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American Imperialism Today: Confronting Rivals in an Asymmetric Multipolar World Order

Chaotic, crisis-ridden, unstable, and plagued with geopolitical conflict. That's how the American foreign policy journals describe today's world. All of these phrases express the transition from a unipolar order dominated by American imperialism to a new asymmetric multipolar order.

While the U.S. remains the world's only super-power, it is in relative decline and challenged by a new international rival in China and a host of regional ones like Russia. In this new order, America is less able to dictate solutions to a growing list of economic, political and military crises.

This document is not meant to be survey of U.S. imperialism's global agenda in each and every region. For example, it will not analyze U.S. policy in Latin America, which has been the site of important resistance to Washington with the rise of new powers like Brazil and the popular movements against neoliberalism that led to the region's "Pink Tide" with the election of Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador. These developments pose any number of problems for U.S. imperialism in its "backyard."

Instead the document will trace the key areas of conflict the U.S. has focused on—its "Pivot to Asia" to contain China; its New Cold War with Russia over Ukraine; and its effort to impose stability on the Middle East. It will not, however, explore these developments in detail—i.e., the latest U.S. negotiating tactics over Ukraine, or the twists and turns of its military intervention in Iraq and Syria. Rather, the aim here is a means of (a) highlighting the dynamics of imperialism today and (b) understanding how socialists and other-imperialists should orient themselves in this period.

American Imperialism's Unipolar World Order

After it emerged victorious from the Cold War, the U.S. aimed to secure a unipolar world order. It developed a grand strategy to incorporate and subordinate all the world's states into the political, economic and military structures it had created in its Cold War bloc.

The U.S. was successful in this project in the 1990s. The American capitalist class restructured the economy restoring its relative economic dominance over Japan and Germany. It also incorporated its former Cold War rivals. It had already struck an alliance with China in the 1970s; during the 1990s it turned the country into an export-processing platform for American capital. It imposed neoliberal structural adjustment on Russia and gobbled up its empire in Eastern Europe, integrating the newly independent states into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The U.S. used various international bodies like the UN to politically assimilate states that had been in the Russian or non-aligned camp. It intensified its use of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as well as the newly christened World Trade Organization (WTO) to crack open state controlled capitalist economies and subject them all to an American-overseen neoliberal economic order.

And, instead of granting the promised peace dividend, the U.S. maintained its massive military arsenal and used it to enforce its unipolar world order against so-called rogue states like Iraq or North Korea. The U.S. also took upon itself to police the wreckage its neoliberalism caused in so-called failed states like Somalia and Haiti. These interventions, whatever their humanitarian rhetoric, violated the right of national self-determination, undermined movements for reform within those countries, and imposed neoliberal globalization at gunpoint.

Neoliberal Boom and the Rise of Rivals

But no international order is permanent in the capitalist mode of production. As Lenin argued in *Imperialism*, capitalism's tendency toward uneven development disrupts the balance of power between capitalist states; old powers atrophy and new powers rise. The neoliberal boom did just that, progressively undermining America's unipolar world order.

Based on their phenomenal and sustained growth, China and a host of lesser economies became more assertive of their interests in the world system, sometimes in conjunction with the U.S. and at other times in opposition to it. Wall Street took to calling these countries the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Many others like Saudi Arabia or Australia could be added to the list.

The two most important of these are China and Russia. China's party state maintained control over its energy sector, compelled foreign investors to partner with its Chinese corporations, developed its own private capitalist class, and consequently retained a high degree of independence as a rising power. Putin's Russia, after it recovered from neoliberal shock therapy, renationalized its energy sector and rebuilt itself as a petro power backed with a stockpile of nuclear warheads.

China and Russia as well as the rest of the BRICS have become important states in the world system. It is important not to lump them all together. China is a growing economic, military and geopolitical power. Russia is a vastly shrunken economic power, but possesses key oil and gas resources, and a powerful military. Others like Brazil are at best regional powers. Thus America's grand strategy of building an empire to oversee a neoliberal world system ironically planted the seeds of rising rivals and an emerging asymmetric multipolar world order.

America's Relative Decline

American imperialism has suffered through three crises that precipitated its relative decline and brought an end to its unipolar world order. First and foremost, it suffered an imperial crisis. Bush's wars and occupations in Central Asia and the Middle East, which were meant to lock in American dominance, backfired. The U.S. suffered defeats in both Afghanistan and Iraq, lost its ability to dictate policy in the Middle East, and provided space for its rivals, especially China to flex its muscle in Asia and throughout the world.

Second, the 2008 economic crisis brought an end to the neoliberal boom and further undermined U.S. hegemony. The great recession and global slump hit the U.S., Europe, and Japan particularly hard.

By contrast China implemented proportionately the largest stimulus package in the world and up until recently sustained its record double-digit growth rates. China's ongoing expansion also underpinned the continued expansion of countries like Brazil and Australia that supply it with raw materials and markets. China's boom enabled it to become even more geopolitically assertive.

The crisis also precipitated conflicts between America and its European allies. Against the wishes of the U.S., German imperialism imposed austerity not stimulus on the Eurozone. While this policy benefited German capital, especially its banks, it has led to stagnation in much of Europe and depression in Greece and the other so-called PIIGS (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain).

In contrast to Europe and Japan, the U.S. successfully restructured its economy to bring about an increasingly strong recovery. The U.S. state combined stimulus and austerity while private capital imposed yet another round of attacks on worker's wages, benefits and labor conditions.

But, unlike in the past, the U.S. recovery cannot drive a new expansion in the world system. Instead the global slowdown seems to be undermining the U.S. expansion. Regardless, the U.S. ruling class faces the reality of its declined position in the world economy and the fact that, if the current patterns hold, China will eventually overtake it as the world's largest economy.

