Contributing to the Pre-Convention Bulletins

This is the second pre-convention bulletin leading up to the ISO convention in February 2015. 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.

The complexities of rape and sexual assault: a contribution

I am submitting this document in response to “Towards a Disciplinary Procedure that Trusts Survivors,” by RA (Seattle) and BE (San Diego) in Internal Bulletin #2, July 2014. I want to first make clear that I thoroughly support the spirit and intent of R and B’s document. As they argue, “Given the prevalence of distrust for survivors of sexual assault and the horrendous ways that survivors are treated in the U.S. criminal justice system, we feel it is critical that our organization approach such accusations with different standards than the courts. These standards need to be unapologetically weighted in favor of survivors.”

Our position as revolutionary socialists must be unequivocal: Legal and law enforcement systems, university administrators and the sexist underpinnings of so-called “conventional wisdom” in capitalist society are all predisposed to disbelieving women when they say they have been raped or sexually assaulted. As revolutionary socialists, we are predisposed to believing women who make accusations of rape and sexual assault.

This document assumes, as R and B’s does, that the vast majority of sexual assault accusations are true—and that “most estimates suggest that only 2-8% of rape reports are false.” Moreover, I agree with R and B’s argument, “the organized left does not have a special immunity from such ills.” As fighters for women’s liberation, we should never treat a woman who comes forward to make a sexual assault complaint with suspicion—but rather offer support and sensitivity to her situation on the assumption that it is very likely to be true. We must be aware at all times that sexual assault and domestic violence are among the most damaging manifestations of women’s oppression in society, the world over—inextricably linked to women’s low social status and the sexual objectification and dehumanization of women’s bodies.
The ISO is not new to this understanding. During our organization’s entire history, we have fought against sexism on every front—up to and including expelling members who commit acts of sexual harassment, sexual assault or domestic violence.

I do differ with certain aspects of R and B’s reasoning in their document. In my opinion, 1) Due process is fundamental to democracy, and can never be relinquished without sacrificing democracy itself; 2) The aims and methods of state infiltration need to be more carefully considered; 3) We can’t and shouldn’t privilege women’s oppression over racial oppression or any other aspect of oppression under capitalism.

Before discussing the specific proposals made by R and B, however, this document will examine more broadly the phenomenon of sexual assault from a Marxist perspective—that is, analyzed in the context of capitalist social relations. Like imperialism and war, oppression is a necessary byproduct of the rule of capital. Exploitation is the method by which the ruling class robs workers of surplus value; the various forms of oppression play a primary role in maintaining the rule of a tiny minority over the vast majority, on a global scale. This approach allows Marxists to understand not only the root causes of oppression but also which strategies can most effectively combat it.

To be sure, sexual assault is not inflicted by “the system” as a whole, but by individual people. Nevertheless women’s oppression does not originate with individual people—it stems from institutional inequality organized from above, in the traditional family structure, the legal system, and other social structures that define women as second-class citizens. It therefore cannot be ended at the individual or personal level but only if we do away with the capitalist system.

Likewise, Marxists understand that police and other law enforcement agencies function as an armed wing of the capitalist state, enforcing laws that maintain class and social inequality. On this basis, we know that a strategy for increasing police power can never be the remedy for fighting oppression, including combatting rape and sexual assault. As feminist legal scholar Aya Gruber argued, after examining FBI reports of the 8 percent of reported rapes in 1997 that were determined by police to be “unfounded or false”:

“Unfounded” does not mean “false,” but only that police decided the case was not pursuable, a decision that itself could be influenced by gender stereotypes… “[P]olice may think a rape claim is false or unfounded if the victim had a prior relationship with the attacker, used drugs or alcohol at the time of the attack, lacked visible signs of injury, delayed notifying police, did not have a rape exam, blames herself for the rape, or did not immediately conceive of the assault as a rape.”

Rape and the U.S. legal system: when “no” means “yes”

In 1927, the U.S. Justice department defined rape as “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will.” That definition was not revised until 2012, when it announced a sweeping change in the definition: “The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”

The press release announcing this change in definition acknowledged that until 2012, “the Department of Justice thus included only forcible male penile penetration of a female vagina and excluded oral and anal penetration; rape of males; penetration of the vagina and anus with an object or body part other than the penis; rape of females by females; and non-forcible rape.” Because “the definition is used by the FBI to

collect information from local law enforcement agencies about reported rapes,” the Justice Department’s
own statistics on rape and sexual assault are thus unreliable in most respects prior to 2012.2

In the twentieth century, the legal system espoused standards of “proof” that assumed women claim to say
“no” when they actually mean “yes”.

The Yale Law Journal argued in 1952,

When her behavior looks like resistance although her attitude is one of consent, injustice may be
done the man by the woman’s subsequent accusation. Many women, for example, require as a
part of preliminary “love play” aggressive overtures by the man. Often their erotic pleasure
may be enhanced by, or even depend upon, an accompanying physical struggle. The “love bite”
is a common, if mild, sign of the aggressive component in the sex act. And the tangible signs of
struggle may survive to support a subsequent accusation by the woman.3

Nearly 15 years later, the same approach remained intact. As The Stanford Law Review claimed in 1966,

Although a woman may desire sexual intercourse, it is customary for her to say, “no, no, no”
(although meaning “yes, yes, yes”) and to expect the male to be the aggressor... It is always
difficult in rape cases to determine whether the female really meant “no”... The problem of
determining what the female “really meant” is compounded when, in fact, the female had no
clearly determined attitude—that is, her attitude was one of ambivalence... Furthermore, a
woman may note a man’s brutal nature and be attracted to him rather than repulsed.4

The women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s challenged these assumptions. Yet legal and
law enforcement opinion continues to embrace the same myths from a century ago: that “real” rape occurs
only when a stranger jumps out of the bushes, not on dates or between acquaintances or family members;
that women’s sexual assault claims should be distrusted because women often “ask for it” by dressing
certain ways or flirting, sending nonverbal signals that mean “yes” even if they said “no”; that women
cannot be believed unless they can provide convincing evidence that they physically “resisted”; that women
whose sexual histories show they had previous sexual intercourse must be considered “promiscuous”—and
therefore not trustworthy. The list goes on and on.

