

Pre-convention Bulletin #12 / January 21, 2013

for members only

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Inside This Bulletin

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

The national convention is the organization's highest decision-making body. It is our main opportunity to generalize the experience of local branches across the whole organization, review and assess the ISO's work over the past year and map out our tasks for the coming year. The convention also elects the ISO's national leadership bodies. Convention delegates are elected by local branches at a ratio of one delegate for the first five dues-paying members, and one delegate for every eight dues-paying members thereafter.

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

Every member should be involved in the pre-convention discussions that will take place in the coming months in order to ensure the fullest and most democratic debate possible. Branches should hold discussions of documents and debates as necessary between now and the convention date.

All members who are in good standing are invited to contribute documents and/or resolutions to the pre-convention discussion bulletins. We will produce as many bulletins as necessary. Please try to keep your contribution to 2,000 words or less. We can make exceptions to this rule for documents on major political issues, but experience has shown that comrades are far less likely to read a longer document than a shorter one on most subjects. So the shorter your document is – and the sooner it arrives – the more likely it will be read and considered by the largest number of members.

Your branch can choose to hold pre-convention discussions at branch meetings or as events separate from branch meetings. **Please be sure, however, to limit all pre-convention discussions (and documents) ONLY TO DUES-PAYING MEMBERS OF THE ISO.**

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

Strategies for Leading in the Labor Movement: Some Ideas . . .

This document is an attempt to assess approaches to our work in the labor movement as organized socialists and lay out a framework for how to move forward with our work in unions. It is not intended to be comprehensive and applicable to all areas of labor work nationally but rather the beginning of a conversation about what we have learned and what kind of labor struggles we can help lead in the current period.

*In order to keep this document (relatively) brief and easy to read it has been organized using sub-headings and does not include that many specific examples of labor struggles except where relevant for explanation and clarification purposes. I use examples from own experience being a member of the organizing team in Berkeley Federation of Teachers, a progressive, fairly militant union of around 950 members who teach preK through adult school learners in a public schools setting. **It is the intention that through the preconvention period and beyond comrades engaged in labor work around the country will be able to weigh in on this conversation.***

Starting point: We need to rethink the “rank and file strategy” and the role of elected leadership positions in unions.

For years ISO members have been putting strategic ideas into practice without clearly putting forward a new analysis of the “rank and file strategy” which has been associated not only with our tradition in the ISO but with the entire radical left in the trade union movement. The rank and file strategy in essence is the idea that socialists in unions should focus their energy primarily on rank and file members in order to build union power from the base up. This is often interpreted as positioning ourselves inevitably as challengers to union “bureaucrats” who because of their positions as class mediators will naturally be pulled in more conservative directions than the workers. This is a very crude outline of the strategy and to read more in depth about it check out the *Rank and File Strategy* pamphlet by Kim Moody and an article that gives a summary at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/rankandfilestrategy>). This theoretical framework has been put forward by other left groups, specifically Solidarity and their labor leaders in Labor Notes, and while it has not been officially adopted by the ISO it has certainly guided some aspects of our labor movement work for the last 15 years. To be totally clear: I believe the ISO has had a consistent policy of ongoing analysis of our work in the labor movement and has been attempting to figure out how best to lead it. We have not sat back and waited for the rank and file to do something and then engaged in struggle, we have tried to foment struggles where they have already begun but also not been shy about initiating them. However, I believe the ideas of the ranks of file strategy have had a disorienting effect overall on the left of the labor movement and we have not been immune to those effects as labor organizers. The problem with this framework in my opinion is that it on the one hand overestimated the level of struggle we would see among the rank and file in our unions and simultaneously underestimated the devastating, long term effect the decimation of the left over the last 25 years has had on the labor movement.

Some of the debates we have had about members running for elected office have been shaped by this theory and we still continue to talk about whether or not we have a strong enough base in the rank and file in order to become leaders in our unions. What we have seen transpire over the last few years is that sometimes a small group of committed leaders can take over and reshape a union. These new leaders need to consist of people beyond just the ISO and have a shared vision. This core leadership also needs to have as a goal constant expansion of leadership who can move the union in a more militant and progressive way. We have seen in practice a few people in leadership can actually activate the rank and file in the absence of spontaneous, independent struggle from the bottom up. This was most clearly demonstrated by the two year organizing plan that ISO members and allies in the Chicago Teachers Union carried out to prepare for and win the strike in the fall of 2012. Currently some key ISO members are either in elected offices or seeking elected offices in their unions. This represents a significant difference from a few years ago when there was open debate about whether it would ever make sense for a member to run for an official union position

without coming out of a large, well-organized base of rank and file members, typically in the form of a caucus. This is not to say that those who seek office now or are currently in elected positions are not always trying to advance the organization and militancy of the rank and file but rather to point out that the process for doing this is not linear. Through progressive leadership and good strategies for winning struggle union leaders can inspire the rank and file to fight back when they have not yet done so independently.

Class Struggle Unionism: What is it and how do we do it?

For a more in depth look at what class struggle unionism is read the great Socialist Worker article by Megan Behrent at <http://socialistworker.org/2012/12/18/class-struggle-unionism-returns>. Essentially class struggle unionism is a model based on struggle, on class solidarity, and on linking union struggles with movements and for social justice. In teacher union work this is about acknowledging that our workplaces are where education happens for working class kids and families and that together we can fight around larger issues of progressive education reform. Class struggle unionism is in contrast to the service model or business model of unionism which describes an approach whereby unions aim to satisfy members' demands for resolving grievances and securing benefits through methods other than direct grassroots-oriented pressure on employers. Class struggle unionism is about truly organizing around the slogan "an injury to one is an injury to all," where the union helps to lead fights around issues that affect the entire working class, in addition to maintaining their own contracts.

