Student work at Stanford

Over the past two years, there have been a couple of active members at Stanford at any given time, and prior pre-convention bulletins explain what we’ve tried in terms of building a base. Suffice it to say that through this summer, we hadn’t expanded beyond a couple people, despite a lot of hard work and several successful events. As part of the national shift to emphasize building the ISO on campuses, the San Francisco branch decided this summer to make a serious effort to establish a base at Stanford.

The branch sent down three off-campus cadre to help with tabling at the student activities fair. A few other members of the SF branch helped with flyering and other publicity for our first meeting, which took place during the third week of classes. The turnout wasn’t huge, but we definitely attracted a handful of very serious students interested in socialist politics and organization. Three of them helped build our next meeting on Marxism and women’s liberation, which was also a small but serious gathering.
With the help of the SF branch, the three aforementioned students went through the Where We Stand packet and joined the ISO on that basis, so now the ISO has a base of four student members, three of whom are undergraduates. (One is a co-chair of MEChA de Stanford; I am co-facilitator of Stanford SJP). We have started going through The Meaning of Marxism in order to get a firmer grounding in the politics. It should be noted that two of the new student members had prior exposure to socialist politics and Marxism.

The ISO is still the only socialist political organization on campus. In fact, it’s the only general political organization to the left of the Democrats. Campus activism as a whole, however, is picking up. Stanford SJP is making a big divestment push with a strong coalition of student groups. The Stanford NAACP and the Black Student Union have made Ferguson and racist policing a live issue on campus with educational events and actions. Stanford had a sizeable “Carry That Weight” rally in solidarity with survivors of sexual assault and calling for reforms of university policy. This climate of politicization is very hospitable for the development of radical politics, and the Stanford ISO plans to contribute to that development.

We are still coming up with ideas for the winter and spring quarters. It will be important to continue a focus on basic political education for our membership, perhaps with a discussion series based on classic readings that is also open to others who may be interested. We may also be able to put on a couple higher profile events, for example with CeCe McDonald. It will be important to have a measured approach that doesn’t run too far ahead of our political development and resources. And it will also be important, as a small (for the time being) crew at Stanford, to maintain our connection to the larger Bay Area district by coming up to key public events or internal discussions in SF and Oakland.

At last year’s convention, I raised my concerns about why the ISO was having a hard time growing numerically in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, and whether we were pointed in the right direction as an organization. I think the shift to student work has been a welcome change – we are back in touch with the current of radicalism that is developing among young people, particularly on campuses, and we will benefit from incorporating some of that politics, experience, and energy. That obviously doesn’t resolve bigger questions about the challenges the revolutionary left is facing here and across the world in terms of reorganizing itself to build a meaningful political challenge to the 1%, who have managed the post-2008 crisis to their advantage pretty well so far. But a new crop of student and youth revolutionaries in the US should definitely help figure some of that out, and I’m glad to be in the middle of that work.

SP

Some defects in our democratic centralism

Over the past several months, there have been a handful of incidents in which our members have not democratically raised and debated key decisions that influence or reflect upon the entire organization. The point here is not to lay the blame upon individual members. I think this is an organizational question that goes beyond these specific motivating examples of varying strength:

1) The endorsement of a Democratic candidate for Chicago mayor by a leading, high profile cadre.
2) The de facto ISO endorsement (at least in Southern California) of Tom Torlakson, the Democratic Party candidate for Superintendent of California. Some may object to this characterization, but (if I’m not mistaken) our leading teacher comrades in LA phone banked for and publicly supported Torlakson. There was no attempt to explain or argue this position with Northern California teacher comrades ahead of time, never mind the organization as a whole.
3) Comrade Bradshaw’s article on Proposition C in San Francisco was a fantastic rebuttal to the critique leveled at him and the ISO. But it probably would have helped to write something like that in a more timely manner (i.e., a few years ago), because it would have been important to explain that position in the context of the ISO’s national push around fighting austerity and rejecting cuts to and attacks on public sector employees.
4) We’ve had a few comrades decide to run for important positions in their unions (including president!) with little discussion and debate with their local comrades, never mind the national organization. Though this has been getting noticeably better lately, at least in the Bay Area.

5) A Northern California comrade who, as part of a job with a non-profit, ended up canvassing for David Campos, a Democratic Party candidate for the California legislature. The comrade was encouraged to write something, even anonymously, to Socialist Worker to explain the Campos campaign in the context of left Democrat pulls on the left, but did not end up doing so.

Of course people are busy, and of course we can’t debate in advance every small question of alliances, tactics, compromises. But that’s not the argument I’m making – the decisions taken above, particularly the first few, reflect on the ISO in a meaningful way because they touch contentious issues for the left. Yet our members are not taking the time to explain them or argue them to the rest of the organization, either in Socialist Worker or in internal communication. I think that’s because they believe there isn’t much value in doing so – that it won't bring much clarity or value to the organization as a whole or to their particular area of work. Or maybe it will, but just not enough to prioritize it over the series of other tasks on their list.

I also think there is some disagreement or at least fuzziness among our membership, including our experienced membership, about the politics – that is, what should we make of left Democrats (or just union-friendly-ish Democrats) running in nonpartisan races, or in races where it’s two Democrats against each other, or in local not-really-partisan races, etc.

Three suggestions for how to proceed:

1) Reduce the barriers to writing and publishing this kind of stuff. I don’t think it’s hard currently, but I think we hold ourselves to pretty high standards when it comes to writing things for national consumption (this contribution aside). For SW, I can understand because it’s a broader and public audience. But for the internal bulletin, we should try to get into the habit of a freer discussion.

2) Have a discussion and debate about the political questions involving nonpartisan races, left Democrats, etc.

3) Comrades should adopt an internal gut check. If your work or your decisions are likely to reflect on the ISO as a whole, particularly when it comes to contentious questions, then it is your duty to your comrades to explain, argue, persuade, and write. That’s an essential part of democratic centralism.

SP

Case-study on democratic leadership selection

As revolutionary socialists around the world, including in the United States (not least among the comrades of the International Socialist Organization) seek to build strong and democratic organizations, it is always helpful to consider the experiences of past organizations. I think that is one reason why some have responded so positively to the republication of *Leon Trotsky and the Organizational Principles of the Revolutionary Party*.