On January 24, 2011 Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti unwittingly demonstrated how little
law enforcement opinion has changed in recent decades when he advised female students at a forum on
campus safety, "I've been told I'm not supposed to say this – however, women should avoid dressing like
sluts in order not to be victimized."5

The attitudes described above, drenched in sexism, represent just the tip of the iceberg of legal and law
enforcement opinions that have traditionally dismissed women’s claims of sexual assault with derision and
contempt, especially if the accuser and the accused were not strangers—which, as we now know, comprise
the vast majority of rapes.

“Marital” or “spousal” rape was a legal nonentity within the U.S. legal system until 1975. Until then, every
state had a “marital exemption” that allowed a husband to legally force sexual intercourse upon his wife,
presumably because this was considered a husband’s “right” to demand and a wife’s “duty” to accept. By
1993, thanks to the 1970s-era women’s movement, all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia had
passed laws criminalizing marital rape. Despite this legal change, however, married women still find it very

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2 “Attorney General Eric Holder Announces Revisions to the Uniform Crime Report’s Definition of Rape,” FBI,
to-the-uniform-crime-reports-definition-of-rape
4 Ibid. p. 38.
5 This advice, given to women students while addressing the issue of campus rape at a York University safety forum
at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, touched off the Slutwalk movement in 2011.
difficult to prosecute their husbands for rape—due to varying state laws that require a higher standard of “proof” (such as demonstrating injuries suffered) and tend to be far less punitive than in stranger rapes.  

While reactionary legal codes and practices do not automatically reproduce themselves in popular culture, history has shown that in the absence of a broad-based opposition, so-called “conventional wisdom” tends to reflect the prejudices dished out by legal and other societal “experts”. Thus, the problem extends far beyond the legal and law enforcement systems. The notion that “she was asking for it” is the all too common reaction (on the part of both women and men) to women’s accusations of rape and sexual assault, especially in situations of “acquaintance rape” or “date rape.” This is certainly the case at high schools and on college campuses, where the concentration of young people makes date rape a more common occurrence than in the population at large.

Colleges and universities systematically cover up rape accusations—while callously mistreating young women who gather the courage to come forward to make them.  

The racial component of rape

It is not the case, however, that all sexual assault complaints made by women are treated equally by legal and law enforcement systems. Rape has had a toxic racial component in the United States since the time of slavery, as a key weapon in maintaining the system of White Supremacy. Both Black women and Black men have been its victims. Indeed, as legal scholar Susan Estrich notes, “Between 1930 and 1967, 89 percent of the men executed for rape were Black.”

Because of the centrality of racism in the U.S. historically, adopting an intersectional approach—which integrates race, class and gender oppression—is much more appropriate than treating rape as purely a “women’s issue.”

In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis argues that rape is “an essential dimension of the social relations between slave master and slave,” involving the routine rape of Black slave women by their white masters.” She describes rape as “a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist and, in the process, to demoralize their men.” The institutionalized rape of Black women survived the abolition of slavery and took on its modern form: “Group rape, perpetuated by the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations of the post-Civil War period, became an uncamouflaged political weapon in the drive to thwart the movement for Black equality.”

As Davis argues, “The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous…. Viewed as ‘loose women’ and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy.” Oftentimes the same Southern racists who systematically lynched Black men in the name of protecting the “virtue” of white women were also systematically raping Black women, as Danielle L. McGuire, shows in her important book, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*.  


*See Jennifer Roesch, “Protecting the university, failing rape survivors, Socialist Worker Online, October 2, 2014 (http://socialistworker.org/2014/10/02/protecting-university-failing)*

*Jessica Valenti, “In Rape Tragedies, the Shame Is Ours,” *The Nation*, May 6, 2013.*

*Estrich, op. cit. p. 107.*

galvanized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity.”

The case of the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black teens, aged 13-19, were accused of raping two young white women on a freight train in Alabama in 1931. A Lynch mob gathered outside the jail where they were held. All but the youngest, Roy Wright, were quickly found guilty by all-white juries and sentenced to death. Even after one of the white women, Ruby Bates, recanted her rape accusation and appeared as a witness for the defense—arguing that the two white women had had consensual sex on the train with white men, the court battles continued. All but two of the accused served time in prison. The Communist Party campaigned on their behalf for many years—with Ruby Bates speaking publicly on their innocence. Andy Wright, the last of the Scottsboro boys remaining in prison, was not released on parole until 1950. Finally, on November 21, 2013—82 years after they were first arrested—the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles voted unanimously to issue posthumous pardons to the three Scottsboro Boys who had not yet been pardoned or had their convictions dropped.

This history is not a relic of the past. The race of both the accuser and the accused continue to strongly influence the outcomes of rape accusations. Author Brandon Garrett, in *Convicting the Innocent: Where Criminal Prosecutions Go Wrong*, examined the first 250 DNA exonerations in the U.S.—and found that 62 percent were Black inmates. When combined with Latino exonerations, the rate went up to 70 percent of exonerations due to DNA. Garrett discovered that 89 percent of exonerated cases were sex offense cases: 68 percent were rape convictions and an additional 21 percent were rape/murder convictions. 12

As legal scholar Estrich argued in *Real Rape*, “The stranger (particularly the black stranger engaging in intercourse with the white woman, is at one end of the spectrum, in which no resistance is required to receive a rape verdict)” She adds, “White women are not required to resist black men, but black women are.”

