

# Pre-convention Bulletin #14 / January 23, 2014

for members only

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## Inside This Bulletin

This is the fourteenth 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](mailto:bulletin@internationalsocialist.org) and cc Sharon at the national office ([sharon@internationalsocialist.org](mailto:sharon@internationalsocialist.org)) if you plan to submit a document and/or resolution, so we can plan bulletin production. Thanks.

## **Implantation in a graduate workers' union: the TAA**

In this document, I aim to describe the experience of the ISO's successes and challenges in the UW-Madison Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA). In last year's pre-convention discussion, I submitted a document (see PCB #15 2013) in which I gave a short timeline of the experience of the TAA between the initiation of the occupation of the Wisconsin Capitol building in Spring 2011 and the start of a campaign for a wage increase in the spring semester of 2013. I'll only briefly summarize again that story here – I refer interested comrades to the original document for more detail. In this document I'll focus more on the experience of that wage campaign, the role the ISO has played in the last year, and the problems that have persisted or arisen.

### **Spring 2011-Spring 2013 Lessons**

The ISO in Madison experienced a rapid upswing in credibility in the union during this time, having started from having next to no influence at the start of the Wisconsin Uprising to being included in the union's formal and informal leadership, setting a clear political lead, and forming the center of the beginnings of an organized union left which had previously been present but diffuse. We enjoyed this success on the basis of 1) our taking the union more seriously as an area of work for all comrades who were members of the union; 2) our political leadership on the question of the Democratic Party's fundamental program: basic acceptance of the anti-working class legislation which passed in 2011; and 3) our ability to frame the challenge in a non-sectarian manner and work with a broad layer of left-wing union activists, including those in other socialist organizations (Socialist Action, Socialist Alternative, Solidarity). We also benefited from a relatively large concentration of comrades in the union; at the highest point, we had seven comrades at some level of activity in the union at a time. Even when that declined, however, our influence remained strong when that number declined to two or three.

The main lessons I drew at the time were that:

1. Taking a bold political position during a crucial political moment mattered. Our arguments against endorsing either of the Democratic candidates in the 2012 recall election gave voice to popular frustrations with the direction of the Wisconsin protests into Democratic electoral strategy.
2. The actual “caucus” formation of the union's left wing, initiated by the ISO – some 15-18 people – was a huge boost for our credibility and influence, and gave an opportunity unprecedented in the union's recent memory (which, with such high turnover, is admittedly short) to develop a rank-and-file organizing program and political strategy among a radical core larger than ourselves.
3. Formal leadership of all or most ISO comrades in the union was not at all necessary at any step. It probably helped having one comrade sit on the Executive Board, though, in order to quickly respond to conservative elements present at that time in the union leadership.
4. Small, minority unions can still fight confidently with the help of a radical left leadership. With the help of the ISO, the TAA went from shying away from something as simple as a wage campaign – essentially on the basis of it being difficult – to pursuing rather large wage demands on the administration (on the order of 8%-12%, depending on appointment level, form of employment, etc).

The main challenges I identified were:

1. The relative inactivity of Madison's labor fraction and general lack of coordination of our approach to the union. Only occasionally did TAA comrades meet together to Only

occasionally did TAA comrades meet together to identify a course of action, and more rarely still did we meet with other comrades in the Madison labor movement.

2. Disconnection between branch life and union life. Aside from an occasional update, our work in the TAA was hardly discussed at any point in branch meetings.
3. Failure to translate our success in the union to recruitment. We won the respect of many of our union allies, but set up very few contact meetings and in general made no serious attempt to recruit.

### The ISO in the union since Spring 2013

In the spring semester of 2013, myself and a close ally in the union, as co-chairs of the Stewards' Council, launched the development of a take-home pay campaign – which came to be known as the Pay Us Back campaign – in that body. We envisioned the campaign as one in which we would 1) send a message to the administration that we were still the legitimate body representing the interests of graduate workers by continuing to insist on regular meetings with top administrators about our demands, and 2) thereby run a sort of rough “contract” campaign wherein we spaced out escalating actions to take place before each subsequent meeting, 3) demanding that the administration waive non-tuition student fees (known at Wisconsin as “segregated fees” or “seg fees”), amounting to a \$1100 annual increase in our take-home pay, or else provide a wage increase amounting to the same. To that end, we met with the Vice Chancellor of Administration, Darrell Bazzell, and director of the academic personnel unit in the Office of Human Resources, Steve Lund; after dodging our demands, as fully expected, we initiated a letter-writing campaign, sending some 500 messages to Bazzell.

After a second meeting, we wrote to the campus and local press about the situation of graduate employees and publicized our demands, as well as beginning a faculty-oriented strategy in which we got individual departments to sign onto (and send to Bazzell) a statement of support for our campaign. After a third meeting, finally, we kept the heat on with the faculty support, getting some 20 departments (some very large, such as Sociology and Chemistry) to sign onto the statement, as well as having a successful presentation of our campaign at the Faculty Senate (video available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ker3XiHAuS0>); and we staged a short and relatively non-disruptive occupation of the main administrative building on campus at the end of the semester. By this time, the campaign had received some national recognition, being mentioned both in Labor Notes (<http://labornotes.org/blogs/2013/05/time-pay-us-back-university-wisconsin-madison>) and in the “Student Nation” section of The Nation (1. <http://www.thenation.com/blog/172930/dispatches-us-student-movement-february-15>; 2. <http://www.thenation.com/blog/175836/school-year-approaches-students-protest-philadelphia-chicago-and-rhode-island#>).

On the basis of the work helping to lead the Pay Us Back campaign, this author was asked by allies within the union to consider running for co-president of the TAA. Comrades in the union met to discuss this and other questions, and in June 2013 I was elected co-president of the union. Soon after, Pay Us Back yielded a major victory: in July/August, the administration announced that all teaching assistants and project assistants – the graduate assistants historically organized by the TAA – would receive a 4.67% wage increase, achieving wage parity with research assistants. This, when 1) the state mandated only a 1% increase for university employees, 2) the initial administration offers to us were on the order of 2%, and 3) the working class and the labor movement in Wisconsin were still reeling from a defeat of historic proportions. Finally, out of this work, we were able to recruit a major leader of the union – a former co-president – to the ISO. He was attracted to the ISO on the basis of 1) our role in opposing the Democratic Party during the recall elections, 2) our general orientation to labor union strategy, and 3) our position on broader political questions, and especially anti-racism work in the district.

