Pre-convention bulletin #6 / January 18, 2015
for members only

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Submitted by SG

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. 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:
We are committed to providing childcare to all delegates who require it. The childcare will take place at the home of Chicago comrades.

If your branch is sending any delegates needing childcare during the convention, please send an email with the word “childcare” in the subject line to orgdept@internationalsocialist.org.

The deadline for submitting childcare requests is Friday, February 6. This is a firm deadline, and we can’t accept any requests after this date, as we will need enough time to arrange quality childcare.

3. Housing:

Housing with comrades:
Chicago comrades are happy to offer free housing to all comrades who need it. But we are only able to guarantee floor space, so we strongly recommend that you bring a sleeping bag and a pillow.

If you want to request housing with comrades, send an email with the word “housing” in the subject line to orgdept@internationalsocialist.org. Please make sure to let us know in your email if the comrades requesting housing have any pet allergies, etc.

The deadline for requesting housing with Chicago comrades is Sunday, February 8.

Local hotels:
Comrades who are able to afford it might prefer to pitch in together to stay in a hotel—which will ensure a more comfortable stay and a shower in the morning.

We will issue a set of hotel options as soon as our meeting location is confirmed. Thanks for your patience.

4. Pre-convention documents and resolutions:

Deadline for all pre-convention submissions:
All documents and resolutions need to be submitted by Wednesday, February 11 at midnight CST if they are to be included in a pre-convention bulletin (although we strongly urge you to submit them earlier if you want comrades to have time to read them before the convention). All comrades who submit documents or resolutions after that time will be required to make their own copies to be distributed at the convention. We will include all of these in the post-convention bulletin, which reports back to the entire membership.

Please submit your documents and/or resolutions to bulletin@internationalsocialist.org and let us know ahead of time if you plan to submit a document and/or resolution, so we can plan bulletin production. Thanks.

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 ISO, P.O. Box 16085, Chicago, IL 60616.
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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Thanks to all comrades for attending to these issues as soon as possible. We want to make sure that every branch is fully represented in the discussions and decisions that will take place. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact sharon@internationalsocialist.org.

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**Next Steps in Retooling the ISO**

**The ISO made progress in 2014:** The whole period of the Great Recession posed tremendous difficulties for revolutionaries. Weakened by decades of neo-liberalism, working-class resistance to Obama’s austerity regime remained fragmented. The three most important moments of struggle in the U.S. (Wisconsin, Occupy and the Chicago teachers strike) were all beaten back or failed to lead to a higher level of sustained class struggle. Winning Gay Marriage in 35 states and forcing Obama to grant temporary legal status to 5 million undocumented workers represent partial gains, but neither of these movements succeeded in generalizing and turning the tide of struggle. In general, bright spots (e.g. BDS) did not transform the overall dynamic (e.g. defeat of the Egyptian Revolution) in a positive direction.

Compounding these difficulties, the crisis in the British SWP (early in 2013) and the emergence of the Renewal Faction in the ISO (later in 2013) forced us to devote an enormous amount of energy to internal argument. These fights took a toll on our organization. We lost a small, but not insignificant, layer of members, either directly to the faction or to people who drifted away over the course of the year. And some branches have had a harder time recovering than others. However, on the whole, it has to be said that the ISO emerged from these fights more unified and clearer around our objectives as revolutionaries.

This is not to say that all the important debates have been resolved. In fact, the faction made comradely discussion and debate more difficult as we had to spend so much time refuting outrageous slander, rather than focusing on real issues. The resolution of the faction fight did mean that these discussions could once again take place in a frank, but comradely manner and focus on the real, concrete problems of building a stronger ISO.
Coming out of the 2014 Convention, the ISO dedicated itself to doing just that, based around the idea of retooling and recentralizing our work. The newly-elected Steering Committee appointed an expanded National Office which reorganized national fractions and communications with branches (see PCB #20, 2014, “Proposals on National Leadership”), greater focus was placed on the National Branch Council conference calls, monthly ISO Notes were re-instituted, Second Saturday SW sales began, and we eventually (by late spring), developed the tools for the launch of our campus perspective to rebuild our student base. All of this flowed from our conception of democratic centralism, or as Lenin once put it, the “greatest possible centralization of information and the greatest possible diffusion of responsibility.”

These changes served us well as we responded in a more coordinated and political manner to Israel’s invasion of Gaza and the protests that emerged after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson. Socialism 2014 was the biggest ever, more than 5,000 people attended the Glenn Greenwald tour in June, ISO member support of Haymarket Books and the redesigned ISR has helped us make a bigger mark on the broad left, etc. We can also report real success on campuses as we have recruited around 50 students, who have joined on a solid basis, on more than a dozen campuses. Socialist Worker Second Saturday Sales helped re-introduce many members to regularly selling the paper and the large numbers of papers we sold on Gaza and Black Lives Matter protests who show that there is a real audience out there to meet. Finally, the organizational method we set out at the 2014 Convention has helped us better navigate some unforeseen and difficult challenges in our labor work and begun taking steps for our union members to assess their perspectives and actions on an on-going basis.

Organizational Perspective for 2015

United Fronts and Movements

The balance of class forces remains sharply negative in the US and internationally (see “US Political Perspectives” PCB #1 by Jen R and Alan M). However, 2015 will see developments that will drive political polarization. For instance, whether were not Syriza wins an absolute majority in Greece, it is already clear that they have managed to have a transformative impact on class politics and on questions of how to rebuild a fighting Left. Similarly, the inability of the US as the leading imperial power to impose stability in its own interest in the Middle East, for instance, has created an extremely volatile situation globally where several national ruling classes (see Russian, China, etc.) are vying for both supremacy and strategic alliances. In such a context we will undoubtedly see a rise in inter-imperial rivalry but also potential resistance to it in different forms. What follows thus is not meant to be a comprehensive, year-long plan, but merely outlines of our priorities and the framework we should pursue.

