experiencing disarray and stagnation on a local level. No one used the term "crisis," but most of the Southeast branches were clearly experiencing decline and demoralization. What's more, most comrades seemed to suspect – from what I could tell, anyway – that something was fundamentally wrong with the state of their branch and with their recent organizational approach. Yet no one appeared to be capable of explaining the cause of the problem. On the whole, the few attempts to explain the issues at hand were mostly confined to the claim that this was due to a minor "downturn in struggle." For my part, I attempted to assess the problems that were, at that time, devastating the Atlanta branch by claiming that ongoing austerity was having a destructive personal and economic impact on many members of the organization. This problem, I implied, was manifesting itself in a breakdown of branch routines and basic branch functioning throughout the region. I was well aware at that time that this argument was utterly inadequate. Unfortunately, I lacked the perspective to provide a real political explanation for the crisis within our branch.

This past week, I have begun to develop a far more useful, politically coherent understanding of our recent experiences in Atlanta. I credit my newfound political clarity, above all else, to reading and grappling with the documents by the ISO Renewal Faction. In addition, I have also had a number of enlightening conversations with a former ISO Atlanta comrade, as well as several current comrades from here and elsewhere.

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[15] Roger Dyer, Rachel Morgan, Adrienne Johnstone, Christine Darosa, Andy Libson, and Brian Belknap, "Theory and Practice of Idealism in Trotskyism and the ISO," *Counterpunch*, November 8, 2013. In addition to this article, another group of former ISO members – in this case from Chicago – have recently written a detailed critique of current problems within the ISO. Unlike the ex-comrades from the Bay Area, the Chicago group remains "loyal to the ISO and the politics of International Socialism"; Adam T., Bob Q., Hector R., Loretta C., Rossana R., Saman S., and Sophie H., "Letter To Comrades In the International Socialist Organization (ISO)," *Socialist Outpost* (blog), October 9, 2013.

In light of my newfound clarity, I want to provide a historical exposition and analysis of the ongoing crisis that we've experienced in the Atlanta branch. My point in doing this is, firstly, to remind comrades – least they forget – *that there has been an ongoing crisis of epic proportions within the Atlanta branch*. Through recounting and explaining this crisis, I hope to find a solution capable of moving the branch forward. It goes without saying that I see this local goal as being inextricably linked with the goal of renewing the national organization. Before jumping into this analysis, let me say that I am well aware of the extremely contentious and sensitive nature of this subject within the Atlanta branch. This said, I think Atlanta comrades will find my assessment of recent events to be fair and, above all else, unflinchingly political. This should stand in sharp contrast to the quagmire of personalism and finger-pointing that, until quite recently, has marred any and all attempts on the part of the branch to seriously grapple with our recent history.

Crisis in Atlanta

As near as I can tell, the Atlanta branch has been in a state of crisis and disarray since well before my partner and I moved here in August of 2012. The basic features of this crisis are undeniable. Over the past several years, the branch has seen the departure of several talented members. A few of these ex-comrades have since developed hostile views about the ISO. At least two former members have become involved with (though not joined) other Left groups – one with the Kasama Project and another with the Atlanta Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In addition to these departures, the branch has also seen the drifting away of an untold number of contacts. In the city branch, this includes the exodus of two especially impressive contacts that were originally recruited through our involvement in Occupy Our Homes Atlanta (OOHA). Since cutting ties with the ISO, one of these ex-contacts – a former member of OOHA's staff – has also become involved with Kasama Project. In addition, during the summer, the Atlanta branch saw the mass exodus of the vast majority of the organization's GSU student members. In part as a result of ongoing fallouts with former members and contacts, the Atlanta ISO has developed an increasingly poor reputation within the broader Atlanta Left. Thus, the ISO has come to be viewed with hostility by – among others – Atlanta's anarchist milieu, including a number of the more constructive (less ultra-Left) militants that were previously involved with the collective group SWARM. We've also come to be viewed with distrust by most of the members of the Atlanta IWW. Internally, the Atlanta branch has been stricken by an acute bout of demoralization and burnout over the past year. This fall, two longstanding ISO members made the decision to take leaves of absences from the branch. While the immediate reasons for these temporary departures were personal, the unhealthy and politically-confused nature of the branch (and the broader organization) undoubtedly played a role in pushing both of these comrades to take a break.