Third, the U.S. has suffered a political crisis in DC. American capitalism's two capitalist parties are at each other's throats. The Republican's base in the petty bourgeois Tea Party and Christian fundamentalists enable it to win election but on a basis of opposing projects that capital supports from Obama and the Democrats. This gridlock has prevented the state from developing and leading a coherent strategy for American capitalism and imperialism.

Despite America's triple crisis, it remains the world's only super power. It has the largest economy, by far the largest military, and therefore most geopolitical power. But its relative decline means it is no longer in a position to impose its will as it was in the 1990s and its various international and regional challengers have more ability to assert their own interests.

But far from going quietly into the night, the U.S. is determined to maintain its global dominance. While DC has been hamstrung, the outlines of an American imperial project are clear, if implemented in a piecemeal fashion. The ruling class aims to maintain cheap labor, onshore sections of its industry, and run them based on relatively inexpensive and plentiful fracked oil and natural gas. Based on its refurbished economy, the U.S. hopes to reassert its power in the world.

The Struggle for Asia

This imperial reassertion is bringing it into conflict with the various rising powers, especially China and Russia. Gilbert Achcar rightly called the U.S. and these two antagonists the strategic triad of the post Cold War state system. At the same time, the U.S., in its weakened position, depends on deals with these powers not only in economics but also in crisis torn regions, where it cannot impose a solution on its own or through its proxies. While every corner of the world is in play, the key sites of conflict are in Asia, Europe and most importantly, the Middle East.

In Asia, the U.S. recognizes that it now faces a rising and potential global rival in China. Beijing oversees the world's second largest economy. It has integrated most of the Asian economies, scours the world for sites for resources and investments, and has become increasingly aggressive in imposing its will around the globe. It is rapidly expanding its military, especially its air and naval capacities, to protect and project its interests. Its assertions of power have triggered intense standoffs with a variety of states in Asia.

To counter China's rise, the U.S. is committed to implement Obama's "Pivot to Asia." It intends to consolidate its historic alliances with countries like Japan, lure new ones like India into its orbit, establish a trade block through the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement (TTP) that excludes China, and increase its military footprint in the region to police its growing conflicts.

Obama's imperial reassertion in Asia has in turn provoked China to become more forceful in defense of its interests. In Asia, it has matched America's "Pivot" with its own political, economic and military counter strategy. It is actively wooing countries into closer political ties, hoping that its economic power will trump any political schisms. It is trying to consolidate its own trade pact, the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP), which would exclude the U.S. And it has intensified its military build up.

It has also forged new geopolitical and economic formations to counter the U.S. In Central Asia, China and Russia have formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes most of the region and even Iran, to politically and economically integrate the area against the U.S.

China also led the formation of the BRICS alliance. It has established the BRICS's New Development Bank, based surprise, surprise, in Shanghai, China. It will provide loans to countries to develop their infrastructure, especially for projects that will extract and transport of raw materials for need by China.

Beijing has also become more assertive internationally in opposition to American interventionism. After supporting the U.S. war in Libya, China and Russia blocked the U.S. from launching a war against Assad in Syria. They have repeatedly opposed the American push for sanctions on Iran.

From Reset to Rivalry in Europe

A second key theater of conflict is Eastern Europe. American attempts to highjack the so-called "color revolutions" in Russia's former empire and bring the new governments into the European Union and NATO provoked Putin to re-assert Russian hegemony in the region. After America flirted with "resetting" its relations with Russia on positive terms, it now finds itself locked in what former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev has called a "New Cold War" conflict over the region.

This has spilled over into two hot conflicts between Russia and American proxies. The first confrontation erupted over Georgia's threat to join NATO. That precipitated a war between Russia and Georgia in 2008. Putin successfully stopped Georgia's accession to NATO and currently occupies the ethnic Russian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The second conflict is the explosive one in Ukraine. The U.S. tried to highjack a popular revolt against the government to secure control over the country and bring it into its orbit. Putin responded by arming ethnic Russians in the country and seizing Crimea. The U.S. has bankrolled the new Ukrainian regime and bullied the EU to impose sanctions to cripple Russia's economy. It is now engaged in intense brinkmanship with Moscow going so far as to consider overriding European objections and arming Ukraine's military.

America's New Cold War with Russia has driven Putin further into the arms of China. Beijing struck an enormous energy pact with Putin that will make China an alternative market to Europe for Russia's oil and natural gas. China has also given it large sums of money to lessen the impact of American and EU sanctions.

The intensifying competition between the U.S., China and Russia has impacted America's alliance with European powers. German imperialism had begun to assert itself as the EU's principal power, bucking the U.S. on economic policy of stimulus and instead imposed austerity throughout the Eurozone.

Germany and the rest of the EU also have developed significant political and economic ties with China and Russia. China is now the EU's second largest trade partner. And the EU has become dependent on Russian natural gas as well as cheap labor in Eastern Europe. Therefore Germany and the EU want to retain friendly relations with these two rivals to the U.S.

In reaction, America has sought to reassert its supremacy in Europe. It finally succeeded in pressuring Germany to relent and agree to stimulus measures, but Berlin made these conditional on Greece and others continuing to repay their loans and implement the structural adjustment of their economies.

Obama is pursuing a new trade deal with Europe called the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which would exclude China and Russia. It is a companion agreement with the TPP with Asia. By

consolidating these two trade deals, the U.S. hopes to lock Asia and Europe under its control for the benefit of its capital.

