

Pre-convention bulletin #11 / February 7, 2015 for members only

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Important convention information and deadlines

1. Childcare:

The deadline for submitting childcare requests was yesterday, February 6., and no further requests can be accepted at this time, as we need enough time to arrange quality childcare.

2. 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.

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:

Hotels near Northwestern:

Comrades who are able to afford it might prefer to pitch in together to stay in a hotel for the sake of comfort. Below are a few suggestions—but if you find a good deal somewhere, please let us know and we'll pass it on to other comrades.

Our advice: Book as soon as possible, as Evanston hotels fill up quickly.

- The Best Western Hotel (1501 Sherman Avenue, Evanston, Illinois 60201-4416) in downtown Evanston \$ **113.96**. Free wifi; free breakfast included. Free parking a couple of blocks west. Please note: We earlier wrote that the hotel offers free shuttle service to Northwestern—but we have found out that they only offer this service Monday-Friday. Nevertheless, this hotel is just a half-mile from the campus. Go to <http://www.bwuniversityplaza.com/>
- The Orrington Hotel (1710 Orrington Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201) in downtown Evanston: \$143 per night for rooms with two queen beds. Walking distance to university. <http://www.hotelorrington.com/>
- There is one option worth considering for a larger group: The Homestead Evanston (1625 Hinman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201). This hotel is located just two blocks from Northwestern University (closer than any other hotel). It has one-bedroom apartments with kitchens (which can save money on food—there is a Whole Foods in downtown Evanston). These apartments cost \$185 per night, but you can probably squeeze in 6-7 people to save costs. **When you register, however, you should only register as four guests, which is the maximum the hotel allows.** They advertise: Free breakfast; free local calls; free self-parking; Free Wi-Fi. Their website is <http://thehomestead.net/results.cfm>.
- One of the cheaper options (a few stops away from Northwestern on the Red Line “el”) is the Super 8 hotel (7300 North Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60626). This hotel is pretty dingy but cheap. They are listing their rate for two queen beds at \$93.49 night (maximum of 4 guests) on Presidents’ Day weekend. Their website is <http://www.super8.com/>

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). We will produce as many bulletins as necessary to include all documents submitted by this deadline. 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.

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.

The Role of Branch Committees

N.B. This document was originally written in the fall of 2003. I considered completely re-writing it to fit our current period more closely; however, 1/ I have not found the time to do so and 2/ I think it stand up pretty well on its own. So, I have decided to reprint it as it stands. Where there are terms we no longer use, or historical references which may be confusing, I will add updated comments [in brackets and in italics]. I have kept these notes to the minimum. Comrades who have questions or would like to read some of the debates in older documents should ask more experienced cadre for resources. – Todd

Branch committees (BCs) (along with District Committees in cities with more than one branch) are primarily responsible for the strength (or weakness) of the ISO in a particular city, neighborhood or campus. It is not possible to have a strong branch without a strong branch committee. This does not mean every member of the BC must have 5 or 10 years of experience and have read everything Marx ever wrote. It does mean, however, that the BC must be politically clear enough to help the branch develop and understand a perspective, know how to carry it out and then help the branch generalize a collective assessment of that perspective's success or failure. This document will attempt to layout some building blocks for branch committees capable of building the ISO. Since our goal is to build an organization of thousands, most ISO members who have not yet been on a BC will most likely do so in the future, and therefore should be relevant to everyone.

Formal role of the branch committee

Branch committees are the local elected leadership of the ISO. They are recallable at any time and should be re-elected at least once a year. Branch committees are elected as a slate, not as separate individuals. This is because the BC must put forward a common political perspective as the basis for their election. BCs are not simply a conglomeration of the “most experienced” comrades, or (worse) the “loudest.” Instead, BC slates should be elected on the basis of support for a particular political perspective and seen as a team of people who can help the branch accomplish it. They should be judged on their capacity to lead the branch in carrying out that perspective successfully. This does not always mean large numeric growth (although that is important). But also includes an assessment of our movement work, how well the branch is educating its members, dues and financial health, and Socialist Worker sales. If any one of these areas is going seriously wrong, it is the BCs responsibility to try to correct it. In sum, the buck stops with the BC. Lenin once said, “Without revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary practice.” When applied to this discussion we can say, “Without a strong BC, there can be no strong branches.”