A couple of years ago, as a crisis began to unfold in the British Socialist Workers Party, ISO comrades asked me about practices of the old U.S. Socialist Workers Party to which I belonged from 1973 to 1983. There were, of course, many negative and undemocratic organizational practices that cropped up in the SWP in the final years of my membership, but the comrades were interested in learning about healthier practices from earlier times. In particular, I recall that I was asked about the practice of leadership selection and the use of slates leading up to elections of the SWP’s National Committee and of executive committees in party branches. My responses were somewhat fragmentary and vague, and I will try to do better here.
What I offer in this contribution is not some kind of formula or proposal that I am urging the ISO to adopt, but simply information that can be considered critically as we think through the ongoing task of strengthening organizations of the revolutionary movement today and tomorrow.

**Selection of National Leadership**

James P. Cannon – a veteran of the Industrial Workers of the World and Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs – was a founder and leader of the Communist Party in this country, an early opponent of Stalinism, and subsequently a founder and leader of the Trotskyist movement. While many have criticized him for real and imagined sins, many (including some critics) have also been impressed by his seriousness in dealing with organizational matters. In remarks he made at the 1942 national convention of the SWP (“On Selecting the Leadership,” in James P. Cannon, *Writings and Speeches, 1940-43: The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975], pp. 266-273), he discussed some of these organizational matters.

“The task of the leadership of the party is to lead the party in everything, including the question of selecting its successors,” according to Cannon, but he added that “to lead the party doesn’t mean to decide for the party. All that the leadership can do and should try to do is give a general direction and recommendation as to the method of selecting the leadership, rather than as to the complete personnel.” He went on to explain the approach of utilizing a *nominating commission* to select the SWP’s national committee. The national committee met several times a year and, in turn, selected a more compact political committee to help direct the party’s activities. The highest decision-making body was the national convention (made up of democratically-elected delegates from the branches). The national committee was ultimately answerable to the democratic convention, and the political committee was answerable to the national committee.

“The ranks of a genuine Trotskyist party must be at all times completely free from any feeling of compulsion or coercion in selecting the general staff,” Cannon insisted. “The leadership is morally bound to give the party that freedom and not, by direct or indirect means, apply compulsion, pressure, and coercion with the result that the rank and file feel frustrated because they don’t want to come into collision with the leadership on this question. The leaders must not control the party. The party must control the leadership. That is the task of the convention – freely to elect, to judge those who have been in positions of leadership, whether they deserve to remain, to judge those aspirants for leadership, whether they are qualified or not, and to make its decision freely.”

Cannon was critical of methods that he and others had seen and experienced in the Socialist Party and the Communist Party. Socialist Party leaders maintained a posture of presenting their organization’s national convention with no proposed leadership slate – and while “on the floor of the convention everything is apparently harmonious,” in fact the leaders would “stay up to all hours of the night, running around to the delegations and making deals like horse traders, and one thing and another, and only the naïve, the duped delegates, imagined there was a free selection.” On the other hand, a widely used practice in the Communist movement involved the outgoing national committee presenting to the national convention delegates its slate for the incoming national committee. In such a situation, according to Cannon, “even though many delegates would like to make changes in it, they would feel a compulsion not to do it. There is a form of compulsion involved in a slate emanating from the National Committee.”

At the same time, Cannon rejected an “open” or structureless approach to leadership selection that would result in “a general chaos and mishmash which could result from lack of any direction whatever,” so the question for him was how best to develop a leadership slate. “The perfect method of selecting a slate of leaders has never yet been devised,” he acknowledged, but he concluded that the device of a nominating commission provided “the best way for a free selection, and also for an approximation of the best possible slate for the leadership.”

The democratically-elected delegations from branches to the national convention each selected comrades to serve on the nominating commission (which would consequently be “a microcosm of the convention”), a body that would engage throughout the convention in deliberations on the composition of the incoming national committee. “For three days the delegates have been reporting back to their delegations, and the
party membership, as represented by the delegations here, have had ample opportunity to bring their recommendations or their criticisms and to weigh them against the criticisms and nominations of other delegations.”

Regarding the outgoing national committee, according to Cannon, “we didn’t want to put pressure upon the convention by an official slate, so we said in our recommendation, get representatives from your different delegations, according to your strength, and make up your own slate and if we have something to say about it, we will say it either as individuals or representatives.” He added: “If some members of the National Committee got on the nominating commission one way or another, it was on their own hook and not representing the National Committee or its decisions in any respect.”

In regard to dissident tendencies in the SWP, Cannon believed the national committee “ought to have that tendency represented in its ranks” to have the benefit of nuances and insights such a tendency might have to offer, which would also enhance the possibility of the majority influencing representatives of that tendency. In addition, Cannon argued for the need of the predominantly male nominating commission to “pay attention to talented women comrades who come forward.” He also spoke for inclusion of representatives from political groupings won to the SWP (for example, a cluster of comrades won from Max Shachtman’s Workers Party), comrades playing leading roles in trade union work, etc. Cannon concluded that the utilization of the nominating commission provided a method that not only eliminated “pressure from behind the scenes” but also “reduced personal friction to the minimum,” and he urged national convention delegates to validate the work of the commission by “accepting its slate as a whole.” The final decision would be made by democratic vote, after discussion, at the convention.

**Selection of Branch Leadership**

My experience in two SWP branches that I helped to build from 1973 to 1978, in Pittsburgh, PA and Albany, NY, more or less reflects the sensibilities articulated by Cannon. In such local contexts, where there was a smaller number of comrades and people knew each other, there was no need for a “nominating commission. Still, there were sometimes different understandings of what made sense. This was certainly the case in Albany, when three of us who had been sent in to help build an SWP branch (consisting of about a dozen Albany comrades of the Young Socialist Alliance). The three of us clashed over the manner through which we should construct the official branch leadership body, the branch executive committee (often referred to as “the exec”). Two of us had been trained in the Pittsburgh branch by an outstanding organizer who had, in turn, been trained in Philadelphia. The third comrade had been trained in one of the New York City branches.