**Racial, ethnic and religious oppression is a necessary feature of global capitalism**

Racism is not merely endemic to U.S. capitalism due to its history of slavery. Indeed, Latinos—and Mexican immigrants in particular—have historically filled a role as low-wage laborers in the U.S., due to the sustained racial discrimination against Latinos in particular and against all immigrants in U.S. law. More recently—and especially since the onset of the “War on Terror” in 2001, Arabs and Muslims have been targeted as innately predisposed to violence and the oppression of women. Such propaganda has been all too successful in depicting Muslim men as unredeemable terrorists and Muslim women as their willing and subservient accomplices.

Racial, ethnic and religious oppression are all a necessary feature of capitalism on a global scale—with ramifications far beyond U.S. borders. As Tithi Bhattacharya commented,

> In August of this year, a young Hindu woman in the Sarawa village in India claimed that a group of Muslim men had gang-raped her and then and one of them had forcibly converted her to Islam and married her. Given the context of a recent Narendra Modi victory, this allegation immediately fuelled the flames of ethnic tension and nearly led to riots with armed Hindu gangs hunting down Muslim ‘rapists’ to protect the virtue of ‘pure’ Hindu women. Last week, the young woman retracted her claim and revealed how her rightwing anti-Muslim family had forced her to bring rape charges because in reality she was in love with one of the accused.14

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11 Ibid. pp. xix–x.
Bhattacharya added, “Since the colonial period in India, the figure of the Muslim male as ‘rapist’ has been in sustained usage by Hindu Right to whip up violence against Muslim communities who are a minority in India. Scholars have shown how a rhetoric of ‘defilement’ is frequently used ‘to paint Muslim minorities’ relationship with the Indian body politic—Muslims have ‘raped’ or are hell-bent on ‘raping’ India.”

Likewise, Bhattacharya noted,

A similar sinister figure of the Muslim male ‘rapist’ is part of the dehumanizing trope created by Zionists in the context of the continued violence of Israel against Palestinians. Ali Abunimah correctly situates this phenomenon to share key features with US racism.

The “rape libel”, writes Abunimah, “is one of the worst that can be leveled against any group of people, for it is often a justification for dehumanization and organized violence.” He further points out that such a libel “was notoriously used to justify lynchings of black men in the southern United States during the Jim Crow era. But now the defamatory stereotype of the “black brute” intent on raping white women is being joined by the racialized Muslim brute.”

U.S. women’s liberationists and the contradictions of rape awareness

The generation of 1960s-era women’s liberationists successfully brought the issue of rape to the nation’s attention. Unfortunately, white separatist-feminists such as Susan Brownmiller conceived of rape as biologically determined. As Brownmiller argued, “When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it… Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”

In defining rape in purely male-female terms, Brownmiller ignored the profound impact of racism and White Supremacy, which led her to draw racist conclusions. Brownmiller uses the case of 14-year old Emmett Till, lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman in 1955 in Jim Crow Mississippi. Despite Till’s lynching, Brownmiller describes Till and his killer as sharing power over a “white woman,” using stereotypes that Black activist and Davis called “the resuscitation of the old racist myth of the Black rapist.” Brownmiller’s own words were, “Rarely has one single case exposed so clearly as Till’s the underlying group male antagonisms over access to women…. Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference, they could get a white woman and Carolyn Bryant was the nearest convenient object. In concrete terms, the accessibility of all white women was on review.”

As noted above, Black feminists such as Angela Davis, scathingly criticized Brownmiller’s racist conclusions, but their criticisms were largely ignored by the political mainstream and even among many feminists.

Nevertheless, feminists of the 1970s did manage to gain mass recognition that rape is a result of women’s oppression and is far more common than previously acknowledged. Brownmiller’s book was named one of the ten best books of 1975 by the New York Times Book Review, while Time magazine named Brownmiller one of its “Women of the Year.”

By the 1980s, liberal feminists began to successfully challenge the prevailing myth that “real rape” necessarily involves two strangers. In 1982, Ms. published an article arguing that “date rape” or

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“acquaintance rape” was far more common than rape committed by strangers. The response from readers was so enthusiastic that Ms. sponsored an extensive study of rape, directed by psychologist Mary P. Kos, surveying 6,100 undergraduate students from 32 college campuses across the U.S. The Ms. study, published in the 1988 book, *I Never Called it Rape* finally provided the evidence: one in four women students surveyed “had an experience that met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape.” The publication of this report gave confidence to campus feminists to begin organizing against date and acquaintance rape—a struggle that continues today. Although the right wing has continued to agitate against what it describes as so-called “victim feminism,” this has proved a center of struggle for women students on college campuses.

Our evolving understanding of sexual assault

But our understanding of the phenomenon of sexual assault has continued to evolve since the start of the twenty-first century. Recent studies have unveiled numerous problems with previous statistical analyses. Researchers have begun to document that sexual assault is far more widespread than previously acknowledged—and that most prior studies drew conclusions based on unreliable data and/or outdated assumptions. The following list outlines numerous problems with previous sexual assault statistics:

1. **The percentage of rapes and sexual assaults reported to police is so low that most statistical studies base their conclusions on conjecture rather than fact.** Since the majority (and perhaps the vast majority) of sexual assaults are never reported to police, Gruber argues, “[a]s a scientific matter, the frequency of false rape complaints to police or other legal authorities remains unknown.”

2. **Reliance on law enforcement statistics vastly underestimates the occurrence of sexual assaults.**

   As Soraya Chemaly argued in *The Nation* in June,

   
   Corey Rayburn Yung, associate professor at the University of Kansas School of Law, concludes that between 1995 and 2012, police departments across the country systematically undercounted and underreported sexual assaults. After nearly two years of work, he estimates conservatively that between 796,213 and 1,145,309 sexual assault cases never made it into national FBI counts during the studied period. That’s more than 1 million rapes.