In order to understand these developments, it is necessary to explain them in the context of recent branch history. Since

I've only been in the branch for about a year and a half, I will begin this narrative in the fall of 2012. Just prior to our arrival in Atlanta in August of that year, Atlanta comrades had, apparently, made the decision to establish two separate branches – one oriented to the GSU campus and one to the broader Atlanta community. I affiliated with the latter of these two. From the outset, the community branch failed to develop a coherent plan for establishing a presence and embedding itself within the community. The majority of the members of the branch never became involved consistently in any movement work or otherwise integrated into any of the even-changing fracture groups. In addition to the organizational incoherence and the failure to formulate a practical program, the city branches also suffered from a degeneration of internal culture and intellectual life. Basically, branch members became increasingly incapable of engaging in political discussions or disagreeing with each other in a political manner.

What's more, from its inception, the city branch proved incapable of organizing successful public meetings. As I recall, our first public meeting during the fall of 2012 was a generic pitch for socialism, entitled, "World in Crisis, World in Struggle." While the designated speaker gave an excellent talk, the event failed to attract *anyone* outside of current branch members. As I recall, just five people (including the speaker) attended this "public" meeting. Early the next year, we hosted another public meeting, billed, "Ain't No Power Like the Power of the People." The event attracted a single non-ISO member – a self-described anarchist that had previously been friendly with the ISO. Rather than moving closer to the ISO following the meeting, however, this individual seems to have been repelled by the stuffy and intellectually stagnant branch culture on display during the meeting.

By late fall of 2012, growing frustrations over the stagnation within the branch led to an increasingly severe series of conflicts and disagreements between comrades. The first conflict that I can recall came in the period following the 2012 Southeast regional conference. This stemmed from frustration over a lack of democracy and collective input that characterized the planning and preparation for the conference. In December, another minor conflict developed during the Atlanta ISO's district-wide pre-convention discussion meeting, held at a local coffee shop. During the course of the meeting, I became frustrated by the inability of the branch to openly debate political disagreements involving various convention documents. Instead, the branch leadership came into the meeting with an already agreed-to plan over whether or not to support each document proposal. In this way, the ostensibly democratic debate session took the form of "rubber-stamp" democracy. My attempts to raise serious political arguments during the discussion were discouraged multiple times on the grounds that my comments were too theoretically advanced and therefore too confusing to the non-"cadre" members of the branch. In response to this disagreement, I was encouraged by multiple branch members (to their credit) to send out an email to the entire branch outlining my thoughts on the convention documents. While the branch later discussed, in passing, some of the points that I

brought up in my email message during a phone conference call, no one took the time to respond in writing to any of my arguments.

In contrast to the city branch, the GSU campus branch (actually a "twig," at first) experienced an initial period of dramatic success in the fall of 2012. After a successful kickoff meeting, the branch began to attract as many as 15 people to weekly branch meetings, which largely functioning as Marxist study and discussion sessions. By all accounts, these meetings were characterized by a sense of intellectual vibrancy and widespread enthusiasm. In addition, during its first semester, the GSU branch came to have a noticeable ideological impact on broader political debates on campus. Following a well-attended public meeting about women's reproductive rights, GSU's student newspaper, *The Signal,* published an editorial that essentially summarized our central political points on this issue. What's more, the campus branch also played an extremely positive role in coming to the defense of the university's unionized campus bus drivers after they were subjected to an unjustified attack (with possible union-busting intent) in a story published in *The Signal*.

By the end of the semester, five new members had joined the branch. In a 2013 pre-convention document, GSU comrades heralded the semester to be an exemplary success. The document attributed the branch's growth to two tactics, "putting forward a clear political perspective (even during a low point of activity in social movements)" and "maintaining visibility on campus through regular branch routines[.]"[16]

Following winter break, the GSU comrades moved to consolidate their gains through reconstituting the group as a formal ISO branch at the start of the semester. To this ends, the branch implemented standard ISO branch routines and methods and sought to recruit other contacts to officially join the ISO. But despite high expectations, *the campus branch suddenly entered into a period of decline*. Over the course of the semester, many of the student comrades and contacts that had previously flocked to the branch now began to gradually drift away.

In response to this decline, as well as the ongoing stagnation of the city branch, the Atlanta district made the decision to merge the city and campus branches in preparation for the coming summer break. Following this, the consolidated Atlanta branch entered into a period of intense internal conflict –far surpassing any of the previous internecine struggles within the branch. The crisis broke out when the majority of Atlanta members came to a collective decision to confront the branch's two-member leadership group with a series of complaints about the state of the branch. During the ensuing crisis, branch members voiced grievances relating to a lack of internal democracy, intellectual stasis, an inability to debate political ideas, and a narrow definition of "cadre" within the branch. This conflict culminated in the

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[16] Emily G. and Tom G. "Branch Building at Georgia State University (Atlanta, GA)," 2013 Pre-Convention Bulletin #7, February 4, 2013.

decision by the branch leadership to step down. A new three-person leadership group was nominated to take their place. Despite the legitimacy of many of the frustrations raised by branch members during this period, this internal conflict took on many of the trappings of an apolitical personal struggle. Rather than attributing the problems within the Atlanta branch to broader political and organizational issues, much of the discontent came to be pinned on the perceived personal shortcomings of the two branch leaders. Not surprisingly, in the wake of this debacle, the two ousted leaders became demoralized and (understandably) embittered toward other Atlanta members – including members of the branch's new leadership.