In my union, Berkeley Federation of Teachers, the transition to a class struggle unionism model over the last few years has not been without its challenges and pitfalls. We have learned it is a long term project which requires a strong core leadership that can carry out new ways of organizing, train layers of people in methods of struggle and have a shared vision for where the union is going. In our union this has been a real project that has required the creation of new tools, new roles for our leadership teams and made us increase our school sites' capacity to handle contract enforcement and grievance issues. The prioritization of organizing around larger class issues has meant that our messaging in our contract campaign has changed and that the work of all of our members has shifted. Some members have complained about the lack of resources centrally allotted to grievance and contract issues and we have had to convince people that the larger fight around public education is worth our time and energy and will affect all our job conditions and contracts moving forward. Our messaging about seeing the whole forest not just each individual tree has overall been well-received and also activated new, younger members who were frankly frustrated by some aspects of the business model of unionism and want to organize around social and educational justice issues. At the same time some of our members have pushed back on this change and have articulated that we should simply look out for ourselves and our concerns and not take on larger fights. I have certainly learned a lot about transitions and process and the time, relationships and politics required to bring as many people along with you into a totally new way of doing things.

The following ideas are meant to lay out a potential framework for thinking about how we organize and implant ourselves in our unions as socialists, help to rebuild a fighting labor movement where we can and implement a strategy of class struggle unionism.

Key Idea #1: It is important that we define leadership and we understand how to be leaders and recognize and train the next layer of leaders.

In my years in the labor movement I have heard many times the use of the term *bureaucrat* to describe anyone elected to union leadership positions. While this term is certainly correct in describing most union leaders, especially at the national and international level, the term does not always apply to local leaders and in fact sometimes flattens a real analysis of who our local leaders are and how we work with them (or against them) on particular issues. It is also the case that we have ISO members and allies in leadership positions in some very large locals like CTU and SEIU 1021, and it would be incorrect to call those individual union bureaucrats.

So what kind of leadership do we want to help build and be part of in the union movement? First of all, many of us in unions have been engaged in long term implantation and building class struggle unionism already. We have learned a lot about what class struggle unionism really means and how to bring as many

people as possible with us in that work. For the sake of brevity I want to focus on what it means to actually lead in our unions, both in official elected leadership capacity and in building worksite organization and militancy.

I want to use an analogy about how to teach someone a new language to describe one model for building broader leadership among our members in our union work. When someone is learning a new language it is critical that you assess where they are in their learning: are they brand new or do they have they had some exposure already etc.? From there your instruction is based on the idea of the formula $i + 1$ which means you should only be adding one new input to what they already know and not trying to inundate them with too much new information because it is overwhelming and won't stick. I believe leading in our unions should follow a similar pattern. Start with where people are at, either small groups at a single work site or more comprehensively the general membership in your local, and then figure out what is the next step beyond that we can get the most people to do. Getting folks to leaflet after school to parents, for example, is a great first step for having many members engaged in contract campaign work. It is based where they are at (literally at their sites) and has the potential for building up people's confidence from talking to parents they already know who are most likely to be supportive. The next step once that happens could be to get people out to protest at a school board meeting or to a community leafleting activity—it requires more effort and can be a more hostile environment—so you may not want to start with that as an ask for people who are not actively engaged already. Having regular site meetings is another way to get people involved and build political cohesion and confidence. The idea of escalating action and activity is critical in things like contract campaigns and requires leadership strategies that meet people where they are at and then move them beyond that, ultimately to be prepared to do something as intense as going on strike to win if necessary. We talk about this work in our union as “low” to “high” intensity, the idea that you can't be on full blast all the time but you need to work up to it and bring large numbers of people with you. It is also critical that we see leadership as connected to education efforts. There are a lot of big things being discussed in the labor movement right now: fight for 15, reclaiming public education, universal healthcare vs. Obamacare, and it is critical that we know what is going on and have something to say about it. This means keeping up with what both our unions and other sources are saying, bringing this information into our locals and weighing in on critical debates whenever possible in trade publications, *Socialist Worker* and beyond.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of leadership is training new leaders. We should not go into any fights or positions of leadership alone but we also should not be satisfied with the current core of leaders in our unions, no matter how great or many they are. Our role is always to be creating new union leaders who are educated in the politics and strategies of class struggle unionism. This takes time and effort and if we don't see expanding the core as a critical part of our work we will not be leading effectively. In my local we have had a project of training new site reps each year and this year over 1/3 of our executive board is composed of new, young teacher site reps. In order to support these new leaders we decided to run an all-day training for them that would cover both the basics of being a site organizer, like creating a communication network etc., as well as giving them an overview of our strategic plan around developing a quality education agenda and reaching out to the community. The cohort of teachers who came to the training left with both concrete ways to better organize and lead at their site and a more comprehensive idea of where our union is headed and why we are engaging in class struggle unionism fights and linking them to our contract campaign.

Key Idea #2: We have to have ongoing, nuanced, and collaborative assessments of our union work and abandon one-size-fits-all strategies.

In order to know both what the $i + 1$ is within your worksite or local and to know who the next layer of leaders are you need to develop you need to have a good assessment of your local union. In order to figure out broader areas of focus like how to relate to things like the fight for 15 or “the schools our students deserve” work across a region like the Bay Area we need to have good assessments of multiple unions. In order to determine whether or not it makes sense to run for elected leadership positions or once elected how best to leverage your position you need to have good assessment of your influence and base of support within your local. Obviously it is critical to have good assessment of our labor work at multiple levels—so what exactly are the components of a good assessment?

I think the starting point is to evaluate a couple of key factors using the following questions about your own local:

- What is your local's general trajectory in relation to class struggle unionism?
- Who is the core leadership in your local and where are they in terms of building class struggle unionism and militancy?
- What is your relative influence in relation to the existing leadership?
- Is there a core of allies you work with who understand class struggle unionism and want to build it? What is their relative influence in relation to the existing leadership?
- What are the challenges to building class struggle unionism in your local? What are some of the arguments members have raised about work of the union?

In terms of more regional assessments here are some questions we need to address:

- Who are the major players in the regional labor movement? What are their positions on class struggle unionism? Is there a local labor council and what is your local's relative influence within it?
- Who are key allies around class struggle unionism and are they in positions of influence?
- Is there a formal or informal network of progressive or left labor folks in your area? Are ISO members connected and known in this network? How are we helping lead it or build it?
- What are key regional fights that could unite multiple unions around a common issue?
- What locals may be going on strike or are engaged in contract campaigns that we want to relate to and build solidarity with in our locals?