The U.S. has used the Ukraine crisis to pressure Germany and the EU into imposing sanctions against the Kremlin. It is developing its capacity to export fracked gas to provide an alternative to Russia's gas for the Europe's energy supplies. And it has turned to NATO to join it its repeated imperial adventures from Afghanistan to its new war on ISIS.

American imperialism now also confronts a revolt from below by those who have suffered from Germany's policy of austerity, especially in Greece where SYRIZA is mounting a challenge to neoliberal structural adjustment. All of this could undo the EU as it exists. Thus Europe has become a battleground for the US. It aims to further push into Russian territory, reassert its primacy in Europe, and contain and coopt the political expression of the revolt from below.

Occupation and Counter-Revolution in the Middle East

The third and perhaps most important theater of conflict is the Middle East. Ever since the U.S. succeeded Britain and France as the region's overlord after the Second World War, its imperial strategy has focused on controlling the Middle East to keep other powers out and ensure its hegemony as part of its project of global domination.

Obama had planned to wrap up the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, decrease America's military footprint in the region, and turn its attention to the "Pivot to Asia" and New Cold War with Russia. Instead, the region's metastasizing crises, especially the rise of ISIS, have forced Obama to re-prioritize the Middle East.

The region's crises cannot be overestimated. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia are all either failing states or being torn apart by sectarian civil wars. In each of these states, imperialist powers and regional ones are exacerbating the crisis by backing proxies to secure their interests. In contrast to the early 2000s, the U.S. is in a weakened position and therefore can no longer threaten invasion and regime change. It is instead implementing a balance of power strategy to stabilize the existing state system.

There are two causes of this crisis in the Middle East today. First, America's failed occupation of Iraq, which trapped it in a protracted counter-insurgency and prevented planned regime changes in Syria and Iran. In a desperate attempt to hold on to Iraq, the U.S. attempted to divide and conquer the insurgency along sectarian and ethnic lines.

It took advantage of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which targeted not only the occupation but also the Shia people and their religious sites. The U.S. encouraged Shia militias to join the new state security forces and attack AQI and the broader Sunni resistance. The horrific result of this policy was a sectarian civil war, which the Shia forces won and used to establish a Shia state.

The result of the occupation was disastrous for the U.S. and the Middle East. America emerged from the war with diminished control of the region. Ironically, its key enemy, Iran, was war's principal beneficiary. It added Iraq's Shia state to its bloc with Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and for a while Hamas in Gaza. This result has enflamed Iran's regional antagonists, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which have ceaselessly agitated for the U.S. to attack Tehran.

The second cause of the region's crisis is the counter-revolution against the Arab Spring. The revolts threatened the entire order, toppling the dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt and then spreading throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The students, workers, and peasants revolted against neoliberalism, class inequality, dictatorship, and imperialism.

Three counter-revolutionary forces suppressed the revolt—the imperialist powers, the existing states, and the reactionary Islamists like AQI's successor, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Initially the U.S. opposed the risings, but then tried to coopt them by allowing them to get rid of individual dictators in order

to save the deep states. It also flirted with highjacking the wider revolt and using it to get rid of unreliable “frenemies” like Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi.

But after its air war in Libya resulted in a failed state and the murder of its Ambassador, the U.S. retreated to a new strategy of shoring up existing order in the Middle East. As a result, after playing with the idea of toppling Assad in Syria, it opted for a “Yemeni solution,” calling for the dictator to step down, but preserving the existing state. It has since seemed to abandon even that strategy. It is now in a de facto alliance with Assad against ISIS.

Other lesser imperialist powers also bolstered the existing order. Russia and China have backed Assad in Syria as well as Iran. They aim to stop the U.S. from following up on its Libya intervention to replace their allies with American client states.

The second force of counter-revolution has been the region’s existing states. They turned to outright repression to drown the revolts in blood. Saudi Arabia repressed its Shia population and crushed the predominantly Shia uprising in neighboring Bahrain. Similarly, Assad launched a war against the Syrian Revolution, bombing the country’s people and dividing it along sectarian and ethnic lines.

At the same time the regional powers have attempted to manipulate the revolt to serve their ends, supporting various proxies in the uprising against their regional opponents. For example, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have supported various forces in the rising against Assad. On the other side, Iran and Hezbollah have rallied to support the Syrian regime.

The third force of counter-revolution is the Islamist terrorist formations like Al Qaeda and ISIS. Inside the revolts, they have undermined and murdered genuine revolutionaries trying to overcome sectarian division and unite the struggle against the regimes. ISIS in particular has played a completely reactionary role, massacring Alawites, Shia, Kurds, and Sunnis who dissent with their plan to impose a caliphate on Iraq and Syria. Tragically the region’s left has so far been unable to organize an alternative to these forces of counter-revolution.

America’s Balance of Power Strategy

The combination of imperialist occupation and counter-revolution has caused protracted crisis in perhaps the world’s most strategic region. To stabilize the Middle East, the U.S. retreated from Bush’s fantasy of regional regime change to a new balance of power strategy. It jockeys between its allies and rivals depending on the situation. But each time it leans in one direction, those on the other side complain and work to undermine their antagonists.

All of this has come to a head in Syria and Iraq with the rise of ISIS. It controls whole sections of both countries, aims to impose a Sunni Caliphate, and has wants to overthrow the entire Sykes-Picot division of the Middle East into separate nation states. ISIS is thus a direct threat to America’s aim of stabilizing the region.

In response, the U.S. has launched an air war against ISIS in both countries. In Syria, it is conducting bombing runs in a de facto alliance with Assad forces on the ground, which has taken the opportunity to crush what remains of the revolution. It also is training a small opposition force in Saudi Arabia meant to fight ISIS, not Assad. In Iraq, the U.S. is bombing ISIS in support of a ground offensive being carried out by Iraq’s Shia state and the Kurdish Regional Government’s Peshmerga militia.

