

Pre-convention bulletin #1 / October 2014

for members only

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The Internal Bulletin Is Open for Your Contribution

The discussion period leading up to the ISO convention in February, 2015 is now open for your contribution. Contributions don't have to be long. They can consist of a report on a branch or district activity; an analysis of a local, national or international political development; a contribution on the ISO's current perspectives or an article on a theoretical/political topic such as how we understand neoliberalism or what approach to take on "privilege" politics. Please submit your contribution to bulletin@internationalsocialist.org.

Considerations when submitting a contribution to the IB

1. The purpose of the ISO's Internal Bulletin and its pre-convention discussion bulletins is to allow members of the organization to evaluate activities they are involved in; to assess the political environment; to educate ourselves, to debate and to work out theoretical issues and/or questions of political perspective; and to debate and discuss issues that relate to the organizations rules and internal functioning, among other topics.
2. Having that "internal" space to discuss our work is part of, and should be considered part of, the democratic culture that we seek to encourage. There's nothing sinister about having "internal" discussions. They're necessary to be able to have accurate assessments of our work among comrades who share a set of mutual commitments to our project. Internal discussions allow for the fullest possible openness of discussion by giving members a place to express doubts, propose new ideas and suggest new strategies without being obligated to broadcast them to a broader, non-ISO audience. We place certain boundaries around membership because we have a particular set of politics and a particular method about applying those. Members are expected to agree with the Where We Stand, to sell the paper, to pay dues, and to participate in ISO-organized activities. Just as we would not take advice about our politics or practice from an unknown person who attended his/her first ISO meeting, we don't think that discussions conducted by members for members in the IB should be subject to critique and commentary from people outside our organization.
3. The ISO has a very public presence through SW.org, public meetings, the paper editions of *Socialist Worker* and *Obrero Socialista*, writings by ISO members for non-ISO publications, and other publications. It's not hard for allies (and potential enemies) to find out what the organization thinks about any one of a number of questions. Most of these "public" outlets for the ISO's views are the result of a collective process that the organization institutes to assure that they accurately reflect the organization, and that they don't discredit it. The editorial team at SW (and ultimately the ISO's elected leadership) is responsible for what appears as representing the organization in SW. Sometimes this requires heavily editing or even rejecting an article submitted to SW.
4. In contrast to the widely available publications of the ISO, the IB isn't meant to represent the official views of the ISO. It is meant to facilitate a discussion among individual members and groups of members toward developing an understanding of a political issue or a tactic or strategy the ISO should follow. Therefore, it isn't subject to as strict a set of editing standards as is the paper. However, this is not to say that no editing is appropriate for the IB. In fact, the bulletin has an editor (currently Lance S.) and an editorial team responsible for publishing the IB.
5. The IB editors' responsibilities go beyond just processing documents as they are submitted. In the age of the Internet and social media, the distinction between "private" communication and "public" communication has been increasingly erased. And so, whether we like it or not, we have to write and edit IB articles with the knowledge that they might be published outside of the ISO, particularly by forces hostile to us. We saw last year that Web sites like Counterpunch and that of the Renewal Faction posted convention discussion documents and/or commentaries on those.
6. While technology has changed, our essential political project has not. Therefore, we cannot be irresponsible about security as it relates to how we assess our work in print. It's not just government or employer spies we have to worry about. We have to think through who might see the documents and what implications they might have for our political work. Disgruntled former members and sectarians can exploit and twist the documents to fit their own convenient narratives (as we saw earlier this year). During our convention, documents were cynically exploited, putting the anonymity of a survivor of sexual assault at risk, for example. More than that, union militants and

activists can be put at risk by exposing their names or workplaces on the Internet. Last year, as a result of documents being leaked at convention, one member, a union and activist militant, was questioned by their boss about various activities. Yes, we should assume that the NSA and the state has access to everything, and we should not be in the habit of making their job even easier, but it's also the case that not everyone has access to everything—employers, those on the left who wish to damage the ISO, the right wing are just some examples. Thus, it would be foolish to throw security practices out the window.