Back to Basics Method

[We adopted the “Back to Basics campaign after a period in which we skewed towards a “movementist” practice, described briefly below. This period extended from the rise of the Global Justice Movement after the “Battle of Seattle” in 1999, to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, which both provoked large anti-war movements. After the period of “Back to Basics” (roughly 2003-2005) we again pushed to a more aggressive movement approach with the return of the anti-war movement in 2005, the mass immigrant rights May Day movemeth in 2006, and the economic crisis/Occupy period of 2008-2011. If our current emphasis on recentralizing the ISO sounds someone like “Back to Basics,” suffice it to say that all revolutionary organizations always face pressures that bush us in one direction or the other and all we can do is learn from the cycles and integrate what we learn from each phase into a higher level of political understanding and organizational know how.]

Last summer [2003], the ISO formally adopted the “Back to Basics” method, which returned party building to the center of all our activity. For a number of years, we downplayed the importance of political education and relied too heavily on training our members mostly in how to be good “activists.” The idea was that struggle would fill in the gaps in socialist education by direct experience. There were two problems with this. First, the level of struggle (especially class struggle in the form of strikes) has been relatively low and episodic, so despite the tremendous protests we’ve helped build from Seattle to February 15, comrades and contacts don’t necessarily learn class politics. Second, as a method, relying one-sidedly on direct experience to the detriment of historical and theoretical education is always a mistake for a revolutionary organization, even when the level of struggle is qualitatively higher. Remember, Lenin wrote “State and Revolution” during 1917. Far from receding in importance, theoretical education, debate and clarity is even more important as the stakes get higher. This cannot be put off until things “quiet down.”

Back to Basics reasserts the Leninist contention that a revolution can only happen given the confluence of a crisis in the ruling class, a mass revolt from the working class and the existence of a large revolutionary socialist party based in the working class. Without the party, capitalism can cause horrifying wars, terrible crises, paralysis of the ruling class, economic collapse and even heroic and mass working class struggle, but there can be no socialist revolution. Therefore, the ISO puts the project of building the nucleus of that revolutionary, mass party (which we don’t claim to be at the moment) at the top of everything we do, both in terms of branch building AND movement work.

This is sometimes easier said than done. The ISO has argued that we are in a “transition period” between a reactionary downturn in the 1980’s and a future upturn in class struggle that will look something like the 1930’s or 1960’s. *[The ISO concluded it was no longer useful to think of the US being in a “transition period” in the mid-2000, arguing it was more useful to analyze the material and political world around us rather than rely on “upturn” and “downturn” comparisons.]* Rapid ups and downs in movements, working class anger combined with a continuing bosses’ offensive, and a tremendous sympathy with socialist ideas but very little confidence to act on them characterize politics today. We have all experienced this in the past few years. The 1997 UPS strike raised the prospect of workers fighting back on a national scale, but

the witch hunt against Ron Carey and the subsequent failure of the AFL-CIO leadership to take advantage of the economic boom has led to an even deeper crisis in the labor movement. The rapid rise of the global justice movement raised the confidence of tens of thousands of students and even began to affect a layer of the working class, but 911 cut short that process and all but wiped out the movement. And, most recently, the mass anti-war movement of last spring went into hiding over the summer after Bush won the initial war in Iraq relatively quickly. There are many other examples. On an individual scale, many people instinctively join the ISO because they hate the system, but we have a hard time integrating them because they don't have much lived experience that workers, not just ought to fight back, but CAN fight back and WIN. The point is not that we have to wait for the day when "better" movements and a "better" working class magically arrive. There is no way to skip over the difficulties we face. Strong branches, based on a membership which takes its own education and action seriously, which debates out perspectives, makes democratic decisions and then puts them into practice in a unified and professional way are the key to more effectively building the ISO during the ups and downs. And BCs are the political motor which should power this process.

