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Proposed slate for National Committee
Submitted by ISO National Committee

Convention information and deadlines

Convention location: Northwestern University. We have sent out meeting room and other convention details for attendees in a Convention Information Sheet.

Pre-convention documents and resolutions: The deadline for submitting documents and resolutions for pre-convention bulletins is past. All comrades who submit new documents or resolutions will be required to make their own copies to be distributed at the convention. We will include all of these in the post-convention bulletin, which reports back to the entire membership.

Please note the following reminders:

1. SW and dues:

   All branches must be paid up on dues and SW to seat their delegates.

   If your branch owes money for dues and/or SW it must be received by the start of registration on Saturday. If absolutely necessary, send outstanding payments along with your delegate. We discourage waiting until the convention to pay branch debts because it will interfere with the streamlined registration process, wasting time unnecessarily while other comrades are forced to wait.

2. Double dues payments for February.
The ISO rules require all members to pay double dues for the month of February.

Here is how to handle the double dues:

If your branch delegates will be flying to the convention, use the double dues money to reimburse your delegates. If you have any money left over, turn it in to the national office to help pay for other branches’ delegates. If your branch’s double dues are not enough to fully pay for your delegates’ plane fares, the national office will make up the difference.

If your branch’s delegates do not need to fly to the convention, you should turn over all your double dues to the national office to reimburse other branch’s delegates.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact sharon@internationalsocialist.org.

Documents

Organizing in Denton, TX

This document is both an assessment of the Denton, Texas branch over the last year and an attempt to share some of the lessons that comrades in Denton have learned in an effort to generalize our experiences to the rest of the organization.

Denton is a small city in North Texas approximately an hour north of Dallas. The city is known for being home to the University of North Texas (UNT), one of the most affordable and accessible public schools in the region with a diverse student population and a student body primarily of working-class origin. The Denton ISO has traditionally been composed of university students who join the ISO and move to a different city after a couple of years of membership. It is for this reason that Denton has been thought of as a transitory city and the Denton ISO a transitory branch.

Student activism in Denton, while small, has had a notable presence, however since Occupy Denton, the radicals and anarchists that were members of organizations outside of the ISO have for the most part become inactive. One disadvantageous result of this situation is that there are few people in Denton with which the ISO can engage in sustainable and productive collaborative work. Another problem we find ourselves in is constantly having to initiate and lead much of the activist work that occurs in town. While leadership in movements is something we strive for as ISO members, we also need to be careful of substitutionism or working through what might be perceived as front groups from the outside.

Currently members of our branch are involved in women's and LGBT rights organizing, Palestine solidarity work, and environmental activism. Struggles for reproductive rights have ebbed throughout Texas after what was an energetic summer of fight-back against anti-choice legislation throughout Texas. The mainstream feminist organizations have largely shifted their support to Wendy Davis and the Democrats or have resorted to volunteerism and creating safe spaces as their only form of activism. In Denton, with the exception of the organization in which ISO members are involved, building mass grassroots’ movements is not a central goal. Clinic defense continues to be a common activity, however, the clinic we and feminists in Denton work with have recently begun to require activists to keep clinic escorts down to 5 people and no longer allow counter-protests to anti-choicers. We can no longer call this activity clinic defense as it is now solely clinic escorting. While the movement against HB2 largely subsided after this summer, the discontent remains, and ISO members involved in reproductive justice organizing are consistently busy and able to find an audience.

After over a year of building a Palestine solidarity group on campus, ISO members of the Denton Anti-War Network are picking up the remnants of the organization after learning many lessons about how to build
such a group on a university campus and sustain its membership. Through collaboration with a Presbyterian church, community members, and students and professors interested in the BDS movement, a better thought-out building and campaign strategy is being worked out.

The environmental movement in Denton is one that has seen many developments, however, the Denton ISO today plays a less prominent role than it did two years ago. Currently the environmental movement in Denton is directed against fracking. Many neighborhoods and schools in Denton are within a few hundred feet of frack wells and community members are increasingly concerned for their health. During Occupy, protestors pushed city council to pass a temporary moratorium against fracking in the city. While the moratorium only lasted a few months, it was a win for the movement in Denton. Since the lifting of the moratorium, frack wells have continued to pop up around town and peoples’ frustration continues to increase, but the movement rises and falls continuously as it lacks organizational cohesion. It is crucial for us to find a better way to relate to the movement if it is to be steered in a left-ward direction, rather than the apologetic liberal stances that the movement’s current leadership puts forth.

The Denton ISO has become a pole of attraction for radicals at UNT searching for an alternative to liberal politics. Because we are the only socialist presence in Denton, we have a large periphery of activists and radicals who regularly attend our meetings and engage with us.

Our membership has grown only slightly after the summer of 2012, when our branch was halved and went from 24 to 12 members after many graduated and moved away. With the near total absence of cadre, our young membership has, by necessity, developed skills in organizing despite the limited engagement with sustained movement work in the area and we have strengthened our foundation of Marxism during this period as we focused on basic theoretical and historical topics.

The past year can be viewed as a time during which we patiently trained our membership to build our branch and are seeing the successes of our efforts. Currently the branch is 14 members and we have a good periphery of potential recruits around us. This periphery has been maintained by having interesting meetings and forums that are both engaging and exciting. Among the most recent recruits to the branch are comrades who were contacts for a year or two. Efforts have also been made to host small introductory study groups around the Where We Stand and accessible theoretical texts that have often consisted mostly of contacts and a couple members in order to allow those with less experience room and encouragement to speak up and ask questions in a space without feeling intimidated by socialists with more experience. This method of conducting contact work has not substituted for individual contact meetings but has been treated as supplementary to more in depth conversations about the politics of the ISO.

Over the past three years our branch went from a predominantly white and male membership to one which white men are in the minority and people of color and women are increasingly joining our branch and periphery. This can be explained by the conscious effort that has been made in the branch to involve itself in movement work that displays our anti-oppression politics, specifically around issues of reproductive justice and feminism. The branch's long-term effort to relate to movements struggling for reproductive rights and gender equality has attracted many women to our organization. With the exception of the short-lived response to the killing of Trayvon Martin, Denton has not seen much movement against racism. Still, we have been able to attract people of color to our organization with the ability to clearly put forward anti-racist politics in meetings, conversations, and in movement work.