7. Responsibility for considering these issues mostly rests with IB contributors. The most basic question those who want to submit a contribution to the IB should ask themselves is whether the topic or issue they want to write about should be published in the IB in the first place. Comrades should speak with members of their branch and branch committee if they are considering writing a document. This can help collectivize the process, and get arguments and assessments out into the open of a branch/district. This always makes for stronger documents. At the same time, we should realize that there are topics of a highly sensitive nature that shouldn't be put into print, for reasons noted above. Some discussions of sensitive matters (if necessary) are best left to verbal communication. We should be even more cautious when putting into print sensitive information that could be used to target our own organization, our members, or organizations or activists that we support or have close working relationships with. We have learned such lessons the hard way as a result of publishing some submissions in the last couple years that in hindsight either should not have been published without significant changes or not published at all.
8. IB authors should use discretion and common sense when preparing their submissions. Authors should be cognizant about publishing names or other identifying information if knowledge of such might endanger someone's job, housing, student or legal status. Publishing information on personal or organizational finances should be avoided. We should take care with how we write about fellow activists and describe

our work, including our assessments and criticisms of other groups, which can be taken out of context. IB contributors, who are most familiar with the issues and events they are writing about, should try to strike a balance between providing the essential detail so that their contribution will be useful to other members, while leaving out details that are not as essential. IB articles should be fact-based with arguments that can be supported by the facts. They should be written in an objective and dispassionate style. IB articles should not include personal attacks or invective. Debate should be carried out in a comradely spirit, and IB submissions shouldn't be viewed as opportunities to air personal complaints.

9. Editors of the IB have a responsibility to make sure that potentially damaging information is not published, just as authors have a responsibility to think through what they put into their documents. This is not about suppressing political debate. In rare cases where we think there is a problem, an attempt will be made to work with the author of a document to suggest edits to a document to make it suitable for publication. In the event that IB editors feel that a submission does not meet the guidelines outlined above, they have one of three choices: ask the IB contributors to revise the submission, make the edits themselves before publication, or reject the submission. As members of the NC committee drafting this document, we affirm that these choices, up to and including rejecting publication of the document, are essential to protect the organization and its internal functioning.

Ad hoc NC committee (ER, LS, N
C, DK, KPS)

U.S. Political Perspectives

There will be many documents to come on the different elements that go into perspectives, such as the state of the economy and U.S. imperialism, as well as evaluations of our political and organizational experiences over the past year. This document will touch on some of those questions, but we want to direct its focus mainly toward an important conclusion from the last convention: How the ISO is strengthening itself politically and organizationally to relate to a radicalizing minority—to be found in many different areas and around broad ideological issues, rather than a single or several areas of political activism—that we view as our prime audience.

We will start by going over some of the struggles and political experiences of the last year, such as the uprising against police violence and racism sparked by Ferguson, to see how they have both reflected and can further shape our understanding of the radicalization and polarization. We also look at some of the factors that are weighing down political radicalization—with a particular emphasis on the stultifying character of mainstream politics, especially as the November midterm elections approach. Finally, we want to emphasize the practical conclusions that the last convention arrived at: to engage with our audience that is radicalizing around a broad range of issues, but with significant political unevenness, requires a continued priority on strengthening ISO members politically and re-centralizing our organizational practices.

The current period

Last year's perspectives discussion focused in large part on a debate about our characterization of the period since the onset of the Great Recession in 2007-08. We believe the conclusions from that debate hold true today: we are still in a political period marked by a high level of volatility that is shaped most importantly by high levels of class inequality and social polarization that are the result of the economic crisis.

The ruling class faces significant economic and political weaknesses and frictions—including the contradictions of the U.S. war on ISIS in the Middle East and deep-seated economic problems that have fueled talk about another recession on

the horizon, for example. These need to be examined in future documents. But in general, we can say that the ruling class continues to be on the offensive around a shared agenda of restoring profitability and power following the 2007-08 recession. In last year's document, we characterized the ruling class consensus as "smash and grab": take as much as you can, as quickly as you can, and resist even the slightest concession to workers, whether financial, social or otherwise.

The resulting deep and permanent cut in working-class living standards continues to fuel bitterness and anger—it is the main driving factor of the political radicalization of the period. For many people in the U.S., it still feels like a recession, even though the economy has been in recovery for more than five years according to official measures—and, of course, corporate profits long ago recovered their lost ground and began setting new records. Opinion polls show that 71 percent of people say the recession personally impacted them “a lot” or “just some,” and 64 percent say it is still having an impact on them. Some 40 percent of people say someone in their household lost a job in the last five years. Student loans, credit card debt and the skyrocketing cost of health care—completely left out of the government statistics showing a low rate of inflation—are a burden on working class families that never seems to relent.