Ongoing factional squabbles – as well as the generally unhealthy and directionless nature of the branch – eventually prompted almost all of the remaining new student members and contacts to resign from the ISO en masse during a single meeting at the beginning of the fall semester. While most of the student members explained their decision to quit in non-political terms, their departure was – at least on a subliminal level – motivated by a number of political and organizational concerns. For one thing, the student ex-comrades complained about a lack of democracy within the branch, as well as the branch's increasingly narrow intellectual life. Following this, the branch fell into a state of disarray and confusion for several months. Like their predecessors, the branch's new three-member leadership team also failed to provide adequate political direction to the branch. What's more, because of the role of some of new leaders (most prominently, myself) in the previous crisis, this group was ill-suited to the task of resolving much of the personal acrimony that continued to plague the branch. In retrospect, the inability of the new leadership to resolve the conflicts within the branch – as well the entire protracted conflict in Atlanta – should not be attributed to the personal failings of any individual or set of individuals. This was an organizational problem that stemmed, in part, from a mounting political crisis in the national organization. It's worth noting that, throughout this entire debacle, the district organizer assigned to assist the Atlanta branch played a thoroughly apolitical role. Instead of helping the branch grapple with a series of political problems raised by this crisis, the organizer instead interpreted these events as being the product of a personal conflict. As I recall, he equated our conflicts to "high-school drama." On this basis, he sought to resolve the crisis through mediating personal conflicts between branch members and, in addition, encouraging the branch to nominate a new leadership committee.

As a result of the inability of the new leadership to revive the branch, Atlanta comrades voted in yet another new three-person branch committee. Around a month following this, one of the three members of the new leadership group made the decision to take a break from the ISO. Another comrade was voted on to take his place. Then, in the late fall, yet another member of the branch committee also decided to take a leave of absence from the branch. In light of these trying circumstances, the new branch leadership has done a remarkable job in partially stabilizing the organization. Most notably, this group has helped to soothe over and repair much of the personal conflicts that had infected the branch over the past year. However, like the branch committees before it, this group has also been unable to establish a coherent organizational perspective capable of moving the branch forward.

For the first time in probably a year, the branch has recently experienced some actual discussion about organizational perspectives. Specifically, comrades have debated whether the Atlanta branch should decide to orient to the city or to the GSU campus. While the discussion has been refreshingly free of personal acrimony, it has also been light on political content. On the one side of the debate, I have argued in favor of continuing to meet at GSU but focusing greater energy on developing roots in the working class and orienting to local trade union struggles. For around three months, my thinking on this matter has been influenced by reading Brian C.'s document, "ISO 'city' branches: What are we building?"[17] On the other side of this debate, another comrade (formally of the GSU branch) has argued in favor of focusing our efforts on GSU's campus. As near as I can tell, she favors this approach because it offers the best prospect for short-term recruitment and growth.

How can the ongoing crisis in Atlanta be explained in political terms?

To begin with, much of our problems in the Atlanta city branch clearly stemmed from the ISO's inadequate methodology for building city branches in general. As Brian C. argues, the ISO's approach to branch building is the product of our organization's lineage as a mostly campus-oriented organization. On this basis, we've come to apply a campus methodology onto our efforts to build branches in communities. The problem with this, as Brian C. explains, is that our model is poorly suited to the needs of working-class organizing:

The methods of campus organizing are too general for the workplace. The campus framework can lead socialists in a workplace or city toward abstract propagandism, toward expectations of a much faster timeframe than things usually happen in non-revolutionary periods, toward a tendency to jump on "the next big thing" without a clear sense of the trajectory of the class struggle. What is appropriate and useful on the campus can be distorting and disorienting off the campus.[18]

This certainly describes our experience in Atlanta. Throughout the existence of the Atlanta city branch, we never developed – or even attempted to develop – an understanding of who our audience was or where we intended to draw new members. Connected to this, we also failed to develop a coherent understanding of the structural dynamics at play in Atlanta – thus further handicapping our ability to understand the nature of our potential audience. Finally, we adopted a generic propagandist approach for public meetings that was unappealing to our prospective

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[17] Brian C., "ISO 'city' branches: What are we building?,'" ISO Bulletin #2, September 2013.
[18] Ibid.

audience. This is evinced in the fact that almost no one attended the generically-focused public meetings held by the city branch. The natural byproduct of this inadequate approach was a failure on the part of the city branch to develop or grow in anyway. Not surprisingly, because of this, many of the comrades in the city branch became demoralized.