Throughout this period, the Denton branch has functioned with little direct communication with the center. Between September of 2012 and the fall of 2013 there was practically no communication with national leadership bodies of the organization. It was during this time that the Denton branch elected a member of about a year to the position of branch organizer. Since the fall of 2013, a member of the Steering Committee has communicated with the branch organizer on a few occasions. While the phone calls between the branch organizer and a leading member have been helpful and appreciated, they have not been enough. With a lack of experienced cadre and communication with national leadership bodies, we believe that the development of the Denton branch has been hindered. We believe that the lack of a regional organizer and a clearly articulated position on Texas have been issues not only for the maintenance and growth of the Denton branch itself, but also for the development of the ISO in the North Texas region,
which has become and will continue to become an increasingly important area of economic development and struggle over the coming years as Texas attracts business as a right to work state, a state with a strong history of racist divide and conquer strategies, and few regulations.

A branch in Dallas, the largest city in North Texas and among the largest in the nation, existed for a couple of years. It began as a project of members of the Denton branch who moved to Dallas for work. In 2012, the branch was about six members strong. By this time last year the branch dwindled and disappeared after two members left due to serious family issues, one left due to personal and political disagreements, another left due to questions about Leninism, and the two that remained for a short while found themselves isolated and increasingly demoralized in a large city. During this time, networks of radicals in Dallas have sprung up around movements. Among the most exciting of these has been OUR Wal-Mart organizing. Also prevalent were demonstrations in solidarity with the Arab Spring, movements around reproductive justice, immigrant rights marches, and now the formation of a chapter of System Change Not Climate Change. Because of our proximity to Dallas, the Denton branch has been able to participate in these struggles. However, because of our distance to Dallas, ISO members have not been as involved in the direct organizing of any of these movements and have also not been able to recruit people living in Dallas. We have formed friendly relationships with these activist networks and the Dallas branch of Solidarity (the socialist organization) but are largely missing out on opportunities to contribute more significantly to the development of the left and growing the ISO in Dallas.

We do not know if the branch in Dallas would have completely fallen apart had they had a regional organizer, but not having one certainly did not help. It is not substitutionism to say that enthusiastic and new members need assistance and guidance from the larger revolutionary socialist organization of which they are a part if they are to succeed. It seems very likely that demoralization and bad politics won out in the end because these comrades received very little direct support outside of the support Denton could give it from an hour away.

In the past months, members in Denton have begun to think differently about the city and the branch. It can no longer be considered only a transitory location where we can train members until they move elsewhere, though that will be the role the Denton branch plays for the majority of members who are recruited while they are students here. After establishing roots here, and contributing to activist organizing in Denton and UNT, we have come to realize that the this location will continue to be of importance for the development of a left in Dallas and the greater North Texas region. To better contextualize things, it should be said that while clinic defense occurs in the nearby city of Fort Worth, it is composed almost entirely of people from Denton. Additionally, the Tar Sands Blockade (which we have many criticism of) that sprung up in East Texas and helped raise national attention about the Keystone XL pipeline was largely initiated by activists trained in Denton. With the understanding of the role that the small city of Denton plays in North Texas, the correct orientation around the already established branch in Denton and the North Texas region is of great importance and we cannot continue to organize without systematic communication with national leadership.

Projects elsewhere in Texas have also been facing many challenges and we have seen the failures of other organizing projects throughout the state of Texas. Many of these failures are largely due to a low level of movement and the demoralization of fairly new members. Many of these tensions have been because of infighting among leadership within certain branches. We are appealing to the organization as a whole and the national leadership bodies, the Steering Committee and the National Committee to begin to think through in a more serious way how we are building in Texas and the South more generally. There is great potential here, and we do not think that we are fully tapping into that potential.

We are not calling for the ISO to come into the South and create mass movements which do not exist, but we are saying that potential for more growth and development exists within Texas. We are not currently proposing anything. However, we would like to draw attention to Paul L.’s document in Pre-Convention Bulletin #2 entitled, “Revolutionary strategy and the ISO: Response to ‘A Critique’”. We agree with him that the proposals from the National Committee for stepping up our Marxist education through more internal classes, public meetings, and Socialist Worker sales do not, in and of themselves, provide a solution for the challenges many areas face. While we have been doing these things for quite some time in
Denton, and we have seen the maturation of our politics and a slight growth of the branch, these suggestions cannot solve the problems we face.

We are also in agreement with likely every comrade in the organization that we need to get on a firmer financial footing, how we do so, especially when so many comrades are struggling to pay rent each month, is another question. We are also in agreement with Paul L. that we should consider as an organization how to reallocate resources internally to help with development in places where we are weaker.

This document does not propose any outright solutions for the dilemmas and challenges facing the South. We also do not think that Texas comrades alone can completely solve or find the solutions to these problems. This document is meant to help continue a discussion about how we can move forward in the South and as an organization as a whole.

Mario O, Elizabeth C, Denton, TX

The ISO and labor in 2014

This document will briefly examine the state of the U.S. labor movement and the ongoing work and discussion on labor in the ISO—in particular, our efforts to implement the rank-and-file strategy in today's conditions. Although labor remains in a parlous state, scattered but important struggles have pointed to the potential for resistance, while changes in the leadership of key unions and electoral challenges reflect a growing debate within the unions over the way forward. Our implantation in the unions, though highly uneven, has also created opportunities for us to try and advance some key struggles. To better relate to this situation, the ISO National Office will be making some important changes, which will be outlined below.

For a more wide-ranging analysis of the state of the U.S. working class, comrades may wish to review the two-part series in the International Socialist Review Issues 88 (http://isreview.org/issue/88/state-us-working-class-part-1) and 89 (http://isreview.org/issue/89/toward-renewal-labor-movement) which were revised expanded versions of last year's convention documents. The material covered in those articles—the impact of the recession on the U.S. working class and an assessment of the Chicago teachers' strike—is still relevant to our current discussion.

A recovery for bosses only

With the 95 percent gains of the U.S. economic recovery going overwhelmingly to the 1 percent from 2009 to 2013—the discussion of inequality has moved to the center of U.S. political discussion. Given weak economic growth, the labor market remains poor. The slight improvement in the jobless rate to 6.6 percent is due to a decline in the number of workers actively looking for jobs (if all those workers were included, the jobless rate would have been 13.1 percent in January 2014). For 60 percent of job seekers, there are simply not jobs. People of color remain hardest hit by the poor economy, with unemployment among African Americans at 12.1 percent and Latinos at 8.5 percent.