Meanwhile, almost all of the increase in national income during the “recovery” has gone to those at the top. Only 22 percent of people say they are satisfied with the state of things in the U.S., and more than 70 percent say that the country is headed in the wrong direction. Today, the percentage of people who call themselves part of the lower class has risen to 40 percent, up from 25 percent at the start of the economic crisis—a profound indicator of a fundamental radicalization of consciousness compared to the era before the recession.

As we have emphasized since this new period began, class anger and radicalization don't automatically translate into a sustained rise in struggle, much less victories for our side. For one thing, the fact that the ruling class is carrying out a particularly aggressive offensive means by definition that the working class is pushed on the defensive. One consequence is that some groups are intimidated or repressed into not fighting; another is that other groups are defeated and

demoralized, drawing the lesson that nothing can be done; another is that some struggles which do emerge are under-confident and self-limited in their goals and strategies. This is particularly true about union and workplace struggles. With some very important exceptions, ranging from teachers in some cities to groups of low-wage workers, the level of struggle is low at the point of production where the ruling class offensive has been most aggressive.

A further factor impacting the level of sustained struggle is the weakness of the left in the U.S. and elsewhere—both the broad left that includes mass liberal, labor and progressive organizations and movements, as well as the radical and revolutionary left. As a result, some of the basic organizational structures and political practices that even modest struggles require need to be revived and rebuilt.

But there are dramatic exceptions that confirm our analysis that the new period has given rise to struggles on a higher level than before 2008, in spite of the unevenness. A few examples are the Occupy Wall Street movement that spread literally across the country in a matter of weeks at the end of 2011; and the Chicago teachers' strike the next fall, one of the most important labor struggles in decades, which electrified all of working-class Chicago.

These are the high points in the volatility—the ups and downs—that characterizes the current period. In general, the level of struggle has remained low compared to the scale of the social and political radicalization. But as we described in one document on perspectives last year, the social pressures created by the new era will “continue to find their way to the surface. There will be ideological fissures, sudden political eruptions, spontaneous and short-lived rebellions, and long-building campaigns and movements that go through ups and downs—all of which the ISO must figure out how to understand and relate to.” We need to be able to shift to relate to the outbreaks of struggle when they do occur—while remaining oriented and prepared to relate to a radicalizing minority on the ideological questions produced by all of these developments.

What Ferguson illustrates about radicalization and struggle

One struggle that dominated our attention and activities this summer and fall—the protests against the police murder of Mike Brown in Ferguson—illustrates many of the dynamics we've been discussing.

Ferguson was the very definition of a “spontaneous” rebellion—although it certainly can't be called short-lived. With police murders of unarmed Black men a regular occurrence in this country, it was impossible to know where and when a rebellion like Ferguson would erupt, but inevitable that it would. No one would have predicted that an unknown blue collar suburb of St. Louis would be the site of the most sustained and dramatic protests, probably since the LA Rebellion of 1992. But knowing the specific political and social backdrop of Ferguson, placed within the backdrop of the national epidemic of police violence, it's easy to see in retrospect why the anger there was poised to boil over.

Over the last several years, we have been involved in a number of struggles of family members of victims of police violence fighting for justice for their loved ones. Most of these struggles have remained small and largely isolated. Just weeks before the shooting of Michael Brown, Eric Garner was murdered by the police in the streets of New York City. The response was contained and timid in contrast to Ferguson. In contrast to a city dominated by an institutionalized liberal leadership, it was its absence in St. Louis, as well as the complete disenfranchisement of the majority Black population, that created the space for the explosive eruption of struggle in Ferguson.

Thus, Ferguson shows the volatility of the political period. But it also illustrates other dynamics we have identified: the development of new political forces brought to life through the ups and downs of the movements; the way outbursts of struggle can quickly become a lightning rod for multiple issues; and, the political questions and developments that outlast those struggles themselves.

In the lead-up to the March on Washington a year ago, we argued that the acquittal of George Zimmerman that summer had “awakened a new movement for civil rights” that first emerged after the killing of Trayvon Martin a year before, and had “brought the issue of racial injustice to the forefront of American politics.” This didn't mean, and still doesn't, that we expect a

continued and uninterrupted development of a struggle around racism. But it does mean we believe that many thousand of people have been directly politicized and millions indirectly around questions of racism. More than this though, that awakening has expressed itself in a higher level of struggle and greater radicalization, bringing new people into political activity and organization. The protests against the execution of Troy Davis in 2011, the struggles of family members against police violence that grew in 2012, the movement around Trayvon Martin in 2013 and now the sustained struggle in Ferguson are all a reflection of this dynamic. And over the course of these different fights, there has been a development in their scale, politics and impact on mass consciousness.