In addition to inadequate branch-building methods, Atlanta's crisis also stems from political problems within the entire organization. In recent years, the political and theoretical level of the ISO as a whole – and the Atlanta branch within it – appears to have declined precipitously. This relates to the growing disconnect between the organization's erroneous current perspectives analysis – which holds that we are currently on the cusp of an "upturn" in class struggle and experiencing a period of "ideological radicalization" – and the concrete nature of our period. On this basis, comrades have increasingly tended to shy away from reading and grappling with Marxist theory and political economy. In addition to this, the current contradictions in the ISO's approach have also fostered a generally apathetic view of local and regional news and developments on the part of the branch.

In practical terms, drifting away from Marxism and concrete assessments of current events has tended to push us to make decisions based on sheer *personalism*. Thus, the motive for much of our day-to-day activity has become *personal ambition* and *internal competition*. Naturally, this has tended to lead to petty infighting.

In the Atlanta Branch, this was exacerbated by an erroneous understanding of "cadre" that came to govern branch life and decision making. Basically, "cadre" came to be defined as a sort of formal status that one achieved through being in the organization for a long period of time. In contrast to the organization's theoretical understanding of the term, grounded in Leninism, "cadre" morphed into something akin to ISO "black-belt" status. Over time, this understanding led to a breakdown in democracy. The branch came to fetishize the views and opinions of certain branch members solely on grounds of their status as "cadre." To a great extent, this problem appears to have been enforced from above by the district organizer assigned to the Atlanta branch. This isn't to say that he did this out of nefarious intent to stifle branch democracy. As near as I can tell, he was simply attempting to ensure the political development of the ISO in a region that is notorious for its political backwardness. Nonetheless, his habit of encouraging certain comrades to think of themselves as "cadre" members vis-à-vis others who were supposedly "non-cadre" had an extremely negative impact on branch democracy, internal culture, and overall political development.[19]

Historical development of the ISO's current perspectives analysis

In order to further explain my conclusions, I'd like to spend the rest of this document offering a summary and analysis of the core arguments set forth in the ISO Renewal Faction documents.

True to Marxist form, the Renewal Faction sees the current crisis in the ISO as stemming, in part, from the organization's internal historical development. In order to determine the source of the problem, the Renewal Fraction argues that there is a correlation between the onset of conflicts within the organization in 2009 and the outbreak of the Great Recession just prior to that. Thus, they argue that the crisis likely relates to a failure on the part of the ISO to properly understand key structural changes set in motion by the Great Recession. This failure has taken the form of the organization's failed current perspective thesis, which has come to assume that the 2008 economic crisis marked the onset of an "upsurge" in class struggle.

To provide a brief summary of their analysis, the Renewal Fraction traces the origin of this current problem to the ISO's original perspectives analysis, adopted upon the group's founding in 1977. This thesis – originally formulated by Tony Cliff from the British SWP – asserted that the organization was on the cusp of a "downturn" in class struggle. As the Renewal Faction argues, this theory "fell rather short of a characterization of the conjuncture."[20] Nonetheless, they assert that Cliff's thesis "did suggest strategic conclusions that were quite correct." Thus, the "downturn" thesis was an accurate enough reflection of reality to allow for the development of a practical plan that aligned with the structural imperatives of the 1980s. To this ends, the ISO's program came to call for "a shift from agitation to propaganda, a shift from workplaces to campuses, and a rejection of 'regroupment' efforts on the far left."[21]

While the ISO's initial perspectives analysis did much to facilitate the future success of the group, the Renewal Faction makes the case that the ideological legacy of the "downturn" thesis has since become a fetter on the organization's development. This problematic approach to perspectives analysis was entrenched in the mid-1990s, when the ISO formally dropped the "downturn" thesis and, instead, adopted its "transitional period" perspective. This new thesis argued that the decline in class struggle was over and that the future likely heralded an "upturn" in class struggle. This argument – which was reasserted in the center's 2007 pre-convention document – had a profound effect on the organization's interpretation of the 2008 economic crisis. In assessing this development in their 2009 pre-convention document, the center argued (correctly) that the Great Recession constituted the start of a "new era" in the global economy and – by connection – global politics. The "new era" assessment, however, led the ISO to assume this also heralded the advent of the long-awaited "upturn" in class struggle.