In the bay area we have been using these kinds of questions to both assess our individual work and our collective work in building a network of progressive labor contacts across unions. We have found that it is critical to be specific in our assessments and also move away from the idea that one-size-fits-all in setting perspectives. For example, while we have certainly learned a lot from CTU and their process for building towards a successful strike, we cannot simply transpose their work onto all our teacher union work. We need to figure out what lessons are most applicable and what the forces are on the ground in our locals as well as what are the specifics of the relevant political fights. We are not facing massive school closures, for example, in my local but we do have a real fight against racism in our schools that is defined by an ever-widening "achievement gap." In our ISO district labor fraction we have been discussing local campaigns related to fight for 15 as well as how each of our teacher union locals are working on projects related to the schools our students deserve. In some cases we come together on unified fights and other times we take some of these broader ideas and lessons and tailor for the work we are doing as individuals in our locals. It seems clear that there are some broad trends happening nationally in the labor movement but in order to really be relevant in our local struggles we need to know a lot more about what is happening in the specifics unions and regions where we are based and have influence. This requires all kinds of inputs and data and research as well as going out there and doing things like building relationships with key fighters in our areas of work and more. This hard work and assessment is best done collectively where other ISO members can support one another and figure out how to move forward.

Also, it is the case in the bay area like other places that our union work is very uneven. We have some locals with very progressive leadership, some where we hold leadership positions and others where we are actively trying to organize in opposition to conservative leaders. We have found that having collective assessments and conversations has helped to support members whatever their situation. We have also been able to leverage our strength in one union to build joint events and support smaller pockets of activists in more conservative locals. The team approach to labor work has also meant the conversation around those questions listed above are brought regularly into our branch meetings as well. Labor work can no longer be something separate from our branch work but rather be a place for collective education, assessment and leadership through our organization as socialists. It has been very helpful for both labor and non-labor

comrades to have regular district union members meetings and then use those to set leads around our work that are discussed in our branches.

Key Idea #3: We need to build progressive labor networks locally and nationally.

We are at a critical point in the public sector labor movement. Either new strategies, like class struggle unionism, will begin to take hold or we are literally doomed to go the way of private sectors unions like the UAW where business unionism, concessions and shrinking memberships have decimated what was once the most powerful union in the United States. It is important that we begin to knit together the people around us locally and nationally who want to fight back and help change the “business as usual” approach to union work.

In our teacher union work we have begun to see a national picture where small but growing groups of progressive union members and leaders have looked to CTU and the Seattle MAP test boycott and build a larger movement to take back public schools from corporate education reform. This political fight has produced connections between self-identified teacher union radicals and has helped to energize a number of younger union members and get them involved in local organizing efforts. It feels like a radical teacher union cadre, that includes many ISO members, are identified as national leaders in how to build class struggle unions that connect the racist attacks on our schools and students to the work of our unions. In my local the profile of the ISO is very high not just because of my work as an individual but because people identify these leading teacher activists from around the country with our organization. The exec board members in my local are familiar with *Socialist Worker* articles about fighting corporate education reform and attacks on teachers’ unions and Jesse S. from CTU coming to speak last year in Berkeley launched in earnest our transformation towards real class struggle unionism and began our work on a quality education agenda. We used a video featuring MORE members in our site rep training this winter. My experience has taught me that we need to capitalize more on this and use our work collectively to both build the profile of the ISO and help rebuild the radical left in our unions.

In addition to building the ISO as an organization we have a responsibility to help rebuild a progressive, radical wing in the labor movement. In the Bay Area our local labor salons have been a place where we are beginning to connect people across sectors and unions who share radical politics and want to come together to talk about things like how to build class struggle unionism and how to fight to reclaim our vision of public education. This kind of long term relationships building that seeks to fill some of the vacuum left by the decimation of the left in the labor movement over the last few decades is critical work that we must be a part of locally and nationally. Participating in Labor Notes conferences, hosting labor salons, writing for publications other than SW and ISR (though also continuing to write and distribute those) are all ways we can begin to knit together progressive union activists and build struggles that extend beyond a single local or location. We need to continue to create a core of radicals who will fight not just as union members but as union members who can lead larger fights in the working class.

-Dana B., Oakland, CA

Socialists in unions today – the question of leadership

In the past several years, ISO members working in unions have found ourselves in a radically changing environment. Obama’s presidency and the global financial crisis have simultaneously muted labor politically, while renewing an offensive on the very foundation of the remaining labor movement – the public sector. Body blow after body blow has been levied on working class organization, whether it’s Right to Work appearing in the North for the first time, the destruction of employer provided healthcare, or the systematic elimination of pensions. Sometimes these concessions are procured through legislation, sometimes through bargaining, while other times through bankruptcy proceedings or other legal maneuvers. Sometimes these concessions are sold as a two-tier system (or “eating your young” as it is sometimes called) or rammed through simply because no alternative is provided.

In the face of this widespread assault, with some notable exceptions, the bulk of the existing union leadership has been unable to respond. In addition, again with some notable exceptions, independent, large-scale rank-and-file opposition to this assault is for the most part absent. At the same time, the apparatus of some unions, once tightly controlled, highly organized machines of bureaucratic self-perpetuation, have been severely weakened. So much so that small groups of committed activists, often times revolutionary socialists in coordination with larger layers of militants, have been successful at running for leadership positions of union locals and using those positions to transform the political nature of these unions. I would add that the quantitative and qualitative growth in the ISO's cadre within labor work has also developed alongside these new opportunities. The result has been that we are faced with new strategic and tactical questions related to these new circumstances. This document is an attempt to articulate and grapple with some of these new questions. Namely, the question of "What is a rank-and-file strategy?" has re-emerged for many comrades in this work. In this document, I hope to provide some background, from my admittedly limited understanding, of what our approach to these questions has been historically, what some of our concrete experience has been in recent years, and what are some criteria we could use in making decisions about running for office and similar questions. Comrades with more extensive personal experience or knowledge of these matters, please correct any factual errors that I am probably going to make.