While rarely acknowledged by law enforcement agencies, police themselves engage in domestic violence and sexual misconduct. According to the National Center for Women & Policing, “at least 40% of police officer families experience domestic violence” [emphasis in original]—based on self-reporting by police officers. Moreover, as Zoë Carpenter reported in *The Nation* in August,

There are many opportunities for someone, if they were a predator, to engage in crimes of sexual violence that they wouldn’t otherwise be able to do because of the power and authority they have [as a police officer]... Researchers have to rely on arrest reports and press accounts, which leave out unreported or unprosecuted cases. But even that limited evidence suggests sexual assault is a significant issue in police forces... According to the Cato Institute, more than 9 percent of reports of police misconduct in 2010 involved

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20 Ibid. p. 2.
21 Gruber, op. cit.
sexual abuse, making it the second-most reported form of misconduct, after the use of excessive force.24

3. Until quite recently, male sexual assaults have been systematically underestimated. The assumption that sexual assault victims are overwhelmingly female and nearly all rapists are male has guided the vast majority of previously available research. That assumption meant that researchers did not ask the kinds of questions or survey the populations that might show otherwise.

Thus, in 1997, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 91% of rape victims are female and 9% are male, and that 99% of arrestees for rape are male.25 But as noted above, the FBI acknowledged in 2012 that its previously narrow definition of sexual assault—which defined rape as committed only against women—has resulted in unreliable statistics, since it has not properly documented police records of sexual assaults that did not fit this restrictive definition. Moreover, most previous research on sexual assault (including that conducted by the Dept. of Justice and the CDC) did not include research on transgender people, while sexual assault among prisoners was systematically undercounted. Likewise, all those not living in households (the homeless, immigrants held in detention centers, disabled people in a variety of institutional settings, people in nursing homes, etc.) went either uncounted or greatly undercounted.26

Researchers have only recently begun to try and estimate the occurrence of male sexual assault. In June of this year, legal scholars Lara Stemple and Ilan H. Meyer published the results of their exhaustive two-year study in the American Journal of Public Health, which found “widespread sexual victimization among men in the United States.”

This research is not grounded in anti-feminist “men’s rights” principles. On the contrary, as they explain, their groundbreaking research is guided by explicitly “[f]eminist principles that emphasize equity, inclusion, and intersectional approaches; the importance of understanding power relations; and the imperative to question gender assumptions.” They also argue,

_The sexual victimization of women was ignored for centuries. Although it remains tolerated and entrenched in many pockets of the world, feminist analysis has gone a long way toward revolutionizing thinking about the sexual abuse of women, demonstrating that sexual victimization is rooted in gender norms and is worthy of social, legal, and public health intervention. We have aimed to build on this important legacy by drawing attention to male sexual victimization, an overlooked area of study. We take a fresh look at several recent findings concerning male sexual victimization, exploring explanations for the persistent misperceptions surrounding it._

The rigid (and binary) gender ideal of the “dominant male” and “submissive female” imposed by capitalism has led to the common assumption that men cannot be raped or sexually assaulted—and if they are, they are less traumatized than women because of the myth that they are “less emotional.” The caricature of “real men” is that their voracious sexual appetites can never be satisfied—leading to the false conclusion that a male’s erection or ejaculation must indicate that he enjoyed an unwanted sexual encounter. Stemple and Meyer concluded, “contemporary depictions of sexual victimization reinforce the stereotypical sexual victimization paradigm, comprising male perpetrators and female victims. As

25 Lawrence A. Greenfeld, “Sex Offenses and Offenders: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, February 1997. http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/SOO.PDF
26 The Department of Justice National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)—which bases its information on interviews with household members—has proven to be less than thorough. It is now acknowledged, for example, that the NCVS statistics vastly under-reported the sexual abuse of prison inmates, male and female, until 2014, when reporting guidelines were finally issued.
we demonstrate, the reality concerning sexual victimization and gender is more complex.”27

Social attitudes about gender and sexuality have begun to shift substantially in recent years. Although there is still a very long way to go, the struggle for LGBTQ rights has begun to break down rigid gender stereotypes, especially among younger people. A 2014, Gallup poll showed 55 percent of the U.S. population supported the right to equal marriage—while among those aged 18-29, support stood at 78 percent.28

Moreover, the epidemic of pedophile priests over the last 15 years—and the Catholic Church’s massive cover up—began to demonstrate in the mainstream media that males are far from safe from sexual assault. Other scandals, including the exposure of Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky as a sexual predator, have begun to make it easier for male victims to speak out.

Just as the FBI finally redefined its definition of rape in 2012, other federal agencies began to also change their methods for gathering sexual assault statistics. Beginning in 2010, the Center for Disease Control’s National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey began to include a category for an additional form of sexual violence: “made to penetrate” due to physical force or coercion. More research needs to be done to examine these results more closely, but they indicate that men are sexually abused at a significantly higher rate than previously acknowledged when the definition of what constitutes sexual assault is expanded. 29

Finally, Stemple and Meyers discovered that, until very recently, most studies of sexual assault neglected to include dependable statistics on prison sexual assault (despite the fact that one in ten people in the U.S. will be imprisoned at some point in their lives). In the last couple of years, the U.S. Justice Department revised its statistic gathering methods and drastically raised its previous estimates of inmate sexual abuse in 2008—from 935 instances to 216,000 prisoners who had been sexually assaulted (often multiple times) in the previous year. 30

A breakdown of the statistics shows that while female inmates were more likely to be abused by fellow inmates, men were more likely to be abused by prison guards—many of them female. This is especially the case for juveniles: 89 percent of juveniles who reported abuse by staff were boys said the abuse came from a female staff member.31 Two of the most horrifying photos of U.S. military torture of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Afghanistan in 2004 featured U.S. Army Private Lynndie England. In one, she is laughing as she points at the genitals of a naked man, whose head is covered by a hood. In the other, she is mocking a naked prisoner as she drags him around with a dog leash. And like increasing numbers of male rapists, they posted their sexual torture on social media for others’ amusement.32