This third comrade believed that before the branch exec elections we (the three “outside” comrades) should assign specific comrades to major positions – branch organizer (one of us), branch financial director, branch sales director, etc. The two of us from Pittsburgh argued that since such key assignments should go to members of the branch exec, it made no sense to make such assignments until we elected an exec. The other comrade responded that this was precisely the point – by our making the assignments first, the comrades in the branch would know who they should elect to the exec. The two of us from Pittsburgh were shocked by a proposal that seemed so so alien from what we had learned in the Pittsburgh SWP. When we consulted with a central comrade in the SWP national office, we were told that each approach could be found in one or another party branch, and that we should proceed in Albany in the manner we thought was best. Since two of the three were inclined to use the Pittsburgh approach, perceived by us as more democratic, that is the path we took.

At a branch meeting, nominations were opened, and anyone who wanted to nominate any other comrade (or even themselves) to serve on the branch exec could do so. It was usual that more comrades would be nominated than there were positions on the exec. This would be followed by acceptances and declinations – to be a nominee the comrade in question had to accept the nomination. If a comrade happened to be absent, he or she could not be voted for unless they had sent word in advance that they would accept.

Acceptances and declinations would then be followed by motivations. Various comrades would explain, often in detail, why they felt we should vote for a particular comrade. On occasion there would be a
“negative motivation” – someone would explain why she or he felt we should not elect a particular comrade (for example, if the comrade had insufficient experience, had a job or family situation that would cut across the ability to serve on the exec, or had proved to be inconsistent in regard to carrying out assignments).

Then the voting would take place, by secret ballot. A couple of comrades not running for the exec would volunteer to count the ballots. When the results were presented, the number of votes each comrade received would be announced. This gave comrades a sense of where things stood in the branch as a dynamic and cohesive collective.

Conclusion

Such practices did not prevent the undemocratic degeneration of the SWP, but they may be a useful reference point for those looking for ways to strengthen the revolutionary movement. The ISO feels to me a more open and democratic organization than what I experienced in the SWP. But the ISO continues evolving as a democratic collectivity, further developing structures and practices consistent with its revolutionary purposes. Through a process of ongoing experience, thoughtful discussion, and careful experimentation, we will be able to make our organization a stronger and more effective force for spreading socialist consciousness and advancing the struggles of workers and the oppressed.

PL

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**The ISO does not support Democrat candidates**

A foundational principle in the ISO is that support of capitalist parties and their candidates is against the interests of the working class struggle and the goals of the ISO. This is codified in Where We Stand and developed in numerous publications. It is against this foundation of the ISO that I raise the issue of an ISO member supporting candidates and officials of the Democratic Party. A set of rules were published in 2014 PCB#1 that is being used to prevent publication of a more precise and clear document. I apologize for only being able to provide a stilted discussion. It is also relevant that this member is in an executive position in his/her union. This has generated some concern from ISO members that I have reached out to but has led to virtually no discussion in the ISO.

I have argued extensively with prospective and newer members over the history and role of the Democratic party as the gravedigger of social and labor movements. I imagine most ISO members have had similar experiences. How can we regard that discussion as vitally important, yet when an ISO member is in a union leadership position we give the member a pass? The question of the labor movement and democrats is probably the most significant and concrete in this member’s case than at any other time within the ISO.

There are a few arguments that I have heard explaining why ISO members don't find this topic significant. One is that as a union executive s/he is compelled to carry out the decisions of the union, which don’t reflect on his/her personal views. What if the union supports republicans? war? tough on crime? austerity? What is the limit of this? A member's limit is defined by the principles of revolutionary socialism and Where We Stand.

This is an argument that an ISO member can carry out union decisions, and that this is somehow independent of the ISO. Can someone have two worlds to operate in? Something like a superhero transforming from Bruce Wayne into Batman? Can a member be in “union leader mode” at some times and “ISO member mode” at other times? Where is the line? Is this member in “union leader mode” only in press releases? In the union building? At official union functions? What is s/he at ISO meetings and ISO
events? At socialism conference should this member argue that union support for the Democrats is the path forward for labor or is the path backward? I think such a concept is not possible.

If this member is in a role in the union where s/he is compelled to support Democrats there is a problem. I hope s/he has spent vast amounts of time in the union speaking of the disastrous history and experience of the labor movement supporting the Democrats. I hope members throughout the union have heard this member develop these ideas so commonly that they can almost recite it. What must they think now that they see and hear this member supporting the Democrats? What do they think if this member would distribute the Socialist Worker articles critical of the democrats and the union’s support of it? This is a path that is at best confusing to the leading activists within the union--and at worst someone may actually believe that supporting the democrats is a step forward for the labor movement. Does anyone in the ISO believe that supporting democrats is the way forward for workers?

This member being in an executive position in the union is compelled to carry out the union's overall direction. The member is in a difficult situation, which is the obvious risk in taking an executive position at this time. At the very least I believe that the member must draw a clear line between his/her socialist principles and the union’s official support for the Democrats. This needs to be crystal clear and broadly distributed. A personal statement by the member is necessary to clarify his/her position on this foundational question to the rank-and-file and the broader labor movement that is watching his/her union closely. This will undoubtedly complicate his/her position in the union leadership, but that is the problem of having a Marxist leading a union in non-revolutionary times. The alternative is that the member is distancing him/herself from the project of developing an independent working class and the principles of the ISO.

ISO members have said that it is important for this member to have the leadership position for upcoming union decision-making. This is a disastrous mistake. It is a retreat from socialism from below to socialism from above. Progress will not be measured by the labor leaders but by the working class. Supporting the democrats weakens the working class.

ER
[Originally submitted November 30, 2014, modified to Dec 16, 2014]

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Eliminate Rules That Shutdown Important Debate

Many weeks ago I submitted an article to the pre-convention discussion. This was an attempt to raise debate across the organization about a leading ISO member, in a union leadership position, where both are supporting democrats. The courtship between labor and the democrats is a betrayal of the working class. Could there be a more appropriate venue than the pre-convention bulletins to raise this discussion?

Convention is the highest body of the ISO, and the PCB’s are the fuel for the convention. Thus I’ve always felt that PCB’s occupy a sacred position in the organization. The PCB’s are a forum for members to raise any issue. Any interference into PCB submissions is laden with great concern. I find anything but the rapid and direct publication of submissions to be troubling.