What is the rank-and-file strategy?

The overall goal of socialists in the organized trade union movement is to meet radicalizing workers and win them to revolutionary socialist politics and to develop strategies in the workplace and within the trade unions to fight the employer class. The strategies necessary to accomplish these overall goals vary greatly in different contexts and political periods. The central question is always what is going to increase to confidence, consciousness, militancy, and organization of working class people. All of these dynamics are interrelated and interdependent.

The concept of a "rank-and-file" strategy comes to the ISO most directly from the work of the International Socialists (US) and the Socialist Worker's Party (UK) in the trade union movements during the 1970s. According to Joel Geier, a leading figure in the IS (US), and current member of the ISO steering committee, the method developed from that period was based theoretically on:

- 1) The Comintern discussions on trade union work, specifically the intervention against "left communism", which succeeded in steering the socialists and other left trade unionists in the US away from dual unionism.
- 2) The work of the CPUSA's Trade Union Education League in the 1920s, specifically the work of William Z. Foster, in adapting the Comintern's approach to conditions in this country.
- 3) The work of the American SWP during the 1930s, specifically the Minneapolis Teamster Strike of 1934.
- 4) The work of the Worker's Party, who organized rank-and-file organization within a number of unions during WWII and throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

The need for a rank-and-file strategy comes from three general conditions. One, that a country is economically developed enough to have a sizeable legal trade union movement and therefore has sufficiently developed, entrenched layer of trade union officials. Two, that said country is in a non-revolutionary period where fundamental structural and ideological crisis within the political and economic structures are more or less non-existent or in their early stages. And three, which follows from and contributes to the previous conditions, the size and influence of revolutionary socialist politics and organization is insufficient to challenge the entrenched trade union bureaucracy for leadership and control over trade unions.

For most of the 20th century up to the present, all three of these conditions were and are true in both the United States and Great Britain. In terms of the sheer scale, influence, and political conservatism of the trade union bureaucracy, the United States has historically been unmatched, with Great Britain coming a

close second. What the Comintern understood to be the task for trade unionists in Germany and Italy in the 1920s, where mass communist parties organically had the allegiance of whole sections of the organized working class, could not be true for the US and the UK. But because the importance of working within “reactionary” trade unions was imperative and because the communist parties did not have the size and influence among workers to challenge the bureaucracy, a rank-and-file strategy had to be developed. This took the form of the Trade Union Education League in the United States (TUEL) and the Minority Movement (MM) in Britain, both of which led significant strikes and other struggles during this period and massively increased the size and influence of the revolutionary left in those countries. (1,2)

In 1934 in the CP adopted the Popular Front Strategy, which compelled alliances with reformists organizations around the world. Although many rank-and-file activists and sympathizers didn’t get the memo right away, by the late 1930s, the CP’s trade union strategy was to orient and ally with “progressive” trade union leaders and the Democratic Party. Practically, this meant an orientation on the bureaucracy of the emerging industrial unions and the newly formed CIO. It was up to the small and isolated Trotskyist groups to continue a consistent rank-and-file strategy and they did so throughout the 1930s, famously leading the Minneapolis Teamster strike in 1934 and leading a mass working class movement in that city for the next decade. (3) The same was true during the WWII and in post-war strike waves. The Trotskyists were the only left groups to resist the no-strike pledges during the war, which the CP zealously supported, and were also the only left groups to help cohere the resistance to the massive leap in the bureaucratization of the labor movement in the decades to follow. Militants in the Workers Party, including Anne Draper, Steve Zeluck, Archie Goldberg, Rube Singer, and Stan Weir were key rank-and-file organizers and strategists during this period, who also provided much needed continuity between that period and the beginnings of the rank-and-file upsurge of the 70s. (4)

The IS (US) continued this approach as a rank-and-file upsurge was developing in response to industrial speedups flowing from a weakening post-WWII boom. As did the SWP, with their approach to building the Shop Stewards movement in the UK, which heavily influenced the US comrades, as the UK movement was larger and socialist influence much deeper. The IS (US) helped formed and coalesce rank-and-file formations in steel, auto, communication workers, in the Teamsters (transport workers), and several other industries, helping to build (and even call) strikes whether officially sanctioned or not. There were ongoing debates within the IS throughout this time about the role of socialist propaganda and politics within the trade union work. In the early 70s, a number of the rank-and-file groups took a variety of positions against racism, sexism, the war in Vietnam, and other more “political” demands. But the recession of the mid-70s dealt a death-blow to the nascent rank-and-file movements and the growing conservative conclusions of the IS’s periphery had reverberations back through the organization. This debate formed the basis for a split in the organization. The two groups to emerge from this split were the ISO, who became more closely aligned with the International Socialist Tendency, and Solidarity.

A few things to note from this very brief historical sketch. First, many of the important battles in the 20th century labor movement would not have happened without the breaking of dual unionism as a strategy and the development of the rank-and-file strategy within existing unions. Second, in all of the organizations and movements, running for elected office was always a component of challenging the bureaucracy, in particular at the local level. This happened in the early Socialist Party, TUED, in Minneapolis, in the work of the Worker’s Party, up through the rank-and-file upsurge in the 70s in the UAW, USW, CWA, and IBT. One distinction that was made was whether you would be a member of an Executive Board (where you remained on the job) or became a “full-time” elected leader. At the same time as running for office was considered, equal was the recognition of the overall power of the trade union bureaucracy, especially in the US, and that significant, politically trained forces in a more revolutionary political period were necessary to fully overcome this obstacle.

The two dangers were always abstention (dual unionism) and accommodation (not recognizing the organizational and politically conservative pull of the trade union apparatus and fellow co-workers). When the recession hit in the mid-70s and the employer offensive began in earnest, the trade union leadership in the US was woefully unprepared and began a devastating cycle of concessionary bargaining, with the UAW leading the charge. There was a tendency for many workers, in the absence of widespread rank-and-file militancy, to have a “kick the bums out” approach to union leadership in the hopes that this would

solve the problem. Socialists, particular we in the ISO, knew that the problems were much deeper and we needed to have a more dynamic approach, namely the rebuilding of the militancy and the Left inside the union movement from the ground-up.