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[19] While I do not know of any other specific examples of this, I strongly suspect that the ISO's understanding of "cadre" has developed in similarly destructive ways in other areas as well.

[20] ISO Renewal Faction, "The organizational crisis and its political roots."
[21] Ibid.

Since 2009, the organization's underlying assumptions about this period have led to a growing detachment from concrete reality. As the Renewal Faction asserts, the "upturn" perspective caused "the leadership to profoundly exaggerate the political break with neoliberalism and predict an immediate rise in class struggle; when in fact the break with neoliberal policy has been severely retarded by the persistence of a very low level of class struggle and a still-tiny international radical left." As a result, since 2009, the organization has become subjected to a series of "zig-zags" in organizational and political approach.[22] At times, the "upturn" thesis seemed to bear some resemblance to reality – most notably in 2011, which witnessed the eruption of the Arab Spring, the Wisconsin Uprising, and – later – the outbreak of Occupy Wall Street. These struggles have long since dissipated, however. Worst of all, in the United States, neither the Wisconsin Uprising nor Occupy succeeded in making any substantial advancements in working-class organization. Thus, without consolidating these gains in the form of class organization, the brief jumps in class consciousness triggered by these struggles have largely evaporated. (This said, it is clear that the Occupy Wall Street movement has led to some tactical advancements within the U.S. trade union movement. In particular, Occupy seems to have influenced the tactics that are being utilized by the current low-wage worker organizing campaigns at Walmart and in the fast food industry.)

The last coherent attempt by the center to provide a perspectives analysis came in its 2011 pre-convention document, which predicted the onset of "a wave of public sector union struggles."[23] This has since been proven false. With the sole *major* exception of the Chicago Teachers Union, public sector unions have witnessed wave after wave of defeat in recent years. Following their erroneous 2011 thesis – the Renewal Faction asserts – the ISO's leadership went "into drift mode."[24] At this point, the center now lacks the theoretical and political tools to understand the current moment.

In general, the entire "upturn" assumption has been proven to be erroneous. As already noted, the United States has not experienced a noticeable increase in class struggle. This is an empirically verifiable claim: it can be proven through strike statistics maintained by the Department of Labor.[25] In general terms, the current level of class struggle in the United States is similar to that of the entire neoliberal period, especially the period from the 1990s onward.[26]

As already noted, the ISO's erroneous perspectives analysis has led to an ever-widening gulf between the ISO's understanding of the current period, on the one hand, and concrete reality, on the other. In part as a means to resolve this crisis, the organization has come to adopt a *common sense* assumption that the Great Recession has, nonetheless, led to an upsurge in class consciousness and "ideological radicalization." The logic here is that the ruling class's ongoing austerity campaign has led increased numbers of people to question capitalism. Crucially, this "ideological radicalization" is seen as poised to set in motion an outbreak of class struggle sometime in the future. In many cases, the few notable examples of mass struggle in the United States since 2008 – the Wisconsin Uprising, Occupy, and the CTU strike – have come to be seen as evidence of the way that ideological radicalization is manifesting itself in struggle.

So what's the problem with this argument? For one thing, it's utterly *un-Marxist*.[27] The claim that the United States is currently undergoing a process of "ideological radicalization" and that this process will likely lead to an outbreak of class struggle is contrary to dialectical materialism. To prove this point, the Renewal Faction document quotes extensively from a famous passage in Marx's *The German Ideology,* which concludes by summarizing that "consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness."[28] I encourage all ISO Atlanta comrades to read, re-read, and grapple with this particular passage from *The German Ideology*. To speak for myself, doing this has essentially enabled me to relearn dialectical materialism over the past week.[29]

For the sake of my point here, let me provide a basic outline of Marx's argument. In this passage, Marx sets out to

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] "Work Stoppages Summary," February 8, 2013. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.nr0.htm (accessed December 6, 2013).