After submitting on Nov 30 I was surprised to find its publication denied on Dec 4. The brief response said that it wouldn’t be published because of “identifying information that is problematic from a security point of view”. The message brought my attention to the many newly produced rules described in PCB #1. Seeing how the identifying information part is rather central and fundamental to my article this is a major
blow that denies this discussion from our membership. The response did not indicate how we could work together to publish it among the concerns. It was simply a statement barring publication unless it was gutted of much of its substance. This is a new rule and process and I may be the first violator, but maybe not. I was surprised that there hasn’t been any engagement with me on how to work through this suggested conflict or how the rules may need to be rethought. The response came with no suggestion on how to edit while maintaining its political significance. The PCB committee showed no concern of silencing a submission to PCB.

I promptly responded asking “how to alleviate security issues but still raise this discussion”. Then on Dec 7 I received a reply responding that I should “refer to published reports, like SW articles” when I describe events and that I should “drop specific name references”. On Dec 9 I responded with a Comrade X version dropping the name and adding in SW references to the text, while complaining that a critical part of the discussion is for others in the organization to be able to respond and contribute to details of the situation that I am honestly unaware of. This isn’t a theoretical exercise, but a very real ongoing situation right now. There is certainly enormous background and detail that I don’t know. I wanted that to be discussed. I can’t think of what details and information may be necessary to understand how the path of working class struggle involves supporting a democrat, but I’d like to hear what others have to contribute. I said that “the security concerns are stifling real and important discussion”. Since responses to my emails had been slow to come and this foot dragging was holding up this entire discussion I asked to be called on the phone to discuss directly. I have yet to be called or to receive any response to my submission now 7 days later. This parallels my attempts to talk to the west coast organizer for many weeks who also hasn’t called me either.

This is an echo of prior reports of submissions that have been edited, delayed, published with a rejoinder, or altogether blocked. I can understand the frustration of those that have found difficulty in getting their PCB submissions transmitted to the organization to inform the discussion in preparation for the convention. I simply ask for publication of my document in order to discuss the complex nature of our member, in a leading position of a labor organization, where the organization and our ISO member our working to elect democrats into office.

ЭП
Submitted Dec 16, 2014

“Amateurs study strategy, professionals study logistics”: The Logistics Industry and Socialist Strategy in the United States

“Amateurs study strategy, professionals study logistics,” declared U.S. Army General Omar Bradley. Bradley rose to prominence during WWII, and was best known to the public from the film Patton. Bradley’s declaration was, of course, an overstatement but a necessary correction. Logistics, the mobilization of vast resources and, most importantly, people to win a war—in Bradley’s case, World War II—was the life-blood of a winning military strategy. A strategy without full and competent logistical support will fail, that was Bradley’s point.

It is a point well worth remembering when discussing the importance of the logistics industry in the U.S. economy today. UPS takes Bradley’s declaration so seriously they have it stamped on their website boasting about their logistical support for U.S. military operations around the globe. For a company that rarely quotes anyone but their hallowed founder James E. Casey that is something to savor. Bradley’s declared the importance of logistics at the beginning of the logistics revolution in the civilian business world that has so profoundly reshaped industrial capitalism during our lifetime.
Most people know the word logistics from UPS’s ubiquitous advertising campaign “We [heart] Logistics.” It is sometimes seen as a fancy word for old-fashioned warehousing and distribution, an advertising makeover for the 21st Century. “For many [others],” according Marxist geographer Deborah Cowen, “logistics may only register as a word on the side of the trucks that magically bring online orders only hours after purchase or that circulate incessantly to and from big-box stores at local power centers.” On still other occasions, it is more glily understood as the “supply chain.”

*Labor Notes* magazine, *Socialist Worker* newspaper, and the *International Socialist Review* have covered many of the most important struggles by workers in different parts of the global logistics industry for the past two decades. The 1997 United Parcel Service, the Charleston 5 defense campaign, the West Coast Longshore strikes, the on-going campaigns at Wal-Mart, and the recent strikes by the Port of Los Angeles truck divers are all pieces to the larger puzzle of understanding the industrial working class today, and where the potential power of the U.S. workers lies.

Socialists should always seek a political relationship with those sections of the working class that have the potential power to elevate the organization and politics of the entire class. For nearly two generations of American socialists that was autoworkers. In the 1930s and, again, in the 1960s and 1970s, radicals and revolutionaries in the hundreds, if not, in the thousands got jobs in the most important auto plants to build Marxist parties in the most important industry in the United States. The auto industry still holds an important place in the U.S. economy but it no longer has the same political impact inside the working class today as it did in 1960, when, for example, one out of every six jobs were directly or indirectly related to it. I believe that the ISO should focus our industrial strategy on the burgeoning logistics industry for the first quarter of the 21st Century.

The “Old” Supply Chain

The production of capital goods (machines and tools for manufacturing) and consumer goods (for personal consumption) has been and will be central to the capitalist system. Every generation or so, however, capital reorganizes its methods of production and circulation (what bourgeois economist calls distribution) and in the process remakes the composition of the industrial working class. These changes can be gut-wrenching and disorienting, and it can take a significant amount of time for socialists and other working class activists to reorient themselves. These changes include modernization of production techniques (the means of production), the organization of production and labor management, the methods of transporting goods to the market, and how goods are actually sold to the consumer.

Getting capital and consumer goods to the paying customer or the consumer market has been, at times, surprisingly fraught with difficulties. The reorganization of capital is rarely as smooth or as modernized as thought, and parts of the system can advance quite quickly while other lag significantly behind. The rise of the large-scale, modern manufacturing in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries was not accompanied by a revolution in retail though this era saw the invention of the department store. In 1910, for example, inventor and capitalist Thomas Edison complained:

> “Selling and distribution are simply machines for getting products to consumers. And like all machines, they can be improved with great resulting economy. But it is the plain truth that these machines for distribution have made the least progress of all machines. They are the same in many instances that they were forty of fifty years ago.”

Let’s be clear about Edison’s complaint. He was saying that the retail industry of 1910 was essentially the same as it was in 1870 or 1860! It was still largely the province of local and very small businesses.

The rise of the railroads in the 19th Century was the most visible and revolutionary development for the delivery of capital and consumer goods. Such innovations as the refrigerated boxcar enabled the packinghouse giants like Swift, Armour, and Hormel to send meat products across the country. Rail transport, manufacturing, and warehousing became (and still is) concentrated around the greater Chicago area. Railroad workers were the most militant, even insurrectionary, of U.S. workers, clearly demonstrated by the 1877 Railroad strikes and the 1894 Pullman strike. Despite the revolution in rail transport, however,
the horse and wagon was still primarily responsible for the delivery of goods from the railroads to the consumer market.