Black Lives Matter is our number one movement priority: (See Keeanga-Yamahtta K’s document in PCB #4) If you want one easy way to think about political polarization, think Republican Congress v. Black Lives Matter. It is impossible to predict the exact shape and tempo of the struggles to come, but all signs point to a year with a significant level of social struggle (certainly more than we can relate to), even if the overall level of class struggle remains low. Furthermore, far from backing down, we should expect an increase in police brutality and very little tolerance for direct action protests by the authorities. This means that even smaller protests will have a radicalizing impact on those participating and watching.

As Keeanga points out, this movement will develop at different speeds in different places and will have to pass through a whole series of phases in order to grow and sustain itself. Our task is to become part of it while maintaining our own independent political organization and profile. Learning the united front method and applying united front tactics, on small as well as larger scales, will be central to our ability to do this. Building relationships and alliances, as well as challenging various forces in the movement, will be equally important.

Studying Lenin’s approach to national liberation and socialism is a must. We stand unequivocally on the side of the oppressed and must defend this movement from all attacks from the right. The growth and success of Black Lives Matters is part of the class struggle and we must offer all the practical and political support we can. At the same time, this doesn’t mean we will always agree with everyone in the movement.
and we must develop the ability to argue for our own ideas and strategies. There will be inspiring times,
and there will be rocky times, and we should prepare for both.

As mentioned above, key to our intervention in this movement will be adopting a centralized ISO approach
where we share the maximum amount of information (taking into account security concerns) between the
SC and the NO and the branches, active use of SW, both in terms of reports and analysis and as a means to
win over individual contacts to socialism and make strategic and historical arguments in the broader
movement, and the development of a national strategy based on our own experience and collaboration with
our allies.

Of course, we will continue to work in other areas, from BDS to labor to immigrant rights, etc. But we
should adopt the same approach for these movements we adopt in Black Lives Matter, and comrades
involved in those areas of work will be reporting in separate documents.

Develop Left Ideological Spaces:
The ISO has a tremendous set of tools for helping to develop broad sympathy with socialist and class
politics. Haymarket continues its unmatched list, the redesigned ISR will sharpen and deepen debate the
left and we will have a significant presence at the Left Forum, Historical Material conference, and the
second annual Howard Zinn Book Fair in San Francisco. Jesse Hagopian’s *More Than a Score* will make a
big splash with educators and Ali Abunimah’s *The Battle for Palestine* will be read by many in the BDS
fight. At the same time, the ISO is helping launch a number of Jacobin Reading Groups (there are around
35 currently in the US), along with a CeCe McDonald tour and helping organize a conference on
independent electoral politics in March in Chicago with Socialist Alternative and Solidarity. And branches
and districts will hold dozens of panels and participate in conferences on a wide range of topics throughout
the year.

All of this is to say that ISO members are deeply engaged with a wide array of other political forces and
movements. We must continue this work and, as we are striving to do with our movement work, improve
our centralization so that we can better leverage all the work we do. For instance, *More Than a Score*
meetings should be discussed by the national teachers’ fraction so we can maximize the political impact of
Jesse’s tour.

The potential January 25 election of Syriza in Greece will provide the ISO with an enormous opportunity
and responsibility to serve as one of the key conduits for the experience of the Greek working class and
revolutionary left. We are uniquely placed to transmit the experience of the first left European government
in decades. While Greece will not have the same sort of mass impact in the US that Black Lives Matter will
have, we should strive to bring the two into dialogue. That is also true for other movements, especially the
labor movement. Through speaking tours, the ISR and SW, John Riddell’s Fourth Congress of the
Comintern, day schools, public meetings, etc.

These tools will, in a way, allow ourselves and our allies and periphery to “see the future” of the sorts of
strategies and tactics we will have to adopt when our own class struggle matures to the level they are facing
in Greece. We shouldn’t underestimate the impact Greece can have on our own understanding of
revolutionary dialectics and this may offer the ISO an incredible opportunity to bring some of the best
forces on the left (remember, Occupy activists paid a lot of attention to Greece) together for debate and
discussion. Two years ago at Socialism 2013, Ahmed S mentioned that we might have “pre-Syriza” tasks
when it comes to building the left in the U.S. In place of pre-mature calls for “organizational unity” among
the left’s small forces, now is the time for common projects and, especially, debate and dialogue with
respect to history, theory and perspectives. Ironically, Syriza may itself present us with one of the chief
means for doing this.

Again, this emphasis on Greece does not imply that other big political issues are not important (Mexico,
Venezuela, BDS, social reproduction, the terrorist attacks and Islamophobic backlash in France, etc.), only
that we should approach all these issues strategically with an eye towards intentionally making certain
arguments to certain people and forces.
Building the ISO:

Building movement and leftist ideological space is obviously related to building the ISO. But our members are often more confident about building broad movements than explicitly building the ISO. Certainly, the ISO helps connect movements together and argues for unity whenever possible; however, that is not the end of our job. In fact, over the past several years, the ISO has placed so much emphasis on the first two tasks (movements and the broad left), that we have neglected the third (party building). In 2015, we have to make a series of decisions, branch by branch and comrade by comrade, so that we re-adjust our energy and focus in order to put more time and people power into activities designed to directly strengthen and grow the ISO – both in terms of developing cadre and leadership and recruiting a layer of new members, which happens most effectively when we project the ISO and its politics to a broader audience through public meetings, paper sales and the like.

This means that when branches look over all our work and assign comrades and make perspectives, party building work is not left as an after thought. To put it crudely, if you don’t feel like your branch has (roughly speaking) dedicated 30% to movements, 30% to broad leftist ideas and 40% to party building, you should stop and reassess.

Here are the core party building activities we want to focus on in 2015.

