

# Pre-convention bulletin #5 / January 18, 2015

## for members only

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## Convention information and deadlines

### Convention dates and times:

Presidents' Day Weekend: Saturday, February 14 through Monday, February 16 in Chicago. [*Please note: the last ISO Notes incorrectly stated that the convention would begin on Friday.*] The meetings will take place from 10 am until 7 pm on Saturday and Sunday, and from 10 am until 3 pm on Monday.

### Convention location:

We are awaiting confirmation from Northwestern University and will notify comrades as soon as we have one. (Unfortunately, Chicago-area colleges and universities are not very cooperative, limiting our options. We hope this will improve in the future.) We'll send out meeting room with other convention details for attendees in a "Convention Information Sheet" as the convention approaches.

### Organizational Deadlines:

I. Below is a set of deadlines that will help us make sure that all comrades who are coming are preregistered, that comrades who need free housing are offered it, and that the pre-convention bulletins contain as many resolutions and documents as necessary.

#### 1. Delegates and guests:

Convention delegates are elected by local branches at a ratio of one delegate for the first five dues-paying members, and one delegate for every eight dues-paying members thereafter.

Please send in the names of your branch's elected delegates along with requests for any guests you would like to attend. Twigs (groups of less than five members) are entitled to request a guest. Please send an email with the words "delegate" and/or "guest" in the subject line to [sharon@internationalsocialist.org](mailto:sharon@internationalsocialist.org). Your delegates will automatically be pre-registered. *Guest requests will be answered on the Monday following the day you send in your request.*

**The deadline for delegate information and guest requests is Sunday, February 8.**

**2. Childcare:**

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**3. Housing:**

**4. Pre-convention documents and resolutions:**

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**II. Requirements for seating of branch delegates.** This second set of items, listed below, is meant to ensure that all branches are able to seat their delegates, which requires branches to abide by the ISO rules and procedures.

**1. SW and dues:**

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

If your branch owes money for dues and/or SW, please make sure to send it so that it arrives before the start of the convention: the mailing address is [redacted]

If absolutely necessary, send outstanding payments along with your delegate. We discourage

waiting until the convention to pay branch debts because it will interfere with the streamlined registration process, wasting time unnecessarily while other comrades are forced to wait.

## **2. Double dues payments for February.**

The ISO rules require all members to pay double dues for the month of February. The extra month of dues is necessary to pay for delegates' plane fares to the convention. This is the most democratic way for us to ensure that comrades who live the farthest from Chicago (and therefore have the highest travel costs) are given adequate representation at the convention. Otherwise, those with the cheapest transportation would be over-represented and those with the most expensive travel costs would be under-represented.

### **Here is how to handle the double dues:**

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

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

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## **Assessing the Dan Siegel campaign**

The ISO endorsed Dan Siegel's campaign for mayor of Oakland in 2014. Siegel is a long-time civil rights attorney and Oakland activist whose central campaign theme was the demand for a \$15 minimum wage. This document is meant to assess: were we right to endorse--did we accomplish our goals? What were the dynamics of the campaign? And what can comrades elsewhere learn from our experience?

### **Why we participated**

We decided to participate for four main reasons.

- First, we thought the Siegel campaign could have a mutually reinforcing relationship with social movements, and provide a rallying point for Oakland's scattered post-Occupy left. The core activists for the campaign, including Dan Siegel, came out of the Justice for Alan Blueford<sup>1</sup> coalition, and we thought the campaign could reinforce the movement against police violence as well as emerging low-wage workers' struggles.
- Second, we hoped excitement generated by the campaign could cut against two too-common political tendencies among Oakland's left: a strain of ultra-leftism where anything short of blockading the Port of Oakland is seen as a waste of time, and a NGO-based (anti-)politics in which individual radicals and anti-capitalists save their broader political ideas for private conversations.
- Third, we thought participation in the campaign could teach ISO members how to run an electoral campaign, better positioning us to perhaps run or support a socialist candidate in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Blueford was a Black high school student murdered by Oakland police officer Miguel Masso on May 6, 2012.

- Fourth, we saw the campaign as a vehicle that could use the election to project radical left ideas to a wider audience than they normally receive.

We knew from the beginning that we didn't agree with Dan Siegel about everything. We included our criticisms of his position on the police (he advocated reform, rather than disarmament or abolition) in our endorsement statement. While he deregistered from the Democratic Party before announcing his candidacy, he doesn't share our analysis of the Democrats as a central obstacle to advancing working-class organization. And while he is, privately, a socialist, that wasn't part of his campaign, unlike Kshama Sawant or Jorge Mújica.

There were also concerns independent of Siegel's politics: as a mayor, unlike a city councilperson, he would have responsibility for implementing policies he might not be able to change. And of course a white man isn't the ideal candidate for Oakland. Nevertheless, we thought that as a candidate and (unlikely but possible) as mayor, Siegel would help organize and advance the struggles of Oakland's working people.

### **What happened**

In the election--a ranked-choice election with a broad field--Siegel came in fourth, winning more than 13,000 first-place votes, 12% of those cast and less than 3,000 votes behind the second-place candidate. He won most precincts in West Oakland, a historically Black but rapidly gentrifying area, and a handful in majority-Black and Latino East Oakland. (The winning candidate, Libby Schaaf, swept the wealthier Oakland hills, while Siegel split the more working-class and multiracial flatlands with three other candidates.)