ABCs for Branch Committees

You DO Need a BC to Know Which Way the Wind Blows

After every BC meeting, each member of the BC should be able to answer the following question: Is the branch politically moving ahead, stagnating or falling backwards? If you don't have a unified answer to that question when you leave your BC meeting, you have not had a successful BC meeting. Some easy ways to assess this question are to start with the basics: 1. Do we (as the elected branch leaders) agree or disagree with the perspective laid out in the ISO Notes and the most recent NC or Convention. 2. If we disagree, have we argued this out with the local or national organizer. 3. If we agree, are we leading the branch in putting that perspective into practice? 4. Does the branch agree with us and does it understand how to accomplish it? 5. Finally, what evidence do we have that the branch either is or is not carrying out the national and local perspective? If you can't answer any of these questions, then your BC is not using the Back to Basics method and is not leading the branch as part of a national Leninist organization.

Division of Labor: Political v. Bureaucratic

BCs must have a strong division of labor. Comrades must be responsible for leading their area of work, be it SW coordinator, membership secretary, treasurer, or movement fraction leader. The best way to instill this division of labor is for members to prepare brief reports on their work for each BC meeting. This forces BC members to gather their thoughts before BC meetings and reduces time spent repeating information. Too often, BC meetings are taken up almost entirely with "information sharing" and "covering the bases" at the expense of developing a political lead. This shows itself in two ways. First, BC members are ill prepared to report on their area of work, so they do not pay much attention to other BC members' areas of work. This leads to a bureaucratic division of information where, for instance, only the SW coordinator knows how many SWs are being sold and the rest of the BC doesn't see it as "their job" to worry about it. The same with dues, Haymarket, or arguments in movement work. Second, sometimes BC members forget their own area of work in order to "help cover" other things, leading to substitutionism. Thinking through ahead of time and establishing the practice of regular reports, distributing the BC agenda well in advance and generally preparing for a political BC meeting is the convenor's responsibility. Just because it's a small meeting, doesn't mean it doesn't take preparation. If the convenor is unprepared, the BC will be unprepared, and the BC will not be able to give a strong lead to the branch. Conversely, a BC that is professional and prepared will be better able to assess the actual (not guessed at) SW, dues, contact, recruit, etc information and combine it with an understanding of education and movement work.

Socialist Worker Sales

[When this was written, the print SW was weekly and all members were expected to do 2 sales per week. After a long debate, the ISO decided to launch a daily website and return to a monthly print SW. As we are now emphasizing the importance of rebuilding our routines around selling print SW on street and campus

sales as well as 5 for me's, this section should be read in conjunction with those efforts. As a point of information, in 2001-2003, the Bay Area sold between 300 and 500 papers per week.]

The buck stops with the BC. The wrong answer to the question how many SWs has the branch sold this week and the past several weeks is "I don't know, ask the SW coordinator." SW sales are the single BEST way to judge the health of the branch. If BC members don't know how SW sales are going, they are not leading the branch. SW is not just a duty, it should be our number one tool in assessing the health of our organization and the consciousness of our periphery. For instance, if you have only half your branch on 2 sales a week, but you are still selling a high number of papers, it tells you that the branch is passively letting a large audience slip through its fingers. Or, if you have lots of members on well-organized sales, but sales are low, then it tells you the periphery is demoralized and you will have to work hard for an audience. In the Bay Area, we noticed that organizing a large number of sales with few comrades on each sale was leading to low sales, no contacts and demoralized members. So we had an argument in the BCs and then proposed to the branches that we collapse small sales into big ones. The result was that we nearly doubled our Saturday sale totals and got several new members much more confident about selling SW. Large, confident SW sales also allowed us to gauge the mood of our periphery from week to week. An upturn in sales in August and the conversations we had on those sales led us to hypothesize that anger against the occupation was growing and that we should figure out how to take an organizing initiative against the occupation. That is, we based our perspective on the experience of our sales, rather than passively waiting for something "big" to happen. If your BC isn't seeing your SW sales like this, then you have a bureaucratic division of labor around SW that reduces it to a chore.

Healthy Fractions

One of the central lessons of Back to Basics method is the importance of concentrating cadre in larger branches to help establish a high level political culture. The same is true in fractions *[or working groups, as we sometimes call them now]*. BCs should think through the division of their branches into fractions. The fractions are the political working groups of the branch that must be able to develop, assess and carry out an area of work and then report that work to the BC and the branch as a whole. Given the complexity of organizing in the transition period, fractions should, as far as possible, have a good concentration of cadre in order to help develop newer members. Again, even though BC members cannot belong to every fraction, they should be informed about the work of those fractions and be able to form a political opinion about whether the fraction is moving forward, stagnating, or sliding backwards. This does not mean knowing every detail of work, but BCs should regularly discuss the fractions and as a collective leadership.