[Aside: It's worth taking a moment to emphasize further the state of the labor movement in Wisconsin in order to get a sense for the significance of the TAA's victory. The three major public sector unions in Wisconsin – WEAC (the state NEA organization, which organizes the vast majority of K-12 teachers and staff), the AFT-Wisconsin, and AFSCME – have each lost 30-50% of their membership. These numbers can even understate the problem; membership losses are obviously concentrated among those locals that

were immediately affected by Act 10 – Scott Walker's union-busting law. For these locals, losses of 80-90% are not uncommon. The TAA's rate is relatively healthy among these locals, with some 25-30% of the historical bargaining unit\* signed up. Other locals are still basically intact since they were able to renew contracts right before the passage of Act 10, but once those contracts expire (some this year, more in 2015), the law will affect them as well. We can therefore expect to see more loss of union membership in Wisconsin. AFT-Wisconsin is now in the process of merging with the much larger WEAC (for a joint NEA-AFT state organization, as exists in 5 other states) after having cut the vast majority of its staff. This hemorrhaging of members and resources is precisely what Act 10 was designed to do, and it is working. The labor movement in Wisconsin is likely to get worse before it gets better.]

In the fall semester, however, we found it difficult to translate that victory – which none of us were expecting – into further momentum. Our regular organizing for the union was badly understaffed (only one or two people comprised our Organizing Committee), there was some confusion about how to proceed with the campaign (for example, the question of whether we were demanding more wage increases or a seg fee waiver, whether we ought to expand the campaign to include several demands, etc), the Stewards' Council took a few months to reconstitute itself once myself and the other co-chair left it, and so on. When we met with the administration in November to present new demands, we did so without having done any major campaign action since May, and the dynamics of that meeting reflected this; the TAA members present at that meeting felt palpably that we were backed into a corner and unable to adequately respond to the administration's misdirections.

Still, it isn't too late to take advantage of the big wage victory from the summer, and the Stewards' Council has been successful in bringing a new layer of core activists to the work of the campaign. Therefore the union is in a good position to get back on track this spring and continue putting effective pressure on the university administration.

### **Lessons and challenges: reassessment**

Taking stock of the TAA and the branch's activity therein, we can review the conclusions drawn in PCB #15 2013.

Many of the lessons drawn then have been confirmed, but some negatively in the emergence of new challenges:

- That a small union with bold left leadership can, even without formal recognition or bargaining rights, win significant concessions, was confirmed dramatically by our wage victory over the summer.
- That the presence of an organized union left matters for the union to do this effectively is confirmed by the union's troubles this semester, which is partially a product of the dispersal of that left. This, in part, is due to the decline of comrades' regular activity in the union to varying degrees for various reasons (e.g., leaving the unit upon graduation, intense job market concerns, and so on). Only one comrade takes regular part in the TAA at this point – the co-president.
- While we recruited an important union leader, this process slowed as it became clearer that the ISO and membership in our organization was less and less central to doing serious and influential work in the union. At this point, it is difficult to make the case to other trade union militants to

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\* I say “historical bargaining unit” because the TAA is not a certified union, therefore is not the sole legally-recognized bargaining agent for graduate employees, therefore technically has no bargaining unit. The silver lining here is that this presents a possible opening for the TAA moving forward, in that previous legal barriers to organizing *all* graduate employees – including research assistants – have been removed.

<sup>1</sup> The Renewal Faction's critique of the ISO's perspectives in the 2000s mentions 9/11, but uses it to illustrate the ISO's alleged delay in recognizing “problems with our organizational methods” because those issues were

join the ISO on the basis of our union work.

- This is related to the persistence of the problem of a basic disconnection between the TAA activity and the main priorities of the UW campus branch. In part, this is due to the branch's orientation toward recruiting undergraduates and building undergraduate leadership – in itself this is not problematic, but we have, in a sense, “overcorrected” away from seriously dealing with the question building the TAA and the ISO within the TAA.

- It is also related to the persistence of the problem of a relatively inactive district labor fraction, but even when this fraction has met, it has not been well-attended by TAA comrades.

### **Graduate worker comrades and union work**

In a separate PCB document, an argument will be made about the opportunities the ISO has to build a profile in the broader graduate worker union movement and the importance of doing so. Suffice to say here that it is clear on the basis of the TAA's experience that such opportunities exist and that the ISO can build itself and act to win real victories in graduate worker unions with the regular involvement of a few comrades (it's my belief that even two comrades devoted *fully* to union work in the TAA would go a long way toward resolving some of the problems identified above). With so many comrades in graduate worker unions, and in academic worker unions more broadly; with so much activity and attention currently trained on this part of the labor movement; and with these unions representing a crucial strategic position with regard to opposing neo-liberalism in higher education, the ISO would do very well to more systematically orient toward this work.

**Michael B, Madison**

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### **A socialist “Big Bang” theory?**

Among the various criticisms of the ISO that have recently emerged, a common theme is the assertion that the organization and its leadership have maintained a political perspective that exaggerates political radicalization and the potential for struggle in the current period. From the Socialist Outpost ([www.socialistoutpost.com](http://www.socialistoutpost.com)) we hear that the ISO's problems are “related to perspectives which consistently exaggerated the potential coming struggles – always just over the horizon – and turning points that never became qualitative turning points.” The organization, the Outpost writers assert, “burned many longstanding comrades out through hyperactivity,” “was unintentionally passive about the possibility of initiating new centers of organizing,” and vacillated between “war footing” and “back to basics” campaigns. “While the ISO has done much impressive work,” the Outpost writers write, “too often it has found itself in the position of ‘waiting for Godot’—waiting for external developments.” The literary reference to Samuel Beckett's famous play is clever, but the Socialist Outpost neglects to add that the play ends with its characters resolving to hang themselves if Godot doesn't arrive by the following day!

The document from six former San Francisco comrades (hereafter referred to as the “SF6”), makes a similar critique. Except it reaches even farther back from the early 2000s to find the root of the ISO's mistaken perspective in its absorption of the “idealist” conceptions of Trotsky expressed in the 1938 Transitional Program. The measure of this idealist method is the ISO's practice of ignoring indicators such as strike statistics and labor union density “in favor of polls, election results, and sporadic demonstrations, which can be used to paint a picture of a working class on the move and on the cusp of an ‘upturn.’ This fits the ISO's ‘transition period’ and subsequent ‘new period’ models, that claim an end to the ‘downturn’ of the 1980's, and put the organization in the posture of constantly searching for that promised ‘upturn.’” Are the SF6 asserting that today's political climate is the same as that of the Reagan era?