Siegel got important endorsements early in the race, including first-place endorsements from the Oakland teachers' union and SEIU 1021, a mega-local which represents most Oakland city workers among others. He was treated by local media as one of the major candidates, was endorsed by the area's largest African American paper, the *Oakland Post*, and for most of the race seemed to have the implicit support of the *East Bay Express*, a high circulation alternative weekly (although the *Express* did not end up endorsing him in the end).

The big unions did not follow up their endorsements with any mobilization of their membership, however. And Siegel's efforts to stand out and build energy around the Fight for \$15 were undercut by Lift Up Oakland, the union and NGO coalition that successfully got a \$12.25 minimum wage, plus paid sick days, passed by citywide referendum. While Lift Up's measure is a major step forward for Oakland's workers, the coalition promoted sitting city council members as speakers at its rallies and press conferences, snubbing Siegel in favor of Democrats who were later to endorse, contributed fewer volunteer-hours to signature-gathering, and saw \$12.25 as a maximum rather than a stepping stone.

Oakland's social movements spent the campaign season in a lull, with the exception of the #BlockTheBoat pickets that successfully stopped Israeli ships from docking at the Port. That meant the campaign wasn't able to have as much of a mutually reinforcing interaction with street activism as we'd hoped. And it meant that while the campaign had more volunteers than any of its rivals, it didn't have enough to overcome its disadvantages in money and establishment connections. There were dozens of activists who walked precincts on a weekly basis, and hundreds who did at one point or another, but most precincts didn't have dedicated captains/organizers.

Siegel was not generally branded as "the radical" in the media or debates, which meant he wasn't dismissed, but also that his politics didn't stand out as much as they might have. In part this was because of Oakland's ranked-choice voting system, which lets voters pick first, second, and third choices, and so gives candidates an incentive to play nice and avoid drawing contrasts so that they won't alienate voters who might mark them second or third. The campaign also hired professional political consultants, who designed a nice website and print materials, but had a tendency to moderate the politics of the materials they produced.

ISO members knocked or hung flyers on thousands of doors, helped train and organize other volunteers in close coordination with the campaign's field organizers, hosted house parties, helped win the Oakland Education Association's endorsement and beat back an effort to have the Alameda Labor Council endorse the incumbent, reported on the campaign for Socialist Worker, and contributed research and writing to the campaign's platform (parts of which were, unfortunately, buried by the consultants who ran the website.) For the most part only a rotating working group within the branch was actively involved; we only voted to mobilize as a branch for one weekend canvassing, which brought out perhaps half our members.

### **Did we meet our goals?**

Let's go through them in the same order as above:

- The Siegel campaign wasn't as integrated with movements as we'd hoped it might be, but it's unclear whether it was possible to do better given the actual developments, or lack thereof, over the campaign season. After the election, organizing is continuing, with a couple of 30-50-person meetings--a promising start, although it's unclear where it will end up. One early plan, after Ferguson, is a series of neighborhood town halls/people's assemblies on community safety and police violence.
- The campaign had some success in getting union endorsements, and--late in the game--the endorsement of the prominent NGO electoral coalition Oakland Rising, establishing the helpful precedent that these groups can support someone left of the Democratic Party. But that didn't translate into much concrete support. In the end the campaign pulled in only a relatively small section of Oakland's left.
- ISO members who participated in the campaign had a rich experience and learned a lot about the practicalities of electoral politics and city government. Much of the branch participated in only one or two events, however. Supporting Siegel while being open about our criticisms proved tricky to navigate even within the branch; bringing new comrades into the working group took some time as we had to talk through a lot of political issues before getting to concrete next steps. In retrospect we didn't think enough about how to handle this with a branch that, like any, has members with a variety of levels of experience and always has to actively work to centralize its activity.
- The campaign was fairly successful in projecting a left alternative to a wider audience. It helped force other candidates to at least pretend to be progressive, and even sometimes to criticize the militarization of the police. It kept the fight for \$15 on the media's agenda, and in general helped push left-of-Democratic politics into mainstream discussion.

As with any work we do, we also wanted to meet people interested in socialist ideas and organization. And we did; for example, some half-dozen contacts who we met through the Siegel campaign attended the 2014 Bay Area Marxism Day School.

### **Takeaways**

Comrades who worked on the campaign believe it was the right call. However, it wasn't an obvious choice or uncomplicated success, and shouldn't be taken as evidence in favor of a strategy where we jump into any electoral campaign that's left of the Democrats. We will need to continue to think carefully about the concrete politics of future campaigns and our own capacity and priorities.

Where we do want to run somebody for local office, the work involved in building a detailed platform, as well as actually campaigning, shouldn't be underestimated. Local governments are limited in various ways--for example, in California, state law prevents them from imposing most progressive taxes. Certainly, a revolutionary in office would use their platform to advocate for policies beyond their legal power to implement, but there's still work involved in learning enough about the arbitrary details of local government functioning to handle debates and detect bullshit. Then there is the work of mobilizing volunteers and winning endorsements, on top of the simple calculus of how many volunteer-hours it takes to knock on a certain number of doors.