The development of motorized transport or trucking—exploding in size and scope in the decades following the First World War—significantly changed the delivery of capital and consumer goods. Freight drivers, long haul or local (work still referred to by the 19th Century sounding terms “cartage” or “drayage”), picked up from the manufacturers or warehouses—including the waterfront—an increasingly larger share of the market. These groups of workers played key roles in the emergence of the CIO and the Teamsters, affiliated with the AFL, in the 1930s. In the years following the Second World War, the development of containerization and air cargo literally revolutionized the transport of goods around the world.

The container was a transport development of historic importance. Mind-boggling simply in design, the container led to a massive restructuring of ocean transport, ports around the globe, the trucking industry, and the railroads. This restructuring of global transportation system made transport so cheap that they stopped being a significant factor in production costs, and allowed a sizable chuck of industrial production to be moved to the Far East. The North American continent, especially the U.S. half, became a gigantic “land bridge,” according Stan Weir, where shippers—avoided using the expensive Panama Canal—dropped their loads at West Coast ports and had them loaded on to rail cars and transported to ports along the East and Gulf Coasts, and finally loaded back onto ships for Europe.

This is a quick sketch of the “old” supply chain and how it began to morph into the beginnings of the “new” supply chain that we are familiar with today. Where does the development of logistics fit into this and how has it transformed industrial production and circulation in the world today?

The Logistics Revolution

Looking back at the United States on the eve of the logistics revolution following WWII, the transportation landscape and economic organization of the country would be unrecognizable in many glaring ways to most of us. There was no federally funded interstate highway system, many of the ports were relics of the 19th Century, trucking companies were tiny and local, retailers were also small and local, UPS specialized in department store deliveries, there was no FedEx or Wal-Mart, international shipping wasn’t done by containerization, computers were in their experimentally infancy, no satellite communication or GPS, universal bar code, and economic life was highly regulated by the federal government. Too name just a few things.

At the time many people logistics was perceived to be a military art or skill. “For most of its martial history logistics played a subservient role, enabling rather than rather than defining military strategy,” according to Marxist geographer Deborah Cowen. This military art was raised to a much higher level of importance with the introduction of modern industrialized warfare with the First and Second World Wars. Global imperialist wars required a mobilization of industry, resources and troops on a scale never seen before in human history, though the actual roots of military logistics go back much further into history. Not only did the successful implementation of a war strategy require a different level of logistical thinking and support, it actually impacted strategic thinking itself.

“The logistical complexity of mobilization [modern warfare] in this context meant that the success or failure of campaigns came to rely on logistics,” according to Cowen. “Over the course of the twentieth century, a reversal of sorts took place, and logistics began to lead strategy rather then serve it.” The close relationship between industry and the military that created the U.S. war machine that won the Second World War also meant that logistics was soon afterwards “adopted into the corporate world of management.” Long before the ubiquitous advertising campaigns of UPS, and others like its chief rival FedEx or DHL, a logistical revolution took place in management.

Sociologists Edna Bonacich and Khaleelah Hardie argue that logistics has two interrelated meanings:

“On the one hand, it refers to the nuts-and-bolts distribution functions that a firm must undertake, namely, transportation and warehousing. On the other hand, it can mean the management of the
supply chain, including the relations between retailers, their producers/suppliers, and their
carrier/transportation providers. The latter meaning has become more important with the creation
of flexible and dispersed production systems, including offshore production, requiring high levels
of coordination to bring products to the market in an accurate and timely fashion.”

For our purposes we can define modern logistics in Bonacich and Hardie’s latter meaning of the word, as
the management of supply chains. How is that different from older methods of organizing manufacturing,
warehousing and distribution? For the bulk of the 19th and 20th Centuries, manufacturers dominated the
retailers that sold their goods, especially, consumer products that, of course, expanded massively following
WWII. The retail industry was dominated by the seasonal production schedules of the manufacturers. For
the most part manufacturers told the retailers what would be sold, and roughly at what prices while massive
warehouses stockpiled huge amounts of goods. This imbalance between manufacturers and retailers
continued well into the later part of the 20th Century.

Retail was also considered a backwater of American capitalism, despite the emergence of the big
downtown department stores in the late 19th century, and the creation of popular chains stores that dotted
the landscape beginning in the 20th Century, such as Woolworth and Sears. Fifty year after Thomas Edison
complained of the sad state of American retail, management guru Peter Drucker made a similar observation
in 1960 but with a positive accent. “Distribution, he wrote, “is one of the most sadly neglected, most
promising areas of American business.” The new retail filled this “promising area.” Starting in the late
1970s and early 1980s the relationship between the retailers and manufacturers began to shift, and has had
profound consequences for the organization of capitalist production, and the composition and power of the
industrial working class.

“The revolution in logistics also marks the rise of corporate retail and logistics giants,” according to
Cowen, “with aggressive and punitive approaches to labor management. Wal-Mart may be widely known
as a mammoth retailer, but in the world of business management it is known as a logistics company.”
Wal-Mart from its world headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas “cut out a raft of salesman, jobbers, and
other supply chain middlemen, squeezed the manufacturers by shifting every imaginable cost, risk, and
penalty onto their books taught the entire retail world how the bar code and date warehouse could finally
put real money on the bottom line.”

Lichtenstein argues,

“Their [Wal-Mart, Nike and others] connections with a global manufacturing network were
practically incestuous. They might not own the Asian or Central American factories from which
they sourced all those big-box consumables but their ‘vendors’ were linked to them by a ‘supply
chain’ that evoked the iron shackles subordinating slave to master.”

The logistics corporation is not only a new stage in the evolution of the modern corporation but has
changed our understanding of the historic distinction between manufacturing, transportation, and retail. The
modern logistics corporation—with the significant help of the capitalist states—has massively reorganized
the global manufacturing network, the shipping and transportation systems and the final delivery of goods.
Cowen explains, “With the rise of global supply chains, even the simplest purchase relies on the calibration
of an astonishing cast of characters, multiple circulations of capital, and complex movements across great
distances.”