Former Bay Area member [Scott J.](#) adds more specificity to the charges against the ISO and its leadership:

There is a regular hailing of some movement or event as the way forward, “The Next Big Thing”—or “The New Civil Rights Movement”—and regardless of how many times ISO members continuously assert that “we are not just moving onward and upward,” this same triumphal attitude seems to occur over and over again... the election of Barack Obama and the factory occupation of Republic Windows and Doors seemed to open a new era in struggle from which we would never go back. In fact, there have been countless moments after which the world would never be the same, although, eventually it always is. The Republic battle—as inspiring as it was—produced not a single similar example in the months following. Yet, leading members of the ISO literally predicted that there would be an explosion of labor struggles in 2009 and those who disagreed with this optimistic assessment were browbeaten and labelled as pessimistic cynics and driven out of the organization.

Many of the specifics of the arguments in these documents have been taken up effectively elsewhere: in Ragina Johnson and Todd Chretien’s reply to the [SF6](#), Eric Ruder and Alan Maass’s [article](#) on the “challenges facing socialists today,” and in several articles that have appeared in the preconvention bulletin. It’s not my intention to reprise those arguments here. My focus is narrower: assessing whether the ISO subscribes to the “Big Bang” theory that these documents assert. Specifically, does the ISO (or did the ISO in the past), assert as a conscious political method, an exaggerated view of the potentialities of working class struggle?

### **What we have and haven’t said**

Before going into any specifics, it has to be acknowledged that many of the concerns and criticisms raised by these former members are not new. Members of the ISO, including its leadership, have not only voiced such concerns, but they formed the basis of a break—if not a fully conscious one at first—with the Socialist Workers Party-Britain (SWP). In all of these broad and somewhat vague criticisms, which ring true to many who have been members of revolutionary organizations over the last decades, there is an element of truth. And the truth is that we have not seen a sustained recovery of working-class organization—on the shop floor, or politically. Instead, we’ve seen a continuing employers’ offensive that has resulted in the decline of working class organization over the last decades. It is not unreasonable to ask why that is. But the answers lie not so much in what the ISO promised or analyzed but in the actuality of the dynamics of the class struggle.

It’s likewise when we evaluate criticisms of “burnout” or “hyperactivity.” Specificity matters. Many ex-revolutionaries (or ex-members of revolutionary organizations), and not just in the U.S., feel they wasted a period of their lives. Sometimes that means as little as a year or two of commitment to a revolutionary organization. To others, it means having spent a decade or two trying to go against the current, only to doubt the meaning of that activity. It is a mistake to lump these experiences together. Moreover, the question of hyperactivity depends on who is engaging in it and for what aim. When the ISO was formed and for many years was largely made up of young people, many of them students, the pace of activity and the demands placed on members was clearly different to that which can be expected of working-class members with families and/or comrades with other political and union responsibilities. At a recent preconvention discussion in Washington, D.C., a comrade remarked that he used to meet around the clock to organize and discuss politics, but now with a job, he has to get up at 6:00 am regardless.

Different assessments of the proper pace of work for the ISO, and the necessary adjustments these may require, are wholly different from an organizational policy of “hyperactivity” based on a faulty perspective. Duncan Hallas, one of the founders of the International Socialist tradition, made this point in his evaluation of the Socialist Labour League [SLL], a Trotskyist group in Britain in the 1960s. In the early 1960s, the SLL was the largest group on the Trotskyist left and had a membership that included many industrial militants and young activists. But as Duncan pointed out [[LINK](#): <http://www.marxists.org/archive/hallas/works/1969/xx/building.htm>], the SLL’s economic perspectives, emphasizing the imminence of capitalist collapse in the midst of capitalism’s greatest boom, transformed it into a sect:

The effect on the work of the SLL in Britain was even more striking. Discussion, which is dangerous to the leadership, can be checked by hyperactivity; and this, in turn, is justified by the nearness of crash. The membership, driven at a frenzied pace, has a high casualty rate. A large proportion is always new – and therefore does not remember the non-fulfilment of past prophecies. A vicious circle is set up which makes the correction of the line more and more difficult.

“Building the leadership” – which is, of course, identified with the organisation – becomes a substitute for serious political and industrial work. Serious militants are repelled and the “revolutionary youth” come to make up an ever larger proportion of the activists. The leadership, which alone has much continuity, becomes unchallengeable and finds it less and less necessary to check its policies and practice.

...

The result is the development of a peculiar psychology in the SLL militants, a psychology which resembles that of “Third Period” Stalinism. A fanatical party patriotism, a ferocious hatred of other groupings which, by definition, “betray”, an effective insulation from criticism since it always comes from “betrayers”; in short all the marks of a “true believer”. This psychology has obvious advantages to the leadership. Its only defect is that it makes it impossible to understand reality, impossible to gain a serious and lasting influence in the working-class.

Do our critics seriously believe that the ISO today resembles the SLL of the early 1960s? I assume that at least some of them do. But I doubt that most ISO members—or even most other members of the left outside the ISO—will identify the ISO with this picture of the SLL or its members. Duncan’s key point, however, was that the culture of the SLL stemmed from its adherence to a “catastrophist” perspective that was clearly at odds with reality. Does this also describe the ISO?

### **The 1930s in slow motion?**

Many of our critics assert that the ISO’s alleged allegiance to a “Big Bang theory” stems from our absorption of the “catastrophist” perspectives of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the International Socialist Tendency (IST). They seem to forget that the IST voted to expel the ISO in July, 2001. While there were many precipitating factors that led to our expulsion from the IST, the most substantive one concerned the ISO’s disagreement with the SWP’s (and hence, the IST’s) analysis of political developments in the 1990s as unfolding like the “1930s in slow motion.” From a disagreement with the SWP comrades over the state of the U.S. economy, to the idea that we faced imminent fascist threat and had to engage in mass work in 1993, we began to distance ourselves from this kind of catastrophism. All of these debates were summed up in the phrase “the 1930s in slow motion.”

At this time, the SWP was beginning to adopt a reading of Trotsky that the IS tradition had historically rejected. This wasn’t the program-obsessed “idealist” Trotsky that the SF6 claim, but the Trotsky of the Fourth International’s 1938 founding. The FI’s founding manifesto, “The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International” claimed that objective conditions for socialist revolution existed, and that “the historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.” The IS/SWP had always rejected this political perspective as voluntarist and unrealistic. Hallas characterized Trotsky’s conceptions as “near-messianism.” But the 1990s SWP seemed to forget those earlier assessments. It adopted a perspective that presumed that, in conditions of generalized crisis, a small group (like the British SWP) could “leapfrog” (a description often used by SWP leaders at this time) over its objective limitations to become the leading force in the working class movement. And from there, it would become the leader of the revolutionary movement.