When we can do that work, there is a mass audience for ideas coming from the radical left. \$15 is exciting to people even in the face of business campaigns against it. If a few things had broken differently in Oakland (more volunteers, and less late-breaking establishment unity behind Schaaf) Siegel could even have won. That would have presented its own set of problems, but good ones to have. And even a relatively small active core of scores of people, organized and mobilized, could get the campaign's message across to a significant proportion of Oakland's 400,000-person population and have a noticeable impact on city politics.

**DJ**

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## **The dilemma faced by revolutionary socialists in unions today**

In the mid-1970s, the U.S. ruling class and its political enablers from both corporate parties launched a frontal assault on working class living standards and organization (then known as the “employers’ offensive” and later labeled “neoliberalism” as it spread globally). Over the last four decades, the success of neoliberal policy can be measured by the appalling degree of class and social inequality existing on a global scale. Although neoliberal excesses were clearly responsible for the Wall Street meltdown in 2008 that launched the Great Recession, neoliberalism has not only survived but has intensified in the years since, as “austerity” has become the watchword of the capitalist class. With the balance of forces tipped so decisively in favor of capital, the level of economic inequality has reached levels not seen in a century.

The U.S. labor movement has experienced a period of working-class retreat and defeat for an unprecedented length of time, with union membership falling to levels last seen a century ago, while strike levels remain at historic lows. Union leaders, for the most part, continue to discourage rank-and-file struggle as they negotiate cuts in the wages and benefits of the workers they represent—while earning six figure salaries unaffected by these same cuts.

Forty years of working-class retreat has also removed the lessons of the class struggle for recent generations of workers, the vast majority of whom have no memory of participating in an open-ended mass strike—much less a strike victory. While class anger is widespread at the immiseration and injustices produced by capitalism, the working class as a whole lacks the experience and the confidence to easily wage an open-ended fight at the point of production. As is obvious to all, this is not an ideal time for revolutionary socialists in unions.

The U.S. is also somewhat unique compared with other societies labeled as democratic, with its entrenched power-sharing arrangement between its two corporate parties, the Democrats and the Republicans—over the last century preventing the rise of a major third party, much less a labor party alternative. While the successes of the Green Party Hawkins/Jones ticket in New York State and the Sawant victory in Seattle are important in pointing the way forward for the left, these are a long way from changing the political status quo. If anything, the recent Republican takeover of Congress has pushed formal politics yet further to the right in 2014. Virtually every union in the U.S. today, with the consent of its membership, remains loyal to the Democratic Party, on the basis of “lesser-evil” politics.

## **The challenges facing revolutionary socialists**

The test of revolutionary socialists lies not only in its theory but also in its success at applying this theory to the struggles of the day. The ISO has, at every point in its history, however marginalized within the labor movement, to build the class struggle—and all social struggles that advance the interests of the working class, be they against imperialist war, racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression. Even in the 1980s, when the right was on the ascendance and the revolutionary left itself was shifting rightward, the ISO has always sought to involve our members in struggles whenever and wherever possible—including in the Hormel strike of the 1980s, the strikes and lockout in Decatur, Illinois in the mid-1990s and the UPS strike in 1997. At that time, the vast majority of our support for the class struggle was building solidarity, mainly from the outside of the labor movement with few union members on the inside. In the 1980s, we

advised our union members to refrain from running even for the role of shop floor stewards or delegates, due to the enormous pressure to adapt to the rightward-moving union movement and “labor left” within unions. In the 1990s, as the political situation began to open up, more members took on union jobs (including at UPS after the strike), but overall, remained outside the union apparatus (with a few exceptions).

That changed in the 2000s, when a growing number of ISO members took union jobs with the long-term goal of implantation in unions. After the economic crisis of 2008 (and Obama’s electoral victory) that marked the onset of a new political period, the membership voted to re-emphasize our commitment to implantation in unions and also in social movements.

Our goal as revolutionaries inside working-class organizations is broadly set by the Marxist definition of socialism as “the self-emancipation of the working-class”—that is, socialism won from below through working-class self-activity. There is no formula for accomplishing this goal, and our comrades remain spread thin, usually operating as individuals in separate unions and workplaces. Over time, we have developed a layer of comrades implanted in unions—especially in teachers’ unions and secondarily in health care unions. Their day-to-day work tends to take up much of their time with little reward in the short-term.

Our comrades in unions today face conditions of continued rank-and-file passivity (one of the few exceptions being the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike) alongside an entrenched union bureaucracy. How these conditions translate into day-to-day union activism depends on each comrade’s (or groups of comrades’) concrete situation. As stated above, the present period is characterized by a large degree of anger at the system alongside a continued low level of confidence to struggle. In most unions today, comrades are well aware of both the potential and the obstacles to building rank-and-file activism.

The organization has thus had no clear policy to guide comrades in unions in recent years. This is because 40 years of one-sided class war is unprecedented in U.S. history. While comrades are encouraged to learn the history of the U.S. labor movement, and the role of socialists within it, we cannot look to any historical model to precisely guide us in our present conditions. We have therefore relied on the experiences and initiatives of our members as the most effective way to *learn* what kind of approach is most effective.