In an article for the *Nation* written during the Ferguson protests, Mychal Denzl Smith developed a similar analysis in an article headlined "Trayvon Martin's Death Launched a New Generation of Activism." The importance of the article is more than its vindication of our analysis going into last year's March on Washington. Smith focused on the same development we have seen and attempted to relate to—the rise of new political formations to confront the issue of police violence and racism, with a life that continues beyond the specific struggles. He traced the emergence and connections between new organizations such as the Dream Defenders and, later, the Black Youth Project. While the Dream Defenders receded from ongoing activity, they helped to launch the Black Youth Project and both were part of the mix of formations coming together and interacting with the wave of activity launched by Ferguson. He also described how many of today's young organizers first radicalized around earlier issues of racial injustice such as the Jena 6 and Hurricane Katrina.

While we can't predict the exact trajectory of particular formations, or what new organizations might come together in the coming years, this development is common to the history of many movements. The formation of SCLC and SNCC when existing civil rights organizations proved not up to the challenges thrown up by the rising civil rights movement is an example. When we talk about the weakness of the left and its organizations being a factor holding back the level of struggle, we also understand that the struggles themselves will throw up the

beginnings of new organization that can fill the vacuum. In fact, there is a contested political terrain right now in which we want to be in a position to put forward socialist answers to the questions being raised and strengthen the left-wing of the emerging struggles.

The uprising in Ferguson has also highlighted the centrality of racism to other social struggles and movements—particularly to the question of class and class struggle. For example, in both the initial protests and the Ferguson October mobilizations, workers involved in the Fight for 15 were regulars, with their own contingents organized to show solidarity with the struggle against racism. A report in *Socialist Worker* on the October protests highlighted the connections that working class people are making around these issues. As one Black mother told *SW*: "You work hard to get something, and you don't see your kids. Or you work hard, and then you lose your kids. I'm very familiar with [Toni Taylor's] son because I saw the posters last year, and no one paid attention to her son being killed. I go to work 11 to 7 every night, and I never see my son—he's four. I'm so hopeless for him...It's so heartbreaking. Her son made it to college. I know she thought she made it, that she was done. That's the happiest thing, that's what we wait for. And then it got taken away anyway."

Thus, Ferguson has been a galvanizing event for a significant minority of people, particularly African-Americans, but also more broadly. The tenacity and persistence of the struggle there has made it a focal point and helped give confidence to other struggles—most immediately and directly, the fight in Ohio for justice for John Crawford, who was killed in a Walmart while holding a toy gun in his hand. Just as importantly, even if and when these concrete expressions of struggle recede, Ferguson will be a milestone in political consciousness for a significant minority of people—just as we can now see that the movement around Trayvon Martin's murder became. The ideological questions it has raised—about the relationship between racism and capitalism, the failure of the liberal Black political leadership, why high levels of racist violence continue under a Black president and many more—still remain to be answered.

Understanding the dynamics of the radicalization

We have gone through Ferguson in some detail because it captures so many elements of the current period, but the same dynamics were revealed by other struggles that have taken place in the last several months.

For example, Israel's war on Gaza this summer produced wider opposition to Israel than has ever been seen in the U.S. It's important to recognize that pointing to this radicalization is not to suggest that victory is near or that the radicalization has reached every corner of America. But there is now a wider ideological breach on the question of Israel than ever before, and in at least many cities, the sense of urgency and commitment gave rise to higher levels of political activity than we've seen around Palestine.

Also like Ferguson, while the scale and intensity of the demonstrations this summer were new, they did not emerge out of thin air. The years of organizing around Palestine solidarity, and particularly around the struggle for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), has helped to radicalize and politicize a new layer of people, especially young people. This contributed to the demonstrations this summer being larger—and now the demonstrations, in turn, will further the ongoing organizing around BDS.

The massive People's Climate March in New York City also reflects the dynamics that we have been talking about. The issue of climate change didn't capture front-page headlines in an ongoing way in the months leading up to the march in the same way that Israel's war on Gaza or the Ferguson police murder did. But we see another face of the radicalization in the mobilization for New York, as well as the ongoing organizing taking place around this issue.

One critical aspect is the development of an explicitly left-wing consciousness on an issue and within a movement that has traditionally been restricted to very liberal politics, particularly reliant on the Democrats. There is a broad spectrum to this leftward movement among environmental activists. The most prominent figures, such as Bill McKibben of 350.org, are taking their first, halting steps beyond the confines of conventional liberal

advocacy, with a series of uneven but significant breaks with the Democratic Party. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a more rapid development of radical ideas, a ferment that has expressed itself in the System Change Not Climate Change coalition.