In addition, most of the Left, starting with the Community Party within the CIO, developed very non-rank-and-file strategies. That is, they've oriented primarily on holding leadership positions, building relationships with trade union officials at the highest levels and obtaining staff positions within unions. Kim Moody calls this strategy "permeationism" and has characterized most of the Stalinist, Maoist, and Social Democratic approaches to trade union work in the post WWII era. (5) The political price of this strategy was severe accommodation to the status quo within the US labor movement, including a profound reduction in internal democracy, concessionary contracts, and unwavering support for the Democratic Party.

How the ISO has historically approached the question of taking union leadership positions

From the founding of the ISO in 1977 throughout the 1980s the ISO existed as an organization of approximately 100 people, shifting more progressively towards work on college campuses but still with a layer of comrades in trade unions. Our concrete approach toward implementing a rank-and-file strategy was constrained by our size. However, all comrades built political relationships with people at work, attempted to organize actions where possible, with some comrades leading successful union organizing campaigns and other campaigns. Several comrades even experimented with holding official positions within their union's leadership and even being part-time staff organizers on certain campaigns. While some of these campaigns were successful, in terms of increasing overall political consciousness and building the ISO, the results were mixed at best and informed a more careful approach to these questions in the decades to follow. Specifically, some members found that their official positions burdened them with apolitical tasks that didn't provide them greater actual leadership among their co-workers, nor increased ability to effect union strategy. Other members were pulled politically by progressive trade union politics and left the ISO. It was also during this period that the space for successful rank-and-file challenges to existing union leaderships was small to nonexistent. Independent rank-and-file activity declined precipitously from the high point of the mid-1970s, and the more crap concessions union bosses had to cram down worker's throats, the more totalitarian they had to become.

In the mid 1990s, John Sweeney took over the AFL-CIO and shortly thereafter the Teamster's For A Democratic Union (TDU) endorsed candidate Ron Carey took over the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and led the successful 1997 UPS strike. The ISO's membership and cadre had grown enough so that some ability to discuss getting jobs in certain industries was possible. Small groups of comrades, between 3-5 total, got jobs as UPS workers (Teamsters), and about 4 comrades began work at Bell Atlantic/Verizon (Communication Workers of America). This experience was extremely valuable for those comrades and the organization, but was not ultimately successful in growing a base in those particular unions or shaping the outcomes of particular struggles involving those unions.

Our approach throughout this period was to build political relationships with our co-workers, understanding that this was a mostly long-term process, and to be involved in any organized rank-and-file groupings that happened to exist. The main group we had an involved relationship with was TDU. Our approach towards leadership positions was that we should support TDU's electoral slates, and in other instances, consider the pros/cons of running for office based on the concrete situation. But we did criticize the strategy within rank-and-file groups of having a more single-minded electoral focus. We argued within TDU that there should be a broader combination of workplace-based campaigns with the goal of pressuring sections of the backward leadership into action alongside running for office. Generally, there was no uniform opposition to running for office, only cautionary tales. But the question was still largely abstract because our membership, by and large, was not in a position to be involved in such campaigns.

Also during this time, the more progressive minded unions (SEIU, HERE, UNITE) now had momentum and were organizing new workers. They were attracting young radicals from college campuses and the ISO recruited a number of people with some experience working for these unions. But it very much appeared that it was nearly impossible to work for a union in this context and also be an effective member of the ISO. For one, you had no ability to develop political relationships with the worker's you were charged with

organizing. Second, you often had to work 60-80 hours per week. Third, as a staff member, you had very little voice and any criticism of strategy was not treated with kindness.

This basic approach remained valid through much of the 2000s. In the early 2000s, a relatively strong rank-and-file group in NYC called New Directions endorsed a candidate, Roger Toussaint, who won leadership in the Transport Worker's Union (TWU) in NYC. That movement was hijacked and then smashed by Toussaint, who subsequently called and then abandoned an illegal strike in 2005. For the consciousness and confidence of TWU members, Toussaint and his bungled transit strike did much more harm than good. This experience reinforced the idea that you needed a broader, democratically organized network of militants if you were to successfully implement class-struggle unionism while in control of a major union under modern days pressures of weak rank-and-file confidence and severe austerity.

In the mid to late 2000s, we found that a few things had changed:

- 1) The ISO developed to a sufficient size and level of experience where we had the beginnings of an organic base, first in teacher's unions, and then, to a lesser extent, in healthcare unions. Also, the breadth of our union involvement increased. We now had at least some members in dozens of different unions.
- 2) We grew enough as an organization so more of these comrades could devote more time to work within their unions. This happened alongside the development of a perspective for the post-global financial crisis era of implanting ourselves in longer-term areas of work.
- 3) The neoliberal assault on labor had weakened certain local union bureaucracies to such an extent that they were more frequently losing their ability to remain in office, and in some key places, smallish groups of committed militants were able to unseat and take over sizable union locals.

A Tale of Two Teacher's Unions

It was in this context that concepts such as "implantation" began to hold practical significance for our labor work. A convention document written by Los Angeles teacher David R. in the mid-2000s argued that we should be actively looking for opportunities in taking leadership positions in weak unions and help restructure these currently ineffective organizations. This was based on a successful campaign of removing the old-guard leadership in the United Teachers of Los Angeles, with ISO members playing a very active role in the newly reformed union. Implantation in labor work, argued Rapkin, meant a focus on developing relationships with elected leaders, union staff, and rank-and-file activists who had a more class-struggle union focus, and using those relationships to restructure the union for the purpose of increasing class-consciousness and the fighting capacity of rank-and-file teachers. But the pressure of fiscal austerity was too much for the new leadership to combat, not having had enough time and unified focus to develop rank-and-file strength. A near strike was thwarted by a legal injunction that the union was unable to break. Unfortunately, given the strength of the rank-and-file in that movement, that leadership then negotiated two concessionary contracts and was removed from office.