We have only just begun to draw some lessons from these comrades’ experiences. These comrades should be credited with jumping in with both feet to play a role in their unions, with the aim of helping to galvanize the rank and file. Some have taken on roles as elected union delegates or stewards, and/or running for local union office. All of these roles have involved tremendous possibilities and also risks for the comrades involved. In general, our comrades have made every effort to develop a strategy of social justice unionism (also known as social movement unionism). This strategy was responsible for the success of the CTU strike in 2012, when the CTU leadership, which included revolutionaries, fought against school closures and against racism and class inequality, thereby bringing Chicago parents and students into the social struggle that eventually led to their overwhelming support for the CTU strike. We are learning many difficult lessons about unions and our role in them, but we shouldn’t forget the very important lesson that our politics and strategies, when put into practice at the local level, as a result of the determined work of our comrades, can help the labor movement win significant victories and potentially move in a different direction.

Many sectarians on the left avoid all risks of “compromise” and stand on the sidelines of the class struggle, thereby ensuring the purity of their political principals. Indeed, by this logic, revolutionary socialists should not involve themselves in union struggles at all to avoid even the possibility of any degree of compromise, limiting their role to one of “propaganda” or commentary. These sectarians (largely from the position of ignorance that comes from a lack of engagement) feel it is their duty to ruthlessly criticize those on the left who are involved in the day-to-day class struggle—which requires an ongoing assessment of its *concrete conditions* at any given moment. This ultra-left criticism tends to confuse political principles with strategy and tactics, the latter of which always involve some degree of compromise until such time that the balance of class forces shifts decisively in favor of labor over capital (i.e. a period of social revolution).

## The working class and the Democratic Party

It is the unfortunate case that the vast majority of the U.S. working class since the 1930s has remained loyal to the Democratic Party—aside from the parts of it that have gone over to the Republicans. Thus, the Democrats hold sway over many of the same working-class people who we hope to win to revolutionary politics—which will ultimately require them to break with the Democrats. Sectarians who refuse to engage with anyone who is today loyal to the Democratic Party render themselves irrelevant to the process of working-class radicalization—which *requires* engagement. “Engagement” does not mean silent involvement in struggles but developing relationships as comrades in struggle, while *arguing against* the betrayals of the Democrats due to their fealty to corporate interests. These “rules of engagement” apply not only to our work in unions but also to all movements, since the entire liberal establishment remains tied to the Democrats.

The character of this engagement does not rely on a single formula but requires a degree of judgment on our part. For example, how should we react if we are involved in a coalition that invites a Democratic Party politician to speak at a rally? In most circumstances, we should make a proposal to exclude the Democrat on the grounds of their affiliation with the party that has proven to be “the graveyard of social movements.” Even if we lose the vote, we will attract those in agreement with the proposal. But even if we lose, in many cases, we will continue our involvement in the rally—arguing for more left-wing speakers to counterbalance the Democrats speaking from the front. If the rally then turns into a cheerleading event for politicians, we should reconsider our involvement. The knowledge and judgment accrued from these experiences—that can only be gained through engagement, even when mistakes are made—will help our comrades to more effectively participate in the future.

What our comrades have learned in practice is that taking on union leadership responsibilities in the present political climate involves an inherent contradiction for revolutionary socialists—involving the clash of two key principles:

1. Revolutionary socialists stand for union democracy at every level;
2. We also hold an uncompromising opposition to the Democratic Party, as one of the two corporate parties in power at any given time.

In the current low level of class struggle in the U.S., the CTU strike demonstrated both the promise and the contradictions of holding a high level union office in a union in which the vast majority of members remain loyal to the Democratic Party. There is no doubt that the socialists and other leftists in the CTU leadership built the **only** kind of strike, from the bottom up, that could shake Chicago’s ruthless union-busting (Democratic) mayor, Rahm Emanuel. The CTU leadership developed its strategy as soon as it took office—activating the union’s rank and file while building a struggle for social justice—a couple of years before it called a strike.

However, the contradictions came into full display in the 2014 gubernatorial election, when the union endorsed the unsuccessful campaign of Democratic incumbent Pat Quinn (who played a key role in dismantling the pensions of public sector workers). And in the upcoming 2015 Chicago elections, the union ultimately endorsed Democratic Party mayoral candidate Jesus “Chuy” Garcia (see the Chicago Teachers Fraction Report in this bulletin for details). CTU members voted for these endorsements. In this situation, revolutionaries in union leadership face an inherent contradiction: standing in principle **BOTH** for the democratic decisions of the rank and file membership **AND** in opposition to the Democratic Party.

### Facing up to this contradiction

Comrades on the front lines in unions are well aware of these opposing principles and the difficulties they pose for our organization. While the example of the CTU has received the most attention, it is not an isolated example. This difficult position that some of our union comrades find themselves in is not the result of anyone’s personal or political shortcomings. On the contrary, all of the comrades facing these difficult conditions are long-standing and dedicated members of the organization who have built a base in their unions. Any discussion of these contradictions—which are a result of the unique situation of the

corporate duopoly in U.S. politics, which are exaggerated by the current political period—therefore, should not assume that any ISO comrade is “selling out” to the Democratic Party. We should approach this discussion on the basis of well-earned trust of the comrades in question, because they should be judged on the entirety of their contribution to building the organization and the union movement over the last two decades—always with an eye to building the agency of rank-and-file workers.