To find support for this effort, the U.S. has doubled-down on its traditional alliances with Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. At the same time, the U.S. has been forced into cooperation with Syria, Iran, and Russia. It maintains this de facto agreement with Assad in Syria. It is using sanctions and negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program to bully it into cooperating to stabilize the Shia regime in Iraq. Even more bewildering, the U.S. has been forced to turn to Russia to establish negotiations with Assad for a peace settlement in Syria.

Saudi Arabia and Israel are completely opposed to America's pacts with their regional and international opponents. Both are adamantly opposed to Obama's negotiations with Iran. And, despite their alliance, they are increasingly working at cross-purposes with the Obama administration.

Israel slipped the American leash and, with the clear disapproval of the Obama administration, launched Israel's murderous war on Gaza. It also intensified its demands for military action against Iran's nuclear program. Netanyahu, who has long aligned Israel with the Republicans to pressure Obama on Iran, went so far in the 2012 election to campaign for Romney. And now he's bypassed the White House to accept a Republican invitation to address Congress on Iran.

The Saudis are using the drop in oil prices, which is largely the result of the global slump and drop in demand, to simultaneously support and counter American imperial policy. They have kept their current production levels to maintain low prices in order to bolster American efforts to hammer Russia, whose economy is utterly dependent on its oil and natural gas industry. This gives the U.S. an upper hand in its Cold War with Russia. The low prices also give the U.S. an advantage in negotiations with Iran.

But the Saudis also want to weaken the U.S. fracking industry, which they see as competition. And they are reluctant to let oil prices rise for fear that it will bolster Iran and Iraq's oil industry. The danger of Saudi policy for the U.S. is that it will drive Russia and Iran into a deeper relationship with China against the U.S. and its allies. That would undermine its balance of power strategy as well as its effort to prevent the rise of a rival alliance with independent access to oil and natural gas.

All of these contradictions are likely to sharpen as the U.S. prepares a major air offensive in conjunction with Iraq's military and Kurdish Peshmerga on the ground to re-conquer territory controlled by ISIS. That offensive may win temporary victories but it will neither stabilize Iraq nor the rest of the region. The only hope is the recovery of mass struggle from below led by a revolutionary alternative to all three forces of counter-revolution.

Marxism's Indispensable theory of Imperialism

The intensifying geopolitical conflict between the U.S. and its various rivals underscores the importance of the Marxist theory of imperialism for explaining the world and guiding our activism to change it. The classical Marxist theory of imperialism argues that capitalism leads to the development of monopolies that rely on their home states to prosecute their interest internationally, bringing them into inter-imperial conflict with other capitalist powers over the division and re-division of the world system.

This theory is the antidote to the various Kautskyan alternatives fashionable today that claim that the integration of the world economy has or is in the process of eliminating the tendency toward inter-imperial rivalry. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* contend that globalization has undermined the capacity of states to pursue imperialist projects in conflict with other powers.

William Robinson in *A Theory of Global Capitalism* argues that an emergent international capitalist class is in the process of building a transnational state through international institutions like the UN to govern a globalized economy. Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch contend in *The Making of Global Capitalism* that the American state has successfully incorporated the rest of the world's capitalist classes and their states into a seemingly invincible American Empire.

Whatever their differences, all agree that inter-imperial rivalry is not built into capitalism and today is a thing of the past. These positions over-generalize from the unipolar world order and cannot explain the emerging asymmetric multipolar one. Bush's wars and occupations in the Middle East disprove the Hardt and Negri's claims. The U.S. state conducted an imperialist intervention to establish client states in the region with the hope of ensuring American control of their oil and thereby the entire world system.

The re-emergence of inter-imperial rivalry especially between the U.S., China and Russia disproves William Robinson's claims as well as those of Panitch and Gindin. Instead of an emergent transnational capitalist class and state, we see national capitalist classes continuing to rely on their states to project their

power in the world. Nor are we witnessing an unrivalled American empire, but growing geopolitical conflict between the U.S. and its new rivals, especially China and Russia.

Lenin and Bukharin's theory remains vital for understanding a world system that, however unevenly integrated, remains divided into a hierarchy of competing blocks of capital represented by capitalist states competing for dominance between themselves and over oppressed nations.

Against Liberalism and Campism

The Marxist theory of imperialism help us avoid two traps the left could fall into today—one, liberal support for imperialist peace pacts and, two, campist support for lesser imperialists and states targeted by the U.S. We must reject both of these and instead support the right of national self-determination and build solidarity with the masses' revolt from below.

Liberals like Phyllis Bennis oppose American militarism. But they do not see the solution to today's various crises coming through revolution from below, but instead through peace negotiations involving the existing imperialist powers and lesser states. For example, in the crisis precipitated by ISIS, Bennis supports a ceasefire, an arms embargo, and a diplomatic solution.

This is not an anti-imperialist position. The U.S. is already engaged in elaborate negotiations to stabilize the existing state system in the Middle East. In Syria, such a negotiated solution would preserve Assad's state, whether he remains in power or not. Thus, liberal support for peace deals provides cover for imperialism and the regimes to preserve the existing order, the very one that oppresses students, workers and peasants.

Moreover, an arms embargo would only strengthen the existing states and their near monopoly on arms. It would also make it harder for the movement inside Syria to defend itself against Assad and the Kurds to defend themselves against ISIS. Instead of opposing American imperialism and the counter-revolution, Bennis' position ends up supporting it.