Intervening in Branch Meetings

The best opportunity BCs have to give the branch as a whole a clear lead is at our weekly branch meetings. Too often, all the details of getting the meetings set up (picking the chair, making sure flyering is happening, working with the speaker, etc) are thought through, but the BC does not develop a political line to carry into the meeting as a group. This line can be about what are the most important ideas to explain during an educational or public branch meeting topic. For instance, if you are having a public meeting about the Iraq Occupation, your BC should not just randomly respond to questions that arise on the floor, but should come prepared with a line that you want to put across. For instance, you might decide that you want to emphasize the right of nations to self-determination or emphasize the occupation is connected to the class war at home. The line can also be about questions of branch organization. For instance, your BC might decide that since your branch just recruited 10 students at a given campus, you need to convince the branch that carefully planned new members meetings are more important than running around to 10 scattered interventions this week. *[In 2003, we still used the "instant recruitment" method, where we asked people to fill out membership cards as soon as they expressed any interest in politics. We rejected this method in favor of our more deliberate current practice. While we don't expect to "recruit" 10 students instantly now, we have started recruiting more rapidly, especially on campuses, so once you calibrate for this dynamic, the underlying point made here remains relevant.]* Whatever it is, the BC should walk into every branch meeting with the goal of winning the branch to a political line. Of course, you may discover that you've picked the wrong line, or something more important comes up, or someone in the branch has a better idea than you came up with, so you have to be flexible.

Turning a Branch – Repetition, Urgency, Results

Given the ups and downs of the political atmosphere, it is very common for a branch that is confident and growing one month, to find itself off course the next month. No branch in the ISO succeeds all the time. Sometimes this is because of objective circumstances. Sometimes this is because we make mistakes (movementism, abstentionism, sloppiness, or just plain screwing up). Quickly assessing the loss of political momentum, developing a plan (line) to turn it around, honestly discussing what you think the difficulties are with the whole branch and then turning the branch around in practice is the mark of a strong BC. BCs often figure out something is wrong, but then flip flop around from one quick fix to another. The keys to turning your branch away from whatever problems it is facing and towards success are simple to layout, but require hard-learned experience to carry out in practice. First, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once said that repetition is important in politics. Don't be surprised if you have to keep making the same argument several weeks in a row or several times to the same comrades. The worst thing is to keep moving the goal posts before you've really convinced the branch (or a comrade) of the line you're trying to carry. Second, the BC must see actively turning the branch towards success as its single most urgent task. If BC members are consumed with movement work (or develop a bureaucratic attitude towards branch building work) and do not focus on leading the branch in the direction they want it to go, the BC is not doing the job it was elected to do. Lastly, BCs should develop and clearly lay out the concrete results or goals that will signal the branch has succeeded in turning itself around. SW sales and dues are almost always an excellent place to start. Building on these you can focus on laying out goals around a certain number of contact meetings in a given week, or organizing a well-prepared and well-attended study group, or a professional intervention in a protest, etc. Lastly, the slightly more intangible goal should be to create an exciting political culture in your branch, where members feel confident about the branches movement work and their own theoretical development.

[Reading this 12 years later, I think this could be interpreted as a bit substitutionist; that is, its tends to place the BC in the role of “motor” of the branch. While I would now put more emphasis on the need for leading members in fractions and the branch meetings in general to take more initiative, as well as placing greater weight on the need for political education, valuing experience cadre, and a recognition that building cadre through patient discussion, reading (reading, reading), and hands-on, side-by-side collaboration, my sense is that most BCs would benefit from erring in the direction described above.]