Moreover, this is a collective problem facing the entire organization, and we must all take responsibility for figuring it out. It will not be easy to resolve, since we will be facing these contradictions at least until there is a significant rise in the class struggle at the point of production.

The struggle that has emerged since the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson is both a struggle for racial justice and a class struggle. It has already made an enormous difference in the present political climate. But the class struggle at the point of production—using the strike weapon—remains key to begin turning the balance of class forces away from capital and in favor of workers. When this happens, we can begin a different conversation based on the concrete state of the class struggle.

In the meantime, the National Committee meeting in September began to discuss the inherent contradictions facing revolutionary socialists in the present political situation. The answer is not a simple one. On the one hand, comrades should hesitate before running for high-level union office based on the experiences discussed above.

On the other hand, all comrades who are activists in their unions during the present low level of class struggle face a different contradiction than the one described in this document thus far—but one which is no less important: Our comrades, alongside other unionists critical of their current union leaders’ practices, face very real pressure from their fellow rank and filers to *replace* the current leadership. To be sure, it is not enough to criticize the current leadership without suggesting a path to replacing it. Most ISO members in unions, because of their effectiveness, are routinely asked to run for union office. Refusing to do so threatens to damage their reputation as union activists—as being those who talk of union reform but don’t take the actions that could actually change union policy at the top. Given the dire state of the union movement today, however, the difficulties involved in holding unions together often prove quite demoralizing—and depoliticizing.

This discussion is one that should involve the entire organization, while respecting the work of those comrades who have been at the heart of union activism over the last couple of decades.

**SS, for the Steering Committee**

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## **Chicago ISO Teachers' Fraction Report**

For the past several months, and in particular since the announcement of Karen Lewis’ grave illness, there has been a debate within the Chicago ISO Teachers' Fraction as well as more broadly within the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) and in some sections of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), about how relate to the upcoming (February 2015) mayoral race, and electoral work more generally.

The debate amongst teachers in the ISO has revolved around how to respond to the pressure generated by Karen Lewis—and staff members of the CTU most closely associated with the “Karen Lewis For Mayor Exploratory Committee”—to throw the CTU’s support behind Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia in his bid to unseat Rahm Emanuel as mayor of Chicago.

Our internal arguments and discussions on how to proceed in this rapidly evolving situation need to be understood in the wider context of the attacks on CTU and the public sector unions in Chicago, the experience of how the CTU has engaged in political and electoral work since the defeat of the historic school closings of 2013, as well as the actual existing forces of our fraction, CORE, and the CTU.

Since the victorious teacher's strike of 2012, the union has faced numerous attacks (budget cuts, school closings, increased work load, looming pension cuts, on the job harassment, layoffs, increased high stakes testing, and continuing proliferation of charter schools and other privatization schemes) and in general has been forced to wage defensive struggles, most of which we have lost. That has led many in the union and within CORE to argue that taking the struggle to the electoral arena against the political forces arrayed against us was the key next phase of the battle. For public sector workers—whose bosses are the politicians and the political appointees they are beholden to—this desire to “fire the boss” at the polls is understandable. In the Chicago context this necessarily meant taking on one of the key leaders of the national Democratic Party, mayor I%, Rahm Emanuel.

Last year, after the victory of Sawant in Seattle and the experiments with the independent labor candidates in Ohio, the left within the labor movement saw a new chance to enter into electoral work independent of and far to the left of the Democratic party. This past spring at the Labor Notes convention in Chicago, several workshops featured discussions taking up this question, and there was a sense of optimism and excitement about opportunities in Chicago and elsewhere to “take the movement to the polls.” Within these discussions comrades in the ISO—both rank and file unionists and elected leaders—attempted to cut *with* the optimism but also attempted to offer a political assessment and concrete tactics we hoped would win people to breaking explicitly with the “progressive” wing of the Democratic Party. (A full discussion of the nature of the “progressive” Democrats and their indissoluble ties to the rest of the Democratic Party is beyond the scope of this report.)

The realization that we were in a minority in the labor movement, and within the CTU, in arguing for a permanent break from the Democrats was never in doubt. The hope—in retrospect, overly optimistic—was that a significant portion of CORE could be convinced to throw the bulk of their organizing efforts into truly independent working class politics, including the socialist campaign of Jorge Mujica for alderman, thereby taking the first steps towards the building of a lasting network of working-class, left-of-the-Democrats, political activists in Chicago. There was also a hope that Karen Lewis' could be convinced to run independently of the Democratic Party, although her allegiance to that party and her willingness to work with them—sometimes in “backroom deals” was recognized. This hope was not just wishful thinking: both during and after the strike, Lewis called out the Democrats as a second party of big business, and we calculated (mistakenly) that with some help from the wider forces of the movement, her campaign could take on a more left-wing, independent character.

As became very apparent by the end of the summer, these hopes were not to be. In the context of the general retreat of the labor movement amidst continued attacks on the working class living standards, and the continued reliance on Democratic Party politics-as-usual by a labor movement nationally, the Lewis campaign emerged playing to much more conservative themes than even the Democratic Party mayor Bill DeBlasio in NYC, and very disconnected from the social justice union politics held by most of the militants or activists inside CORE.