Most of the left rejects such liberalism. But many have fallen into the campist trap of supporting any and all enemies of the U.S. Russian Marxist Boris Kagarlitsky and Canadian Marxist Roger Annis came out in support for Russia and its proxies in Ukraine. Predictably Stalinist groups like the Party of Socialism and Liberation and Workers World support Russia, China, and Assad's Syria as anti-imperialist.

This is faux anti-imperialism that threatens to discredit Marxism as an alternative for revolutionaries in the Middle East and around the world. Russia and China are capitalist states that exploit their own population. They are also imperialists that oppress other nations in pursuit of their interests.

That is the only way to describe China's oppression of Tibet or their looting of numerous countries in Africa. And it is obviously Russia's project in Ukraine. The campist's support of lesser imperialists forces them to compromise the fundamental socialist principle of the right of oppressed nations like Tibet or Ukraine to self-determination.

The campist support of lesser states like Syria leads them to similarly terrible political conclusions. Let's be clear, Assad's regime like the other lesser states they support are is capitalist. They are in no way anti-imperialist. Assad for example has happily collaborated with Russian imperialism and is in de facto collaboration with the U.S. today against ISIS.

But given their support for these regimes, campists oppose revolutionary movements against the states they support. They denounce them as counter-revolutionary plots carried out by the U.S. Thus they did not support the Arab Spring across the board, but only against states that were allies of the U.S. They supported the revolt in Egypt, but opposed the one in Syria.

Even worse, campists support their chosen state's repression of popular revolution from below. They endorsed Assad's brutal war on the Syrian people. Such a position actually puts campists on the side of counter-revolution in Syria, Iran, North Korea, and other similar states opposed to the U.S.

Our tradition that raised the slogan, “Neither Washington Nor Moscow, but International Socialism,” is the genuine Marxist alternative to liberalism and campism. We oppose all imperialisms whether that of the U.S. or its lesser rivals. We defend the right of oppressed nations to self-determination no matter what “camp” they are in. And as internationalists we support genuine revolts of workers and peasants to fight for democracy and socialism. Thus, we are on the side of the revolt in Egypt, Syria and Ukraine.

That is an essential internationalist responsibility that Marxists have today. Because liberals and campists line up with the existing states, they will repel those striving for liberation. The genuine Marxist tradition of socialism from below will attract them and can play a role in helping revolutionaries, especially in the Middle East, construct an alternative to the forces of counter-revolution that have for now pushed back the struggle to transform the region.

Countervailing Factors and Inter-Imperial Rivalry

To conclude, the outline of the asymmetric world order is clear. The U.S. remains the sole super-power but it is increasingly conflict with China and lesser rivals like Russia. The Neoliberal boom and the global slump are sharpening those antagonisms and setting the world on a course for more inter-imperial rivalry.

That said there are two countervailing tendencies against such rivalry developing into open warfare. First, the main centers of capitalism accumulation in the world, including U.S. and China, are integrated economically. This means that the capitalist classes have economic interests in avoiding war if they can.

Second, while the U.S. has an overwhelming monopoly on arms, its main antagonists, China and Russia, both have nuclear stockpiles. The prospect of what during the Cold War was called “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD) mitigates the tendency toward military conflict. As a result, we should expect over the near term Cold War standoffs between the U.S. and its rivals played out in regions like Eastern Europe or the Middle East.

Nevertheless, the neoliberal boom’s restructuring of the world economy will inevitably entail a reordering of the balance of power between capitalist states in the system, in particular shifting power away from the U.S. toward China. That puts these powers on a collision course over the coming decades. All of this points to the essential project of building revolutionary Marxist parties throughout the world that can fight against imperialism and for a new international socialist world that will put an end to war for empire and profit.

Lessons on Membership Development

Through our experience as organizers of a year-long study group, the NC New Members’ Education Series and through leading a district membership development fraction in New York City, we’d like to contribute some things we learned along the way. While the the document titled *Towards Organized Political Education* in *Bulletin #2* went through some of the more concrete methods we used, the goal of this document is to put forward some broader approaches we learned in practice. We think the lessons we learned along the way put us in the best position to develop our membership by creating an engaging educational setting that raised the political level overall and facilitated a healthy culture of debate. This document is not necessarily suggesting that these approaches are not things that the ISO already practices, but is intended as more of a reflection on what *is* working alongside some ideas for how to further improve.

People learn in different ways

Education is the transfer of *understanding* to all conditions. The basic concept of education is not just the passing of information, but also the ability to apply that knowledge. That is, the merits of a good education cannot be tested by basic memory exercise or repetition of material. Rather it is the ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts that we seek in the ISO. We want our members to be able to use the Marxist method as a lens through which to understand the whole world. How do we achieve that?

A well-rounded Marxist education is best facilitated when it involves reading about history and theory, discussing and debating the reading, and testing out those ideas in practice through organizing. These can happen in many different settings: in branch meetings where we politically assess our world, movement and organization; public meetings and left events where we engage with our audience; discussions led by experienced speakers who reflect the invaluable experience our organization has accrued; smaller group discussions where people can speak multiple times and where the particular questions people have are taken up; movement work, actual organizing and involvement in struggles. Each of these experiences might resonate differently or be more or less effective for each comrade.

Studies about how much retention is increased by different methods of learning show roughly the same conclusions: on average when people either read something or listen to someone speak they retain less than when they both read and attend a talk. However, if they *discuss* the topic and actively participate in a discussion they retain an even greater rate of knowledge. People learn more by raising arguments, questions and articulating their understanding of the material than they do from simply hearing the "correct answers" to a set of pre-ordained questions. Further studies show the highest rate of retention is acquired through actually *teaching* the material.