Democratic Centralism

Lenin defined the organization method of the Bolshevik party as “democratic centralism,” or “the greatest possible freedom in debate and the greatest possible unity in action.” This flows from Lenin's idea of the revolutionary party as a “combat organization.” In other words, an organization that aims to put into practice Marx's dictum, “Philosophers have merely interpreted the world, the point, however, is to change it.” We put a high premium on democracy, not *[only]* because we believe that *every member has the right to say* what they believe. But because we believe in an active, contentious democracy where *every member has the obligation to argue* for what they believe because that will be the most effective way for determining our course of action. We insist on unity in action, where every member abides by the democratic decisions made by the majority (or by the elected leadership) in order to test our ideas in practice. This is a radically different notion of political organization compared to all other political groups. The hegemony of bourgeois ideas and the weakness of the working class movement in the US in the last 30 years means that almost EVERYONE we recruit has been systematically taught to degrade the importance of their own participation in political debate and action. This means that if we want a real, active, functioning democratic centralist organization, we can't just passively hope political debate spontaneously arises in our branches. It must be organized. Training our membership to think for themselves, to argue for what they believe in, to learn as much history and theory of the socialist movement as possible and, finally, to develop the discipline to act in a unified and professional manner no matter their side in a particular debate falls primarily on the shoulders of the BC.

So again, without strong branch committees, there can be no strong branches.

[Political Education and Cadre Development

*One point I feel is missing from the original document is a heavier emphasis on political education and the role BCs should play in developing a culture of Marxist analysis, discussion and debate. We have found through hard-won experience that knowing the “ABCs” of revolutionary theory and history is insufficient. Building a cadre which can respond to complex questions, answer theoretical and historical questions, criticize competing political currents from a Marxist point of view, etc. And all the while, pairing this “book” learning process with gaining experience in putting Marxist ideas into action in united fronts, coalitions, arguments with contacts, operating in unions, etc. The process of creating a sharp Marxist cadre, who can operate on multiple fronts, both internally in the ISO and externally in movements and the class struggle, takes time. BCs can play a critical role in helping make this a priority. As Lenin argued in *What Is To Be Done*, “Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected — unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other.” (WITBC, Chapter III) While we have long emphasized the importance of the first part of this quote, “respond[ing] to all cases of tyranny, oppression...,” in retrospect, I would argue BCs (and ISO members in general), but place equal weight on the second part, “respond from a Social-Democratic [Marxist] point of view and not other.” Given the terribly crude level of political culture in the US, this means not treating branch education (for new members, developing cadre and more experienced cadre alike) as an afterthought (as was perhaps the case in my original document), but as a very high priority for BCs.]*

Education Committee Report

The education committee was recently reconstituted and held its first meeting, with the aim of establishing a more permanent body to discuss and prepare proposals and materials regarding the internal education of ISO members; both new members and more experienced members who already have a basic understanding of Marxism and our organization’s basic politics. We see this task as including the creation and systematization of study series based on topics, readings, and whole books; as well as designing day schools and cadre training schools.

The body consists of members of the steering committee and of the national committee (they are listed below). Members of the committee hope to confer with and draw on the knowledge and expertise of various members around the group—as well as the experience branches have already had doing various study groups, day schools, and branch readings. (In that light, comrades should make sure to take the time to read Daphna T.’s piece in *Preconvention Bulletin #2* on New York’s experience with the new members’ education plan). We want to create a more systematic set of educational tools that will deepen our members’ understanding of Marxist theory, history and politics.

We have set our sights on the following tasks:

- I. Create a cadre development program, starting with a forthcoming study series developed around questions of race, class, and Marxism, as well as the history and politics of Black liberation in the United States. We believe that web technology has improved to the point where such a set of meetings (with presentations by experienced members, along with set readings followed by discussion), is doable via videoconferencing. The presentations could also be recorded and used locally as the basis for future discussion groups. We are in the process of concretizing a plan for this study series, and will keep comrades posted as we proceed.
- II. Devise a curriculum for an introductory study series for the entire membership on Marxism and Black liberation, using Ahmed Shawki’s *Black Liberation and Socialism* as a base, with additional readings to accompany each chapter. (The latter could potentially be put together

and issued as a *Black liberation and Marxism reader*). A version of this already exists, but we want to review it and revise it.

- III. Develop study guides for books critical to an understanding of our approach to Black Liberation, including Mark Naison’s *Communists in Harlem*, Robin Kelly’s *Hammer & Hoe*, Jack Bloom’s *Race, Class, and the Civil Rights Movement*, and Manning Marable’s, *Race, Rebellion, and Reform*.