Campus Perspective:
ISO Notes, the Campus Toolkit and the “For a New Generation of Student Socialists” document from IB #2 in summer 2014 all lay out this perspective in detail. I won’t repeat it here, other than to say that one good semester does not a revolutionary student base make. We now have branches or fractions working on around two dozen campuses, all at various stages of development. Most are not yet independent branches, but are related to community branches as fractions and some of these fractions face bigger challenges than others (more restrictive campus accessibility, comrades’ availability/work schedules, connections to campus, number of students, etc.). So, one size does not fit all. However, if we continue to carry out this perspective, the evidence points to us being able to collectively bring between 75 and 100 new student members to Socialism 2015. That would be a tremendous accomplishment for one year’s work and it will set us up for even bigger success in the fall of 2015.

Branch Infrastructure Building:
Next steps in SW campaign: Expand street/campus sales beyond Second Saturdays, improve 5-for-me use and reporting, continuous reporting on BLM actions. Selling SW is not only critical for raising our profile and meeting potential new members on and off campus, it is also one of the best ways to learn how to argue and answer questions as a socialist. This is a skill we don’t often get to practice in our daily lives, but SW sales are a tremendous opportunity to engage with our communities, take their temperature and learn how to differentiate between people who are potential recruits or activists, and people who are not.

Dues: part of the decentralization that took place over the last few years was a sometimes lax attitude towards dues and fundraising. All members are required to pay dues to scale every month as stated in the ISO Rues. Rare exceptions can be made for unemployed comrades, especially those with children. But dues are not optional. The National Office will be helping branch treasurers make sure all members are paying dues and that 90% (or something like that) of member are on dues check-off.

Contact Work and Recruitment: This fall has demonstrated that there is a significant number of people (both on and off campus) who want to join the ISO. Having a conscientious contact/recruitment coordinator in your branch is critical. Having recruited around 50 students (and more off campus) this summer and fall, we should expect similar growth in the run up to Socialism 2015. A rough outline for recruitment guidelines is available in the Summer 2014 IB #2 “For a New Generation of Student Socialists” document. The essence of it is: we want to aggressively recruit anyone who has read and discussed the “Where We Stand” packet and 1/ agrees with the basics of Marxist politics, 2/ is willing to be active in the branch by selling Sw, paying dues, and attending meetings, and 3/ agrees to take their own socialist education seriously. This may take months with some contacts, but there are many where it should only take weeks.
Membership Education: If we want to act effectively in movements and building the left, we need to deepen our own education. This means every member who has not yet done so, should go through the entire NC Education series. The NO will be helping branches re-launch that series after Convention. Of course, education can’t stop there. Branches should regularly hold study group meetings on various topics, this winter branches are especially encouraged to read and discuss Ahmed Shawki’s *Black Liberation and Socialism* as a branch. Obviously, readings and study groups around Greece will also be important this spring and the NO will be helping provide materials and resources for those as well.

Public Branch Meetings: The rise of BLM offers ISO branches a golden opportunity to tap into the ideological crisis of American capitalism. Sexual assault, Iraq/Syria and Palestine, ecological crisis, etc., to name a few, are also topics that are high on people’s minds these days. Many branches have found that holding well-publicized meetings can bring around a new (and often recruitable) layer of contacts. Having a well-known Haymarket author speak or hosting a big panel can be a big boost for a branch, but branches should also hold public meetings where cadre or developing cadre are given the time to prepare a speech on any of the topics listed above, or topics like: Why We Need a Revolutionary Party; Trotsky and the History of the Russian Revolution; Rosa Luxemberg and Reform or Revolution; the Politics of Malcolm X. That is, not every branch meeting has to be “topical.” In fact, we’ve found that theoretical or historical meetings about socialism often attract exactly the right type of person who outraged by police brutality or environmental destruction, but is also looking for a deeper explanation of history than can be found on FaceBook. Branches should consider holding public meetings every three weeks or so.

Branch Meeting Rotation: Branches have experimented with various rotations over the past few years. In general, this spring the NO would like to stress the importance of having more public ISO meetings. This means basing ourselves on a three week rotation: study group, organizing meeting, public meeting. Branches are free to be flexible within this. For instance, at an “organizing meeting” it might make sense to read and discuss an ISR or SW article in addition discussion a fraction report or plans for a BLM protest or SW sale. At a “study group” meeting, it might make sense to get a report from the Socialism 2015 committee and brainstorm publicity. And it might even make sense at a “public” meeting to have a brief section in which a fraction reports on an upcoming protest and asks the audience to discuss it. But in general, if your branch is hosting well-built public meetings less than once a month, it’s time to reconsider this. Finally, many branches have found that contacts are often interested in attending study groups and organizing meetings, so consider sending notices for most of these out on your lists and having a branch calendar of events on your branch website and to hand out at events or SW tablings.

All Roads Point to Socialism 2015: Despite last year’s late start to Socialism organizing, we had our biggest conference ever. This year promises to be as big or bigger - remember we’re in downtown Chicago this year! But more important than the sheer numbers, Socialism will play a key role in creating a more cohesive and politically sophisticated organization. All branches should begin thinking about fundraising and the NO will launch publicity immediately after the Convention.

Conclusion: Comrades may be forgiven for looking at the list above and worrying about how to fit it all in. Please keep in mind that branches are in different stages of development and what is possible for big districts will not be possible for new or smaller branches. It might be helpful to think about there being three main political topics that branches of all sizes should find a way to address in the coming months, either through public meetings, study groups or even informal gatherings: Black Lives Matter, Syriza’s (probable) victory, and projecting Marx theory. For smaller branches, please feel free to consult with the National Office about getting support from speakers or by even sharing video feeds. The point is not to look at this list and feel overwhelmed, but simply to think through how we can collectively address this big topics and raise the ISO’s own level of sophistication and our ability to project our ideas to a wider audience.