The result of all this has been a continued decline in living standards nearly five years after the economic recovery began. The U.S. economy has not experienced anything like this in any economic recovery since the Second World War. The employers have seized the opportunity created by the depressed economy to lock in a deep and permanent cut in the working class standard of living. The perspective for the capitalist class is for a long-term economic revival based on low wages, a low social wage (cuts in Social Security, Medicare, etc.), low corporate taxes, and cheap energy. The aim is to bolster U.S. competitiveness against its rivals, not only in Europe and Japan, but also China and the newly industrializing countries.

Corporate America's approach necessarily entails a further intensification of the war on organized labor that has been taking place for nearly 40 years. In the private sector, particularly manufacturing, the template is the 2009 auto industry bailout that gave the government ownership of General Motors and Chrysler while wiping out decades of union gains. Thus even enormously profitable companies like Boeing reopened a union contract that passed, thanks to pressure from top union officials, to successfully demand sweeping
concessions on pensions and the create a two-tier workforce. Legislators in Indiana and Michigan abetted such attacks with the passage of anti-union "right-to-work" laws in historic labor strongholds. Public sector unions, now the final redoubt of union strength, have seen escalating attacks. While Republicans led the way by stripping unions of collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin, Democratic governors in California, New York and Illinois have also targeted pensions, pay and benefits, while local officials in municipalities and school boards consult professional union busters to demand crippling concessions.

**The state of the unions**

This onslaught from employers has continued to grind down union membership. Unions in 2013 lost 400,000 members despite the improving economy, for a total of 14.3 million. Moreover, the continued growth in the size of the working class means that union density—the percentage of workers in unions—declined sharply too, from 11.8 percent to 11.3 percent. In the public sector, some 35.3 percent of workers were in unions; for the private sector, the figure is 6.7 percent, a 97-year low.

To try and come to grips with this decline, organized labor's strategy—if it can be called such—is contradictory. On the one hand, unions have increasingly tried to organize low-wage workers, starting with immigrants in the 2000s and today, more generally, in the various Fight for 15 campaigns among retail and fast-food workers (about which more below). On the other hand, the unions have abandoned the defense of "American Dream" living standards in manufacturing, such as auto and aerospace. Faced with the prospect of high-stakes confrontation with increasingly aggressive employers, most union leaders, prioritizing institutional survival, have sought to preserve partnership even at the cost of abandoning decades of union gains. By making these concessions, union leaders hope to prove to employers that they can revive labor-management partnership of the long-gone days of Big Labor of the 1950s through the 1970s.

Meanwhile, labor has doubled down on its efforts to get Democrats elected to stop the Republican union-killers, even though President Barack Obama has himself pushed the anti-union agenda through the terms of the auto bailout, the teacher-bashing Race to the Top program, a right-to-work type regime for labor organizing in the Federal Aviation Administration and a pay freeze for federal workers (which is worth remembering the next time you hear Obama talk about raising the minimum wage).

Labor's dilemma was on display at the September 2012 AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles. The labor federation, recognizing that unions are weak and in danger of isolation, threw open its doors to groups like the NAACP, the National Council of La Raza and the Sierra Club. For a movement that has historically been insular, and even hostile to social movements, this was in some respects a step forward, legitimizing a range of political debate over racism, immigration and the environment within the unions. Yet in the conception of AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, labor was further positioning itself not as a champion of movements in struggle, but rather recalibrating its place within traditional liberal interest-group politics inside the Democratic Party. Indeed the AFL-CIO has reorganized its structures at the state level to dovetail with Democratic get-out-the-vote efforts. It marked a further retreat from the union's historic role as the representative for workers at the point of production.

Moreover, once the AFL-CIO convention was out of the way, the unions reverted to their traditional stance of seeking partnership with the employers. U.S. labor leaders' formula, in place since the early 1950s, is to help employers prosper in order to increase the number of jobs and union members. All other considerations are secondary. Thus Trumka, despite labor's overture to environmental groups, has embraced the Keystone XL pipeline in the name of job creation.

Partnership remains the watchword for major unions. Thus the United Auto Workers (UAW), reduced to 383,000 from a high of more than one million in the late 1970s, signed off on concessions in the hope that the Detroit Three would revive on the basis of low wages. The union's high-profile organizing campaign at a Volkswagen plant in Tennessee hinges on management agreeing to a German-style labor-management cooperation.

For the International Association of Machinists (IAM), Boeing's threat to begin production of the 777x airplane in a nonunion location was sufficient for the union president to ram through a second vote on a
concessionary contract after it was initially rejected. For the IAM, which has seen steady decline for decades with few organizing success, the prospect of 10,000 new dues-paying Boeing workers was too much to pass up—even if it meant handing over massive concessions to a company that was already awash in cash. The agreement has fueled the first significant opposition challenge for the IAM presidency in decades.

At another profitable company, UPS, management has insisted on concessions on health care and other issues from the Teamsters, which accepted lower-tier pay for part-timers nearly 30 years ago. Teamsters' officials were shocked when several UPS locals refused to ratify parallel agreements, delaying the passage of the new contracts for months.

The pattern is similar in the public sector. The tremendous Wisconsin labor uprising of 2011 showed that workers were fed up with the relentless demands for concessions and were searching for a way to resist—and their struggle resonated across the country. Union leaders, of course, were opposed to strike action that could have violated the law and put their institutions at risk. Unable to forge a partnership a hostile Republican governor, Scott Walker, labor wound down the struggle and turned to a recall effort that put forward the same union-bashing Democrat that Walker had defeated earlier. The failure of the effort has decimated public sector unions.

The risk of struggle against such aggressive employers has only reinforced top union leaders' efforts to cling to partnership at almost any cost. Thus American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten has for several years pushed for union contracts that abandon the fundamentals of modern teacher unionism, agreeing to merit pay and the effective abolition of tenure (which, in fact, is no more than due process in the case of dismissal). The larger National Education Association (NEA), following the AFT's lead as usual, has also retreated in its defense of tenure. The AFT does not even formally oppose the creation of charter schools that are driving the privatization of public education, and has mounted a highly uneven attempt to organize them. Following her counterparts in the private sector, Weingarten has forged partnership agreements with Bill Gates and other "liberal" school reformers. (Of course, the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012, discussed more below, pointed in a very different direction, and its impact is still being felt in teachers unions across the country).