[26] The case for using strike statistics to indicate general trends in class struggle is presented in Shaun J.'s first pre-convention document from last year. Among other points, Shaun J. argues that it would not be useful to attempt to adjust strike statistics in order to compensate for other forms of non-economic class

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struggle. The reason for this relates to the fact that "the workplace is the fundamental locus of struggle for the working class; the power of the working class rests, in the final instance, entirely on its ability to stop the production (and turnover) of capital." For this reason, "the disorganization of the working class in the workplace cannot be 'balanced out' by increased activity in the streets – this is like saying that a stalling engine is 'balanced out' by nice tires. Of course the level of 'political' class struggle (movements) may be, at any given moment, more or less independent of the level of 'economic' class struggle (strikes) – but to assert that these levels have become delinked for some twenty years strains the Marxist logic. (If such things were possible, it would not be clear why the anarchist arguments about the 'autonomy' of each struggle from every other are not, after all, correct.) On the contrary, the weakness of the struggle at the point of production underlies the many problems encountered in the social movements, such as the difficulty of sustaining them." Shaun J., "Through which period or we passing?" ISO 2013 Pre-Convention Bulletin #1, January 2, 2013.

[27] My use of the term "un-Marxist" here is not intended as a pejorative put-down. It is a statement grounded in a basic reading of dialectical materialism.

[28] ISO Renewal Faction, "The role of perspectives," External Bulletin website.

[29] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, "Part I: Feuerbach; Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook; A. Idealism and Materialism."

explain his epistemological basis for social analysis. He argues that, in order to accurately conceptualize the world at a given point in development, it is necessary to look at the real-life conditions of society and the actions of people within this society. Conversely, Marx argues, it is impossible to come to an accurate understanding of the world by first reviewing "what men say, imagine, or conceive." (Using this formula, it holds that one cannot come to a Marxist understanding of contemporary society by first analyzing opinion poll statistics or magazine covers.) The reason for this derives from the fact that *people develop ideas through the process of acting upon the world*. Of course, within this schema, people's actions are determined inside the established structural conditions of society.

This phenomenon begins in practice when human beings act upon the world; these actions then alter the already-established conditions (both economic and social) that exist in society – at least in some minor way. After first acting on the world, people then review the results of their actions; they determine whether those actions were conducive toward their needs. Through this latter process, people come to alter their *ideas*. As the Renewal Faction document surmises, "We learn by doing – that is, we do first, then extrapolate the lesson."[30] In turn, these altered ideas serve to influence people's *future actions*. This is what Marx means by stating that, "men who develop their *material production* and their *material relationships* alter their *thinking* and the *products of their thinking* [emphasis added]."[31] Thus, consciousness ultimately emerges and reemerges from people's active involvement in the economic development of material production and the social development of relations of production.

In regard to the current debate within the ISO, Marx's summary of dialectical materialism indicates that *the only basis for the development of working-class consciousness (at least on a collective level) is working-class struggle*. Let me put this in practical terms. The way that workers in a given workplace come to be collectively conscious of their interests as a group is through the experience of engaging in collective acts of resistance in opposition to the boss. In cases when these acts of resistance are successful – an outcome that's usually facilitated by the assistance of established trade unions – workers are inclined to come to the conclusion that it's in their interest to engage in struggle. As the famous labor slogan goes, they come to the conclusion that, "Direct action gets the goods." (This is the essence of what Lenin called "trade-union consciousness.") From a broader perspective, it holds that, in order for workers to become class conscious on a mass level, it will require a period of widespread, sustained class struggle.

With this in mind, the current assumption that, prior to struggle, workers are already in the process of becoming radical on an ideological level needs to be discarded. Such a notion could be termed "dialectical idealism." It should not be confused with dialectical materialism. The increasing

entrenchment of this idea within the organization has led to a widespread degeneration on the part of the organization's understanding of Marxist theory. Sad to say, one of the best examples of this degeneration comes from something that I wrote as part of a Facebook discussion with a former ISO Atlanta comrade on November 27 of this year – just before I came across the Renewal Faction documents. At one point in the debate, I attempted to offer an explanation of my understanding of "the role of ideas within the class struggle." My statement is fraught with idealism:

Workers are bound to enter into struggle whether or not they're aware of what they're doing. The role of revolutionaries is to help drive the class struggle forward by arming workers with the political ideas that reflect the material interests of the working class as a whole. The way this is done is through engaging in struggle alongside workers and the oppressed; this provides the basis for the formation of political ideas that help drive the struggle forward and, by connection, the propagation of such ideas.

So how does one arrive at revolutionary political ideas? These are derived, in part, from accumulated bodies of revolutionary theory. Such theory is a historical product of continuous assessments of concrete reality. Over time, revolutionary theory has crystallized into a body of thought that exists independent of empirical data. (The highest expression of such revolutionary theory is dialectical materialism). Such theory provides a means by which to make sense of reality. Understanding reality, in turn, provides a means by which to effectively act upon the world. Assessments of the effectiveness of such actions then provide a means by which to gauge the validity of ideas and praxis.