This year, while we build movements and unite with those around us, it is clearer than ever that recruiting to and strengthening the ISO’s unique role should be our central objective. The low level of class struggle, weakness of the left, beginning of the Hillary lesser-evil forces, anarcho-liberalism’s hold and the fact that the BLM movement is in its infancy (and there are many competing forces – NGOs, Democrats, etc.) all
mean that the ISO and revolutionary socialism are not the automatic point of view of the overwhelming majority of young activists. Furthermore, we cannot prove much of our theory in practice at this level of struggle. We can be excellent activists and point towards our ideas on the state, working-class power, Lenin on the national question, etc., but as long as class struggle remains very low, we must rely very heavily on ideological argument, patient explanation and historical education to convince people that becoming a Marxist is not only about being a better fighter today (not getting taken by the Democrats, racist cops are not bad apples, etc.), but also because we are preparing for a level of struggle in which a strong Leninist current will be a pre-condition to creating a really revolutionary mass party and having a real chance to challenge American capital and empire.

In essence, our future is Greece and we are in a race against time to win a substantial section of this new generation of revolutionaries, first to practical unity with us in the movements, second, to broad sympathy with class politics and socialism, and third, to actively considering joining the ISO. All our actions in 2015 should be dedicated towards taking a few more steps towards these goals.

TC

For an organizational perspective on disability and disability oppression

This document will argue for a more systematic approach to the development of a perspective on disability, disability oppression and the self-emancipatory activity of people with disabilities – a perspective that is consistent with our Marxist tradition and that takes into account the parallels and intersectionality of other forms of oppression integral to capitalism. This is by no means intended to be prescriptive of what that perspective should be, which would require a greater sense of self-importance than I can muster. I think I am but one of many people who would be interested in helping to develop the wider discussions required. Rather, it is an attempt to organize some recommendations for practice and questions I believe the ISO should begin to grapple with as an organization, rather than as a scattered network of individuals within the organization. Even the questions and recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive, as there are many who can (and hopefully will) supplement, refine and clarify much of what I put into this document. These recommendations and questions are broken down into three general categories:

- Organizational practice
- Political perspective on disability and disability oppression
- Integration of disability into other areas of political work

The ISO and its related publications have been receptive to discussion of aspects of these topics through articles in Socialist Worker and the ISR and through sessions at the Socialism conference1. These contributions from members are extremely important in exposing all of us to perspectives from people representing a variety of experiences with disability, both as individuals identified as disabled, as parents of children and youth so identified, and/or as people employed in the corporate, non-profit or governmental organizations that rely on people with disabilities for their continued existence. I represent the latter two categories, having been a lawyer practicing special education law for more than 20 years and being the parent of two kids diagnosed with dyslexia. I have also worked in the non-profit world within the developmental disabilities service industry. I have had the opportunity to develop some understanding of the concept of disability as a social condition, and some knowledge of specific systems set up to regulate and provide services for certain groups of people identified as belonging to a range of disability classifications. I have learned a great deal from people in and around the ISO about other disability experiences, and I am aware of the gaps and limitations of my own knowledge and experience. I look forward to continuing to benefit from the breadth, depth and quality of Socialism talks and SW/ISR articles

focused on disability. The focus of this document, however, is on generating discussion of ways the ISO can pursue organizational objectives going beyond facilitating opportunities for members to educate themselves and other members.

Organizational practice

As a first priority, the ISO should try to ensure that nothing in the practice of the organization or any of its branches perpetuates exclusion and marginalization of people with disabilities. Looking for space for meetings, whether ongoing, regular branch meetings or public meetings, should always include the criteria of accessibility – not merely the absence of stairs, but ADA-compliant rest rooms and, whenever possible, proximity to accessible public transportation. It may not be possible to achieve total accessibility to every meeting, but it should be a consideration and objective for event planning, particularly for meetings for which there is public flyering and Facebook notices. Similarly, branches should be prepared to make an effort to accommodate children with disabilities in child care. This might mean asking not just the age of children for whom child care is needed but whether they require special accommodation and support.

Parents who don’t see such a question may assume their child can’t be accommodated, but asking invites them to collaborate with whomever is arranging child care to make appropriate arrangements.

In terms of conversation within the ISO, we should make an effort to ensure that clearly oppressive language is challenged, in a clear but not moralistic fashion. I have heard comrades say things like, “That article was retarded,” presumably unaware of how that term has been used to define and limit people, ultimately following words like “imbecile,” “idiot” and “moron” into use as a slur in casual conversation. All of these words were created in the context of “scientific” definition and classification, and all have become insults. Discussing that history to discourage use of terms like “retarded” can lead to an understanding that all these terms – including some that I am using in this document – express changing social characterizations and not immutable scientific truths. That awareness alone is a significant advance for anyone developing an understanding of disability oppression.

Similarly, we need to learn to pay attention to how people with disabilities refer to themselves. People with disabilities are far from unanimous in their preferences. For example, two writers and activists I will cite below take different approaches. James Charlton, the author of Nothing About Us Without Us, uses “person-first” language, which is based on the idea that saying “disabled person” or “autistic child” suggests that disability defines their existence, whereas “person with a disability” or “child with autism” suggests that the disability is one characteristic, presumably one relevant to the context of the statement. Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes, the authors of The New Politics of Disablement, explicitly reject person-first language for their own usage, because they feel “disabled person” better describes the social creation of disability (i.e., disablement, or “the economic and social processes that ultimately create both impairment and disability.”). As a person who has never been identified as disabled, it’s not my call to say that one is incorrect and should be disregarded. I should make an effort to be attentive to what people say, and as much as possible respect people’s preferences in referring to them. That does not mean that I must accept what any person with a disability says as representing the views or preferences of every other person with a disability, or that conventions accepted within one group (e.g., deaf people) necessarily represent the views prevailing in another (e.g., people with intellectual disabilities). Even within disability-specific communities of self-advocates and activists, there are disagreements about whether “psychiatric disability” is preferable to “mental illness,” and a distinct difference in meaning between upper-case “Deaf” and lower-case “deaf.” The point is not to know at all times what language is preferred, but to be attentive to how people refer to themselves and open to conversation about why some terms might be considered oppressive and others empowering. These should be objectives in talking to contacts, participating in discussions at public meetings and interacting with people in movement work. Conversations about language are often an introduction to underlying politics. Branch and district leadership should give thought to how to incorporate these considerations into developing cadre.