In the U.S. Postal Service, a relentless privatization campaign has seen dozens of postal plants closed while various kinds of work—mail sorting and trucking—have been handed over to private corporations. The main postal unions, while protesting the USPS pre-funding pension formula that willfully starves the system of resources, have objected but have made concessions at the bargaining table that's created a two-tier workforce. Finally, however, workers in the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) have said "enough," and elected new left-wing leadership that has stepped up the anti-privatization struggle.

**The fight for 15**

While making these historic retreats, labor is attempting to make a comeback through the Fight for 15 campaign initiated by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Our Walmart campaign launched by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). These efforts have included efforts that, for U.S. unions, are uncharacteristically bold: strike actions, pickets and protests. Recognizing that the resonance of the Occupy Wall Street "99 percent" theme among working class people, the unions have, in some cities, begun to experiment with non-majority union strategies usually used by immigrant workers' centers and other formations. Thousands of workers have taken part in such actions, and dozens turn out to organizing meetings in cities around the U.S.

Fight for 15 campaigns vary by city: in some cases, nonprofit/NGO groups are in the lead, while in other locales it is the unions. The pattern of worker involvement is also uneven. Nor is the overall union strategy clear: in Chicago, for example, the SEIU-backed organizing committee shifted its focus away from workers at retail outlets and instead concentrated on fast food outlets (the exception is Whole Foods, where workers remained organized and got the support of the organizing committee).

The Fight for 15 did get a big boost with the election of socialist Kashama Sawant to the Seattle city
council on a platform of support for such a demand. Her campaign is launching a 15 Now initiative to either boost, or bypass, existing efforts, and will have an electoral focus on a referendum in Seattle.

The Fight for 15—in which ISO comrades have been heavily involved—is perhaps best understood as a nascent social movement with union backing, rather than a traditional unionization campaign. It is clear that the unions don't have the resources to organize, say, McDonalds, on a franchise-by-franchise basis. Instead, the aim is to put pressure on corporations to raise the wages, which would require a change in their relations with franchise owners. In parallel to this, the unions will back political efforts to raise the minimum wage to $10. This will dovetail with the 2014 Democratic campaign for the midterm elections. The SEIU appears to be experimenting with non-majority unionism in which workers will pay union dues and be active but not necessarily obtain collective bargaining agreements.

Many on the left have questioned whether the unions will follow through on these struggles—or if the unions that have made so many concession and acted so undemocratically can be relied upon. This, however, is a passive and politically mistaken way to approach the question. Big unions have historically followed the initiative of rank-and-file workers, sometimes running to catch up, as in the 1930s. This does not mean taking an ultra-left position that minimal union involvement is some Fight for 15 efforts is a good thing. On the contrary, without the involvement of labor, the low-wage organizing would have fizzled early on. We need to press for more union support for such efforts, not less. The challenge for the left is to build these struggles of low-wage workers as widely as possible, thereby creating the conditions for the improvement of workers pay and conditions and, over time, unionization.

The ISO can and should deepen its involvement in the Fight for 15 and the struggles of low-wage workers generally. This will take several forms. Comrades can take jobs in targeted workplaces and industries to help build the campaign from the inside. Further, ISO members can join or initiate support groups for low-wage workers, particularly on college campuses, where the demand for $15 for all university workers—both employees and contract workers. With Obama's push for a higher minimum wage, the timing is right on campus for pickets, protests and sit-ins this spring, with all due attention given to the salaries, perks and privileges of college presidents and top administrators. Also, ISO members can join or initiate efforts to put minimum wage and/or living wage ordinances on local ballot initiatives and/or pressure local governments to be involved. Petitions in favor of such efforts should be standard at every Socialist Worker street sale and tabling efforts.

In all these efforts, ISO members will be able to relate to large numbers of working class people, including people of color. A number of them will be interested in socialist politics. We should be sure to invite the workers we meet in such campaigns to attend ISO branch meetings and public forums—not just on the issues of low-wage workers, but on the range of political topics we take up.

New struggles and stirrings

The CTU strike showed that the upsurge in Wisconsin and the anger of Occupy could find expression in a direct confrontation between a union and the boss. The social movement unionism of the CTU meant that union officers, staff and members consciously and systematically reached out to parents and the community while at the same time undertaking an effort to rebuild the union’s effectiveness at the workplace. The result was perhaps the most popular big-city teachers' strike in U.S. history against one of the most influential politicians in the U.S.

It should be stressed that the CTU strike came from many years of effort inside the union undertaken by
ISO members and many others on the left who founded the opposition caucus CORE. The lesson of CTU strike is that such effort—if it can relate to a wider rank-and-file struggle—can shift the direction of a major union and make it an effective fighting force.

The impact of the CTU strike—beyond a spate of local teachers' strikes in suburbs—has been slower than we hoped, but it is demonstrable. In New York, the MORE caucus (its name inspired by CORE) made a strong showing in union elections. In Newark, N.J., a CORE-inspired caucus won office. In Seattle, a MAP test boycott and subsequent election campaign was boosted by the CTU's success. Teachers unions in Portland, Ore., and St. Paul, Minn., have prepared for likely strikes using the CTU organizing method as a model, and teachers in Medford, Ore., are walking the picket line as this document is being written. In Los Angeles, a challenger for the presidency of United Teacher Los Angeles has campaigned on adapting the CTU strategy in their union. In Berkeley, Calif., a union local mounted a contract campaign that was in part modeled on the CTU experience.

There have been rumblings of change in other unions, too. The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), long one of the most conservative big unions, now has an activist reform leadership that's stepped up action in a number of cities. The New York State Nurses Association, as noted in Sean P.'s document, has also elected a reform leadership. The new leaders of the APWU have lost no time in launching an effort to fight the outsourcing of postal services to Staples. And in the IAM, an election rerun ordered by the Department of Labor has enabled a reform slate to link up with dissident workers at Boeing who are disgusted by their union's strong-arm tactics in pushing through the concessionary contract. In the Teamsters union, where reform forces have struggled to regain their footing in recent years, a grassroots rebellion against contract concessions has delayed the implementation of a national contract as both low-wage part-timers and full-time drivers have opposed the union's givebacks to the company.