Our work within the Chicago Teacher's Union was, as we know, a different story. A more developed and politically unified layer of young teacher activists formed the Caucus Of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) in the wake of a previous betrayal of another reform movement in years prior. They read anti-capitalist touchstones like Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, cut their teeth in school closure fights, and generally saw themselves situated in a much larger fight with the political establishment and were generally armed with a broader vision of education justice. CORE successfully ousted CTUs leadership, but, crucially, had 3 years before their next contract battle. This time was spent wisely building an activist core of over 1000 new teacher union leaders. Also, crucially, CORE's unity and democracy were tested before the strike when President Karen Lewis tacitly accepted the implementation of anti-union legislation. There was sharp but healthy internal debate and CORE's position ultimately changed. These experiences set the stage for the success of the strike, building healthy dynamics of trust and communication, and while not perfect, allowed for the development of the most democratically run strike in the U.S. labor movement in at least three decades. During the strike, the position of ISO members in leadership positions was crucial, but so

was the position of ISO members outside of the all-consuming inner-circle of CTU's Executive Committee. On questions of taking the political temperature of the membership during the strike and advocating key strategic initiatives, such as extending the strike for two days to fully understand the stakes of the contract vote, our non-elected CTU ISO members played a decisive role.

Healthcare Unions

One rank-and-file movement that did have success in the mid-90s was the California Nurses Association. They ousted the old-guard "professional association" devotees allied to the conservative American Nurses Association. A layer of rank-and-file militants and some key staff members (some of them former members of the CPUSA/Committees of Correspondence) led a successful campaign to disaffiliate. Immediately, they lost more than ½ their membership, but rebuilt the CNA through rapid new-worker organizing especially in Southern California. They successfully passed the first and only nurse-to-patient staffing legislation, which increased the amount of nurses in California by close to 200,000. In 2000, they endorsed Ralph Nader for president (though they've endorsed plenty of Democrats before and after) and led the formation of National Nurses United (NNU), completing the almost full-scale defeat of the ANA model of nursing unionism. NNU is the closest thing to a class-struggle union that the US labor movement has to offer. For the two comrades we have working in NNU nursing unions, and they can correct me if I'm wrong, it seems that their primary role is not necessarily to become elected leaders themselves, but to take advantage of the space created by a more consistently competent and militant union leadership to develop struggles in the workplace and build a socialist pole of attraction within the union.

In New York, where I work, we were finally successful in our own rank-and-file takeover in the fall of 2011. Our union, the New York State Nurses Association, includes 37,000 nurses and we were a tiny group with a core of about 10 nurses, with broader connections to about 30-40 others. Our rank-and-file base was weak, and it only took around 2,500 votes (although these were a hard fought 2,500 votes) to kick out the old leadership. At my hospital, where I have worked since 2007, after being able to be freed from other ISO branch and district responsibilities, I had been becoming increasingly active in organizing my co-workers. I became very active in the reform group, called NY Nurses for Staffing, Security, and Strength (S3), but also maintained a focus on campaigns in my hospital. When we first took over, I chose not to be a part of the elected slate of leaders. But after we expanded the number of elected positions, I chose to run for the Board of Directors.

This decision was largely made without regard to the nature of my particular "base" in my hospital, or even the strength of our rank-and-file network (which is still very weak and not really at all politically unified), but was more based on the influence I may be able to exert individually within the Board of Directors of the new NYSNA. Part of this calculation was that I would not have to stop working at my hospital and would still mostly be organizing with my co-workers. But even more significantly, that our union wasn't under the same pressures as, say, teacher's unions. The idea was that this would allow more space and political latitude in a highly dynamic and flexible situation. So far, this has basically turned out to be true. Although the employer offensive and neoliberal healthcare restructuring is accelerating quickly, and we have not made enough advances in the political development of our leadership or membership to sufficiently respond, our union has not faced the kinds of devastating frontal attacks that the Transport Worker Union or teacher's unions have faced. In fact, given our modest forces at present, we have been able to make some significant stands, such as fighting concessionary contracts, stopping hospital closures (including recently occupying a hospital), and massively raising the profile of key healthcare issues (single-payer, public hospital crisis, nurse-patient staffing ratios, and climate change).

I say all of this only to point out that historically, the ISO has never really had a one-size-fits-all strategy and our approach has generally been very flexible toward newly developing circumstances and material realities. To be more blunt, I don't think we were using the "rank-and-file" strategy to determine whether I took this particular elected position. We use and weigh different criteria in different periods to determine questions of our relationship to rank-and-file groups and leadership positions, but we have not really fully articulated these criteria. I hope this document helps to begin that process. Below, I will list some of the criteria I believe we continually use in making these decisions so that any group of comrades can make use of these questions in applying them to their own concrete conditions in this political period.

Some beginning criteria for determining when to run for a leadership position

For perhaps most of our comrades in trade union work, this is not an option. The bulk of our trade union work remains the development of a socialist pole of attraction in our workplaces and within our union structures, the broader development of a layer of militants committed to class-struggle unionism, and helping to organize, when possible, workplace based struggles against employers around a range of issues. But for those comrades in unions where elected positions may be within our reach, these questions may be useful. One further note, these questions are necessarily bound up with each other and can't be taken into consideration in any rigid hierarchy or in isolation from one another.

1) What is the level of political development, level of organization, and degree of activity of other rank-and-file militants? For most of us, the answer is low, low, and low. But there are critical degrees of difference amongst different forces. This is the question that most of our comrades are most familiar with when discussing when deciding on this question. For most cases, I think it is still the most important factor because it will determine the strength of our ability to actually implement a particular strategy, thereby putting the union in position to actually win.

Sometimes the decision to run for union office flows organically out of the struggle of rank-and-file/reform/opposition caucuses. This was the somewhat the case in the Chicago Teachers Union, and will be again in the Seattle Education Association. In both cases, although there are degrees of difference, we don't have a sufficient "base" in order to implement many our political/strategic ideas. In the case of Seattle, however, to abstain from union elections would actually disorganize and demoralize a growing reform activist group. After careful consideration at the branch, regional and national level, comrades have decided to take that course as the best way to advance the influence of the left within the union. Victory is by no means assured, but it is possible. Win or lose, however, the campaign is the next logical step for militants in this particular local.