Finally, we need to encourage comrades to engage with people with disabilities in discussing politics. One manifestation of the infantilization of people with disabilities is the tendency among some non-disabled
people to listen politely and applaud when a person with a disability speaks in public, but not to disagree, challenge or explore what they are saying. This can result from a perception of disability as a personal tragedy, and a person with a disability as a “victim” deserving of pity and indulgence. Worse, an activist with cerebral palsy, which affects her speech, has told me about the frustration she feels when people who can’t understand something she has said are too embarrassed to ask her to repeat herself. Excessive politeness and deference may have the effect of marginalizing people. Guidance for chairs could include asking someone to restate a question, or encouraging people in the audience to take up a point made during an intervention to encourage people to engage.

Political perspective on disability and disability oppression

Systematically developing and testing a theory of disability, or even a definition of disability, means looking at a range of experiences. People with disabilities are not a homogenous group, and disability experience is not fungible. There are important differences by disability group. There are also huge differences between the experience of people with disabilities in the US and other wealthy nations and those in impoverished nations ravaged by imperialism and neo-liberalism. For the ISO to begin adequately to explore the relationship of disability oppression to capitalism, we can’t generalize based on analyses that exclude specific categories of disability or entire regions of the world. Therefore, while the efforts of members to generate discussion of specific aspects of disability oppression and the self-emancipatory activity of people with disabilities are valuable, there should be a broader effort within the organization, including leadership, to identify issues that should be addressed in developing a perspective. Beneath the questions raised, I’ve included very brief discussion, which is intended solely to set a rough context, not to resolve the questions or adequately summarize the issues.

1) How do we define disability? How is it socially constructed/created? Does this process differ for different disability groups? Does it change over time?
2) What are the arguments about whether there is a material basis for disability oppression or it is merely ideological?
3) What can we learn from the arguments about false consciousness/consciousness in the disability rights movement?

I suspect that within the ISO there is very little controversy over the notion that what we call disability is at least in part socially imposed. In other words, most limitations in functioning are not inherent to the person but result from discrimination, exclusion and barriers. While we can’t claim Bolshevik provenance for the idea, Lev Vygotsky touched on it in the 1920’s, long before the social model of disability became dominant in sociology. Nevertheless, there are disagreements over whether and to what extent actual impairment exists separate from socially imposed impairment. Some arguments are made based on specific disabilities or categories. For example, one can say that a disability resulting in use of a wheelchair is a mobility impairment only so long as the built environment presents barriers and appropriate adaptive equipment isn’t made available. Presumably, the development of adaptive technology is relevant, in that as technology is developed (or could be developed) to provide for the mobility of severely impaired individuals, the impairment ceases to be inherent to the individual, and becomes the result of the decision not to make it available (or not to develop it in the first place). In addition to whether time and technological capacity is a factor, the nature of the impairment may be relevant. Arguments made regarding people with psychiatric diagnoses don’t necessarily carry over to people with cognitive impairment. The danger is that in adopting an approach to social construction/creation based on an analysis of one category of disability experience, one disregards others and perpetuates what Charlton referred to as a “hierarchy of disability,” with those with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities at the bottom.

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2 Oliver and Barnes differentiate between social constructionist and social creationist views of disability, and adhere to the latter. They see constructionism as “rooted at the ideological level and sees the problem as being located within the minds and attitudes of able-bodied people…Alternatively, the social creationist view sees the problem as located within the institutionalized practices of society…”
Charlton powerfully expresses theoretical connections between consciousness and self-emancipation in the disability rights movement (DRM), in terms suggesting parallels to anti-imperialist, anti-racist and anti-sexist organizing.

The oppression of people with disabilities does not derive from a backward set of attitudes about disability, it is the product of a dominant culture that marginalizes people in the process of domination. Disability identification takes place as people begin to recognize their oppression. Whether a person relates to and identifies himself or herself with his or her oppression as a person with a disability, an African-American, a woman, a man, a worker, a Palestinian, a South African, or a mixture of these, flows out of the individual experience with oppression. Ultimately, the DRM must recognize that the phenomenology of oppression is a totality of lived experiences—from poverty and isolation to cultural degradation and self-pity. The oppression that produces powerlessness and false consciousness is systemic and not simply the representation of outdated attitudes of those who do not know any better. The experiences of oppression are not only particular to the site of oppression (the asylum, the charity, the classroom), they are generalized throughout society by the necessity to reproduce the existing power relations.

By contrast, adherents to identity politics in the DRM generally pose the problem as ideological. Theorists seeing an ideological basis for disability oppression pose a very different framework for identification than Charlton does, and these differences are important.

4) How is self-advocacy defined? Can strategies for empowerment developed for one group be prescriptive for all others?

Charlton acknowledges that the under-representation in the DRM of people with cognitive and mental disabilities is “notable.” I won’t speak about people with psychiatric diagnoses because I am not knowledgeable enough to do so, but intellectual disabilities pose a unique challenge. Strategies based on a conventional definition of self-advocacy may promote an individualistic or group identity approach that excludes resistance by people with intellectual disabilities. At times, I have heard people with disabilities assert their right to be treated as self-directing adults by emphasizing that, while they are deaf or have cerebral palsy, they are not cognitively impaired. They are responding to the tendency toward infantilization of people with disabilities generally, but the suggestion might be that infantilizing people with intellectual disabilities is somehow appropriate. A mother once told me that her adult son could not advocate for himself, and so she had to advocate for him. He was non-verbal and tested in the severe range of intellectual disability. An example she gave was that he began tearing and soiling his clothing, and the group home in which he lived treated this as “problem behavior” to be addressed through a behavior intervention plan developed by clinicians. His mother discovered that the staff was shopping for his clothing without him, and would select the outfits he wore, presumably because of staffing constraints and workload issues. She concluded that he didn’t like the clothes and that the behavior would disappear once he was included in shopping for his clothes and choosing what to wear. This turned out to be correct. I suggested that his behavior was in fact a form of self-advocacy, because there was a communicative intent and a goal, which he achieved with her intervention. A narrow definition of self-advocacy would ignore this type of awareness of and resistance to oppression. An expansive definition would recognize that resistance is often treated as a manifestation of individual pathology.