Despite this, the vast majority of CORE never wavered in support for Karen Lewis' mayoral campaign (even if a few of them quietly whispered about their misgivings over her support for hiring more cops, etc.). This meant the late summer and early fall became a politically disorienting period for most of the activists we work with, and this disorientation reached its height at the exact moment that the CTU moved into more direct work in the electoral arena in the city than ever before—the CTU now has 8 members running for alderperson in February's election! (Some as true independents like Tim Meegan and Tammie Vinson, some more cloudy about their relationship to the Democrats but declaring themselves independent like Sue Garza and Tara Stamps, and some running as progressive Democrats.)

The ISO was publicly critical of the first steps that Lewis' mayoral run took (*writing articles in SW, Jacobin and speaking critically at the CORE convention*) but overall the forces for a decisive break with the Democrats had little influence over the character of her run. The mayoral strategy was being directed by a small group of political advisors inside the Democratic Party and a small handful of staffers inside the CTU, and those forces were not interested in debating out electoral strategy with the wider membership of CORE.

After Lewis' sudden illness and exit from union office and the mayoral race, we found ourselves in uncharted territory. A comrade was thrust into a position of leadership that he did not ask for in circumstances far from ideal. In the first week after of these unexpected events, a new mayoral candidate was hand-picked by the same small group of people directing the old mayoral candidate and thrust upon the teacher's union. At the CTU's annual political event, the LEAD dinner, "Chuy" Garcia was slotted in at the last minute to be the keynote speaker and introduced as the "next mayor of Chicago." This was done without the approval of the CTU's member-staffed political committee, and certainly with no discussion inside CORE. This led to an immediate backlash against the violation of standard CTU process around how political endorsements come to the floor of the union's elected Executive Board and to the House of Delegates. This fight placed an immense amount of scrutiny on one our comrades in particular.

In assessing these events, it is apparent that comrades in a position of union leadership in this particular political period find themselves in an extremely difficult and contradictory position. How do you democratically represent and carry out the will of the membership you were elected to lead when the dominant politics of that organization stand in stark contrast with your own political convictions and those of the ISO? How does a revolutionary in this situation act to ensure democracy, rank and file empowerment, and social justice unionism in a period of union retreat, defeats, and a low level of rank and file initiative and fight back and in a context of other political forces in the union who are pulling towards the right? Further questions arise for the fraction as a whole as to how to carry out our work and fight for our political perspectives with a very small number of members within the union, spread out at different workplaces, with the realization that our politics are cutting against the grain of dominant politics within our union and caucus.

We all agree we did not have enough collective discussion amongst our fraction before decisions were made within the caucus and union. Thus, our comrades were not put in the best position to project and advocate for our politics and this has led to a tendency for us to operate as individual activists or leaders within the union and CORE. Although we started having more regular fraction meetings this past summer and are making more regular phone calls to each other, we have not overcome all of the barriers to more day-to-day collaboration given our differing workplaces and organizational roles and responsibilities.

Votes in favor of endorsement for Chuy Garcia were eventually taken in the CORE steering committee, at the Executive Board, and in the House of Delegates and were won with fairly big majorities after a period of debate and after official apologies from the acting president of the CTU for the way the endorsement was basically announced at the LEAD dinner prior to any vote. The main argument in favor of the going ahead with official endorsement was that Garcia was the most electable candidate in a face-off against Rahm, and without a rapid response by the CTU to secure a place for him on the ballot he might not have the time to make it on.

There has been an intense amount of debate inside CORE about the way the new mayoral candidate was endorsed and pushed through the bodies of the teachers union. There is a section of CORE, who disagree with the Garcia endorsement process, but who defend the decision because ultimately they are desperate to get rid of Rahm and see Garcia as the last, best hope since Lewis' exit from the race. There are others, some very vocal, who support an endorsement of Democratic alderman Bob Fiorreti's mayoral bid and are angered by the Garcia endorsement for this reason. There is a small minority, of which we are a part, that sees the fight for internal union democracy and rank and file control ("process") as strongly connected to question of the political direction of our union and disagree with the endorsement of Democratic politicians with a proven track record of implementing austerity cuts against our union brothers and sisters (i.e. Garcia).

Most in this group cite this specific action as symptomatic of a larger problem that CORE has moved away from active participation of the rank and file and needs some form of renewal. People in this camp want these issues discussed now so that 1) it doesn't happen again, and 2) that the movement can move forward together in as united a manner as possible in the face of the distrust that has been sown over the past few weeks.

At the moment, our fraction is trying to figure out some strategies to coordinate efforts amongst people

with similar thinking to ours and figure out what types of proposals/changes we could organize around that would in fact help CORE remain true to the principles upon which it was founded. Given the upcoming fight for a new contract (our expires in June of 2015) and the looming budget shortfall we face next year, the fight for the political and organizational direction of our union and caucus has enormous implications for the 28,000 members of the CTU as well the education movement more generally.

The debate is now centering on how much union money and muscle will be devoted to the Garcia campaign and the other races the CTU has endorsed. This is a particularly important question because it provides another opportunity for us to discuss and debate the priorities of the union in the current period as well as what kind of politics we want to support and fund. ISO comrades in the union continue to debate and discuss with one another what kind of strategies we should put forward within CORE and within the CTU more widely. We stand firmly united in trying to build both a stronger, better organized, and more militant union and a revolutionary socialist current within it.