2) How organized is the current leadership? More and more union locals are losing their ability to bureaucratically stay in power and have decreasing support of the active membership. But most unions, especially at the national level, maintain a firm hold on power and even have the allegiance of a large section of the active rank-and-file. The latter is the case, for instance, for the United Federation of Teachers in New York City where the ISO has the highest concentration of union members in any one union local in the entire country. Teacher members in NYC have helped form the Movement of Rank and File Educators to organize and contend for leadership among the rank-and-file and run for elections, but there is no expectation of winning leadership positions in the short term. But if the current leadership of a particular union is disintegrating, both in terms of their influence within the rank-and-file and in terms of other bureaucratic mechanisms of retaining power, then it might be worth considering.

3) What is overall political and economic pressure on your particular industry or particular workplace? Are you threatened with mass layoffs or facility closures? Are you a key strategic political target of the current business class, either nationally or locally? Are there expected to be massive contract concessions being demanded in the short term? For most of us, the answer to these questions is high, yes, and yes. But there are critical degrees of difference among different forces. For instance, teachers specifically, and public sector workers generally, are currently the number one target of the ruling class offensive. They have been politically scapegoated and demonized, and their working conditions have been drastically altered in the last several years. Nurses face similar neoliberal pressures in healthcare restructuring, but are not under as intense pressure ideologically, we are harder to scapegoat, and are more concentrated in the private sector. Postal workers are facing severe economic pressures, really a life-and-death battle, as well as being ideologically scapegoated, but not to the degree as public school teachers. Whereas fast food and low-wage workers currently are gaining the moral high ground and are located in highly profitable industries. Generally, we should be more cautious taking leadership positions in circumstances where we know we have little chance of being able to transform the union so as to withstand a specific attack. But this is very difficult to predict ahead of time.

4) What exactly will you be doing in this newly elected position? What other elected leaders will you be working with? What are their politics? Do you have decision-making power over directing resources of

the union (money and staff)? Will you be burdened with numerous apolitical tasks that don't directly build the power of the union? What will be the political constraints in your newly elected position? How will these new responsibilities change your relationship to non-elected rank-and-file members of your union? Again, the answers to any one of these particular questions are not deal breakers, but help provide for an overall assessment of the situation. But, especially if you're the only ISO member or lefty in a given union local, it is generally more challenging to both build class-struggle unionism *and* be a socialist pole of attraction if you are an isolated militant and too politically constrained by the nature of your position.

5) How will taking this union position change your relationship to your branch of the ISO? We are still small enough where questions of devoting resources to such long-term work can have significant consequences for the branches. This is especially true given that the comrades most likely to be in a position to run for office are usually highly valuable cadre often at the political center of branch life. It is not automatic that we should sacrifice the health of the branch for the opportunity to take even an important leadership position in favorable circumstances. We have had some experience of branches being significantly weakened by these particular decisions. For these reasons, local branch committees, district committees, the national Organizing Department and the Labor Organizer should be consulted when considering these possibilities. But there are a number of cases where the branches and districts will grow both qualitatively and quantitatively by devoting more comrades to longer-term labor work, including, potentially running for office.

What about working for unions?

As was previously mentioned, while deciding whether to run for office involved a range of criteria, working-full time for a union as an organizer or other staff was strongly discouraged due to the lack of agency, political myopia, and long hours inherent in most worthwhile staff positions. But this is not an ironclad principle. Taking a staff job or becoming an organizer in the context of specific struggles can materially contribute to the success of that effort and create new opportunities for building the labor left and a socialist current within it.

For these reasons, in recent months, several comrades have taken positions as organizers for major unions. Nevertheless, there is constant pressure for anyone in this position to conform politically and reinforce a particular political and strategic positions of the union that may be antithetical to class-struggle unionism. It is quite possible that comrades will find it impossible to maintain their political principals while continuing in such a job. This is not inevitable, but possible, and any ISO member who takes such a job should be particularly aware of the pitfalls and collaborate with other experienced comrades as frequently as is possible.

Today

We have found that, even though we are small in size, if we're well positioned and have the right instincts, we can make an impact on today's labor movement. We have only to look at the success of the CTU strike, the development Occupy the DOE and MORE in NYC, the movement to challenge standardized testing in Seattle and across the country, the fights to save post offices, and fast food worker organizing, and many other examples of important work we've done in labor. These fights signal the relative weakness and relative strategic flexibility of some of today's labor leaders, as well as the small but growing strength of a (very, very) new rank-and-file movement. Overall, politically, organization, and tactically the labor movement is more influx than in previous decades. But these factors exist in the overall context of a still powerful and politically regressive union leadership, especially at the national level. Business unionism and slavish devotion to the Democratic Party still remain the norm. There are new opportunities as well as new and ever-changing obstacles. Not all opportunities should be taken advantage of and not all obstacles can be overcome in the short term, but we should think about each situation carefully, using the criteria listed above as a starting point. We primarily will need to use the methods of the rank-and-file strategy to accomplish our goals, but that may not be the only strategy we use in this historically unique situation. One important plea: please write more labor documents. We need more understanding of the nature of the different struggles going on right now, specifically the political character of current union leaderships, which are as varied as they've been in the post-WWII era. This is particularly true in the different teachers

union locals, NNU and NYSNA, APWU, and the different unions involved in WalMart and Fast Food organizing. We should also more clearly assess comrades' experience as being elected officials and/or staff in trade unions - What's the subjective role we have played in these circumstances? What are the limitations? What affect has it had on the labor movement, the left, and our organization thus far?, and many other questions. This document aims to be constructing the skeleton of our approach. We now need the flesh.

Sean P., NYC

1. See <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/tuel.html>
2. See Jim Higgins, "The Minority Movement", *International Socialism*, No. 45, Nov 1970. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/higgins/1970/11/minmvtm.htm#n16>
3. See Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*, Pathfinder (1972).
4. See Stan Weir, *Singlejack Solidarity*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis: 2004).
5. Kim Moody, *The Rank and File Strategy: Building a Socialist Movement in the US*, Solidarity (2000).