This reorganization has changed the manufacturing of goods not just the delivery of the finished products.
“It is misleading to think about a singular site of production. Commodities today are manufactured across
logistics space rather than in a singular place,” according to Cowen. While some industries, like auto,
have always relied upon outside suppliers for parts for their products, this is the norm on a much larger
scale today for all manufacturers. “The point is highlighted if we account for ‘inbound logistics’—the
production process of component parts that make the manufacture of a commodity possible—and if we
recognize transportation as an element of production rather than merely a service that follows production
[my emphasis].”
If we see transportation as a key element of modern production, then the new distribution centers of the “new supply chain” developed by the logistics giants are also important historic development. Lichtenstein highlights this point in his book *The Retail Revolution*,

“Unlike the great icons of the twentieth-century industrial age, like Ford’s sprawling River Rouge complex celebrated in Diego Rivera’s heroic murals, or the vast Boeing Assembly building in Renton, Washington, the Wal-Mart Distribution Centers build nothing. They are neither inspiring nor grim, merely a functional set of docks and locks from one place and are destined for sale and consumption somewhere else, hundreds of miles downstream. *Yet these Distribution Centers and similar facilities operated by Home Depot, Target, UPS, and Federal Express, stand at the center of the production and consumption network that girdles the planet [my emphasis].*”

“Stand[ing] at the center of the production and consumption network” these new logistical workers—that should include Amazon’s distribution centers, whom Lichtenstein leaves out of his analysis—have the potential power to regain the workplace muscle lost by a generation of industrial workers in this country during the last three decades. While Wal-Mart has pioneered the development of the modern logistics corporation replete with its own trucking operations and distribution centers that make its world go around. I believe that with the on-going and massive expansion of e-commerce—which should just be called commerce at this point—it will be the transport companies with their air delivery operations that are the future of logistics. These include Fedex’s “SuperHub” in Memphis, UPS’s “Worldport” in Louisville, and one ground facility—UPS’s Chicago Area Consolidated Hub (“CACH”).

“Cargo Alley”

In 2013, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the United States was $16.8 trillion, according to the World Bank. Spending on the logistics and transportation industry in the United States, according to some sources, totaled around 8.5% of the annual GDP. The logistics industry is vast and growing part of the economy. Despite the great reliance on satellite technology and computers to make this system work, “the last mile” is totally depend on a delivery person to make sure the packages or goods get to their destination. This growing industry has been plagued by a shortage of drivers for decades, and it is expected to get worse, according to a recent *Boston Globe* article there are expected to be 100,000 openings expected over the next decade.

The deregulation of interstate commerce, the trucking and airlines industry had a transformative impact on the evolution of the logistics industry in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Major sections of the freight industry that had been bastions of union power collapsed within a few years, or were reorganized on a non-union basis. The evolution of logistics in the delivery business was intimately tied up with the neo-liberal era, and in some ways pioneered distinctive neo-liberal economic policies. For example, trucking on the waterfront became the province of “independent contracts,” and UPS pioneered part-time wages and work.

The Big Three U.S. based international delivery companies that emerged out of this transformative era were Fedex, UPS, and DHL. All three corporations operate globally with enormous workforces that rival or exceed the size of some of the largest standing armies in the world. UPS, for example, has a worldwide workforce of 395,000 employees making it nearly the same size of the 400,000-strong United States Army. Fedex follows with a worldwide workforce of 300,000 employees and DHL with 275,000. In sharp contrast, the combined standing and reserve force of the British army is 80,000. The size of these workforces testifies to the importance of these specific corporations in national and international trade. Deutsche Post owns DHL but it started out as a U.S. corporation, and remains the major competitor to UPS and Fedex on the international level. Its spectacular failure in ground delivery forced it to withdraw from the U.S. ground delivery market in the 2000s.

UPS and Fedex air operations based in Memphis and Louisville are the pumping hearts of both companies. Why Memphis and Louisville? Both air hubs are located in aerial geographic region nicknamed “Cargo Alley.” “If you want a system that connects every point in the U.S. to every other point,” FedEx founder Fred Smith told business writers John Kasarda and Greg Lindsay, “the hub has to sit somewhere in a
trapezoid between Memphis in the Southwest, to Champaign, Illinois, in the Northwest, over to Dayton, Ohio, and down to Chattanooga. It has to sit in that footprint. From Memphis and Louisville FedEx and UPS cargo planes can reach nearly 80% of the continental United States in two hours.

“Louisville and Memphis both languished until they deliberately embraced the overnight carriers calling each one home,” wrote Kasarda and Lindsay in their fascinating book Aerotropolis: The Way We’ll Live Next. “Two cities rooted in the steamboat era have been refashioned into the most import hubs of our era.”

Looking up at the nighttime sky the duel between both hubs is made visible by the enormous air traffic congestion over both cities that rival Chicago, Los Angeles or New York:

“The midnight sky over both cities are filled with stars bearing down on you. Wait on the tarmac long enough and they gradually come into focus—727s, 747s, 767s, 777s, A-300s and MD-11s, blinking steadily as they approach in parallel, landing every ninety seconds on each airport’s twin runways. They line up single file, bunched as tightly as pearls on a necklace, at least from the controllers’ point of view.”

The FedEx “SuperHub”

Frederick W. Smith founded FedEx in 1971. It was then known as Federal Express and pioneered the overnight delivery business. Smith claimed to have first put forward the idea for such a business while at Yale in 1966, for his efforts his professor gave him a “C” for a grade. Later after he was a commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, and served as a forward air controller during the Vietnam War. Smith wasn’t a pilot but got an insider look the U.S. military’s global supply network. He chose Memphis, Tennessee for the location of FedEx’s central air hub because it was on the western fringe of “cargo alley.”

By the time FedEx setup shop in Memphis, the city had seen much of its industry move out, or was planning on heading out of the region, and was known to most people as the city that killed Martin Luther King. In the 19th century Memphis’ economy was infamously based on the selling of slaves, and the cotton trade. The Memphis Cotton Exchange overlooking the Mississippi River was the center of business. Beginning in the 1970s, business began moving to East Memphis near the Memphis airport “where the airport, highways, and rail yards had given birth to an entire forest of white, multi-story warehouses adorned with the stubs of truck-loading docks.” For Kasarda and Lindsay, Memphis is the “embodiment of an evolution from warehousing to distribution to logistics that took less than twenty years and saw it rise from a necessary evil to the front lines in an eternal war on costs and the competition.”