Changes in local union leadership have made a big difference in some important areas, too. In Northern California, a reform group in SEIU Local 1021 first restructured the union to make it more democratic, and then launched a series of public sector contract campaigns that made successful use of the strike weapon by making credible threats to walk out and doing so several times. Their efforts captured headlines last year when workers at Bay Area Rapid Transit went on strike twice. While the gains were short of what was possible, it was a show of workers' power and highlighted the difference that a well organized and fighting union could make.

These are important changes. Such developments are not apparent from a look at unionization rates or the number of strikes. It's a reminder that a fighting socialist organization that aims to make a difference can't take its bearings simply from labor statistics, but must be engaged in the struggle and constantly assessing the consciousness and activity of rank-and-file workers.

The ISO and the unions today

The ISO is today more implanted in the unions than at any time since the late 1970s, with many comrades having worked for more than a decade in union jobs. However, this implantation is highly uneven, as many comrades are on their own. But where we do have concentration of members—the teachers' unions—we have been able to implement the rank-and-file strategy in the unions. Assessing and generalizing from this experience is essential if we are to move forward in our work in the unions. Thus the rank-and-file strategy was the focus of three contributions to the pre-convention bulletin by Dana B. and Sean P. in Bulletin #12 and Dennis K. in Bulletin #22.

It's useful to begin with a summary of the rank-and-file strategy. The rank-and-file strategy is not simply a left-wing version of union reform movements, which periodically arise to clean up corruption or toss out do-nothing and ineffective union leaders. As Sean points out, the rank-and-file strategy is rooted in the practice of the revolutionary era of the Communist International, implemented in the early years of the Communist Party through the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL). It was revived in the 1930s by the Minneapolis Trotskyists in the Teamsters' strike and general strike of 1934 and by the Trotskyist Workers Party in the 1940s.
The rank-and-file strategy isn't simply aimed at getting rid of bad union leadership. It may succeed in doing so, but its aims are much more than this. The rank-and-file strategy is the means by which socialists raise the level of combative, consciousness and organization in the unions in non-revolutionary periods, and, in the course of such work, increasing the size and influence of revolutionary organization within the working class.

How does the rank and file strategy fit our work in the unions today? Both Sean and Dana both raise questions about how relevant the rank-and-file strategy is for our period, where nothing remains of the rank-and-file movements that underpinned the dramatic labor struggles of the mid-1970s. Both discuss the potential and problems in trying to use union office to advance the forces of the left in the absence of that movement. Dana, for her part, is concerned that the rank-and-file strategy has sometimes led to ultra-left abstention from seeking union office. Sean writes that his own decision to seek an executive board position in his union (while remaining a rank-and-file member) was not linked to the wider considerations of the rank-and-file strategy.

Certainly it is difficult to engage in a rank-and-file strategy when you are the sole ISO member in your union or workplace, as Dana and Sean both are. However, I would argue that the rank-and-file strategy is in fact central to our work in the unions even when we are on our own—and is critical to our long-term efforts of building rank-and-file movements.

Part of the issue, I think, is a misreading or misrepresentation of the rank-and-file strategy. I don't agree with Dana that the rank-and-file strategy has been the dominant approach on the labor left, or that it has led to a reflexive rejection of left-leaning union leaders as "bureaucrats." On the contrary, our current is in the minority compared to the social democratic and Stalinist approach of trying to "permeate" the unions by seeking office and staff positions as a shortcut to influence. This method has inevitably led to the adaptation to the overwhelmingly dominant trend in the U.S. labor movement of class collaboration and support for the Democratic Party.

Our tradition, by contrast, has always maintained that he left and class-struggle unionism will grow in influence in the unions on the strength of the rank and file, or it won't succeed at all. That's because we understand that the union bureaucracy, whatever the political coloration of individuals, is a social stratum that mediates between labor and capital and ultimately plays a conservative role.

This does not mean that we always reject running for union office and even holding it. Rather, we operate on the assumption that union leaders will be under enormous pressure to conform to the rest of the union bureaucracy and its subservience to the Democrats. Therefore, the building of independent organization is a cornerstone of the rank-and-file strategy to act as a counterweight to that pressure. As the 1930s and the 1970s struggles showed, a well-organized rank-and-file movement can exert sufficient pressure to compel even conservative workers to take action. Rank-and-file organizations, while not putting forward their own candidates for union office, may choose to ally with reformers in union elections while continuing to build their own organizations independently.

Where does that leave us today? Is the rank-and-file strategy something to be held in abeyance while we take the opportunity to run for union office and shift things to the left through the official union machinery? I would argue that the opposite is the case. If and when ISO members run for union office, they should do so on the basis that it would help coalesce a nascent rank-and-file movement. The past few decades have seen many union reform movements wrecked after taking office for having failed to organize the rank-and-file against the inevitable employer backlash.

CORE's success in the CTU is a good example of how to implement the rank-and-file strategy at a time when the union membership is restive and ready for a change, but not well organized. CORE was carried into office by a groundswell of anger against the union old guard's ineffectiveness in dealing the employer. But once in office, CORE worked to use the union's machinery to provide organizational expression of that rank-and-file bitterness and turn it towards rebuilding the union's base at the workplace. In the process of doing so, the new CTU leadership not only led a successful strike, but also recruited a layer of militants to CORE and strengthened the rank-and-file base of the group.
In hindsight, CORE’s strategy might appear to be obvious. In fact, it was a huge gamble. The key members of CORE, based on decades of experience in the union, saw the potential for the union to be transformed. As a rank-and-file group, CORE spurred the union into a campaign against school closings. It then saw an opportunity to advance that process through union elections. Had the old guard not split, CORE would not have won office. Having prevailed in the election, CORE took a big, but calculated, risk in attempting to further the movement through the machinery of the union itself. There were many obstacles in doing so, including a split in the leadership over whether to oppose an anti-union law—and CORE rank-and-file members intervened to formally reject that law. If CORE hadn't been a healthy rank-and-file formation led by confident militants, it could easily have busted up, as have so many union reform groups in the past.

(More recently, there are huge pressures on CORE and the CTU to conform with the norms of Democratic Party politics by backing liberals in what are effectively intra-party elections.)