Once again, Stemple and Meyer’s statistics need to be examined more closely to determine their precise reliability, but they do point to a higher rate of sexual assault among inmates than acknowledged previously. And since most prisoners are male, this significantly raises the estimate of male sexual assault. 33

30 Jill Filipovic, “Is the US the only country where more men are raped than women? The figures on rape may be uncertain, but we could lower the sexual assault rate in American jails – if we had the political will,” The Guardian, February 21, 2012. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/feb/21/us-more-men-raped-than-women
31 Stemple and Meyer, op. cit.
33 Filipovic, op. cit.
4. **There are still many aspects of rape and sexual assault that we do not yet understand or for which dependable research is lacking.** Much of our understanding of pedophilia, sexual assaults within the LGBTQ population, among people with disabilities and among homeless people remains anecdotal rather than scientific. Nevertheless, we know that the strict and binary gender definition of rape and sexual assault as perpetrated overwhelmingly by (heterosexual) males against females is obsolete. The distortion of sexual relations under capitalism affects not only heterosexual relationships and the treatment of women by men, but also impact same-sex relationships. Indeed, no one is immune from these distortions and the violence and abuse they create. This has many implications: for example, pedophiles are neither heterosexual nor gay, but are child predators. Hopefully, new research will help to both deepen and broaden our understanding of rape and sexual assault in contemporary capitalist society.

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**My differences with R’s and B’s proposal**

My primary disagreement is with the following proposal put forward by R and B: “at all levels of the organization, the standard of sufficient evidence in cases of sexual assault, sexual harassment, or domestic violence should be a statement by a named survivor against a named individual. An account of the events in question should be collected from the accused and any other relevant witnesses before a decision is reached. However, in the absence of direct counter-evidence beyond the word of the accused, a statement of this nature should be considered enough evidence to warrant disciplinary action.”

To be sure, an accuser’s statement might well constitute sufficient evidence to warrant disciplinary action in some cases. But to **automatically** consider such an accusation alone as sufficient evidence is a clear abandonment of due process—sometimes referred to as “guilty until proven innocent.”

I will explain below the ways in which I believe this reasoning is problematic.

1. **Due process is fundamental to democracy**

Like the principle of “one person, one vote,” the right to due process is a crucial component of any democratic organization, institution, or society. These rights must be universal to be meaningful—to abandon them for one set of people or under certain circumstances is to abandon them as “rights”.

The right to due process assumes that the accused is “innocent until proven guilty.” There are different standards of proof in criminal and civil courts: criminal courts require “proof beyond a reasonable doubt;” most civil courts require “a preponderance of the evidence” or “clear and convincing evidence.” But all nevertheless operate on the assumption of innocence unless guilt is proven, as a fundamental democratic right.

R and B argue, “The worst outcome that can occur from our disciplinary process is expulsion from the ISO.” They also acknowledge, “There remains the theoretical possibility that false accusations and, thus, unwarranted expulsions could occur.” R and B also note that most studies estimate that between 2 and 8 percent of reported sexual assaults are false, although they estimate that the number is lower.

But there is no doubt that, however rarely, false accusations take place. Unlike Justice Department statistics, exoneration studies are rooted in empirical reality rather than supposition. A substantial number of inmates have been exonerated after being convicted of false rape charges and serving years or decades in prison. In 2012, a report by researchers from the National Registry of Exonervations, estimated that the number of exonerated prisoners numbered roughly 2,000, although that number is being updated all the time. They also disclosed that, of the exonerated inmates in their database,

- 93 percent are men, 7 percent women;
- Nearly 50 percent are black, 38 percent white, 11 percent Hispanic and 2 percent Native American or Asian;

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• 48 percent had been falsely convicted of homicides, 35 percent of sexual assaults (23 percent adult, 12 percent child), five percent robberies, five percent other violent crimes, and seven percent drug, white-collar and other non-violent crimes.

The database’s researchers also reported, “In adult rape cases, for example, false convictions were typically based on eyewitness mistakes, "‘more often than not, mistakes by white victims falsely identifying black defendants.’”

R and B conclude, however, “disbelieving women in the face of overwhelming sexual oppression will have a much greater negative impact on our organization, its standing, and the struggle against exploitation and oppression than any opposite error could.” Here they equate the principle of due process—or “innocent until proven guilty”—with “disbelieving women.” (Or in reverse, believing women’s accusations of sexual assault requires abandonment of due process in these cases.)

But abandonment of due process, a central tenet of democracy, would likely negatively impact our organization’s ability to build a democratic “struggle against exploitation and oppression.” Any organization that operates democratically must embrace these basic democratic rights—both voting and due process as universal rights for every member. To deprive these rights to particular members or to suspend these rights under specific circumstances negates them as rights, thereby relinquishing democracy.

Thus, we can be predisposed to believing women who make sexual assault accusations without abandoning any member’s due process rights.

2. The aims and strategies of state infiltrators need to be carefully considered.

COINTELPRO—the FBI program to “disrupt, discredit and destroy” left wing and social justice movements between 1957 and 1971—involved a massive infiltration strategy. COINTELPRO operatives used any and all means to accomplish its aims—including sowing distrust between movement members that sometimes involved inventing fictional sexual activities. In 1974, a U.S. government investigation of this program revealed

A distressing number of the programs and techniques developed by the intelligence community involved transgressions against human decency that were no less serious than any technical violations of law. Some of the most fundamental values of this society were threatened by activities such as the smear campaign against Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the testing of dangerous drugs on unsuspecting American citizens, the dissemination of information about the sex lives, drinking habits, and marital problems of electronic surveillance targets, and the COINTELPRO attempts to turn dissident organizations against one another and to destroy marriages.