In reply to a series of letters the SWP leadership sent to the ISO Steering Committee, as well as various SWP attempts to create a factional situation in the ISO, the ISO Steering Committee responded to the SWP on March 20, 2000. A part of the Steering Committee’s document, which was distributed to the entire ISO membership, explicitly dealt with this disagreement on “the 1930s in slow motion.” For the benefit of comrades who were not members of the ISO at the time [which, by the way, does NOT include most of the writers cited above, who were], I reproduce a section of that document below. Comrades can read the entire

document at <http://www.angelfire.com/journal/iso/idb.html>. (Apologies for linking to that sectarian Web site.)

The one disagreement that did surface in a separate meeting between the ISO representatives and the SWP Central Committee was what one SWP CC comrade referred to as the “theory of the 1930s in slow motion.” Comrade Ahmed Shawki did in fact voice disagreement with the usefulness of this parallel in his presentation at the ISO Convention last October [note: October, 1999], during a discussion of how the ISO’s perspective developed over the course of the 1990s. This was part of a discussion that, yes, looked back self-critically in assessing the ISO’s own perspective over the last decade. . . .

The ISO . . . stressed that the [1990s] boom was based on an enormous class polarization, which fueled the continued development of working class consciousness on a scale unseen in the U.S. in decades—and far to the left of mainstream politics. In the course of the 1990s we effectively dropped the analogy, “the 1930s in slow motion” as we responded to the changing political situation. This was a fine tuning of our perspective, one which SWP comrades were well aware of—and not by any means a return to the “downturn” perspective of the 1980s.

Of course, the state of the U.S. economy marks the biggest difference between the 1930s and today. In the 1930s, one quarter of the U.S. working class was unemployed. Today in the U.S., unemployment stands at record lows. Between 1929 and 1932, the U.S. economy contracted by 30 percent. It did not recover until the Second World War buildup. In February 2000, the U.S. economy broke its previous record for the longest continuous expansion. Throughout the U.S. boom, we have continuously stressed its contradictions, the fact that the gap between rich and poor has expanded, and the fact that the workforce is working harder for less, and that large sections of the population have seen no improvement in their living standards at all. (See, for example, Joel Geier and Ahmed Shawki’s “Contradictions of the American Boom,” *ISR* 3; and Joel Geier’s “Can the U.S. Escape the Global Crisis?” in *ISR* 6). . . .

If we have moved away from using the “1930s in slow motion” formulation, it’s because it didn’t provide a guide for us to building in the late 1990s. Rather, we maintained our perspective for growth (while facing up to the reality that integration of new members was a major challenge given the low level of struggle) and shifted our focus to how all the benefits of the “miracle economy” went to the bosses—that it was high time that workers got their share of record profits or CEO pay.

Class consciousness hasn’t yet found expression in widespread struggle. The number of strikes in 1999 was the lowest in more than 50 years. Indeed, the 1990s was characterized by a sharp rise in the level of class consciousness coupled with a very low level of class struggle, in a period of sustained economic recovery. The 1930s in the US, in contrast, was a period during which both the level of class consciousness and class struggle rose sharply, during a period of economic depression. No matter how much all of us would wish the pace of events to be faster, and the level of struggle higher, we can’t leap beyond the objective conditions we face. To be sure, this situation could change suddenly. If the New York transit workers had defied vicious anti strike injunctions and laws just days after Seattle, it could have sparked a major confrontation between labor and employers. Yet they didn’t have the confidence and organization to do so.

When ISO representatives raised these points about the boom at past international meetings we were accused of having a “pessimistic” outlook. We don’t believe that looking reality in the face should be characterized in this way. Moreover, our assessment of the period has never led us to downplay the degree to which new people—either workers or students—can be won to socialist ideas. Indeed, the opposite is the case. As we have said many times, the period of the American boom has been one of a “political awakening” among large sections of the U.S. population. The fine tuning of our perspective has positioned us to relate to this sentiment and to build our organization within it.

The document added that “another reason the level of opposition was so low was the rapid disappearance of the U.S. far left after the collapse of Stalinism in 1989.” With 14 years of hindsight, perhaps ISO members (including members of the Steering Committee) might disagree with various formulations in this document. But for me at least, it stands the test of time as a reasonable assessment of the state of politics at the turn of the millennium. And I note that it stakes its case on many of the factors that the aforementioned ISO critics insist that we ignore or downplay: the level of strikes and class organization, the decline of the left, the disconnection between leftward-moving consciousness and struggle on the ground, the material conditions of the economy, the role of liberals in demobilizing struggle, and the like.

In the immediate aftermath of that reassessment of the 1990s, the ISO took an active and leading role in the global justice movement, a reawakened movement for the abolition of the death penalty and against the criminal injustice system (which we at times described as a “new civil rights movement”), and the 2000 presidential campaign of Ralph Nader, among other activities. A fairly accurate recounting of our outlook at the time was Ahmed Shawki’s “Between Things Ended and Things Begun,” printed in *ISR18* in June/July, 2001 (LINK: <http://isreview.org/issues/18/18.shtml>). While Ahmed recently [criticized](#) that article as incorrect on many levels (an assessment with which I would agree), it bears rereading. Perhaps it evinces a certain reflexive “optimism” responding to the charges of “pessimism” that the SWP had leveled. Or perhaps the article reflected a general feeling of revival in the world left, exemplified by the global justice movement and the World Social Forum. But the idea that it presents an undialectical “onward and upward” perspective, or that it predicts events analogous to the November, 1936-May, 1937 upsurge that largely built industrial unions in the U.S. (i.e. a “big bang”) is a figment of critics’ imaginations.

A perspective that emphasized possibilities and opportunities also included many important qualifiers. Consider, for example, this passage on the state of the U.S. labor movement:

We have to have a clear assessment of where we are. On the labor front, the important strikes of the past several years have marked a break with the pattern of previous years. But there is still very little confidence to take on the bosses. As measured by number of strikes, the labor movement is still very much on the defensive. In 1999, all measures of work stoppages were at or below the lowest levels recorded since the collection of these statistics began 53 years ago. There were 39 major work stoppages in 2000, and in only two years during the decade did the number of work stoppages number more than 40--44 in 1990; 45 in 1994. Compare this to the years 1980 and 1981 (the year that Reagan was elected and the year that he fired the PATCO workers), where the number of major work stoppages was 187 and 145 respectively.