These are some of the examples of radicalization we have paid the most attention to in the course of recent months. But there are many others that could be pointed to. Through all of these issues, as well as in our own meetings and the reception to our publications, we can identify some important features of the current moment.

First, there is a hardening of the radicalizing minority, sometimes as a result of an eruption of struggle like Ferguson, and sometimes in reaction to a lurch back the other way, like the jingoism of Obama's new war in the Middle East. Also, there is a sense of solidarity and an element of generalization across different struggles, leading to a cross-fertilization of different movements, around different issues. We saw this most obviously this summer with the recognition of the connection between police violence and the suppression of protest in Ferguson and Israeli repression of the Palestinian struggle this summer. In general, whether as a result of an outburst of struggle or of generalized discontent, big ideological questions are being opened up that aren't easily answered by the system.

At the same time, largely because there hasn't yet been a breakthrough of class struggle on any kind of sustained basis, the process of radicalization is highly uneven and halting. We have to understand that this radicalization is *one* expression of a political polarization that has emerged out of economic and social conditions. But another expression of this same polarization has been a growth in the confidence and organization of the right. Thus, at the same time that there was wide outrage against police violence after the shooting of Mike Brown, there was a hardening of the right in defense of the police, based on all the ugliest stigmatizations of Black youth that have dominated in the media for years. And in areas where there have not been visible struggles, or where the left is weak, we have seen backsliding on political questions. This has been true around the issue of abortion for many years. And now, as Obama launches a new round of war in the Middle East, there is a resurgence of anti-Arab and Muslim racism.

This has an effect on the radicalizing minority that we encounter. As we have said previously, it can harden their opposition, deepen the level of overall disgust and drive people to the left as they question everything they've been told. But it can also create a feeling of isolation and a gut-level "us against the world" sentiment; this sentiment is then directed not just at the ruling-class and its institutions, but also against other students and working-class people who are just beginning to develop political consciousness and have not yet come to all the political conclusions of the self-identified radical left. We can point to a number of ways in which this ultra-leftism expresses itself.

One is the prevalence of what has been described as a "call-out culture" in which people who may not have the shared language of the new radicalization or who simply have not developed political consciousness around particular questions are dismissed or derided rather than patiently argued with. Another is an over-focus on "radical" tactics and slogans, which counterposes direct action to what people see as the purely symbolic action of mass protests.

The clearest example of this recently was the response to the People's Climate March among left-wing figures like Chris Hedges and Arun Gupta, who criticized the mass mobilization of hundreds of thousands for being insufficiently radical and coherent. There were certainly things to criticize about the organizers of the People's Climate March, and the ISO rightly made those criticisms. But to focus only on that was to miss the importance of a further shift leftward of the climate justice movement, which gives revolutionaries new opportunities to relate to it. We saw this quite starkly during the march and convergence where we met large numbers of people looking for a critique of capitalism, sold nearly 500 copies of *Socialist Worker*, pulled hundreds of people into our contingent and met more than 100 people who were interested in the ISO.

The central problem here is the near-absence of class struggle and the resulting weakness of class politics within the radicalization. There are very few concrete examples of the ways in which a rising tide of class struggle can begin to transform people's ideas on a range of political questions while raising broader social issues. Similarly, the importance of mobilizing the

social weight of the working class is the missing ingredient in so many of the discussions of protest tactics. The CTU strike of 2012 – in which a strike of 26,000 teachers catapulted issues of also of class inequality, racism, and poverty to the center of politics – was one crucial example of how working-class struggle can begin to re-define the political landscape, but it was also short-lived and not replicated.

A rise in the level of class struggle will have a transformative impact on the political character of the emerging radicalization. But in the meanwhile, we have an important role to play in winning the people most open to our ideas to class politics. This will mean pointing to contemporary examples like the CTU strike, but will also have to involve patient and ongoing discussion, reading of history and theory and debate. The nature of the radicalization – existing within a highly polarized society and in the context of a low level of class struggle – means that there is a wide opening for Marxist politics, but that it is not at all automatic.

While the upsurges of protest and political openings that are bringing new people into activity can be tremendously exciting, there is an inherent tendency towards demoralization and disorientation that is built into the volatility of the period. Politically strengthening our own organization while winning wider layers of people to Marxist politics, can provide a firmer foundation for rebuilding the left and the ISO. This will be critical because we need to be able to stand against the stream on those issues on which the Left is weak or small while playing a role in galvanizing those who are ready to fight.