R and B argue, “We feel that a straightforward policy that trusts survivors in the absence of direct counter-evidence will decrease the likelihood that this sort of accusation could be used by the state against us. If the policy is uniform and clear, there is far less to be gained by the state through false accusations of rape.” But R and B’s approach actually makes it easier for the state to successfully harm its targets.


inside the organization—since the assumption of guilt will automatically result in the expulsion of those accused (by anyone, including a state infiltrator) of sexual assault.

3. **We can’t and shouldn’t privilege women’s oppression over racial oppression or any other aspect of oppression under capitalism.**

B and R argue, “The prospect of losing a member can be upsetting and challenging for the organization, but it is absurd to think that anyone, including people of color, will hesitate to join the ISO simply out of concern that they might later be expelled due to a false accusation of rape.” I think this approach, while well intentioned, effectively privileges women’s oppression over other forms of oppression, especially racial oppression. We need to gain a much more accurate understanding of sexual assault in society at large, in all its dimensions. There is much yet to be learned, but it is clear that only an intersectional approach will allow us both to understand and support all victims of sexual assault—while integrating class inequality, racism, homophobia, national oppression, religious oppression and all other forms of oppression into our analysis. This intersectional approach, in turn, should inform the actions we take in response to individual accusations against ISO members—including accusations of sexual assault.

**Conclusion:**

I truly thank R and B for bringing this discussion into our organization—it needs to be debated so that we can collectively reach a common conclusion as to how to make the ISO as responsive as possible to sexual assault complaints. I have listed above the points that I find problematic with their proposal, but I also realize we have much yet to learn.

What we are beginning to understand more fully is the ways in which sexual assault is a more comprehensive product of capitalist social relations than most activists, including Marxists, realized before. Capitalism relies not only on the alienation of labor, and not only on explicit discrimination, but it also produces personal alienation and the suppression of sexuality. In the absence of class and social struggle on a mass basis, individual people develop themselves in the “dog eat dog” mentality that the system produces. Not all people, but some people—some of those in a position to physically overpower, intimidate, or coerce others into sex—sometimes do so, at the expense of those who are overpowered, intimidated or coerced into sex. One or more individuals can physically overpower another; those in a position of authority can intimidate or coerce another person—be it a prison guard over a prisoner, a teacher over a student, a priest over an altar boy or an adult over a child. The experience of sexual assault is extremely traumatic for all who survive it. All of them deserve our support as Marxists.

One last point: Developing a more rigorous and comprehensive understanding of rape under capitalism does not lessen the importance of women’s oppression as the root cause of rape and sexual assault among women. On the contrary, it allows us to increase our understanding of the social and class inequality produced by the capitalist system—and to build solidarity among all those who are oppressed in a variety of ways by the system.

--SS, for the Steering Committee

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**Towards Organized Political Education**

**Summary:**

The experience of organizing the series has helped to politically develop us. We’ve needed to be creative and experiment with ways to facilitate the best discussions and create an inclusive atmosphere. Leading a long-term study series requires thinking about members and assessing their particular development. How do they contribute to the group, what are their particular strengths? What can they take away from their
participation and what would they like to develop around more? What makes sense for the group as a whole? How do you democratically organize the series and really listen to requests and suggestions?

A systematic program:

The Cadre Development Series was a joint initiative of the Steering Committee and the National Committee. It was conceived of as an educational program for new members, intended to fill a gap between initial books (e.g., Case for Socialism, Meaning of Marxism and the Communist Manifesto) and more advanced readings.

Many members that joined in the last few years either did not read through all the preliminary books from the Toolkit that lay the groundwork for understanding our political tradition, or else did not have the opportunity to discuss these readings with other, longer standing members. This program was meant to offer that opportunity.

After evaluating the state of the ISO’s new members’ education, the SC and NC determined that one major weakness was the lack of a systematic program for continued education of members in their first couple of years.

The SC/NC education committee identified a number of “key topics that form core elements of the ISO’s politics” (e.g., socialism from below, race and class, imperialism and Palestine, socialists and the Democratic Party, Anarchism and other socialist traditions etc.). The list was not intended to be exhaustive, but was meant to provide a thorough and systematic overview of subjects that members of the ISO need to be well versed in.

We wanted to move away from self-selecting ad-hoc membership development and think about what would benefit our developing members. What questions they had and what are the key next steps for them. Through the recommendations of branch membership organizers and conveners we conducted a focused outreach in the district through which we formed a core group of 8 comrades committed to participating in the entire study series, with other members and close contacts joining in occasionally. Creating the group and not allowing it to be self-selecting has meant in practice more commitment throughout.

The people who we reached out to were serious developing comrades, mostly in positions of leadership in their branches, in the district and in movements. The majority of the participants were female and half comrades of color.

It was useful to keep the group smaller and target it primarily at regular attendees because this allowed for more in-depth conversations and debates geared toward particular members and their particular questions. One member said the series “feels open, safe but demanding, and I feel like I can raise questions that are on my mind but that I’m not sure I want to make in larger branch much less district meetings. So, in this way, I can resolve issues I’m grappling with or at least clarify the questions and pose them better in these other settings.”

Organizing a consistent study group:

In order to make the program manageable and still allow people to participate in other work and other study groups, the education committee limited each session to roughly 50 pages of reading. They included one or two relevant talks from WeAreMany.org and study questions to help spark discussion.

This education plan was designed to be “flexible and user-friendly enough” so that members could complete it within a year. We have been meeting with some regularity twice a month on Sunday afternoons for 2-hour long sittings. We found that when we tried to meet only once a month we quickly lost momentum and engagement. The length of the series as it is has created a sense of continuity. And because
the sessions were planned as independent “stand alone” modules, when we met every other week participants could easily rejoin after missing a meeting without difficulty. As a result, we avoided any drop in participation.