Practical ramifications

The ISO's erroneous perspectives analysis and its increasingly idealistic counterpart has contributed to a number of practical problems within the organization. In "The role of perspectives," the Renewal Faction makes the case that the ISO has – partially as a result of its perspectives analysis – adopted a practical program that has come to focus primarily on pinpointing "'next steps' and 'immediate opportunities.'"[32] In general, the organization's approach to both movement work and Party-building has become characterized by short-term searches for "low-hanging fruit." As a result, the ISO has become increasingly prone to aimless movementism and, worst of all, volunteerism. As the Renewal Faction puts it, the ISO has come to emphasize "only the possibilities, successes and positives" within movement struggles. That is, we've become prone to "movement cheerleading."[33] This problem is directly connected with the organization's increasingly noticeable disinclination to conduct systematic assessments of concrete situations. We've come to ignore the concrete realities that define the stakes, the potential, and the structural implications of our movement work – or, for that matter, the broader historical *moment* in which we're

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[30] ISO Renewal Faction, "The role of perspectives."
[31] Marx, quoted in Ibid.

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

operating. Thus, rather than basing our assessment on real possibilities and limitations, we've adopted a strategy based on wishful-thinking.

What's the basis for this? Rather than attributing this solely to the recent problems in the organization's political perspectives, the Renewal Faction makes the case that much of the problem actually stems from the "goal" that the organization has come to adopt for movement work in general. This goal, the Renewal Faction asserts, "seems to be to keep the membership activated and (ultimately) trained, so that when the big struggles break out, comrades will be tested and steeled and able to act decisively."[34] On this basis, a disconnect has developed between the ISO's directionless short-term approach and its long-term goal of building for a workers' revolution.[35] The nature of this

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[34] Ibid.
[35] While the Renewal Faction does not mention this, the contradiction between long-term and short-term goals within the ISO has undoubtedly been present – at least as a partial tendency – for much of the organization's existence. For one thing, elements of this problem are clearly evident in the 1987 book, *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, written by a group of socialists connected to the British SWP and other IST groups. The book was originally published by the SWP's press, and several additions have since been published by Haymarket Books over the past decade. Thus, this book has occupied a position of prominence in the ISO's canon of theoretical literature for some time.

   To summarize, the book takes the form of a series of case studies about five different revolutionary situations during the latter half of the twentieth century – France, 1968; Chile, 1972; Portugal, 1974; Iran, 1979; and Poland, 1980. As a core thesis, the authors argue that the reason why each of these revolutionary struggles failed to bring about a socialist transformation of society relates to the absence of an organized political group – a revolutionary Party – capable of pushing the movement forward at the pivotal moment. In contrast with the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, there existed no Party or group in these five cases capable of calling for the organized overthrow and the seizure of the State apparatus.

   While I agree with the general flux of this assertion – that a socialist revolution requires a revolutionary socialist Party – I have become increasingly critical of some of the implications inherent in the way this argument is presented in *Revolutionary Rehearsals*. Most notably, the book fails to adequately explain the role that the Left must play *prior* to the outbreak of a revolution situation. In all of the historical case studies presented in the book, the organized Left had been closely involved and integrated in the trade union movement and other working-class and popular organizations for decades. Indeed, the Left played an essential role in building each country's trade union movement in the first place. The book fails to discuss this, however. In this way, the authors seem to imply that the Party only plays a role in the movement once the revolutionary situation arrives in full form. This analysis thus ignores the dialectical relationship that exists between the class struggle and the organized Left.

   As a final point, it should be acknowledged that one of the reasons for these shortcomings stems from an attempt to reject the undemocratic and patronizing tendency – still predominate in the Left in the 1980s – to see the working class as playing a largely passive role in socialist revolution. According to this

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disconnect has led to an inability to perceive how short-term movement work fits into a broader picture or organizational goal. Without any concrete idea of where we're headed or why we're headed there, the ISO's movement work has naturally become shortsighted and "structurally biased against having an accurate reading of the world and strategy that flows from that."[36] The current perspectives analysis of the period has clearly contributed to this problem. Since this analysis is out-of-touch with reality, it has tended to confuse and discourage attempts to develop a concrete analysis of real developments. In addition, the very notion that we're undergoing a collective "ideological radicalization" has tended to imbue the entire organization with unfounded wishful thinking. We've come to expect that, sometime sooner or later, the next upsurge in struggle will magically materialize before our eyes.