### **Chicago ISO Teachers Fraction**

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### **Labor work in the Burlington Branch**

In what was an eventful year for labor in Vermont, members of the ISO's Burlington branch have played major roles in our own unions and in solidarity with other unions and groups. While in the past we have suffered from federalization--individuals operating without the guidance of the branch leadership or a centralized political plan--our labor work has cohered through regular meetings of a labor fraction that includes representation from the branch committee.

While we have seen the best of a rank and file strategy for fighting the employers' offensive, we also continue to face the limitations of the broader labor movement. Our experiences in a polarized and contradictory political climate have led us to conclude that there are no short cuts to building an independent rank and file activist network with socialist politics at the core.

### **The CCTA Strike**

Last year's victorious bus drivers' strike at Burlington's Chittenden County Transportation Authority (CCTA) was one of the most significant labor struggles in Vermont in living memory. The branch played a key role in the struggle, spearheading a solidarity committee that galvanized a broad if brief working class social movement. The strike by 70 drivers showed that workers could strike and win by following the strategy of social justice unionism.

CCTA has tried to impose what Kim Moody calls lean production. In the most recent contract negotiations, it aimed to expand already grueling split shifts of 12.5 hours a day to 13.5, increase discipline of drivers through video surveillance, and hire more part time drivers.

This assault compelled the drivers to organize for a fight in contract negotiations. The business unionist leadership of Teamsters Local 597 did little to help them and more often than not obstructed their efforts. The drivers therefore had to organize themselves. With the help of Teamsters for a Democratic Union they built an independent rank and file group called the Sunday Breakfast Club.

They reached out to other labor activists to form a solidarity committee, We Support CCTA Drivers, that brought together the ISO, the local Jobs with Justice chapter, the Vermont Workers Center, labor leaders, rank and file activists and community organizers. Inside the committee, the ISO argued for a social justice union strategy modeled on that of the CTU.

This approach was encapsulated in the slogans 'we're on this bus together' and 'our driving conditions are your safety conditions' demonstrating that the drivers' fight was in the interests of other workers, drivers and riders. The solidarity group helped the drivers with their own internal organizing, but mainly concentrated on building solidarity among riders and even students who ride CCTA buses to their schools.

During the strike, the solidarity committee organized rallies, press conferences, leafleting throughout working class neighborhoods, and an 'invite-a-driver program' that got strikers into other unions' meetings, public schools, religious institutions, community groups, and onto the University of

Vermont campus. This ensured that the strike maintained public support despite the inconvenience it caused workers and students in the city and county.

Key in this whole struggle was reliance on workers' power and solidarity, not politicians. Indeed the solidarity committee had to fight off the Democratic Party aided by some in VT's Progressive Party who tried to pressure the strikers into binding arbitration.

While CCTA prepared to hire scabs, in the end they backed off doing so and instead made a new offer to maintain 12.5 hour split shifts and relent on its abusive discipline in return for workers accepting an increase in part time drivers. The drivers agreed to the contract, which in today's climate of concessionary bargaining was a dramatic victory.

Whether this strike will be a precedent and model for further struggle in VT is an open question. In many ways the conditions at CCTA and within the IBT were exceptional. The officials' hostility to the drivers' fight forced them to play by a different rulebook. In other unions liberal officials are less obstructionist, which appeases a relatively passive rank and file, while these officials nevertheless pursue the failed model of business unionism and concessionary bargaining.

In such circumstances, we will have to build a core of socialists embedded in a network of rank and file militants that can work with but also pressure liberal officials to pursue a social justice unionist strategy and use more militant mass tactics especially the strike weapon to stop the employers' unrelenting offensive. A key part of that will be building the Vermont Labor Solidarity Committee.

### **The Vermont Labor Solidarity Committee (VLS)**

Following the energizing solidarity campaign that coalesced around the CCTA drivers' strike, a large number of union activists met to discuss the formation of a more sustained group that could build solidarity and develop rank and file strength. Calling itself the Vermont Labor Solidarity committee, the group is comprised of members of about a dozen union locals, the Vermont Workers Center, and the ISO.

Attendance was strong (30-40 participants) for the first several months. Meetings were dynamic: union members often gave presentations on various contract negotiations and campaigns, giving others a chance to weigh in on how to put a rank and file strategy and social justice unionism at the heart of each struggle.

The group started by organizing solidarity with a Vermont social service worker who successfully rebuffed disciplinary action for whistleblowing. It also held a 'lessons of the bus drivers' strike' public forum; built another public forum to support a union drive of social service workers; brought Mark Brenner, editor of *Labor Notes*, to speak; and organized a Troublemakers School.

This group is an advance over established organizations like the Central Labor Council, which at best had connections to some labor officials, but no reach into unions themselves and no possibility of posing an alternative to business unionism.

We have also seen more strikes locally, all of which variously underscore the importance of social justice unionism and inter-sectional solidarity.

The South Burlington teachers struck for the first time ever and successfully defended their healthcare, among other things. While the solidarity among the workforce was extremely strong, and the liberal union leadership organized a very successful defensive strike, the union did not reach out to students, parents and the community—in fact the teachers were told NOT to discuss the strike with students or others. This meant that the only coverage of the strike was hostile, and the teachers were very isolated. No doubt this union will face greater challenges in the future, especially as the Democratic governor Peter Shumlin has declared his intent to ban teachers' strikes as part of a round of budget attacks particularly in education.