Throughout the length of the series the consistency of the study group, as a group, has been significant. Comrades agree that this has allowed us to develop our thinking collectively and more rapidly. One member said “There’s great continuity of analysis, because it's the same core of people sharing ideas and insights over time. There are often helpful links people make by referencing older conversations that most of the people attending that week were a part of, giving the sense that we are deepening our politics and seeing connections. It's something I miss from more “formal” education but have found in this group.”

We divided the talks up amongst the participants, so that all members of the study group prepared at least one (or two?) 10-15 minute talk(s). Presentations at times were given by members who had some expertise related to the topic but at other times by members who were not necessarily the most experienced in the room. This created opportunities for newer people to develop some proficiency on a new topic, and for older members to focus on leading a discussion from the floor by taking up questions and clarifying arguments.

Members who read most of the material in the past were able to delve further into the reading and offer helpful insight to newer members. Different people chaired or facilitated each study group, and different people wrote report backs to the group about the main takeaways and key questions that we hashed out during the session. This heightened the level of political engagement. It also created a collective sense of ownership and an atmosphere of sincere collaboration.

We found that the quantity of study questions (between 10-17) was a little overwhelming and for the most part members did not use them. Separating out a few “choice” questions from the list (between 4-5) and asking people to take those up during the meeting was more helpful in getting new members to try and articulate political arguments. In general we found that mostly members came with their own questions, and preferred to prioritize those. The range of questions reflected the range of knowledge and experience in the room, and made for very interesting and dynamic discussions.

The small size of the group allowed us to structure the meetings creatively. We usually had go-arounds at the beginning and end of discussions, and this helped embolden even under- confident participants to speak multiple times. We tried other structures that included “turn-and-talks”, in which we allocated 10 minutes at the beginning of any discussion, usually after the presentation, for people to pair up with their neighbor for ten-minute “mini discussions”. Following this up with a go-around, allowed people to come in with political arguments developed in conversation with a comrade, rather than just raising questions. While the readings themselves motivated people to pose important questions that were broad and very political, these formations encouraged people to also voice thoughts and arguments.

In the initial phases of our program we decided to add two topics, one on ‘Immigration and Capitalism’ and the other on ‘Socialism and Human Nature.’ We added the former so as to really take advantage of the fact that a large portion of our group is involved in immigrants’ rights activism; and the latter we added because we felt it was a good supplement to the talks on oppression under capitalism. This worked well because it meant that each person would be able to give two talks. For the added subjects we put together our own readings, wearemany.org talks and a handful of questions. It was interesting thinking through what readings could help lay a framework for our politics, and help facilitate a good discussion.

Additionally it was necessary to choose readings for the study group on Women’s Oppression because the revised edition of Women and Socialism is yet to be published and not all participants own the book. The articles chosen paralleled the chapters in the book (and were mostly written by the same author). We also added an introductory article on Social Reproduction Theory, a topic we hope can be incorporated in this section in future series.
Another suggestion from the group was to add a session dedicated to Indigenous Struggles and Socialism. Teaching new members the basics around this issue, it was argued, would lay the foundation for a membership with a clear Marxist understanding of Native American history and politics. It was also requested that the series include in the LGBTQ section a specific reading on Transgender oppression.

Finally, because the program is so flexible we were able to change the schedule quickly in order to hold the discussion on Palestine during Operation Protective Edge. This felt like a perfectly timed “crash-course” for participants on the Palestinian cause. A handful of contacts showed up as well and we were able as a group to collectively take up their questions and arguments.

**Deepening politics and strengthening membership:**

**Overall comrades have expressed great enthusiasm for the program and have consistently described leaving sessions inspired and excited with even more to think about.** Members reported that while they continued to do the readings for sessions they’d missed, they were getting much less out of the material than when they attended the collective discussion.

Not only has the study group deepened members’ politics but it has also served to strengthen their relationship to the ISO and to one another. One participant said, “Getting to know you guys better has been fun and inspiring, my understanding of the ISO’s politics would not be the same without having done this.”

Often times the series has directly translated into greater participation in branch meetings, especially when the topic of branch discussion that week related to the topic covered at our study group. **Newer members are able to lead in branch, district and movement settings generally, with greater confidence and clearer interventions.** They participate in discussions with sharp, confident contributions and take up questions from new people in the room.

As one member said, “This study group...[has] reinforced my Marxist analysis and it’s application through the variety of subjects we've covered. Furthermore, this study group has in fact helped me conceive of my political work from a more intersectional and socialist perspective (for instance, understanding the critical importance of having an eco-socialist and feminist perspective in migrant justice work.)”

In conclusion, it is clear from the success of this year’s series that the initiative for a systematic educational program for members in their first (in our case 1-4) years will lead to a much more profound sense of understanding of the ISO and its politics and perspectives. Education in the organization when taken on collectively and not individually leads to much more rapid and cohesive cadre development.

**Next steps:**

The following next steps are not formal proposals because I think this needs to be part of an ongoing discussion based on the experiences of comrades nation wide. These recommendations are based on our experience here in New York.

*Re-introduction of this series next year, nation-wide. Ideally each branch/district will coordinate a small group that meets regularly, consisting of newer and slightly more experienced members. In areas where branches are very small, branches should consider planning a branch wide series.

*Branches should incorporate the Communist Manifesto into annual education, immediately following Meaning of Marxism study groups (not all our participants had read and discussed it prior to the series)

*For current participants, extending the series to include a second part, which takes up Marxist classics (i.e. Reform or Revolution, State and Revolution etc.).
The overall goal should be to have a systematized and collectivized education program in place moving forward, for members as they enter the organization. A plan all members follow over the course of their first couple of years. Even new members with a greater grasp of Marxist politics can improve their ability to wage arguments and ground their understanding of the politics of the ISO, by engaging with other members and helping to cultivate a political culture of discussion and debate amongst all members.

DT, NYC

InternationalSocialist.org Redesign

Anyone who has seen the ISO’s national website (www.InternationalSocialist.org) any time in the last few years will know it’s badly in need of an overhaul. A redesign has begun. We’d like to report on progress and ask for input.