This is certainly true of the Atlanta ISO's approach to movement work. To provide one example, over the past year, our work within the housing justice coalition Occupy Our Homes Atlanta has been characterized by high levels of enthusiasm and dedication on the one hand, and an inadequate structural assessment of the broader context within which we're operating, on the other. Indeed, despite being involved in the housing movement for over a year, the Atlanta branch never attempted to make any analysis whatsoever of the structural nature of the housing crisis in Atlanta. As a result of this failure, the branch became incapable of adequately understanding the limitations and potentialities of the housing justice movement. Instead, we accentuated the positive. During branch meetings, the primary point that both members of the OOHA fraction tended to emphasize in our report-backs usually related to our excitement about engaging in struggles with an inspiring group of Black working-class homeowners. Outside of this, the branch OOHA fraction developed one primary strategic analysis in the movement: this was a limited "rank-and-file" critique of OOHA's paid staff. In sum, we argued that organization's staff had become a fetter to organizational democracy and, on this basis, the growth of the housing justice movement. While our critique of OOHA staff's undemocratic tendencies was justified and correct, the problem with our analysis was that it failed to adequately comprehend that it was (and still is) *structurally inconceivable* for the housing justice movement to develop into a mass movement in this period. This is likely to be the case for some time. Because of the relatively limited potential of the housing justice movement, our ongoing, principled opposition to OOHA's staff increasingly came to take on the character of ultra-Leftism.

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view, the revolution would be characterized, above all else, by the violent seizure of power by a vanguard party acting in the name of the working class. Thus, within the context of the 1980s political milieu, *Revolutionary Rehearsals* was a well-needed corrective to the erroneous distortions of Marxism propagated by Stalinism and Maoism. During the current period, however, I would argue that the understanding of revolution and class struggle presented in this book has ceased to be useful. Colin Barker, ed., *Revolutionary Rehearsals* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2002).
[36] Ibid.

In a broader sense, the ISO's detachment from real-world political reality is evident in the utter disinterest that the Atlanta branch has developed in regard to local news. While several branch comrades apparently follow local news (though many do not), there has been virtually no effort on the part of the branch to incorporate discussions of local events into our formal weekly meetings. Out of all of my frustrations with Atlanta branch life, this is likely my greatest. I've often wondered how the branch will ever be able to play a meaningful role in political or social struggles in Atlanta if we're uninformed and disinterested about our city's structural conditions and history. One of the most problematic aspects of our approach to local news is the tendency to dismiss reading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* out of hand on the basis that it's a reactionary newspaper with conservative politics. While this is undoubtedly correct, such a critique is equally valid – albeit in varying degrees – of every single major daily newspaper in the entire country. Indeed, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is – just like other dailies – a bourgeois newspaper. To expect it to adopt an editorial standpoint that isn't bourgeois would be utterly idealistic. But the point of reading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* is not to obtain ideological guidance. Rather, it's to develop an understanding of Atlanta's political, economic, and social dynamics. Only through applying our skills as Marxists to understanding real-world developments will we ever be able to formulate a practical program for building the movement in our city.

As a final point, the Renewal Faction notes that there is also a partial *class basis* for the ISO's problematic approach to movement work and its tendency to create over-inflated perspectives analyses. This relates to the ISO's predominantly student and campus orientation and its general lack of working-class roots. Notably, it is true that a substantial portion of the group's members are workers. However, the ability of these members to contribute to the overall political synthesis of the ISO is limited – in large part as a result of the ISO's "routines and methods," which are explicitly oriented toward building campus branches and recruiting student members. On this basis, the ISO's orientation to student members has tended to result in an approach that overemphasizes propaganda work – the very nature of which tends to lead to excessive optimism. As this Renewal Faction asserts, this is due, quite simply, to the fact that "a realistic assessment of low levels of class struggle[…] does not lead to exciting, energizing propaganda."[37]

This isn't to say that the current flaws in the ISO are the deterministic product of *petite-bourgeois deviations* arising solely from the organization's student social base. Rather, this simply means that there's a connection between our current dilemmas and the social content of the organization. It is undeniable that the ISO's overwhelming orientation to students tends to produce a political synthesis that can be distorting. It holds that one of the ways to resolve our current problems will be through establishing a plan for building the ISO's roots within the working class.

Let me conclude by stating that there are many more ideas that I want to express on this subject. Over the past week, it's felt as if I've been born-again as a Marxist and a revolutionary. I credit this development, in no small part, to the ISO Renewal Faction. With this in mind I sincerely hope that I can convince Atlanta comrades of the essential correctness of the arguments put forth by the Renewal Faction. I look forward to discussing this and other matters with everyone during our December 10 perspectives meeting.

Ben S., Atlanta

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[37] Ibid.