Additional Source:

Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *Marxism and the Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926*, Bookmarks (London: 1986)

Campaign to End the Death Penalty: Keeping the pilot lit

The current political climate for socialists is challenging, and this is certainly the case for those of us working on the criminal justice front.

Episodic struggles

Struggles have been episodic, like the rise of protests around the Troy Davis and Trayvon Martin cases. We saw large numbers of people mobilized in each of these struggles, but both lost—Troy was executed in the fall of 2011 and George Zimmerman was acquitted this past summer. Without successes, combined with the passing of time and the overall low level of struggle—the rise in activism around these specific cases and related criminal justice issues dissipated.

This poses challenges to those of us working to keep up an activist fight on this front. It is easier to figure out how to relate to a struggle as it is taking shape and growing—it is more difficult to adjust to the low levels of struggle.

Confronting this situation, we have reduced the number of ISO members relating to the Campaign to End the Death Penalty to a small number of people. We've also had to adjust our expectations of what is possible at this time, but also understand that this could abruptly change. Both Kevin Cooper, who is on death row in California, and Rodney Reed, who is on death row in Texas, are at critical stages in their appeals. The Campaign to End the Death Penalty (CEDP) has profiled both of these cases for years and maintains close relationships to the family members and prisoners themselves as well as a small group of close knit activists. If a struggle ensues in the coming year the CEDP is well positioned to be key to that fight.

As this document was being written we got word that the 5th Circuit has denied Rodney's appeal. This is a very devastating ruling. Rodney's lawyers are appealing the decision but as far as they are aware, it is possible for an execution to be set. Austin TX CEDPers, along with ISO members and family members held a meeting to launch a series of actions, one is a contingent to march in the MLK rally with a Justice for Rodney Reed banner. We are also attempting to get Democracy NOW to pick up this story. While

Rodney's case has gotten a lot of press in Texas and he has excellent journalists cover his case there -- it hasn't broken nationally. We are trying to change that.

Confronting Life Without the Possibility of Parole sentences (LWOP)

Although our work is streamlined, we have been able to help maintain a radical political viewpoint among a core group of activists in the CEDP—most strikingly, around the question of life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) sentencing, and whether or not abolitionists should advance that sentence as a humane alternative to the death penalty (most of our liberal allies believe we should!).

Those of us in the ISO have pushed for the CEDP to adopt the stance that death by incarceration, LWOP, is not in *anyway* a humane sentence. We have reached out to Kenneth Hartman, a prisoner serving LWOP in California who recently edited a book on LWOP entitled *Too Cruel, Not Unusual Enough*. The CEDP held a national conference call with Kenneth, and nearly 30 people participated.

This past fall, Lily H., an ISO member and the Campaign's National director, along with Delia Perez Myers, whose brother is on death row in Texas, went to a World Coalition Against the Death Penalty gathering. At the conference, they networked with many different groups and were able to raise the issue of LWOP, pointing out that the abolitionist community should not embrace this draconian sentence. Their comments were well received.

In the coming year, we look to do more to expose the injustices surrounding the issue of LWOP sentences.

Valuable contribution

We also think our efforts over the years to maintaining our website and continuing to produce our newsletter, the *New Abolitionist*, has been useful. The newsletter is mailed to over 1,000 prisoners.

The importance of our newsletter was brought home to us at our annual convention this year. At the convention, we celebrated the release of Tim McKinney, an African American man wrongly convicted and sentenced to death in Tennessee. He was released in May of this year after spending over 15 years on death row. When he spoke at our convention, he talked about how important the newsletter was to him, and the importance of the several people -- Lee W., Katherine S., Lilianna S. -- in the CEDP who had befriended him during his years of incarceration. He broke down as he thanked all of us for sticking with him over the years. That moment brought home to us the importance of trying to keep a routine together, even if we have to scale back.

ISO members have also contributed articles to *Socialist Worker*, and we hope to do more in the coming year, including interviews with prisoners as well as writing on certain cases and prison conditions and policy.

Yearly CEDP Convention

We have also continued to hold our annual national conventions. This year was the 14th convention—for the past three years, we have held them in Texas in conjunction with the annual Texas march for abolition, which drew out 200 people this year. While this year's convention was smaller (40 people), it was no less impactful. Listening to family members talk of their loved ones in prison, being able to celebrate the release of Tim McKinney, and having other exonerated on hand to welcome him home, it was an emotional roller coaster that left us all catching our breath. In the end, we all decided that we would hold another annual convention the following year.

To sum up:

We recognize that remaining committed to this fight is important in several ways:

1. We can participate in winning real gains and reforms, such as freedom for Tim McKinney and reduced numbers of executions.
2. It puts our politics into practice by taking on one of the harshest faces of racism in America.
3. Our participation positions us so that when the struggle breaks out in a bigger way, we will be better able to help shape it, strengthen it and give it direction.
4. The organizing teaches us strategy and tactics in how best to advance the struggle.
5. We can implant ourselves, so that the ISO has respect among a core group of activists, prisoners and family members. We have shown, even if on a small scale, that multiracial organizing is possible.

Socialists understand the racist nature of our criminal justice system and how it is used to hurt those most marginalized in society. Forging efforts to pry open the door on this tragedy is part of what we are trying to do. The sharpest tool our enemy has is repressive institutions like prisons and the criminal justice system. Dulling that sharp edge, even if just a little bit, is important.

While the struggles for Troy and Trayvon were not successful in their immediate goals, they did further tarnish the image of the system. Did that duller edge mean that others like Tim McKinney were freed? Will it mean that Rodney Reed and Kevin Cooper will win justice?? Of course, we have no crystal ball, but it is certainly the case that they stand a better chance at justice because of those high-profile fights.

The fight for Troy and Trayvon exposed the racist nature of the criminal justice system to the world, and that is incredibly important. While it wasn't enough to win justice for either of them, it does not lessen the importance of our efforts. Taking on the most brutal aspect of the criminal justice system is a difficult fight. And their side wants nothing more than for us to feel dejected and give up. But we must continue the fight. Justice is on our side.

Marlene M., Chicago