There are many audiences for an ISO website: members, people considering becoming members, allies, journalists, or international contacts looking for information, etc. For members, a national website could help centralize the organization, providing not only resources like readings, posters and forms, but also a political lead. For others, a national website could provide clear information about what the ISO is and does, how to get involved, and how to find socialists near you. The current website does some of these things, but none as well as it could. Of course, it’s all public, so other audiences to keep in mind are the state, right-wing cranks, etc. We have to be highly aware of what we choose to publish on this site.

The last national convention voted on a redesign and the SC has delegated SS to oversee the project as the product owner. BK is the primary editor of the site, organizing content and the product, working with many comrades, and the main decision wrangler for the project. DW is acting as project manager to coordinate the work, and also a developer and architect, working with ZK and DJ from the Bay Area to design and implement the new site.

The current plan for the initial re-launch will include a “responsive” visual redesign (something that looks good on a small/mobile device and makes use of more space if available), along with a few new features: national notes, initiative pages, study guides, and a new collection of downloadable resources.

The new national web notes are meant to provide a political lead for ISO members, like the ISO Notes, which they will supplement, but written to be made public, and accessible without having to be forwarded through email. The current distribution of notes is inconsistent. SocialistWorker.org has tried to recreate the weekly editorial lead from our print edition in the late 90s and early 2000s, but that website has never been able to clearly play the same role. Most traffic on SW lands on specific article pages that have been heavily linked on social media or good hits for popular search terms. A redesigned national ISO website would be a more effective platform for that clear political analysis and perspective on a weekly basis.

Initiative pages will provide a central repository of the ISO’s analysis and activism on individual political topics, like BDS, Fight for 15, or eco-socialism. Members involved in a particular area of work will be able to visit these pages to easily find out what comrades around the country are doing, find SW/ISR articles or WeAreMany.org audio/video, and share posters or slogans. Contacts and allies will be able to see a quick overview of what we say or do about an issue or controversy. We will also categorize all the content on the site by wider “areas” of activism/work, so that people can explore everything we’re doing on topics like Women’s Liberation or Labor.

Finally, we hope to create an easy way to share posters and study guides, as well as forms such as dues checkoff and signup sheets. If one branch puts together readings and study questions on social reproduction, or a great flyer for a meeting on police violence, ideally other branches will benefit.
Many branches and districts maintain local sites with some of this information, as well as calendars of upcoming meetings. In the future, we’d like to integrate those with the national site. But, in part because there are questions about the best process for keeping them up to date, that won’t happen in the first version of the relaunched site, and will wait for a second round.

It would be convenient for the national site to be a way for individual members to update their dues directly. But, due to security concerns, especially given our all-volunteer IT staff, this is not on the current roadmap. The same holds true for managing branch email lists, although we will be exploring various national email lists that the site could organize.

We want your input and help with the new InternationalSocialist.org. We’re still at an early stage with plenty of time to make changes.

1. Who in your branch is responsible for maintaining your branch’s web + social media presence? Is your listing at www.internationalsocialist.org/branches.html accurate? Ultimately, the national site will require input and some effort from every branch to keep the content current and relevant.

2. If you have run a local site for a branch or district, we’d especially like to hear about the purposes it served, your workflow for keeping it up to date, and any lessons learned.

3. Do you have ideas about what a redesigned national website could provide (content and/or functionality) to be most useful for you or a specific audience we should be addressing?

4. If you have time, we can use your help (on this and other web projects). We are currently building the site in Drupal, although we can use lots of different kinds of skills including data entry, editing, cataloguing + classifying, Q/A + testing, etc. If someone with WordPress experience wanted to try to implement a test site, that would be great for comparison.

Please send any ideas, concerns or offers of help to website@internationalsocialist.org.

Other projects
At this time, all our other web-related projects are on hold to focus on launching the new InternationalSocialist.org. But as soon as the initial redesign is live, we’d like to be able to put energy into some of these other initiatives. Having more people working on these projects will enable us to make more progress on more of our sites.

**Responsive SocialistWorker.org**
As people are accessing the web more frequently via mobile devices, it becomes increasingly important for our sites to work well and look good on small screens. This is especially true for a news site like SW.org. Although the functionality and visual design of SW.org have held up very well over the 6+ years since the site was launched, we’ve never had a chance to design the experience for mobile devices and tablets.

Other points to address in the SW redesign include:

- Consider how to make each article page a more compelling invitation to explore the rest of the site (understanding that most of our traffic lands on individual articles, not the front page or other landing pages).
- Automating tasks that currently require manual effort from the SW staff to free up their time for political work.
- Replace the search functionality with an integrated Google search (like on www.ISReview.org) since the native search box is mostly useless as-is.
- Consider how to drive more traffic to InternationalSocialist.org for SW readers who want to get involved with a local branch -- trying to turn more of our online periphery into active participants in our organizing and work.

**Do something with ObreroSocialista.org**
www.ObreroSocialista.org hasn’t been touched since 2012, and still has the vintage SW.org visual design from before the 2008 relaunch for the daily website. At the very least, it should redirect to a landing page on SW.org where we collect all the Spanish translations we periodically do of SW stories.
Hosting and infrastructure
Comrades may have noticed some episodes of downtime on our various sites. Many are hosted effectively for free, but we sometimes get what we pay for. The current infrastructure also doesn’t lend itself to lots of comrades helping to develop and improve our sites (other than content). We’ll have to invest some time and money improving our hosting, which in turn should help with site uptime and performance, and make it easier for comrades to collaborate and contribute to our overall web presence.

Backlog of features and fixes
There’s a long list of feature requests for all our sites. There are various “phase 2” plans from each project that we’ve never had resources to get to. Over time we should triage the list, prioritize the tasks still worth doing, and continue to improve our web presence.

--DW, DJ, and ZK

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