The impact of mainstream politics being pulled to the right

The challenges involved in this become clearer when we turn our attention to one of the main features holding back the development of the radicalization and struggle in the US; that is, the total bankruptcy of mainstream politics.

We've seen, if only briefly, how an eruption of struggle on a national scale can begin to break through the stalemate of official politics. At the height of the Occupy movement and after, the terms of mainstream political debate shifted to one set by our side: the idea of a society divided between the 1 Percent and the 99 Percent. A much earlier example was the UPS strike in

1997, which briefly catapulted the Teamsters slogan “Part-time America won’t work” into the mainstream political discussion amid the economic expansion of the Clinton years. But without a generalized struggle that forces attention to be paid to it, the narrow political framework of the U.S. two-party system becomes the filter through which a majority of people try to make sense of their experience. As important as economic and social conditions are in giving rise to class anger, this political framework has profoundly distorting and constraining effects on mass consciousness.

The levels of dissatisfaction with the U.S. political system are a clear by-product of the economic crisis and its political ramifications. But that expression of that dissatisfaction is with a political system limited to Democrats on the left and Republicans on the right. This is accentuated by the dashed hopes of large numbers of people who expected change from an Obama presidency. In fact, the two times that polls showed greater satisfaction with the U.S. political system were immediately after the elections in 2008 and 2012—indicating that even as late as the beginning of Obama’s second term, significant numbers still expected some kind of change.

Now, however, more than five-and-a-half years into his presidency, it is painfully clear that Obama does not plan to fight for—let alone deliver—any substantive change for the millions of working-class people who voted for him out of a sense of hope. This has led to a demoralization of the Democrats’ traditional voting base, while emboldening the Republican Party, and particularly its right wing. This situation of Democrats surrendering and retreating and Republican maniacs on the offensive has led to apathy and disaffection from the political system for large numbers of people.

So long as mainstream politics is limited to the narrow spectrum between Republicans and Democrats—and so as most people don’t identify with an alternative beyond the mainstream system—the main vehicle for expressing discontent with the two-party system will be against whatever party is in power. We have seen this repeated in Europe, where successive governments of either the center-left or center-right (and even far right) have come to power on a wave of revulsion against mainstream political force that held power—only

to quickly disillusion their supporters and lose popularity. Because of this phenomenon, we should be prepared for a Republican victory in the mid-term elections this November.

The Democrats and the hold of lesser evilism

Already, we can see the way in which the elections have shifted the mainstream discussion even further to the right. Across the country, Democrats are running Republican-lite campaigns and distancing themselves as much as possible from the Obama administration, which has been far from radical or even liberal in its policies in actions over the last few years. Democrats in office have retreated from any liberal initiatives they might have promised even a year or two ago, for fear of alienating conservative voters.

The most outrageous example of this is Obama’s reversal of his promise to sign an executive order halting deportations. After the 2012 elections—in which Obama was able to win an easy victory, thanks to the mobilization of the liberal base of the Democratic Party, including Latinos as a particularly important constituency—it seemed certain that Obama would be able to honor his election promise of “comprehensive immigration reform,” and the defeated Republicans would have to go along with it. In reality, of course, comprehensive immigration reform was always filled with holes and far from the justice needed. But Obama and the Democrats weren’t pulled to the left to answer the criticisms leveled against their compromising proposals by immigrant rights advocates. Instead, they were instead dragged further to the right by the successful obstructionism of the Republican Party.

As on so many issues—most obviously, health care “reform”—the default position of Obama and the Democrats was to concede and compromise. Republicans continued to refuse to accept any form of immigration legislation other than heightened border security, and they exploited every opportunity, including a large influx of refugee children into U.S. earlier this year, to scapegoat the victims. When it finally became clear that the House Republicans in the House wouldn’t allow a vote on compromise legislation endorsed by Senate Republicans and Democrats, Obama vowed that he would issue executive orders to enforce the critical elements of the bipartisan proposal—including, most importantly to activists, a moratorium on

deportations of undocumented immigrants with children born in the U.S.

Yet when Obama's self-declared deadline for the executive orders rolled around at the end of the summer, the administration announced it would postpone action until after the elections. The White House had come under pressure from Democrats in Congress who feared the executive orders would cause problems for them with the right wing in November elections. Worst of all, liberals like Hilda Solis, the former labor secretary, defended the administration's delay as a political necessity, given the coming elections. So on an issue where a majority of people recognize the need for federal action and where the Democrats promised again and again that they would take such action after the 2012 elections, the Republicans' enforcement-only policies carried the day.