The mood among some of the best activists in the labor movement was perhaps summed up in Kim Moody’s piece in *Labor Notes* in March 2001:

When we started organizing for the 2001 Labor Notes Conference over a year ago, the Battle of Seattle, with its defiance of corporate power and hope for new alliances, was foremost in our minds. Since then, the new alliance has frayed, union membership has taken a dive, and the political atmosphere has taken a turn for the worse. The specter of recession and the machine-gun pace of layoff announcements proclaim a new context for labor in the next couple of years.

There is a feeling of change and a desire to fight--but also apprehension at the capacity of the movement to ward off new challenges and turn the situation around. This is of course not a static situation. But it depends, above all, not on statistics and figures of union membership, but on action itself--and in particular, successful action--even if these battles begin as defensive.

Nor did it whitewash the state of the American left, about which it notes, “The U.S. left has been in the doldrums for some years now. There have been some false starts and signs of revival, but the truth is that the picture is not pretty. The U.S. left was already a pale reflection of a relatively weak labor movement going into the 1990s.”

In fact, the very notion captured in “between things ended and things begun,” a reference used in the socialist Daniel Singer’s *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?* (a popular book on the left at the time), is the necessity of building struggles and organization that can bridge the gap between an untenable social order (“things ended”) and a socialist future (“things begun”). There’s nothing automatic implied in this analysis—or that socialists need to hang their hopes on some “external event” that will suddenly transform the political situation in our side’s favor.

Ironically, an “external event”—the September 11, 2001 attacks—did transform the political situation soon thereafter. And it certainly didn’t move things in “our side’s” direction. In fact, it shifted world politics dramatically to the right. September 11 rescued the illegitimate Bush administration that, by August, 2001, the media were already describing as “failed.” I doubt today’s critics would damn the ISO for failing to predict 9/11, but it is notable that their accounts of the first decade of the 2000s don’t grapple with the impact of 9/11.<sup>1</sup> Nor, by the way, do they mention the ISO’s approach to what was arguably the largest upsurge of protest in the post-9/11 period: that of the mass demonstrations against the impending war in Iraq that culminated in the international mobilization of millions on February 15, 2003. While many on the liberal left insisted that the demonstrations could stop the war, and while the *New York Times* was hailing “world public opinion” as a second “superpower” that could challenge the US war machine, the ISO challenged those conceptions. We were just as committed to building the mass demonstrations as any other anti-war activists, but we continuously argued that the demonstrations alone *would not* prevent or stop the war (for example, [http://socialistworker.org/2003-1/442/442\\_09\\_Protest.shtml](http://socialistworker.org/2003-1/442/442_09_Protest.shtml)). The subsequent invasion and destruction of Iraq demoralized millions, and led many activists to conclude that mass demonstrations “don’t work”. For liberals, this argument fed support for an electoral turn toward the Democrats (“anybody but Bush”). For some radicals and anarchists, this lent support to a denigration of mass action in favor of smaller, more “militant” actions that later found an echo in the Occupy movement. These developments were unfortunate, but no one can seriously argue that the ISO left its members and periphery unprepared for them.

Ahmed’s 2001 article also characterized this pre-9/11 moment by noting that “We are in a transition period—between things ended and things begun.” This concept of a “transition period,” has become another point of contention, as the quote from SF6 notes above. The ISO Steering Committee introduced this concept in the 1990s as a shorthand to describe “the phase after the end of the ‘downturn’ in class struggle that characterized the 1980s and before the onset of a future upturn in struggle. The term is useful in highlighting in broad strokes the general trajectory of class politics, based upon the degree of class polarization.” (from IS Steering Committee, “Organizational perspectives #1: Why is the transition period taking so long?” *Pre-convention bulletin #1*, December 21, 2006) The Steering Committee also noted that the “transition period” concept applied to a phase of the class struggle, and not to “every aspect of US politics since the early 1990s.” Whatever the merits of the “transition period” formulation—and Steering Committee members have acknowledged its weaknesses<sup>2</sup>—it’s important to note that the idea of a “transition period,” *explicitly contrasts to (and rejects)* the core of the “1930s in slow motion” perspective that saw only two types of political periods: “downturn” or “upturn.” It also emphasized the necessity for preparatory work, for the building of socialist cadres, and the training of working-class militants through their own experience as an essential component for the success of a future upturn in struggle.

In the period leading up to the 2009 convention—a period, it should be remembered, that included the near-meltdown of the world financial system, layoffs of more than 800,000 workers a month in the U.S., the Democratic sweep that elected Obama, and the Republic Windows and Doors factory occupation, among other events—the Steering Committee wrote that “The ‘transition period’ that followed the conservative dominance of the Reagan era has finally—and decisively—given way to a political period characterized by

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<sup>1</sup> The Renewal Faction’s critique of the ISO’s perspectives in the 2000s mentions 9/11, but uses it to illustrate the ISO’s alleged delay in recognizing “problems with our organizational methods” because those issues were “‘masked,’ in a sense, by the post-9/11 reaction: there was an obvious and true explanation for any difficulties the organization may have been experiencing.”

<sup>2</sup> In response to criticisms of the “transition period” formulation that former member Shaun J. raised at the 2013 ISO convention (almost five years after the organization had stopped using it!), Sharon S. agreed with Shaun that the “transition period” was not a useful rubric.

the possibilities for rising struggle and a growing left.” (Sharon S. for the Steering Committee, “Organizational Perspectives, Part I: Preparing to Grow” Pre-convention bulletin #1, December 22, 2008).

### **Optimism, pessimism and looking reality in the face**

If the core of these critiques of the ISO’s so-called “Big Bang” theory were simply whether the ISO predicted the future accurately, they wouldn’t require much of a response. No organization, even one more firmly rooted in multiple arenas of struggle than the ISO is, can predict the future. One can only, through a process of “successive approximation,” arrive at a more accurate assessment of the political environment and its role in it. It would be more accurate to assume that the ISO’s critics disagree with the characterization of current political conjuncture as a “new period” “characterized by the possibilities for rising struggle and a growing left.” This is clear from the contribution of the SF6. The Socialist Outpost comrades are less fatalistic, recognizing the opportunities for “experimentation” and left-wing initiatives. But they stake much of their critique of the ISO on its alleged exaggerations of potential in struggles and continuous predictions of “turning points” that didn’t materialize. The critics are warning the ISO not to overestimate the political environment since 2008, lest the organization run aground, as they allege it has in the past. How should we respond?