In short, CORE is distinct from conventional union reform groups because several of CORE’s key leaders—members of the ISO, Solidarity and independent socialists—worked from the beginning to raise the consciousness and organization of the CTU rank and file in order to prepare the union for its biggest battle in decades. It is the best example of the rank-and-file strategy that the labor movement has seen since the 1970s.

There are many lessons in CORE’s experience for ISO members seeking to build rank-and-file activism today—even where we are operating largely on our own. If we decide to seek union office, we should do so only after close consultation with experienced ISO union activists, branch/district and national organizers. The decision to run for union office—especially when there is a possibility of winning—must be predicated on the existence of at least a loose rank-and-file network that can further develop as the result of such a campaign.

In the Seattle teachers union, for example, the decision of comrades to seek top union office flowed from the experience of the previous year. The rank-and-file group in the union, while modest in size, had played a central role in both the boycott of a standardized test and the campaign against a concessionary contract that was only narrowly approved. In these circumstances, the best activists in the union concluded that a run for office was both timely and necessary—and approached ISO members to help lead that effort. To step aside from this challenge risked derailing a growing rank-and-file caucus.

To be sure, there are many risks for a revolutionary socialist in holding full-time union office. In 1924, James P. Cannon spelled out the issues in a speech to Communist Party miners in a speech worth quoting at length:

In the discussions which took place here today, we heard the remark made by one of the comrades that our struggle in the unions is a struggle for strategic positions. This is a one-sided view and if we allow it to stand alone, we will fall into a serious error. We must adopt the point of view that our struggle is a struggle to develop the class-consciousness of the rank and file workers and to win them over to the principle of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism under the leadership of our party.

If we will connect the fight for strategic positions with this broad political aim and subordinate it to this aim, we will be on safe ground. Otherwise, we will be confronted with the spectacle of party members regarding the fight for office as an end in itself; of evading or putting aside questions of principle with which the masses are not familiar; of scheming and calculating too closely in order to get into office. Of course the comrades will justify all this on the ground that once they get into office they will be able to do big things for the party. But quite often we will be apt to find the very comrades who adopt this method of getting into office falling into the habit of continuing it in order to hold the office. They will thereby degenerate into mere office-holders and office-hunters. They will lose the confidence and respect of the militant rank and file workers, and our party, which stands responsible for them, will have its prestige greatly injured.
Strategic positions, however, are very important and we must not take a doctrinaire view in regard to them. The opinion expressed here by one comrade that men become petty bourgeois in their interests and outlook as soon as they are elected to office and that, therefore, we should have nothing to do with office, is not correct. It is true that official position, especially in the American trade union movement, has led many men in the past to corruption and betrayal of the workers, but that does not say that communists must be corrupted. We have to hold the conception that a true communist can go anywhere the party sends him and do anything, and still remain a communist—still remain true to the working class. Comrade Lenin was an official. He had more power than [corrupt miners' union official] Frank Farrington, but he did not become like Frank Farrington. The guarantee against corruption of party members who become officials is that they remain close to the party and that they base their fight for office on the support of the rank and file for the policy of the class struggle, and do not become too expedient and too “clever”—do not try to “sneak” into office by soft-pedaling and pussy-footing on questions of principle which may be unpopular, but which communists, nevertheless, are duty bound to stand for.  

How does this framework apply to union elections that are not for full-time positions, such as posts on executive boards and the like? Certainly the pressures to adapt to business as usual are not as great as they are on full-time officers. Even when a comrade is in a small minority, such a post can allow them to serve as the eyes and ears of the rank and file. In some cases, as in the case of SEIU Local 1021, a comrade's position as a rank-and-file member of the executive board provided the opportunity to play a leading role in the transformation of the union and the revitalization of rank-and-file activism. But the general approach outlined by Cannon applies: We should seek such positions only when and if they can provide a boost to the effort of building rank-and-file organization at the base. Otherwise, such an undertaking can be a waste of time or, worse, make it seem as if ISO members are simply part of a dysfunctional union machine.

I think Dennis K. makes this point well in his document when he writes: "From my limited standpoint, amongst most comrades who are involved in workplace organizing, the key question confronting them is not whether they should run for elected union office, but how can they get their co-workers to fight back? How do we initiate workplace struggles or insert ourselves into existing ones seems to be a more common problem. Starting to fight back can often logically lead to an electoral challenge, although this shouldn’t be a hard and fast rule either way."

Reorganizing the ISO's labor work

With a large number of comrades implanted in the unions for many years, and other ISO members seeking union jobs or to organize the unions, our tasks in the labor movement have become more complex. Where we have developed a certain concentration, as in the teachers unions, we now face a series of challenges in building rank-and-file caucuses that are now in communication across the U.S. as well as the day-to-day work of building our unions. The CTU strike has raised the hopes and expectations of thousands of teacher union activists across the U.S., and the ISO, in alliance with others on the left, will continue to work to try and develop this network.

At the same time, other comrades have become well established in the health care unions, and have an important profile in key debates. Still other groups of comrades may in the same union, but are in different cities, workplaces and even industries, and have difficulty coordinating their activism.

In parallel to all this, the Fight for 15 campaigns has brought many ISO members into contact with organized labor for the first time. Other comrades are trying to get union jobs, or jobs in workplaces where it may be possible to organize a union in the near term. These are important decisions that should be coordinated at local and national level. If ISO members are able to get jobs in the same workplace or industry, they have a better chance at making an impact.

All these developments require to change to the way in which the ISO has organized labor work. For more than a decade, we've relied on a single labor organizer in the National Office, who is "on call" to comrades around the country and who works with the labor coordinators of branches and districts. In practice this has meant that immediate struggles, such as the CTU strike or the Occupy Labor committees, tend to crowd out
other, long-term work. To address this, the Steering Committee proposes to reorganize the ISO National Office to include a labor committee to better gather input from our labor work and provide better coordination and direction.

The upcoming Labor Notes conference in Chicago will provide a good opportunity to reboot our labor work. It will bring together rank-and-file activists from a variety of unions, as well as union reform leaders to discuss and debate the lessons of the CTU strike and other struggles. Every ISO comrade who is involved in labor work should consider attending.

Lee S., Chicago


New York City Teacher Fraction Report

Last year, the NYC fraction spent the bulk of our political time organizing in MORE - The Movement of Rank and File Educators, a new caucus within the UFT. ISO comrades were central to arguing for and founding the caucus, and last year played a leading role in running a MORE slate in the UFT leadership elections. Our members made leaps in their political development, as did the fraction collectively. As individual activists, we gained tremendous respect on the teacher left and within MORE, and raised the profile of the organization.