5) How has the dominant mode of production affected how disability has been defined and perceived, and how people with disabilities have been treated? How did the transition to capitalism change disability and create the institutions and limitations that have shaped disability? How is neo-liberalism affecting these institutions and limitations?

Colin and Barnes refer to the “rise of disabling capitalism.” James W. Trent, Jr., in Inventing the Feeble Mind, describes the impact of the transition to wage labor on people with intellectual disabilities—a need

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3 See, for example, Tobin Siebers’ description of an “ideology of ability,” in “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register,” Ch. 21, Disability Studies Reader, 4th ed.
for increasingly rigid classification, the rise of institutionalization, etc. The eugenics movement won at least as many adherents because it was politically and economically convenient as it did because of the persuasiveness of its pseudo-scientific arguments, and the overlap with racist, anti-immigrant and anti-radical ideology surging during the same period should be explored more fully. There is much to be said about the political economy of disability over time, and many questions of current relevance to be considered. The current emphasis on subsidies to employers as the preferred method of promoting employment for people with disabilities is as much a reflection of dominant neo-liberalism as institutionalization was a reflection of industrialization.

6) How does disability oppression overlap and intersect with other oppressions?

For a variety of reasons, inequality and poverty make one more likely to experience disability, and disability makes one more likely to experience inequality and poverty. Environmental racism, war, “vital inequality”\(^4\), and other factors combine to make disability more common to people experiencing some other form of oppression – racism, imperialism, etc. In addition, people with disabilities have experiences that are different based on whether or not they are members of oppressed groups. Women with intellectual disabilities are uniquely at risk for sexual abuse, Black men with psychiatric diagnoses are at heightened risk for police violence, gay and lesbian people living in community residences experience discrimination, etc.

All of these questions, and many more, are worthy of wider consideration within the ISO. Planning should be done for national, district and branch assessments, suggested reading groups, invitations of appropriate outside speakers for Socialism, and incorporation of disability into perspectives documents.

Integration of disability into other areas of disability work

- Police violence: The cases of Ethan Saylor, a young man with Down Syndrome who was killed by police when he went to the movies and wanted to stay for a second showing, or Milton Hall, a man with a psychiatric diagnosis shot by police from yards away while holding a small pocketknife, along with many more, show us that police often kill people with disabilities with impunity. We should be open to reflecting this in our work against police violence, including our work with families.

- Labor: People with disabilities and their families are often powerful advocates for direct care and support workers, who are typically paid less than a living wage. The ISO should explore campaigns in which linkages can be made between workers and the individuals they work with, all of whom are badly treated by the systems that depend on them for their existence. We should also explore the tensions that can arise because direct care and support workers tend to absorb blame whenever anything goes wrong, so there is tension between respect for people’s right to make their own choices in the community, and the aversion to risk that comes with being in the line of fire for managers and regulators. Finally, we should look at how often understaffing and mandatory overtime are linked to allegations of abuse and neglect in congregate care settings, with workers being scapegoated for systemic neglect.

- Criminal justice: There is gross over-representation of people with disabilities in prisons and jails, and the disproportional suspension of students with disabilities feeds into the school to prison pipeline. Facilities routinely neglect and violate the rights of people with disabilities.

- Education: Charter schools serve far fewer students with disabilities than public schools, and are permitted to exclude those with more complex service plans. High-stakes testing and the implementation of common core have tended to undermine the right to an individualized education.

- International solidarity: We should explore and highlight the extent to which the policies of the US contribute to disability in Africa, Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere. We should look at the

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\(^4\) “Vital inequality” is what Gören Therborn in The Killing Fields of Inequality calls class inequality of health, which is both a causative factor and result of resource inequality and existential (status) inequality.
impact of neo-liberal structural readjustment and austerity policies on people with disabilities all over the world.

DL

How we recruited 12 members and counting

Since Socialism 2014, the Oakland branch has recruited and begun to integrate 12 members, including both Oakland community members and students at UC Berkeley and Berkeley City College. We are now in a position to split into community and campus branches. Here we share some lessons we learned through this process.

- **Make Recruitment Explicit**--We told each of the people we recruited that it was our intention to recruit them. Sometimes this meant a single sit down meeting in which we discussed Where We Stand and the Members’ Toolkit, and sometimes it meant months of inviting contacts to be part of regular branch activities, paired with targeted reading plans. Each of the contacts, carefully considered whether they wanted to join the ISO before joining.

- **Prioritize**--We found that over the last few months, we had more non-members around the branch than we could possibly follow up with. We decided to focus on those who were interested in being recruited. This meant deprioritizing some folks who had been coming to branch meetings on and off for years but were never convinced to read Where We Stand or movement allies who we spoke with often, but rarely came to branch meetings. There was some hesitation among members to make this shift, but it is clear at this point that this strategy paid off.

- **Systematic Follow Up**--We assigned one or two members to follow up regularly with each contact, meeting regularly to discuss readings, questions, and disagreements. We also made sure that most branch members spoke with contacts at branch meetings, afterward at the bar, and at other political events. This meant that one or two members could follow up with contacts on specific questions and also that contacts were welcomed into the branch as a whole.

- **Check Branch Emails**--A number of out contacts came to us straight from the internet, some having read SocialistWorker.org for a while or googled Oakland Socialists, wanting to find a group to join. We also met contacts and members from other branches who moved to Oakland and found us by email. If we had not systematically checked and responded to our branch emails, we would have missed out on a number of promising contacts.