The tasks described in points I, II, and III above are particularly important in the current period, given the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, our systematic involvement in it, and the modest but significant recruitment of more Black members into the ISO in the past few years. We hope to devise an education plan that both deepens our members’ historical and theoretical understanding of the questions, but that also grapples with questions that are emerging in the current struggle. We believe that this education plan will benefit all members, but it is particularly aimed at the political development and confidence of our comrades of color.

In addition, we have set these following tasks:

- IV. A redesign/update of the New Members Education Plan, including adapting some of the readings and topics, and exploring various other suggestions for topics to cover, such as those suggested in DT’s report in pre-convention Bulletin #2.
- V. The development of a study plan that comes after the “new members” plan, as well as material for more advanced study groups, for example around Marx’s *Capital*.
- VI. The development of study series, guides, etc., for the reading of key Marxist classics like *State and Revolution*, Right of Nation’s to Self Determination, *Reform or Revolution*, and *Left Wing Communism*.

At this stage, some of the educational tools at our disposal, such as the current New Members Education Plan, are used by only a minority of branches. One of our goals in developing and systematizing our education plans is to get them to be used regularly by all branches as a matter of “routine.” We hope to see a time when every member went through a group process of Reading *Meaning of Marxism*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *New Members Education Plan*, some key Marxist classics such as *State and Revolution* and *Reform or Revolution*, as well as key Haymarket texts such as *Women and Socialism* and *Black Liberation and Socialism*, in their first two years or so of ISO membership. The new ISO Web Site, which will be up and running soon, will help in this process, as it will be able to “house” many of the readings/study series/education plans that we have developed and are now developing.

Anti-Ableism Initiative for the ISO

[Please note: there is a resolution embedded in this document. It is in **Bolded Red typeface**—editor]

The International Socialist Organization’s mission is to prepare the left for the revolution to come. To that end, the authors of this document propose an initiative to combat ableism both inside and outside the organization. This document will illustrate how ableism is absolutely necessary for capitalism to function, and we must actively combat it just as we would any other oppression for our revolution to be successful. Ableism, the oppression of the disabled, needs much more attention than it receives, and the ISO should fully integrate anti-ableism into our politics. The ISO could even spearhead a disabled worker’s movement, with few disability activists focusing on the intersection between disability and class at the moment.

Many disabled members of the organization feel as if the ISO does not adequately take up the issue in many ways. We want to be a part of this organization because we believe it is a worthwhile, long term project. However, if we are contributing to the cause, the cause should treat us like equals in return, and yet that often does not happen.

Just as in the rest of society, ableist language is ever prevalent in ISO discourse: I have heard slurs such as “crazy” and “idiot” thrown around nonchalantly by even our most respected members. Ableist language matters just as much as racist and sexist language. “Idiot” and “retard” are slurs with a diagnostic history. They are akin to the n-word and should never be used. However, one time when I tried to call attention to this, I was instead later met with a lecture about facilitating a call-out culture. While we understand the need not to have a “call-out culture”, and language slip-ups are among the least of our concerns, some measure of correction and education still must happen, otherwise many people will not realize they have to change in the first place. This correction must be firm and respectful, not done in such a way that will drive potential revolutionaries away from our organization. Language also IS culture. It defines how we think, and words have power to oppress. *We have to be mindful to never oppress anyone and play into capitalists’ hands.*

Accessibility is a much larger issue the ISO must grapple with. Documents handed out for member education are frequently in inaccessible formats, such as PDFs of scans from books, which are unreadable to a screen reader program. Not helping that is the fact that no Haymarket Books are easily available in braille or large print. One idea is to have comrades make audio recordings of socialist readings and upload them as MP3s to a database. It is important to remember that inaccessibility is structural violence, and as a revolutionary organization, we must strive to never uphold this status quo. When the very format or existence of something is inaccessible to someone, they miss so much--and the ISO loses potential revolutionaries. **So the authors propose as a solution an accessibility initiative, to be led by disabled ISO voices to express their accessibility needs, some more of which I outline below.**

Socialism 2014 was in a very inaccessible hotel. We chose not to have the conference at the Crowne Plaza for the Conference in 2015, but that was primarily for BDS reasons. It is wonderful to see that the new hotel choice, the Hyatt Regency Hotel, seems to pride itself on being ADA-compliant. Still, some lessons have yet to be learned: at Socialism 2014, most if not all of the talks relating to disability were in cramped basement rooms, which are not accessible if one has any number of impairments: sensory integration disorder, physical disabilities, or mental illnesses such as claustrophobia or anxiety. The lighting and air conditioning in those rooms was terrible, and we believe that the choice of the worst rooms for the ableism talks is indicative of ableist priorities, however unconscious that may be.