From modest beginnings FedEx has evolved into one of the most important logistics corporations in the world. Its first sort took place on the night of April 17, 1973 when six French-built Falcon jets brought back a very modest 185 packages and envelopes. “Now three hundred planes nose up to its gates nightly, and 3.3 million packages pass through its labyrinth of belts on any given day. Memphis International has been the busiest cargo airport in the world for eighteen years running—since the rankings began—and 95 percent of its title is due to FedEx [my emphasis],” wrote Kasarda and Lindsay. Memphis International held that title until 2009 when dropped to number two behind Hong Kong International, where it has remained.

FedEx also expanded into other areas of transportation. Jeffrey F. Rayport wrote in the MIT Technology Review;

“The result is the largest air-cargo company in the world: it employs 290,000 people, maintains a fleet of 75,000 trucks, and owns and operates 684 jets. It has more wide-body jets than any airline, including Boeing 777s that can fly from Shanghai to Memphis nonstop. The SuperHub, the heart of FedEx’s operations, measures four by four miles. Some 30,000 people are needed to run it [my emphasis].”

The SuperHub is an amazing feat of engineering. “Every weekday night at the SuperHub, FedEx lands, unloads (in just half an hour, even for a super-jumbo 777), reloads, and flies out 150 to 200 jets. Its aircraft take off and land every 90 seconds. This all happens between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m. Central Time. The SuperHub processes between 1.2 million and 1.6 million packages a night.” It is also a virtual company.
town with “a hospital, a fire station, a meteorology unit, and a private security force; it has branches of U.S. 
Customs and Homeland Security, plus anti-terror operations no one will talk about. It has 20 electric power 
generators as backup to keep it running if the power grid goes down.”35

FedEx’s impact on Memphis has been transformative. Dubbed “America’s Aerotropolis” by Greater 
Memphis Chamber of Commerce, one could dismiss this as typical boosterism but I think they have a 
point. More specifically I think Kasarda and Lindsay are right when they call Memphis “the Pittsburgh or 
Detroit of the Instant Age.”36 “Not only is it the largest private employer in a metropolitan area of the 
region of more than million people,” according to Kasarda and Lindsay, “it sits at the center of an 
ecosystem of warehouses, trucking firms, factories, and office parks.”37 This “eco-system” includes “more 
than a hundred foreign companies have set up shop around the hub.”38 Memphis is also the final stop of 
the “Chicago Express”—the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) freight line linking it with the port of 
Prince Rupert in British Columbia—making it an inland port for goods arriving from Asia.39

Outside of FedEx’s pilots are unionized, the SuperHub is one of the great non-union industrial complexes 
in the United States. It took sixteen years for FedEx to become a $4.6 billion company; last year it’s 
revenues were a $ 45 billion. Its wealth has been built on the same basis as its chief rival UPS namely part-
time wages and work.39 More than twenty years ago Kevin Coyle, in his superb book A Day in the Night of 
America, wrote a vivid description of “The Sort” at the SuperHub:

The roads leading to the airport filled with the commuting cars and the crosswalks streamed with 
brigades of workers, almost 4,500 strong, in blue uniforms and steel-toed boots, marching out of 
the night and into Federal Express complex, through the long, wide, sci-fi- white corridor and 
toward their stagemarks for the nightly one-act drama called The Sort—three-hours-or-so sprint 
wherein the delivery cycle reached its busiest peak. More than three-quarters of them college 
students, the moonlighting, part-time backbone of the sorting process. For a few hours, at an 
average wage of nine dollars an hours, they would work at a pace few could sustain over a full 
right-hour shift, human cogs in the din of a vast Letter Sorting Machine.”40

Today far more people work at the SuperHub and, very similar to UPS, the proportion of college students 
as short-term workers has drastically declined because of the declining incomes of American workers who 
seek an additional part time job to make up for falling wages or who work two or sometimes three part time 
jobs for “a living.” The potential power that these SuperHub workers have is vast and untapped, and 
unionization would be a huge battle but would have a transformative impact on the working class as a 
whole because of how import they are to the U.S. economy.

(2) UPS’s “Worldport”

Worldport, UPS’s Star Trek-sounding mammoth air hub in Louisville, Kentucky is another engineering 
marvel. It is currently 5,200,000 square feet or the size of 90 football fields with 115 miles of conveyor 
belts capable of sorting 416, 000 packages per hour.41 It is the largest UPS facility in the country employing 
over 20,000 workers most of whom are members of Teamsters Local 89. It has 70 aircraft docks and 
delivers daily to more than 220 countries and territories around the world. UPS’s pilots are members of the 
Independent Pilots Association.42 UPS has spent billions of dollars over the last two decades turning the 
Louisville air hub called Hub 2000 until 2002 when it was christened Worldport into its showcase facility.

In an April 2005 New Yorker article by veteran writer John McPhee captures something of the 
overwhelmingly quality of Worldport for the first time visitor:

The building is about seventy-five feet high, and essentially windowless. Its vast interior spaces 
are supported by forests of columns. It could bring to mind, among other things, the seemingly 
endless interior colonnades of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, but the Great Mosque of UPS is 
fifteen times the size of the great Mosque of Cordoba.43

FedEx pioneered the overnight package delivery business in the early 1970s. UPS, on the other hand, was 
founded as a messenger service in 1907 and went through many transformations through the decades before
air delivery became so central to its operations. It did some air service in its early decades of business but focused primarily on small package delivery that made it the king of the small parcel industry. UPS planned very methodically before it decided to take on FedEx in the overnight delivery business. “Nine years after the first FedEx sort, UPS landed in the opposite corner of the trapezoid with its own hub at Louisville,” according to Kasard and Lindsay. “In the intervening years, they [the U.S. government] had deregulated American aviation, allowing any airline (passenger and cargo alike) to fly wherever it wanted whenever it wanted, using whatever aircraft it liked.” UPS initiated Next Day Air service in September 1982, seventy-five years after the founding of the company.

UPS initially outsourced its early air transport operation, then “it went on a spending spree, acquiring several hundred planes, including a dozen of its very own 747’s. By the 1990s, UPS put the ‘International’ in Louisville International Airport with its nightly sorties to Europe. Even more than Memphis revolves around FedEx, Louisville and its airport depend on UPS. So does Kentucky—UPS is the state’s largest private employer, with more than twenty thousand workers.” UPS owns 237 jet aircraft and charters 388 to deliver packages to 940 U.S. destinations and 1,015 around the globe on a daily basis. It is one of the largest private airlines in the world.