- **Stay in Touch with Friendly Former Members**--Among this year’s recruits is one re-recruit, a former student activist, who had not had time in recent years to be a member. Only because a member reached out to him were we able to get back in touch and reintegrate him into the branch. He is now in a position to either help relaunch the Berkeley branch this spring or help lead in our low wage worker organizing.

- **Recruitment Is the Beginning, Not the End of the Process**--When contacts join the ISO, they still need experienced members to help train them to give talks, sell papers, chair meetings, participate in coalitions, and help recruit the next layer of members. Members who recruited contacts continued to follow up with them in order to help facilitate this integration into the branch.

SS

On the New Member’s Education Plan
The current education plan is a major improvement in its scope and depth over the previous loose education plan, and after working with it for many months we have found some minor changes that we believe could make it even more effective. The list of questions is useful for distilling the key lessons in the reading, but is not appropriate for facilitating discussion. The questions are closed questions (questions with answers that are either right or wrong). They are good for checking reading comprehension, but not encouraging new recruits to develop their own insights and opinions. Disagreements and doubts can go unaddressed because there is not explicit space in the discussions to deal with them. Also to emphasize reading and checking for understanding in our education plan presents a “canon” in a way that is not consistent with our best thinkers’ understanding of the body of insights gleaned from the history of class struggle.

These shortcomings are to be expected for a new education plan and I believe that they are relatively easy to address. By centering discussion on a short list of open questions that may be generated by the study group prior to the discussion or suggested in the study package itself we can balance the need to learn the key lessons of the past with the need to develop critical, strategic, and independent thinkers.

**Educating Unfinished Leninists**

*A Bolshevik is not merely a disciplined person; he is a person who in each case and on each question forges a firm opinion of his own and defends it courageously and independently, not only against his enemies, but inside his own party. Today, perhaps, he will be in the minority in his organization. He will submit, because it is his party. But this does not always mean that he is in the wrong. Perhaps he saw or understood before the others did a new task or a the necessity of a turn. He will persistently raise the question a second, a third, a tenth time, if need be. Thereby he will render his party a service, helping it to meet the new task fully armed or to carry out the necessary turn without organic upheavals, without factional convulsions (Trotsky, *The New Course*).*

**Some Tensions:**

The need to develop dynamic and creative class fighters who can argue for and defend their positions both inside and outside of the organization is clear. But it is also true that we have amassed a tremendous number of insights on key questions that we wish to pass on the next layer of cadre. How do we do both in a balanced way?

Put another way, how do we transmit the Marxist canon, the treasure house of insights amassed over centuries of class struggle, in a genuine way to the next generation of revolutionaries? Not as a set of dead, answered questions to be memorized and trotted out at appropriate moments, not as a fait accompli but as a living and powerful tool, the key to bursting the chains of class oppression?

**Holding Fast to the Traditions of the Past**

In his talk at Socialism 2014, Neil Davidson argued against the notion of a fixed Marxist canon as set out for example in John Molyneux’s *What is the Real Marxist Tradition?* Davidson writes in *Holding Fast to Images of the Past*: “The danger we face is … assuming that the tradition is fixed and immutable, providing a set of “lessons” applicable in any situation, no matter how inappropriate, and in that way handing victory over to the ruling class by mistaking what is to be done for what was done.”

We agree with Davidson that in order to win a socialist revolution we must look forward to our own situation which will have marked differences from the Russian experience. But it is also the case that thinkers like Davidson are able to do that precisely because of an intimate and detailed knowledge of and engagement with the insights gleaned from past revolutionary moments. For a newly minted revolutionary, exposure to the central texts of our tradition is the quickest way to pull her into the debates and discussions of experienced revolutionaries. She will have difficulty arguing her perspective if she is not at least aware of the positions put forth in these texts. To deny the importance of this canon is to rob new revolutionaries of the materials they need to analyse and engage with present experience.

Nevertheless, we must be clear that the key question is always *what is to be done*, and that the canon, if we are to call it that, is of a different sort.

**The Unfinished Leninist Canon**
Paul LeBlanc discusses this different sort of canon in his chapter in *Unfinished Leninism* entitled “Leninism is Unfinished.” He recounts a story “from the late 1960’s of [a] discussion with an older veteran of the Trotskyist movement. [T]he young recruit asked what the SWP’s program was. The old-timer “waved his hand in the direction of our bookstore and replied,’It’s all there.”

The young recruit in the story interpreted this gesture to mean that “being cadre meant learning the position embodied in over a hundred pamphlets and books and defending them in public.” LeBlanc sees a different significance in the veteran Trotskyist’s gesture. “It is not the case that SWP bookstores were simply stocked with pamphlets and books outlining positions on everything from the Second World War to the Kronstadt uprising of 1921. Rather, they contained a rich array of material — accounts of labor struggles, antiracist struggles, women’s liberation struggles, the history of the revolutionary movement, writings by Marx and Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher, Ernest Mandel, Che Guevara, Malcolm X … as well as some of the most creative thinkers in the SWP - not simply James P. Cannon … To say that it’s all there could be seen as reference not to a closed system of Truth, but to a rich and multifaceted tradition, an approach that is rigorous but also open, critical-minded, and revolutionary, with theory and analysis rooted in the actual mass struggles of one’s own time” (emphasis added).

**Engaging With the Unfinished Canon**

In developing our study program we should follow LeBlanc’s understanding of our canon: not as a mountain of fixed perspectives on everything from WWII to Kronstadt, but as a rich history of struggle and theory with which the new recruit must engage if she is to address the questions and debates of the present and future. The goal of our education program should be to introduce new recruits to the live debates within the left and the ISO, and help give them some background as to the ways that the revolutionary socialist tradition has responded to these questions so that they may participate fully in branch democracy and lead struggles effectively. There should be an explicit emphasis on applying the insights of the past to the changing present situation, and on analyzing how our situation may be different from the one we are studying.