MORE is vibrant and growing. Monthly meetings regularly draw 60-70 people. Our participation in the elections and events we held such as a forum with Jesse Hagopian, Julie Cavanagh and Angelo Pinto last year have helped to raise our profile in NYC. This year, MORE has led the fight against the new teacher evaluation system, which the leadership of the UFT supported, distributing petitions demanding a democratic vote on the agreement and calling for a moratorium. In addition, MORE has played a leading role in the growing movement against testing and the common core. A recent conference entitled “More than a Score: Talk Back to Testing Forum” organized by MORE and Change the Stakes was a huge success drawing a large number of parent, teacher and student activists around the city. MORE has also started a newsletter the first issue of which we distributed almost 20,000 copies. In addition, after almost 5 years without a contract, MORE is launching a contract campaign in anticipation of a report from the factfinders committee (a form of non-binding arbitration) or a memorandum of agreement with the city now that Bloomberg is out of office. There are clearly many opportunities and openings for us to continue to grow MORE.

Our work within MORE has raised several questions for us about balancing implantation and branch building. This year, coming out of the election, the fraction struggled to project the ISO, and re-establish our foundational routines that were let go somewhat during the quick pace of election season. A few factors have contributed:

1. An intense year of building MORE and running in the UFT leadership elections culminated in serious and persistent accusations against ISO members.
2. Balancing implantation in teacher work, leading in our schools as chapter chairs, delegates and activist, participating in our branches and dealing with volatile working conditions of our new teacher evaluation system.
3. NYC district reorganization, coupled with internal debates, has been disorienting.

1. Importance of Acting Collectively as a Fraction
Over the course of last year, our most visible ISO members in MORE were accused, by a small group of MORE members (a very small minority), of being undemocratic, building the ISO instead of MORE, and having ulterior motives in our union work. At first, the fraction did not act collectively to respond. After the election was over, a final round of accusations took place, directed at two of our leading members. As a fraction, we collectively discussed the situation and decided on how to move forward.

We responded with an e-mail that first corrected the many inaccurate statements that had been made about the fraction as a whole or the actions of our individual members. Then, the e-mail explained more clearly than we had ever done before how we operate as a fraction, what our project is as the ISO and why we see building a rank and file caucus as central to the growth of the Left. The e-mail ended by inviting anyone with questions to feel free to talk to us, and asking for an in person meeting rather than more e-mails to continue discussion.

The steering committee of MORE, which included 3 of our members, organized an “Air it Out” meeting. All suspicions were put on the table. As Peter L wrote in his document, “Admitting Mistakes,” there were specific tactical routines that the fraction agreed to change. For example, wearing a MORE t-shirt in the UFT Delegate Assembly, but then selling SW after. Equally important though, if not more so, was that we drew a line about what we were willing to negotiate and what we were not. We did not admit any mistakes in terms of our politics or our right to be socialists in MORE. We did the opposite. We provided as much transparency about our practice, our project, and our motives as possible. We were honest about the toll that constant questioning of motives takes on members - people that had been central to the building of MORE, and its maintenance. We argued against the culture of mistrust and red-baiting that had developed, and importantly, our key allies stood beside us.

The takeaway was that the more open we are with our allies, the more likely they will be to defend us when push comes to shove. In addition, we learned the importance of having open honest conversations with our long term allies, listening to their concerns, but also being firm in our politics and not giving any ground to our right to organize as socialists. We were able to admit mistakes about specific routines because we were in a position of strength. In retrospect, we should have responded collectively sooner. Moving forward, we will make it a practice to collectively assess such accusations, and respond collectively. We came out of the situation in a stronger position, with some of our key allies coming to our defense when we most needed it. However, the experience took its toll on our members. Our fraction this year has been less confident, and we have retreated in our efforts to recruit new members from teacher work and bring Socialist politics to our movement work. While what happened in MORE is by no means the only contributing factor, it has played a role.

2. Chapter Building: Opportunities and Limitations
Many of us have taken on the role of UFT chapter leader (shop steward) as part of MORE’s strategy to run for chapter leader positions. The experience of this work has been uneven due to the widely varying cultures of schools across the city. MORE has struggled to organize a coherent committee to support the work of chapter leaders and the UFT apparatus is next to useless in many districts, so the result is many of our members attempting to lead chapters on their own.

In some schools this has meant creating a political pole of attraction, engaging the chapter in city-wide action, and talking openly about socialist politics. In others, members are consumed completely by defending teachers from abusive principles and dealing with the paperwork of filing grievance after grievance.

This year has been particularly difficult because of the new evaluation system. In either situation, the work is critical, and often if our member does not take it on, it will go undone. Because of the variety of experiences and challenges, development of a coherent chapter-based strategy and supporting chapter chairs in a systematic way is difficult.
Further difficulties arise from the nature of the period—the position of chapter leader is a position of rank-and-file leadership, which we are assuming at a time when “service” conceptions of unionism predominate not only among the staff but also the membership. Years of hostile management and neoliberal reform in the city has left the membership disoriented and demoralized. While many schools are seething with anger at endless attacks on public education, they are also plagued by historically low morale and intense frustration. In the absence of a culture of collective action in the union, teachers seek individual solutions to their problems and are more likely to try and “stay off the radar.” This is a challenging climate to try and develop consciousness, militancy, or activism in.

The preponderance of “service model” notions of unionism among the rank-and-file means many members see their chapter leader as somebody who “does for” instead of “doing with—” grievances, disciplinary cases, and even bread-and-butter questions about health-care and pension options are thought of as “the chapter leader's job,” rather than seeing the CL as somebody who supports the member in their own advocacy and organizing. Further, in order to retain credibility, we have to be good at providing these services even as we try to win our members to an approach based on organizing and solidarity. In most schools the kinds of direct-action approaches to workplace conflict which we know would be more effective are off the table, leading us to rely on bureaucratic approaches to solving issues like the grievance process, which is rarely effective due to the time-delays inherent in the system, which leave management prerogatives uninterrupted on the “shop-floor.”

In the short-term, our challenge in workplace organizing is to find ways to bridge the gap between the prevailing situation, characterized by anemic organizational presence, fear and apathy among the union membership and move toward confidence and organization at the school level.