First, we should ask the most obvious question. Is the characterization of the period from 2008 to the present as a “new period” with many opportunities for struggle and left-wing politics accurate? This is certainly an important question and one that should take up quite a bit of pre-convention discussion. Alan M.’s Perspectives document in 2014 Preconvention Bulletin #1 emphasized that the last five years have seen huge upsurges in class and social struggle on a world scale. Even in the U.S., Alan writes, “we have seen important upsurges and movements develop in reaction to the crisis, and with a particular intensity around class questions. The ISO’s participation in them has made us stronger, more experienced and more capable, and put us in a new position of prominence on the left.” Comrades can disagree with this assessment of the last five years. But it is impossible to deny the actuality of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, general strikes in Greece and other countries, the mass student movements in Quebec and Chile, the Wisconsin uprising, the Chicago teachers strike and the Occupy movement in the U.S., to name just a few events of the recent past.

A subsidiary point is also worth making here: the ISO was not alone in assessing the 2008 crisis as the beginning of a new political period. The Argentinian Marxist economist Claudio Katz, who spoke at Socialism 2009, wrote about a “new conjuncture” in October, 2008: “From despair or confusion the mass media are no longer singing the praises of capitalism. With panic and stupor they write ironically about the “socialism for the rich” which accompanies the rescue of the bankers. They do not know that real socialism is the antithesis of this rescue, that it aims at helping those who are abandoned and penalizing the rich. At the beginning of a great political turning-point this simple message can once again become as popular as ever.” François Sabado, one of the leading theoreticians of the Fourth International, analyzing 2007-2008 as a “systematic generalized crisis,” continued: “The dominant classes have just undergone a political and ideological defeat. That gives new space for anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist ideas, but this is within an overall relation of forces which remains unfavourable to the world of labour. It is necessary, now, to follow in detail what will occur at the level of social struggles in the societies affected by the crisis. . .” [The Katz and Sabado articles can be found in *International Viewpoint* 406, November 2008 at <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?rubrique130>.]

Second, if these assessments amount to an accurate accounting of the present period, how should socialists position themselves to realize its possibilities? The critics have accused the ISO of alternating between a “war footing” to struggles that never break through, with retreats to “back to basics” campaigns when over-optimistic predictions fall short. I’ll leave it to ISO members to decide if this is really the character of the ISO’s practice in the last five years. But what should be obvious from a reading of the organization’s perspectives documents in this period is a spirit of consistent assessment, reassessment and recalibration of the organization’s perspectives. Given our assessment of the present period as one of political polarization and volatility, perspectives documents have regularly featured discussions of “what we got right, and what we got wrong,” as well as admonitions that limited the application of the perspective to a specific timeframe. Comrades Ruder and Maass explicitly cite an example of this in the organization’s 2010

perspectives document on U.S. politics, evaluating the Obama administration's first year (see <http://socialistworker.org/2013/11/20/the-challenges-facing-socialists>). The Steering Committee's Organizational Perspectives document (Pre-Convention Bulletin #1, February 5, 2010), issued a little more than a year after Obama's inauguration stated: "Although we were right about the scale of the economic crisis and the growing radicalization, our expectation that the level of struggle would continue to rise after Obama took office turned out to be *very wrong*." This is hardly an assertion of infallibility, papal or otherwise. Recall again, Duncan Hallas's explanation for the SLL's decline: its failure to evaluate its perspectives in relation to developments in the real world.

As Alan notes in his 2013 perspectives contribution, ISO members and the organization's publications may have been guilty of making overstatements about the possibilities that inhered in a particular political event or movement in the last five years. Yet this is hardly tantamount to declaring each event a "turning point"—no matter how much any of us would wish otherwise. What is more, a particular event or movement *can be* recognized as a milestone in one sense, but not another. Although many people in the labor movement and left had hoped that the Wisconsin Uprising would become a point where labor would finally draw the line against the employers' offensive (Mary Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle's 2012 collection was "optimistically" titled *It Started in Wisconsin*), this did not happen. However, that's not the same as saying Wisconsin had *no* impact, or was a mere blip on the radar screen, as organizations like Solidarity have contended since. For thousands of labor activists, Wisconsin was a touchstone of this era whose lessons are still being absorbed. And it's also important to stress that the ISO never underestimated the scale of the opposition the Wisconsin Uprising was up against, underplayed the scale of the struggle that was necessary to win, nor whitewashed the scale of the defeat that resulted. (See, for example, <http://socialistworker.org/2012/03/08/bottom-up-rebellion-in-wisconsin> or <http://socialistworker.org/2012/06/21/the-lessons-of-wisconsin>.)

And yet, our comrades in Madison, *Socialist Worker*, and many comrades, allies and unionists, around the country poured all the energy they could into trying to turn the Wisconsin Uprising into a victory. This shouldn't be taken as indication of some unthinking "optimism," but of the proper posture that socialists should take to all manifestations of genuine struggle. When confronted with a particular struggle, socialists try to advance it as far as it will go in achieving its aims, while organizing the people within it who want to fight. Even in times of defeat, socialists try to organize and educate elements who want to understand how to fight better the next time, *because we understand that there will be a next time*.

With obvious allowances for the differences between 1924 and today, George Lukacs wrote of this attitude to struggle as one of Lenin's central insights:

The actuality of the revolution: this is the core of Lenin's thought and his decisive link with Marx. For historical materialism as the conceptual expression of the proletariat's struggle for liberation could only be conceived and formulated theoretically when revolution was already on the historical agenda as a practical reality; when, in the misery of the proletariat, in Marx's words, was to be seen not only the misery itself but also the revolutionary element 'which will bring down the old order'. Even at that time it was necessary to have the undaunted insight of genius to be able to see the actuality of the proletarian revolution. For the average man first sees the proletarian revolution when the working masses are already fighting on the barricades, and – if he happens also to have enjoyed a vulgar-Marxist education – not even then. For to a vulgar Marxist, the foundations of bourgeois society are so unshakeable that, even when they are most visibly shaking, he only hopes and prays for a return to 'normality', sees its crises as temporary episodes, and regards a struggle even at such times as an irrational and irresponsible rebellion against the ever-invincible capitalist system. (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1924/lenin/ch01.htm>)

The point here isn't that socialists should see every demonstration or strike is a "turning point," a characterization that is only really known in hindsight. But it is about being prepared for the possibility that a particular struggle *could be* a launching point for more, or deeper, struggles. Socialists can't hope to contribute to today's struggles if they start from what some might call a "realistic" position—based on an

assessment of the balance of forces today—that the struggles are destined to fail, or to be derailed.<sup>3</sup> With few exceptions, the leaderships of today’s trade unions and liberal organizations already play the role of convincing their memberships that not much is to be gained from struggle, and to accept whatever employers or politicians are willing to offer. Being a “serious” socialist today doesn’t mean adopting the same fatalistic posture to struggle, but justifying it with quotes from Marx, Lenin or Trotsky. We orient to those who want to struggle not because we are evangelists spreading the “Good News” of socialism, as former comrade Shaun J. has put it (<http://torepeat.wordpress.com/2013/08/02/the-disarticulation-of-the-us-working-class-introduction-unions-and-strikes/#more-142>), but because socialists attempt to do their “theoretical and strategic thinking” from inside the struggle.