Connecting theory with practice

In jobs trainings they find that new employees retain 90% of what they are taught after actually performing the tasks. As Marxists and activists this means that when we are actually organizing, building movements and branches etc. we learn the most. Similarly, when there is a rise in the level of class struggle we see an immediate correlation not only with a rise in general class consciousness but also our own members develop in great strides from the experience (recent examples Occupy, BLM).

The level of one's political education will affect how well one is able to organize, to shape the struggles and movements we're involved in and build the revolutionary left. When we organize, what and how much we learn is again informed by new questions, new experiences and new people we argue with. In struggle, whether we are successful or defeated, there are always lessons for us to learn.

Importance of systematic and collective development

When the level of class struggle is low, the ISO is almost singular in its dynamic and political discussions. In the absence of more widespread political debate to inform us and teach us to argue our politics, our own internal collective and group education is crucial. And in that we need to be systematic and prioritize the specific questions of members.

The role of cadre in these settings is not only to patiently explain, argue with and educate newer members. Cadre should also encourage new members to take an *equal* amount of responsibility in organizing (and at times leading) discussions and in their own education and development. Thinking through what questions they have, cadre can help find readings and also prepare speakers (newer or more experienced) to facilitate those discussions.

A national education program (such as the NC's New Members series) connects the political education of members in smaller branches to those in the largest districts. In the districts, we can find greater collaboration and cohesion in our political foundation when members from all over the district participate in study groups together and develop in small "cohorts" that engage with each other over an extended period of time. Having a balance of experience in the group without over-weighting it with cadre encourages members, who would otherwise defer to more experienced cadre, to take up the questions being posed. **A collective "cohort" model of education**, as well as a systematized approach, in which we have thought through the readings we want our membership to prioritize, as well as gearing the readings toward the particular participants, allows us to create a "Marxist school" within the organization that not only develops the most amount of people, but also the strongest Marxists. It yields quantitative and qualitative results.

Creating safe spaces

The ISO's membership has and will hopefully always have a range of political experience. For newer members, or working class people with less time to devote to steeping themselves in the ins and outs of a

Marxist education, they are often in spaces (branch meetings, study groups, conferences) with members with far more experience articulating political arguments than they have. This range of development will always be the case, and while we want comrades to learn to engage at all levels over time, there's something to be said for giving comrades a "safe space" to practice making arguments with a cohort of other comrades. Study groups outside of branch meetings can be a great way to bring together a group at a similar political level and give them the opportunity to test out arguments with one another, practice saying an argument out loud that they may have only ever rehearsed in their head and attempt to answer each other's questions, without the pressure of "getting it right".

While we want comrades to have the confidence to make arguments in any ISO venue, the material reality of many people's lives, especially people of color and women, is that they haven't been socialized to have the confidence to believe their ideas matter. Thus making a strong political statement in a room full of people for the first time can be very intimidating.

Empowering people to speak

Practicing articulating a thought or argument out loud is the only way to learn how to do just that. Because our organization strives to train members to go out into the world and lead movements, recruit members, and generally be a pole of Socialist attraction in whatever space they occupy (work, school, etc) learning to have **confidence to speak** out loud and make strong arguments is of utmost importance. Therefore putting a lot of emphasis on this skill from the beginning of someone's membership is key.

Of course we cannot *force* a comrade to speak, but we can help equip them to do so by always making sure to have pre-meetings before an event we are participating in (movement meeting, SW sale or tabling, left event), by sending out SW articles before branch meetings, by thoughtful chairing, supportive buddy work, etc.

In New York we've tested a few other methods of making larger settings and public discussions accessible to more people in the room with much success. Some examples include: **a go-around or a turn-and-talk** at the beginning of a meeting, which gives comrades an opportunity to quickly talk through what they are thinking about the topic being discussed before the larger discussion begins. It can also be a great way to draw out questions early on. Another method that is used often to help level the playing field of a space is the use of progressive stack or having the chair explicitly solicit contributions from traditionally marginalized people in the room.

Toward a healthy culture of debate

Having a healthy culture of debate is obviously very important in a democratic Leninist organization, where we want the most number of opinions to be expressed in order to make the best decision possible to guide our way forward. This is the only way to create a vibrant, engaging, and truly democratic organization.

Alongside formal political education and development through study groups, etc, which help give people the **confidence to participate in such debates**, we should also always be thinking about some of the other methods that help facilitate such a culture in all spaces. This requires all comrades, but particularly more experienced comrades who have the experience of organizing and training, to **be very tuned in to who their audience is when making an argument**. Successfully winning someone to an argument, means meeting them where they are at and understanding where they come from in order to understand why they might have the ideas they have. Adjusting our tone or how we phrase an argument does not mean tempering down the content of it, but is instead a materialist approach of interacting with one another, whereby we understand that we each come into this organization with our own unique set of life experiences and flowing from that our own unique set of ideas.

In the absence of a broader organized left and a widespread political culture of debate, inexperienced members often struggle to articulate arguments. It is however important that members raise arguments on comradely ground, whereby all parties respect the dedication and hard work that has been dedicated to building this flourishing democratic organization, and assume the highest responsibility to maintaining that healthy culture.