At one level, mainstream politics in the U.S. seems to be taking place in an alternative universe to the lives of ordinary people. When lawmakers continue to cut social programs, avoid any significant efforts to create jobs and still give away tax breaks to corporations and the rich, they are going completely against the grain of popular consciousness. It's little wonder that Obama's pitiful approval ratings are rivaled only by the Democrats in Congress, who are despised only slightly less than the Republicans.

But we do need to recognize the impact that mainstream politics has on popular consciousness, including the broad left and even reaching into the ranks of the radical left. On certain issues, Republicans have been able to gain ground for their right-wing agenda, as evidenced by the corrosion of liberal sentiments at the level of mass popular consciousness. For example, the sentiment for a national health care system that came out of the 2008 election has been undermined by the disaster of Obamacare—to the extent that the failures of the Obamacare rollout earlier this year have whittled away at the belief, once widely held, that the government needed do something to solve the health care crisis. For those who had to deal with the Obamacare mess, government seems as incompetent and ineffective as the private health care industry. As a result, cynicism reigns on this issue in particular.

There will also be an impact from the looming Republican victory—no matter how clear it is

that the Republicans are merely winning on the basis of opposition to the incumbent party and because the Democrats are so pathetic. Even for those on the left, there will be disorientation and demoralization when the worst of the right-wing Republicans triumph in November. We need to be prepared for the political commentary in the mainstream media, reaching into the liberal press as well, about how the U.S. is actually a conservative country after all. Mainstream commentators will claim, as they always do, that the right wing ideology of the Tea Party and the Republican right has a popular mandate, even though the right is succeeding in dragging the mainstream political spectrum toward it because of the spinelessness of the Democrats.

There is more disgust and cynicism about Obama and the Democrats than has existed at any point since 2008, and it is strongly held among our immediate audience. For some, the betrayals of the last year will convince them of the need for independent politics, and they will come closer to our organization. But others—including people who have been radicalized and politicized in the course of struggle over the past several years, and who we want to continue bringing closer to use—are sure to be drawn to the politics of lesser evilism. Lesser evilism will take different forms—both the open plea to vote for useless Democrats in order to stop the Republican maniacs, and the broader sentiment that our side can't be too radical or extreme, or we will bring on a right-wing backlash.

We have already begun to see examples of this in work where we are deeply rooted and have built allies over several years, through the course of struggle. The most prominent, but not the only, example is the Chicago Teachers Union endorsement of Pat Quinn and Paul Vallas for governor and lieutenant governor of Illinois. Quinn has carried out an explicit attack on public-sector wages and pensions, including those of teachers, and his running mate is actually the architect of the corporate school reform agenda in Chicago before Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan took it over. CTU members surely understand that these Democrats are enabling the attack on teachers and education justice. But in the context of a governor's race where the Republican candidate is Bruce Rauner, a billionaire and vicious opponent of public education, the pull, even among the best activists, is going to be towards lesser evilism.

Relating to the radicalizing minority

This is the complicated terrain in which we are operating. The momentum and sense of optimism of a few years ago during the height of the Arab Spring, the rebellion in Wisconsin and the Occupy movement have been blunted and blocked. But the economic and social conditions that gave rise to these struggles still exist. In fact, they have been accentuated by the continuing ruling class offensive. What's more, the actions of the emboldened right has also helped to harden a radicalizing minority that is more political and looking for more serious answers, both politically and organizationally.

Our primary task is to figure out how to orient on that radicalization. We have discussed how we have become a much more rooted organization in recent years, with large numbers of comrades active in their unions and in various areas of ongoing political organizing. We are also involved in many collaborative initiatives with others on the left. One result is that the challenges of the political period—the pull of political pragmatism, the potential demoralization in the face of a Republican victory, the polarization on certain political questions—are much more directly felt by our membership and those we work with day to day.

In addition, the period in which it seemed like struggles were more advancing generally saw the buoying and development of a bigger and broader left. As large-scale, generalized struggles have receded, we oftentimes find ourselves a smaller minority on key questions. The non-existence of any significant antiwar activity in the face of the new campaign of air strikes against ISIS is one particularly clear example. ISO branches and districts have done a good job of focusing on this with meetings, but the fact is that there are few other forces doing the same which we can work with, much less an antiwar movement in which we can involve ourselves. We should also say, just to be clear, that the support for Obama declaring a war on ISIS may be broad for a time, but it will decrease in size fairly quickly as the hypocrisy and contradictions of the war machine quickly overshadow the propaganda offensive. For certain, the hold of pro-war ideas is not nearly so strong as it was after the September 11 attacks—and there remains a significant minority of people who are bitterly opposed to the war machine.