Let’s take a contemporary example of struggle which all of our critics seem to hold in high regard: that of the low-wage worker campaign embodied in the Fight for 15, Our Walmart, and other campaigns. One could see these campaigns as simply media lobbying efforts, led in a top-down fashion by some of the most undemocratic, pro-Democrat unions around. Indeed, I think there is much truth in this characterization (as I and other comrades have argued in *Socialist Worker*, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/09/23/what-will-get-labor-moving>). But does this mean that our comrades who are working within the campaign, as well as those who are working in solidarity with it, are just biding their time, waiting for when SEIU or UFCW will “pull the plug,” in order to “expose” this reality? Of course not. As the contribution of Chicago comrades Mario C. and Trish K. in 2013 IB #2 (September, 2013) shows, not only are comrades in the Fight for 15 campaign fully aware of its limitations, but they also try to organize their co-workers to push against these limits. And they have won some small, but important, victories through the collective organization of their co-workers—which is what it means to organize as a socialist in the workplace.

How socialists position themselves *vis-a-vis* a generalized outbreak of struggle (e.g. a strike wave or a mass movement) is only one, albeit the most important, measuring stick by which socialist practice can be judged. But what about the 99 percent of political time when a strike wave or mass movement isn’t breaking out? How socialists position themselves in relation to struggles as they exist today is important too.

### Building the ISO Today

There are many discussions to be had at the 2014 convention concerning the ISO’s interventions in movements, its strategic orientations, and its pace of work. But all of those discussions take place (or should take place) within an overall understanding that the great working class and social movements in U.S. history have always taken many years to develop, but win major advances in short, and concentrated, periods of struggle. In her *Subterranean Fire*, Sharon Smith quotes socialist Bert Cochran’s analysis of the development of the U.S. labor movement. This analysis emphasizes that over more than 150 years, there are only a few short periods in which the labor movement made its biggest gains in membership and organization. Similarly, the multi-city sit-ins that retook the initiative for the civil rights movement were mainly concentrated in February/March, 1960. One could easily note that the mass popular phase of Occupy Wall Street and other occupations across the country was essentially confined to about two months in the fall of 2011.

I make these observations (and there are many more that could be made) to emphasize that rejecting a perspective based on the imminence of a “big bang,” doesn’t mean rejecting the possibility that a sudden eruption of struggle can help to transform the political landscape. After all, who would have predicted in, say, mid-2010, that only a few months later, the dictators of Tunisia and Egypt would be overthrown? Who would have predicted that the modest (and to many activists, disappointing) launch of Occupy Wall Street would ignite a nationwide movement that would include working-class action to shut down the U.S.’s fifth busiest port? The task for us is to build an organization that, in the U.S. context, can act when these

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<sup>3</sup> In my view, this is essentially the position that comrade Ben S. in Atlanta is arguing when he writes, “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 operating. Thus, rather than basing our assessment on real possibilities and limitations, we’ve adopted a strategy based on wishful-thinking.” Ben S., “An assessment of the Atlanta branch in light of the Renewal Faction documents” *Pre-Convention Bulletin* #9 (January, 2014).

opportunities present themselves. That's because we not only understand the urgency of building an alternative to the untenable status quo, but we also want to help influence events now.

Precisely because we have a realistic assessment of the state of struggle and consciousness today, we tend to be very modest about the role our own comrades have played in the most important struggles of the day. We forget that ISO members were key activists in the initial organization of Occupy Wall Street, or that in leading a protest against Troy Davis's execution to the OWS encampment, our members and allies actually helped to give OWS its mass and multiracial character. We forget that our members and allies in the University of Wisconsin teaching assistants' union helped initiate and maintain the occupation of the capitol during the Wisconsin Uprising; or that one of our members offered the resolution that put the South Central (WI) Federation of Labor on record in support of a general strike in 2011. Or, more recently, that our comrades, doing the hard work of organizing their coworkers, forced Whole Foods to grant a Thanksgiving day off to any worker who wanted to take it. And I won't even mention the role our comrades played in the 2012 Chicago teachers strike. Sure, we have made many mistakes along the way. But if our organization was truly as clueless and misdirected as our critics claim, it would be hard to understand how its members could have played such important roles in some of the major struggles of the post-2008 period. And I should point out that comrades from every "cohort" of the ISO (people who joined in the 1980s, the 1990s, the 2000s and the 2010s) played key and leading roles in the struggles mentioned above. That fact alone should illustrate the value of a long-term orientation and commitment to building the kind of organization that the ISO has become.

We have a lot of important issues about the period and perspectives to discuss before, during and after the 2014 convention. Burying the myth that the ISO has spent the last five-plus years "waiting for Godot" is a good place to start.

**Lance S., Chicago**

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## **Low Wage Organizing in the Bay Area**

In the Bay Area, the ISO has been involved with Our Walmart for a little more than a year, and is now considering involvement in electoral initiatives tied to low-wage workers' fight for a higher minimum wage. I'll discuss both together, because while the campaigns are distinct, they involve many of the same forces and problems.

There are a few aspects of our experience that I think make it worth understanding for the rest of the organization. First, through an Our Walmart community solidarity circle we have become unusually involved with the organizing for a group outside the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), giving us a good view of an important piece of the rising wave of low-wage worker struggle. Second, we have begun to convince some of these activists to become organized socialists, a challenging process which may hold lessons for comrades elsewhere. Finally, low wage organizing in the Bay Area has flowed naturally into electoral politics, starting with a local ballot measure for a \$12.25 minimum wage whose proponents are now collecting signatures, and our debates about how to approach this have brought up questions that are part of a national discussion about socialists and elections in the present period.