Some disabled people also got the impression that their voices did not matter. In the talk about special education in 2014, there was an incident in the discussion where the chair was trying to gauge who to prioritize for a progressive stack, and asked for the voices of teachers, parents, even school administrators--but one of the authors of this document, Rebecca B., had to say, “Who here is actually disabled?” to get our voices included in these considerations. Many, many people raised their hands at this question, but there seemed to be an assumption that the disabled would have no interest in a talk about their own education or in socialism, perhaps on some level an unaddressed presumption of disabled incompetence. This is also a form of substitutionism--the disabled do not want abled people to discuss our liberation without our input.

Nothing about us without us--this has long been a mantra of disability rights activism, and that itself is the same concept as Marx’s self-determination. For this reason, in a talk about race, it makes sense to prioritize the voices of people of color, so it should also follow that in a talk about disability, disabled voices should be prioritized.

The ISO does have a general culture of intellectual elitism, which is another form of ableism. This needs to be curbed with increased awareness of abled privilege in its many forms. This means that we cannot assume all people will be able to read books or documents at the same speed, or at all, and then attach no stigma to that impairment while trying to find a way to make our space fully accessible. Instead of leaving such a person to attempt to study documents on their own, non-stigmatized study groups or one-on-one tutoring on certain topics may be necessary--do remember that many college students aren’t expected to read Lenin and Trotsky, and that when students have difficulty, accommodations are (theoretically) available upon request, and that these burdens should not be completely on the disabled person.

General ignorance of all of these issues and more is why the authors propose amending the New Member Education Plan to include a section on ableism. This would include portions on ableism and capitalism, the history of disability activism, and current disability issues.

Ableism is practically invisible, and it is used to define all other oppressions. Women are thought of as inherently emotional and incapable of reason. Blacks are presumed to be more prone to anger, promiscuity. LGBTQ people are thought of as mentally ill and more promiscuous. In other words, society presumes that women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and all other people oppressed by capitalism are *inherently disabled* compared to the ideal of a perfect worker.

Capitalism cannot function without ableism, so dismantling it should be one of the most basic parts of our education as revolutionaries. Disability is always defined in terms of productive capabilities, which is where ableism comes from. Capitalists would be unable to make profits if they could not weed out workers that will not generate sufficient profit for them. Through this mechanism, capitalism specifically excludes the disabled from the means of production, excluding many from even taking up the term “working class” because they are unable to access work. However, a large portion of the reserve supply of labor *is* very much made of disabled workers. During times of war, industrial nations have historically hired disabled workers to work the factories while the usual abled male workers were at war. Capitalism can always find a use for disabled bodies during times of mass slaughter, but most of the time, we are excluded from the means of production and thus from society as a whole.

The history section would include the various ways “communist” and “socialist” revolutions of the past failed the disabled community. In the middle Soviet period, for example, the disabled were very quickly labeled by the bureaucracy and shuffled away to do labor for the state. The language around disability was shifting at this time as well, and the disabled began to be referred to as “invalids” for the first time, whereas previously in Russian society the disabled were integrated into society relatively well, and given terms which in Russian mean “prophet” and “God’s fools”--terms that are problematic in their own ways, but do not carry a negative connotation. Later on, the USSR created a hierarchy of “invalids” in terms of productive capability. (Phillips, Sarah 2009)

While much of that can be blamed on the counter-revolution, most of the problem stems from the fact that rarely has there ever been sufficient counter-ideology and organized resistance against ableism since its inception--and that is something we can change right now, for the revolution to come. Every intended communist revolution thus far has forgotten the disabled at some point, in some way. We cannot allow that to happen again. The disabled cannot wait to stop being invisible. The revolution cannot succeed if it is not intersectional, and we cannot call ourselves a revolutionary organization if we oppress the disabled.

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