Conclusion

Flowing from these points, and in addition to some things already mentioned, here are some things we suggest as we develop our membership:

- Make clear to all, and especially new, members how important their contributions are to developing a democratic culture where all voices are heard. “Buddies” can be instrumental in this. Speak to your buddy before meetings so they can figure out with you what they want to say.
- Encourage new members to take ownership over their own education by taking an *equal* amount of responsibility in organizing, and at times leading, discussions. Working with newer members, cadre can help identify questions, choose readings and prepare less experienced members to speak.
- Make sure it’s not always the most experienced people giving theoretical or historical talks.
- Use the NC New Members’ Education program as a model for how to set up education plans that take up the questions we face and allow comrades to have ongoing discussions where they apply a Marxist analysis in a variety of contexts. Use these plans flexibly and adjust them in ways that make sense locally.
- In larger districts bring together comrades with a balance of experience to encourage the development of “cohorts” that can learn and grow in tandem with one another.
- Allow and encourage people at all political levels to raise as many questions and arguments as necessary in order to help comrades learn how to articulate their ideas and work toward developing a healthy culture of debate. Be conscientious about the political culture we wish to cultivate and the shared goal of building a revolutionary socialist organization.

It has been shown in practice that the ISO is able to train its members in ways that far surpass other organizations. The ISO strives to be a welcoming organization where working class radicals and students can join, have clear channels for growth, and be trained to go out into the world equipped with a clear Marxist perspective on what they see around them. Though other things such as branch roles and movement work also play a large role in political development, we would like to put these thoughts forward as things to keep in mind when engaging in education and political development.

Student Work at UT Austin

The Austin ISO’s shift to building on the UT Austin campus began in the late spring of 2014, with the “A World to Win” meetings that branches were doing nationally. It was our biggest public meeting in a long time, bringing out 35-40 new people. This confirmed the student perspective, that young people were responding to the horrors of capitalist crisis with interest in radical ideas. After this meeting, we failed to integrate any of these new contacts through the variety of ways to do so: contact meetings, paper sales, study groups, etc. This is a problem we are still trying to overcome - we are repeatedly able to bring people out to a public meeting, but do not have the branch infrastructure to integrate or recruit them. This lack of infrastructure is partly a result of the faction fight, which had a destabilizing effect on many branches. Our goal in Austin is to address the recruitment and infrastructure problems simultaneously, to use the recruitment of new, young folks to reinvigorate branch life.

The infrastructure problem continued into the fall semester, and we also ran into an additional problem - the political quality of our contacts varied greatly. Some were outspoken Marxists, for whom integration was much easier. Most, however, were at a low level of political development that did not fit with the national push for quickened recruitment. We met contacts who were not pro-choice, saw the ISO as just another student organization and were not convinced of the need for intense struggle (often a byproduct of middle class upbringing), were entirely new to radical politics and thus underdeveloped, had radical politics but through the lens of identity politics, were more committed to other organizing (such as BDS), etc. There were two methods to work through this problem: engage these contacts to develop them further, and continue to hold public meetings to meet other people. We continued our success with the second method.

Our lack of infrastructure made the first difficult, but we were intermittently successful at raising the level of politics with events like the Marxism Day School - two of our recent recruits attended that event.

There are two shifts that are occurring or have occurred that are moving our branch into a better posture regarding recruitment. The first is that our sustained activity on campus has given the ISO renewed “cred” among student leftists. This activity is not just holding the big public meetings, but also our involvement in helping to build the fledgling Palestine solidarity campaign on campus, and Black Lives Matter off campus. Even students who are not immediate targets of recruitment come to branch meetings or approach comrades for political discussion - in short, we have developed a periphery, which was not the case even a couple of months ago. This periphery has helped to redevelop our infrastructure, with consistent paper sales, a study group, and lively branch discussions underway - this process is only beginning, but with a better perspective than in the past. The second shift is the Black Lives Matter movement, which the Austin ISO has had roots in for a while due to our founding of the People’s Task Force in Austin, an organization that is campaigning around Larry Jackson, who was shot dead by Austin police in 2013. This movement has energized and radicalized a large segment of young people, and we have met several major contacts out of that work. We recently had a public meeting on Cops, Class, and Race that brought out over 80 people.

There are plenty of issues that we continue to encounter, and the resolution of each is not yet clear. These issues include unprincipled anti-ISO attacks from other leftist organizations (which influence our contacts’ view of the ISO), we are only at the beginning of rebuilding our branch infrastructure, our division of labor is still primarily in movement work rather than student work, and even our politically strong contacts still need some convincing of actually joining the ISO. However, our perspective is that these issues can be overcome, which is appropriately optimistic when considering that the state of the branch today is incredibly improved over just a few months ago. The Austin ISO’s experience confirms the national perspective on student recruitment, but as in Austin, branches need to adapt their recruitment posture to the local political environment.

Organization in the Black Lives Matter Movement: Ferguson to Chicago

It would be incorrect to indicate that the murder of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer was the absolute beginning of a new movement against racism and police brutality. However, it is undoubtedly the case that in the wake of the not-guilty verdict, a radicalizing strata of those who came out in protest began a crystallization into a number of new Black radical organizations. The existence of these organizations and also the formation and reformation of new groups as a result of the Ferguson uprising were an important component allowing the protests for justice for Mike Brown and Eric Garner to maintain themselves beyond the mostly spontaneous eruptions on the streets of Canfield and West Florissant. It is these organizations that are attempting, in very different ways, to apply a pro-organizational character to a developing national movement. This development will not be a linear progression as groups will break apart, merge, and reform and recombine in different ways. This progressive transformation will be composed of multiple actors on the national scale who are attempting to articulate the movement in an organized form. Getting a sense of these forces will be helpful for our being able to relate and help play a role in this process. This document will briefly touch upon this dynamic and share some of the experiences that we have had in Chicago organizing with Black Youth Project 100 and We Charge Genocide.