In general, so long as there is not a rise in generalized and sustained struggle, there is a premium for the ISO on building explicit left-wing socialist propaganda and organization, in order to resist the pull towards lesser evilism and “political realism” and to overcome the feelings of demoralization and isolation that will reach into our audience and organization. We have to stand firm on political issues and principles in order to galvanize a resistance on issues where the tide is flowing to the right, or at least not moving in our direction. We should aim to convince those we work with on these questions and build alliances when we can, but we also should be confident to put forward clear Marxist politics, even when we know that this will put us in a minority.

This does *not* mean abandoning important work in which we have implanted ourselves over the last several years, whether it be in our unions or in various social struggles. It does mean, though, that we cannot be simply focused on organizing the immediate next practical steps or being the people who hold things together. Instead, we want to make sure that we are thinking through how to politically strengthen the formations in which we are involved and that we devote time and attention to building a clear, visible and confident left-wing. Rebuilding the left is not only a practical, organizational task but, much more fundamentally, a political one. In a moment as complicated as this, our ability to put confidently answer the political questions that are emerging will be decisive.

But even more importantly, we have to equip ourselves as an organization to reach out directly to the layer of radicalizing people who are looking for political answers and a political home. This layer may be smaller in number than it was a few years ago as bigger struggles were taking place, and it may recede from sight as a result of demoralizing events like the election victory of Republicans, but even in these circumstances, it numbers many thousands of people and is plenty large enough for the ISO to relate to.

The same climate that will give the Republicans an edge in mainstream politics is the climate that created Ferguson and the Palestine solidarity movement of this summer. Even on issues where the right can pull both mainstream politics and popular consciousness behind it, there are many,

many people who are moving to the left as a result of the same events, and who want to do something about it. We need the ISO to be a vehicle for cohering and developing a layer of people out of this.

Concretely, this will mean making difficult choices about what areas of work we can involve ourselves in and dedicating sufficient resources to the projection and development of the ISO. At our last convention, we discussed the need to re-centralize our work politically and organizationally, and strengthen our organizational infrastructure to connect with this audience. There will be numerous documents to assess that experience, both nationally and locally, and to develop these points at more length. But for now, it is worth emphasizing that where we have turned branches and districts much more explicitly toward developing socialist propaganda and orienting on this layer of people, we *have* found a large audience for our ideas—certainly one big enough to leave members with a lot of work to do.

The campaign to reinvigorate—in many cases, to rebuild from step one—our organizing on college campuses has been a clear success in places where comrades focused methodically on identifying and connecting to this audience. In many places, campus public meetings have pulled dozens of contacts toward us. We are beginning to see a layer of people, while still small, join the ISO, while a larger number engages with us through study groups and local activity. This result confirms not only the importance of this fall's explicit concentration on campus organizing, but our orientation in general of reaching out to a radicalizing minority on a broad range of questions, with an explicitly socialist message. Because campuses are self-contained communities, it is easier to make the ISO a pole of attraction that will engage with people who are radicalizing around a number of issues, and who want a set of political ideas to explain them and a political organization to do something about it.

While campus work has been central to our immediate perspective this fall, it is not the only place where we have been able to bring around this audience. While the pace is slower in branches without a campus base, we have seen a direct relationship between the rebuilding of branch infrastructures and a rise in the number of new people coming around. Successful branches

have been able to create a vibrant political culture, and a sense of excitement and relevancy for socialist ideas, that have helped to create a counterweight to the volatility – and impressionism – of the current period. This in turn can build the confidence and clarity of our members, and those we organize around us, to strengthen the emerging left of which we are a part.

We need to understand all the aspects of the current political period—both the radicalization that is continuing to politicize a significant minority of people, as well as the contradictions and political questions that remain in broader consciousness and specifically in the consciousness of the radicalizing minority—in order to set a perspectives for the coming year. If we are successful, we will build a firmer core of Marxist cadre within the ISO and a much larger audience for revolutionary politics around our organization. This is a vital contribution that we can make right now to the rebuilding of a revolutionary left in the United States.

JR and AM for ISO Steering Committee