Strategies that involve collective action while operating within the limits of the service model (i.e. filing grievances collectively as a staff and presenting them in a united way) have had some limited success at beginning to bridge this gap by breaking down fear and apathy. One of our members recently had a victory at their school when the majority the teachers (in a school of 60, including six ‘anonymous untenured teachers’) signed a grievance pertaining to abuse of teachers’ non-teaching periods. After 16 months, they obtained a ruling in their favor, but more importantly, the process of collective action that was required to do the grievance meant involving many members in circulating among the staff, making arguments for why to sign, and arguing for collective action. Members of the staff who were hesitant or fearful to sign this grievance have signed subsequent ones, most recently one that included signatures from 32 out of 45 tenured grievants.

The current goal is to try and maintain some level of solidarity and strength at the shop floor and not wait for the grievance process to resolve our issues. Our goal in organizing workplace campaigns should not be primarily the end result of the whatever formal processes we rely on (although victories matter) but to increase our capacity for collective action on the job, build the confidence of the workers involved, and draw layers of workers toward closer identification with the union, with MORE, and with socialist politics. These are the elementary steps in rebuilding workers’ power in one workplace.

Our fraction has been grappling with the question of whether running for chapter leader positions is the right one, given the enormous strains it places on our members and the frustrations of occupying this position amidst the contradictions we’ve laid out. We believe that for all the difficulties, it is necessary for MORE and ISO comrades within it to run where possible for chapter leader or delegate positions, although this will require some local assessment of the pros and cons in each school. For one thing, it provides practical training in trade-unionism, forcing us to become intimate with the contract and layers of the union machinery. It also connects us to wider layers of chapter leaders through monthly district meetings. Finally, it is an essential way for us, as ISO and MORE members, to establish ourselves as rank-and-file leaders of the organization.

That said, it's important that we retain a sober sense of the limitations of this strategy and structure our fraction time to support this work. Organizing a union chapter the right way takes an enormous amount of
time and can be politically narrowing. Our chapter leaders struggle to participate in branch building routines and often find it challenging to make time for conversations about socialist politics in their workplace. Does this mean then that taking on the role of chapter leader does not build the ISO? We want to argue that these roles raise the profile of the ISO in a very positive way particularly in MORE, show that we are able to put our politics into practice in our workplaces even if only in a small way, and give our members on the ground organizing practice that is essential to fully internalize our politics. However, we cannot ignore the strain that it puts on our members and our ability to contribute to ISO base building within the NYC district.

3. District Reorganization

Last year, the district agreed that the work of the teacher fraction and other fractions necessitated more meeting time. After lengthy debate about how to alleviate the tension of movement work and branch building, while still prioritizing building the ISO, the district decided on an alternative calendar of biweekly branch meetings and biweekly fraction meetings. The argument was that given more built in meetings, fractions could devote more time to cadre development, contact work and even build some public meetings.

The reorganization is a good example of the kind of experimentation in organizational structures that the district has engaged in to meet the political priorities of the district. It is too soon to assess the new district structure, but it has allowed us more time to discuss our teacher work as well as organize one public study group on Steve Zeluck’s “Teacher Power.” Despite the extra fraction meetings, it has taken some time regain an outward posture.

Currently, there are debates about whether to keep the existing structure, return to the previous schedule of weekly branch meetings, or to form a teacher or education activism themed branch in the district. While these need to be discussed in more depth, key questions for any reorganization are 1) will our structure develop a new layer of cadre, 2) will the structure project the politics and project of the ISO and 3) will the structure provide a stabilizing counterbalance to the political pulls of the larger left and movement work.

New York City Teacher Fraction

Resolutions

Resolution:

Proposed slate for the ISO Steering Committee

The Steering Committee will include the following representatives:

Ahmed Shawki
Alan Maass
Ashley Smith
Elizabeth Schulte
Eric Ruder
Jen Roesch
Joel Geier
Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
Lance Selfa
Lee Sustar
Paul D’Amato
Ragina Johnson
Sharon Smith
Shaun Harkin
Motivation
A previous Steering Committee document “Proposals on National Leadership Structures” contains an expanded motivation for the most significant departure from past nominations for the SC—it nominates comrades who are not resident in the center (Chicago). In the past, we thought it was impossible for SC members to carry out their week-to-week responsibilities without living in Chicago, but technological developments, combined with planned and proposed changes in the practice of the SC, will make it practical to have non-resident SC members.

We are proposing that a majority of the current Steering Committee be returned to the body for the coming year, on the basis of the SC’s overall successes in leading the organization over the past year.

This slate nomination also proposes that three current members of the Steering Committee not return to the SC. The sole motivation for this is that it is necessary for some number of comrades to come off the SC in order to add new, non-residential members and keep the body at a manageable size. These comrades have all devoted themselves to the SC, some over a number of years and even decades, and have played an indispensable role as national leaders. We know they will continue to do so in a variety of forms in the years to come.

We are proposing five new members of the Steering Committee, all non-residential (Ashley Smith, Jen Roesch, Ragina Johnson, Tithi Bhattacharya, Todd Chretien). As the document on national leadership structures outlines, we have set a goal of expanding the SC to represent national leadership that has emerged and developed beyond the existing, until-now-residential body. These five comrades have played very important roles in advancing the ISO organizationally and theoretically. We want to point out that while four of these five comrades have been organizers of the ISO, their nomination is not contingent on this, but on the depth of their experience and the central role they have played as national leaders.

ISO Steering Committee

Resolution:

Proposed slate for National Committee:

Current members proposed:

Anthony A. (NYC)
Geoff B. (NYC)
Khury P-S. (Boston)
Kirstin R. (Chicago)
Lee W. (NYC)
Leela Y. (Seattle)
Leia P (NYC)
Madeline B. (Boston)
Phil G. (Madison)
SherryW (NYC)

New members proposed:

(NYC) Brian J, Chris W
(Chicago) Becca B., Bill R., Brian B., Nicole C.
(Portland) Wael E.
(Bay Area) Dana B., Jesse M.
(Texas) Snehal S.

SC members proposed for NC:

Ahmed S
Keeanga T
Lance S
Sharon S

Current members not proposed (due to changed personal circumstances):

Jason N.
Sarah K.

Submitted by the ISO National Committee