The packages are transported in U-Haul-truck size aluminum cans cut to fit the interior of the airplanes. Nick-named “cans” they can weigh up to two tons, and they are moved about thanks “to miles of inverted casters and ball bearings studded in the Worldport’s floor and at gates. The cans need only a solid push to glide across them into the hub or onto the caravans of waiting tugs.” Workers unload the cans and sort the individual packages. Only two sets of hands are suppose to the packages, while the rest of time they are transported and guided across the miles of conveyor belts by smart labels that contain zip codes and tracking numbers. UPS has spent hundreds of millions of dollars advanced computer software to make Worldport work. “The majority of this software resides at Worlport itself,” according to Kasarda and Lindsay, “making twice as many calculations in an hour as the New York Stock Exchange does in a heavy day of trading.”

Worldport maybe highly automated and rely on the most advanced computer technology and engineering but, at the end of the day, it is human beings that make it run. Tens of thousands of part-time workers (union and non-union) work during the crucial hours of 11:00 P.M. to 4:00 A.M. Teamsters Local 89 in Louisville has over 16,361 members, overwhelmingly UPS workers, and because of the continued expansion of Worldport is likely to be the largest Teamsters local union in North America in the near future. Worldport like many UPS hubs across the country is plagued by a shortage of part-time workers despite the Great Recession and chronic unemployment in minority communities because of its notoriously low wages, and miserable work conditions that produce a high turnover rate.

Attempting to stabilize its workforce at Worldport, UPS leaned on the local and state governments to allow students to take courses at Metropolitan College, a special program created by a joint venture of the University of Louisville and the Jefferson Community and Technical College. Metro College has several locations through out Louisville including at Worldport. The “college” was designed “to fit the needs of UPS,” Time magazine reported in 1998. The Student-workers “will experience a daily schedule that will essentially reverse their internal clocks. Class schedules, social activities and sleep patterns will revolve around the hours of the night shift at UPS.” UPS has also recruited large groups of refugees, including Somali Bantu tribesmen, to meet its needs.

Like its FedEx twin, the Superhub, Worldport stands at the center of the production and consumption network of the modern logistics economy. Located two miles south of the vast runways and conveyor belts of Worldport, UPS Supply Chain Solutions (SCS), the logistics arm of the company, “burrows deep inside and straightens out kinks in the customer’s operations.” UPS official Carl Norris explained to writer John McPhee the rationale for SCS,

A company that is concentrating on marketing and sales doesn’t have a lot of time to worry about distributing problem. That’s where we come in. We become a partner with the companies. We run these businesses like there are own.”
Of course, UPS is paid very well for their services that have morphed beyond just providing “distribution know-how.” For example, “If Toshiba laptops need repair, UPS technicians repair it. Mastercard, if you lose it, it will be it printed her and sorted.” However, proximity to Worldport is of the most importance to the seventy or so major companies that have set shop near the airport or close by in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. SCS has seven secluded, heavily guarded warehouses that cater to their most prized customers including Bentley and Rolls-Royce, who stock engines in Elizabethtown. “Bentley’s are for coupes and Roll’s are for jet engines,” according to Kasarda and Lindsay.

The real power of the air hub workers and pilots was demonstrated vividly during the 1997 during the national strike against UPS. Planes didn’t fly and packages weren’t sorted. The Great Mosque of UPS was a ghost town. Since then the power of these workers have been continually muted or undermined though there is clearly a growing restlessness among them. Local 89 members as recently as rejected the local agreement with UPS—called a rider—by a 90% no vote in March 2014.

(3) The Chicago Area Consolidated Hub (CACH)

The one non-air facility in this discussion that can’t be ignored is UPS’s Chicago Area Consolidated Hub (CACH). It is the largest ground package facility in the world, and one of the most important distribution centers for the U.S. economy. Located southwest of Chicago straddling the two suburbs of Hodgkins and Willow Springs, construction of the CACH was completed in 1991 on the former grounds of General Motors’ truck and bus manufacturing facility. During peak season (the two months running up to Christmas), the CACH has employed up to 8,000 people who load and unload trailers, and as many as 3 million packages through the facility, making it one of the important hubs in the UPS system.

Unlike the SuperHub or Worldport, the CACH has its feet firmly on the ground. It is at the vortex of interstate highways and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) rail line. There are two “Feeder Boards”—seniority lists for the drivers of tractor-trailers—who connect the hundreds of Chicago-area and Midwest UPS hubs, and many rail lines around the Chicago and Joliet region. Teamsters Local 705 and Local 710 have 380 or so drivers on their respective lists. The BSNF rail yard located adjacent to the CACH is one of the busiest rail yards in North America “where every 80 seconds a trailer is lifted on or off a flatcar,” and moved to one of CACH’s 170 bays to be unloaded. “In 2005, Willow Springs was BNSF’s second-busiest intermodal yard, performing 770,000 lifts,” according to Trains magazine.

During the 1997 strike, the CACH like Worldport was completely shutdown, and became a magnet for national media coverage of the UPS strike. Turnover among the part-time workforce remains high, and the potential power of these union workers muted since the strike, and has been made worse by a policy of benign neglect from Teamster 705. Whether under the former Local 705 reform leader, turned Hoffa supporter, Jerry Zero, or his successors, the CACH has been woefully unorganized by the local union, who seem completely devoid of any interest in relating to a workforce drawn heavily from the Southside of Chicago.

Conclusion

After nearly a generation, can socialists, once again, have an orientation on the industrial working class in the United States? I think we can. The past, however, looms large in this discussion. The previous generation of revolutionaries saw their political perspectives shattered by the gut-wrenching changes to manufacturing from 1979 to 1982. The decades following those years only added to a sense of disorientation and defeat as industrial unions virtually collapsed, and many of the great industrial cities of the Midwest became ghost towns or saw there populations shrink significantly. However, the vast changes in retail, trade and the emergence of the modern logistics corporation have created a new industrial working class in the United States with potentially enormous economic power. We need to develop a strategy and a plan to be at these new workplaces. I hope this document can help further that discussion.
Bradley, if he is remembered at all today, it is because of the 1970 film Patton starring George C. Scott as Patton with Karl Malden as Bradley.

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