**Education Past and Present**

The previous education plan was extremely bare bones with almost no scaffolding to guide new recruits and the cadre who were tasked with supporting their education. There was a list of books that held many of the key insights we would consider central to our understanding of class struggle, oppression, and the fight for a better world.

In the Burlington Branch where the combined experience of our cadre is in excess of 100 years this method worked quite well. Being so open, the real education happened in the spaces between the lines of the education program. New members were able to generate their own questions in conversation with branch cadre and use the readings to help answer them for themselves. Despite the openness of the plan, there was an expectation that certain steps would be taken.

New recruits would

1. **Engage with the material**
   - Do the reading
   - Check their understanding in conversation with cadre

2. **Use it to answer their own questions both short term and long term**
   - Identify questions, areas that need clarification, and disagreements
   - Develop a personal study plan in coordination w/cadre

3. **Contribute actively to the internal democracy of the organization and more broadly to debates on the left**

These steps were not scaffolded, they were just common sense. This loose method of education has some rather obvious weaknesses. There was no mechanism to ensure that these expectations were being met. Important questions could go unaddressed for years. In the absence of advanced cadre new members may plug along without a rudder. Less self-directed new members may lack clear guidance.

The new education plan helps with part of this. By making the reading more concise and targeted it ensures that new recruits are engaging with the material. Also, it helps distil the key lessons from
past experience by zeroing in on them through well selected questions.

The expectation remains that the other elements of education will happen around this plan without specific scaffolding, that we would debate and discuss important disagreements and questions outside the list even if it weren’t prompted in the package and that we would take the next step and apply these insights to current debates. In practice, this happened most of the time in our branch study meetings, but the process was awkward. Despite our best intentions many of the discussions in our own branch began to resemble a quiz. In retrospect, I believe this awkwardness was caused by using the list of questions in the wrong way, and because the elements of education that we are used to prioritizing: debate, analysis and application, were not explicitly scaffolded in the existing plan.

I would argue that we must include the more dynamic elements of education explicitly in the plan alongside the basics of engaging with the material and distilling the lessons. Without considering how to balance these aspects of education one will tend to get crowded out by the others.

Let us look the list of questions from the section on Socialism and the Centrality of the Working Class:

1. Explain why socialists don’t idealize the working class.
2. What compels the working class toward socialism?
3. What is the difference between rank and file workers and union bureaucrats? How do these differences shape their respective worldviews and approach to struggle?
4. Why do workers, when they organize, tend to challenge the capitalist system? How does this contrast with peasants and middle class intellectuals?
5. What is the working class’s unique power to make a socialist revolution?
6. What is the difference between socialism from above and socialism from below?
7. What do Stalinism and Social Democracy have in common?
8. How does Proudhon, the father of modern anarchism, fit into the tradition of socialism from above?
9. What is the difference between the elitist approach and the vanguard approach to socialism?

These questions prompt new members to distil the key insights in the readings for this section. They are essential questions, but they are all closed questions. The answers are in the reading and the job of the new recruit is to find them. Her answer will be either right or wrong. This type of learning is necessary and important, but on its own it is insufficient to the task of educating revolutionaries.

Focusing the discussion on closed questions, the new recruit can get the sense that with her limited knowledge she has nothing of value to offer the organization, or worse that we are not interested in her insights as we already have all the answers to the really important questions. It would be unfortunate for a new recruit to feel this way because this is not how we feel about new members.

Ultimately, it is not the new recruit’s ability to repeat back key lessons that we are most interested in, but her ability to apply these lessons to the present situation. This is a skill that we should actively cultivate from the very beginning. We should not wait until the recruit has “got the basics” to start, especially since the first year is a make or break year for many recruits. If we are to retain them in the organization it is imperative that they feel they have a voice in their education.

Unfinished Education

Our education plan needs an extra step. If we are to respect the power of new revolutionaries not just to digest information given them but also to create knowledge and to strategize effectively in the face of new realities we must focus discussion on open questions whose answers are not fixed. For example: How would you respond to someone who told you that vanguard parties are by nature elitist? or, can you think of something that is happening now that is compelling some workers toward socialist positions? Were there elements of last week’s protest that were “substitutionist?” Can you strategize a way to connect the Fight for $15 to the environmental movement? To women’s rights?

This type of question represents a higher level of cognition from a strictly pedagogical point of view. It engages the learner more fully in the question. Using open questions increases the intrinsic motivation of learning the basics because members and our periphery value creative solutions to current problems and we respect the use of past lessons to get to new insights. New recruits will learn the basics better if it is clear why they need to know them. Using this information to strengthen their argument in a current debate obviates the why of the basics. Finally, the use of open questions reflects the ISO more
accurately as an organization that values the insights of new recruits and respects their power as creators of knowledge.

Some Suggestions

1. The discussions should be based around 3 or 4 open questions that represent either current debates or a key question for a participant. “How would you respond to this situation?” “How does this example differ from our present situation?” etc. New members could generate the questions themselves with guidance from cadre in preparation for the discussion or a suggestion list could be appended to the present study guide.

2. The present list of questions should be used as preparation for discussion as they represent the key insights gleaned from the history or class struggle.

3. Sections should be chosen as much as possible to coincide with other goings on in the branch, for example reading the section on labor history during a strike, reading the section on Palestine during an upturn in the number of protests around Palestine.

Our current education plan improved upon our previous plan by making explicit expectations for study that had been implicit. The expectation that cadre will help new recruits apply their knowledge to current debates is an implicit expectation that we should develop explicitly in our study plan. If we can strike the right balance, not only will the education plan strengthen the politics of our branches, it will serve as a tool for recruiting and retaining new members. We should not be satisfied with our plan until we have people joining the organization specifically because they want to take advantage of the education we offer.

SG