### **Our Walmart**

Our Walmart itself is made up of current and former Walmart associates. However, most meetings are run by UFCW staffers as part of the union's Making Change at Walmart project. Our Walmart members tend to lead public actions, but UFCW makes decisions about which actions will happen and what they will look like. The Our Walmart community solidarity group meets sporadically, usually several times leading up to a large event, and includes staffers from UFCW, current and former Walmart associates, and other community and labor activists (e.g., Jobs With Justice).

The UFCW strategy for Our Walmart seems to be fairly media focused. Four of the 16 members of the

Walmart board of directors live in the Bay Area, so the campaign often organizes events that target directors' homes or public events. For example, when board member, and Yahoo CEO, Marissa Mayer delivered a keynote address at DreamForce, a conference of thousands of software engineers in San Francisco, we were there to disrupt the event with a banner and chants. This led to an uptick in tweets about #WalmartStrikers. UFCW's media strategy has been largely successful in bringing the struggles of Walmart workers to public attention. The story of the Canton, OH Walmart that held a food drive for their own workers went viral, Ashton Kutcher launched a twitter war with Walmart, and the second annual Our Walmart Black Friday protests became part of regular Black Friday media coverage.

While this media strategy has been important for bringing attention to Walmart workers and shaping public opinion in their favor, it has come at the expense of recruiting new members. At least in the Bay Area, if not nationally, most of the Our Walmart worker leaders were fired after last summer's "strike", which meant workers across the country travelling to the Walmart home office in Bentonville, AK. They continue to be active leaders in Our Walmart, but they have not yet been replaced with current associates in the stores.

Some current and former associates have expressed concern with this strategy and with UFCW's top down organizing model. They have begun to talk with each other independent from the union and have organized some small events on their own. They are still active in Our Walmart, recognizing the resources that come from working with UFCW, but they also recognize that UFCW will only allow them to go so far.

The ISO has related to Our Walmart by attending community meetings and events and by building relationships with workers. One Our Walmart leader, who came to our branch meeting that followed the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington to announce an upcoming event at the end of the summer, was so impressed with the meeting that she asked about joining. She read parts of Women, Race, and Class and the Where We Stand packet with us and enthusiastically signed up to join. She has become an active member of our branch, in particular our low wage organizing working group. Another Our Walmart leader has attended several branch meetings, regularly speaks about the merits of the ISO at Our Walmart meetings, and was interviewed in Socialist Worker.

While we have sometimes become frustrated with UFCW staffers while working in the community solidarity group, we have tried to minimize confrontation and focus on building relationships with associates and allies, for example through weekly catch-up calls. We have pushed gently both inside and outside of meetings for a more transparent and democratic decision-making process for the community solidarity circle. Perhaps our most confrontational move was simply raising an objection in one meeting to the description of us and other non-UFCW, non-Walmart activists as "volunteers", arguing instead for a class-based understanding of solidarity. The result has been that workers who have developed their own criticisms of Our Walmart's top-down style have tended to view us as potential allies, but it has remained clear to everybody that these criticisms are coming organically from Walmart associates, not from us.

### **The ballot**

This election season, we have the opportunity bring low wage organizing to the ballot box in Oakland as there is an initiative to raise the minimum wage. UFCW, SEIU, and Unite HERE, along with several community organizations, have organized a campaign called Lift Up Oakland to propose a \$12.25 minimum wage that will rise with the consumer price index and include paid sick days. ISO members in the Bay Area have been debating the pros and cons of getting involved with the campaign. On the con side, comrades criticize both the process that the unions have used and the conservative \$12.25 that falls short of the national demand for \$15. The unions met behind closed doors, only allowing organizations that could chip in \$100,000 for polling and research to be part of the discussion. Their polls showed 70% in favor of an \$11 minimum wage and 45% in favor of \$15. While socialists might conclude that if 45% of people are already in favor of \$15 before a campaign is even launched we could tip the scales through an active campaign, the unions opted for a more conservative figure.

While these criticisms are valid, there are even more reasons to consider supporting the campaign. Firstly, \$12.25 per hour plus paid sick days would significantly improve the lives of many workers in Oakland, and

we should be on their side. Getting actively involved in the campaign will allow us to work alongside Our Walmart activists and other labor and community allies with whom we want to strengthen our relationships. Having petitions to get the initiative on the ballot will allow us the opportunity to go door to door and meet more people in our audience, and will give us renewed energy for Socialist Worker tablings that recently have often been stagnant. Finally, we can help to build a sustained campaign that can not only win \$12.25 but continue the fight toward \$15.

Also on the ballot this year is Dan Siegel's campaign for mayor, which it is tempting to see taking the same relationship to the minimum wage measure in Oakland as Sawant's socialist city council campaign in Seattle took to the minimum wage measure in Sea-Tac. Siegel is a civil rights attorney, lawyer for the family of Alan Blueford who was murdered by Oakland police, Occupy activist, and long term radical. The campaign is pulling together many of our activist and union allies, but is also drawing support from Democrats who criticize Quan. He has talked about a \$15 minimum wage, community policing, turning schools into community centers, and universal pre-K. He has no written platform as of yet, and says he wants the campaign to help shape the platform. After several conversations with comrades, Dan agreed to deregister from the Democratic party, but we don't have confirmation of that as of yet.

ISO members in the Bay Area are continuing to figure out our relationship to the campaign and may not have a decision by convention. Personally, I am more skeptical of Siegel's campaign than of the minimum wage measure.

Minimally, for us to consider endorsing and joining the campaign, I think he would need to deregister as a Democrat as well as refrain from forming alliances with Democratic candidates to get their supporters' 2nd choice votes in the instant runoff voting. Also, we still need to do more research about Dan's record on the Oakland School Board, as the attorney for the Oakland School District, and as part of the San Francisco city attorney's office.

But beyond the individual questions, Dan has a real chance of winning this election, so it's important for to consider the implications if were to actually take office. To my knowledge Kshama Sawant is the first candidate the ISO has ever endorsed who won, and she just came into office, so we've never been in the position of having to defend our candidate in office. Moreover, Dan is running for mayor rather than city council, so he could end up in control of, and responsible for, the executive functions of Oakland government, not simply a minority legislative voice. We need to think about what the objective possibilities really are to govern Oakland from the left, given the powers of the mayor as well as the other economic and political forces at play in Oakland. I worry that the social movements here are not strong enough to hold a left mayor accountable or lend him the strength to successfully confront capital over central policy questions, and I'm reluctant to count on the campaign itself to change that. But, we'll see how things develop.

**Stephanie S., Bay Area**

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