At the beginning of September, unions at the University of Vermont were engaged in contract fights and a new organizing drive. Through the VLS, they began to coordinate strategies, and it seemed that a critical number of rank and file members were interested in building up their respective bases. The VLS put this work front and center and opened up meetings for strategizing and analysis. At the core was a public campaign around the theme of a 'struggle for the soul of the University of Vermont', laying out the stakes not only for faculty and staff but also students and workers in the community.

However, this core of rank and filers proved to be fairly small, and solidarity efforts became thinner and more scatter-shot. The promise of coordinated strategies between unions at the University fell apart in a series of contract agreements that established concessionary patterns, and a failed organizing drive among unrepresented staff.

Lacking the strong rank and file core involvement so necessary to the bus drivers' strike, participation and focus within VLS has fallen off somewhat.

This is not to say that it faces irreversible decline. The group was able to pull off a successful Troublemakers School in November (see below). And it continues to organize solidarity actions for telephone workers on a prolonged strike against Fairpoint Communications. Upcoming contract fights in the UVM Medical Center and the City Market grocery store offer potential ground for renewed solidarity efforts with rank and file workers at the center.

And a number of independent rank and file militants continue to see the group as their political home. The visible role played by socialists in the group, its democratic structure, independence from Democratic Party and labor officials, and its interest in taking up broader political issues (such as the fight against police brutality) have helped train a small but important layer of union activists in rebuilding social justice unionism. As further fights develop within the regional labor movement, this group is well positioned to grow in size and influence, as are the socialists who have helped build it.

### **The Trouble Makers School (TMS)**

Because it was organized by the VLS network of activists established over several months, this TMS held at the University of Vermont in November had significantly more union representation (over 130 attended from a wide range of unions) than previous ones. Also more union members led workshops on workplace organizing, such as building effective steward networks and how to have an organizing conversation.

Given the prevalence of business unionism and the absence of conscious socialists in most unions, many developing activists were excited about figuring out new and more effective ways to organize.

At the same time some of the workshops were divorced from social justice unionism and similar to what you would receive at any AFL-CIO training center. At times radical rhetoric about union power was disconnected from the reality of record low levels of unionization and strikes. The default mode remains a model of lobbying government instead of understanding that union, class, and workplace organizing are key in advancing the interests of our own union members and the interests of workers generally. The idea that the Democrats are pro-labor exerts a lasting power, despite sharp criticism of the Democratic Party by social justice leaders such as Barbara Madeloni (president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association and a featured speaker at the TMS.)

This further illustrates the necessity for a sharper focus on a class struggle perspective centered on workers' power, a rank and file strategy, and an independent network of socialist militants in our unions.

### **Socialists in Unions**

Those of us who are members of unions confront this reality. The 'class struggle' unionism represented by the victorious bus drivers' strike is going against the grain of a still-dominant 'corporate unionism' that is top-down, administrative, secretive, suspicious of membership self-activity and radical politics, and reliant on 'political campaign unionism' that bypasses confrontation with management.

The polarization of the broader political environment can be seen within our unions, where some members are eager to pass resolutions around justice for Stephen Salaita or solidarity with racial justice activism, while others will condemn any criticism of Israel and/or deny the existence of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. While the lesson from the Chicago teachers union is that movements for social justice are central to a successful workplace struggle, many among the official leadership orient on the most conservative members (the 'lowest common denominator') and see radical initiatives as 'divisive' or 'not relevant' to labor issues.

While many of us have taken elected positions in recent years, our own experience and observations lead us to conclude that we can be more effective within the rank and file where we can focus on the radicalizing minority who could potentially form the core of class-struggle unionism: those who are eager to fight for a contract that we want, rather than settle for 'the best we can expect'; who are motivated by the struggle for racial justice and free speech; and who may be frustrated with the politics of lesser-evilism.

We have seen that the highpoints of labor militancy, the exceptions to the rule of a declining and non-combative labor movement, have pivoted on the self-conscious and long-term activity of radicals and socialists in the workplace. The success of radicals or socialists who hold formal elected positions depends

on the existence of a substantial body of members who can counteract both the weight of the bosses' assault and of 'business as usual' unionism.

We need to consolidate and mobilize such a layer within our unions. There are no short cuts to doing this: we must engage in patient outreach, ongoing discussion, collective reading of socialist analyses, and mobilization around political actions within and outside the workplace. While this may change in the future, for now we will be in a far better position to recruit more members to the project of building socialist organization if we are freed from the restrictions of official union work. Our emphasis for now is at the shop steward level rather than formal leadership positions, though this is a tactical question rather than a hard rule.

### **Conclusions**

Our work in the coming months will be focused on three central goals: building the ISO in our unions as the core of a rank and file strategy; developing VLS more explicitly as a network of rank and file militants with a social justice union strategy, particularly focusing on upcoming contract fights; playing a more consciously political role in VLS, pushing beyond a purely syndicalist approach and taking up explicitly political questions such as racial justice and the need for a political alternative to the Democratic Party.

**TA, PF, HS, AS, NW**