New Forms

It is important to note that this rise of new organizations is directly related to a failure of leadership in the traditional black establishment as a result of deferment to the Democratic party. With the uprising in Ferguson it became clear to organizers on the ground that for this moment to be sustained, and in order for a new movement to be born from it collective organization had to be developed. The character of the Ferguson uprising suggests that this realization did not materialize from preexisting organizers/organizations on the ground in St Louis alone. However, organizations such as Organization

For Black Struggle (OBS) were intentional and integral in making this point. OBS is a black nationalist group with strong ties to FRSO(soft) founded in 1980. In the vacuum of traditional liberal organizations in Missouri was formed the coalition of Hands Up United. Hands Up United is a coalition of largely Missouri based organizations which include OBS, Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment(an Alinsky influence group formed in the wake of Occupy), Lost Voices(a formation of youths who camped on Florissant), and Millennial Activists United. Organizations from other states like Dream Defenders from Florida and Freedom Side from Ohio (both also formed after Trayvon.) Hands Up United played a leading role in influencing the direction of the movement locally, nationally, as well as internationally in terms of their attendance in Geneva, Switzerland for the 2014 convening of the United Nations Committee Against Torture. This collection of new post-Trayvon organizations reflect a more militant character and a more radical critique of structural racism is often present. It is not uncommon to hear stirring rebukes of capitalism from the platform.

#BlackLivesMatter

Black Lives Matter began as a social media campaign and as a hashtag in 2012 after the Trayvon Martin murder, and a rally cry in response to the venomous anti-Black racism that permeates our society. Black Lives Matter has since become a loose national organization which joined a coalition with St Louis organizers of Ferguson October (OBS, Hands Up United, Millennial Activists United, Lost Voices/Found Voices). Black Live Matter and the organizers within it have been instrumental in shifting the lens of anti-racist struggle from narrowly focusing on the extra-judicial killings of black people by police and vigilantes and black nationalism, which merely call on black people to love black, live black, and buy black while keeping straight cis black men at the front of the movement. Instead black lives matter has focused their work on affirming the lives of black queer and trans people, disabled, and black-undocumented people, people who live imperfect lives, and women. In short Black Lives Matter attempts to center the lives of those marginalized within the movement for black liberation. The intentionality of this particular orientation helps to broaden the conversation around state sponsored violence on black people while making clearer connection to the systemic racism under capitalism.

Black Youth Project 100

In Chicago, the ISO has been able to cultivate a growing relationship with the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) Chicago chapter. The Black Youth Project is a national organization that got its start with the creation of online spaces that attempted to engage, empower, and spark debate among black youth on a political level. Originally an online platform/hub, started by University of Chicago professor Cathy Cohen, it produced research about the ideas, attitudes, decision making and lived experiences of black youth. In the wake of the Trayvon Martin murder one hundred youth made the decision to organize a more activist manifestation of the Black Youth Project that would be “dedicated to creating Justice and Freedom for all Black people.” BYP100 is set up as a membership-based, dues-paying organization with chapters in about five cities. It aims to develop black leadership and engage in recruitment and training of activists to take part in initiatives and campaigns. The politics within it are very mixed, running the gamut from liberal softness on the Democratic party who see this as a lobbying vehicle, to a left wing who favor a change characterized as revolutionary (though inconsistent defined). It is not uncommon that explicitly anti-capitalist viewpoints are voiced from the platform and its identified Black Queer Feminist lens through which it strives to articulate the intersections of oppression. The contradictions of its politics aside (it receives some funding from large national foundations and the decidedly ruling-class University of Chicago) it has attracted all manner of young Black people who, are radicalizing by this political period and see radical (though undefined) organization as a vehicle to enact change. This attraction, its militant rhetoric, and the space that it occupies as a political vehicle organizing against police violence has placed it at the vanguard of the organizing in the city.

Our relationship with BYP100 has developed over years, through ongoing relationship building and political discussion with key members who are in leadership positions both in the Chicago chapter and the national organization. Our entry into the organization has only recently come about through our involvement in We Charge Genocide as we note below. Though it became clear that a few of the UN delegates and organizers within the Black Lives Matter movement were able identify police brutality as part of a larger structural underpinning that allows capitalism to flourish.

The persistence of the call for black voices to be centered in this struggle is resultant of many things. Namely, the understanding among many of the organizers that youth of color are the ‘experts of their own oppression.’ It is my opinion that this particular tactic might come from a motivation to preserve and reaffirm the right of Black people to exercise self determination and self organize within the black population. They begin to shake off the chains of state coercion, and the ideological and physical domination of the conventional attitudes of the elite. This is an expression as CLR James puts it, “to demand the control, both actual and symbolic of their own future destiny.” In the failure of existing black leadership and the contention for new leadership (or broad leadership) centering black voices has helped, and will continue to help, construct a training ground for new, more radical organized leadership. Furthermore, these calls for black lead marches, organizations, etc demonstrates self determination in practice, instills confidence and inspiration among black masses promoting increased participation from the poor and working class masses (which we are beginning to see). It is an articulation that reflects the need for the movement to develop young Black activist cadre. In Chicago, we have experienced a certain exclusion of white organizers/organizations from the ‘organizing table.’ In order to overcome this there needs to be a demonstration of intentional practice of welcoming and defending self determination and leadership of black organizations by multiracial and white organizations, which Comrades have done quite well. This has helped to set us apart as an organization that is serious and dedicated to Black liberation in accordance with Lenin’s writings on self determination as the self-organizing of a marginalized people toward their own liberation. It is through our demonstration of solidarity both in practice and in theory that the ISO has (in Chicago) built a level of trust within the movement and will continue to do so going forward. Additionally a national discussion continuing to develop both a strategic approach to this as well as theoretically untangling Black nationalism from identity politics will be important for our work.

We Charge Genocide

The Chicago district over the past couple years has taken an active approach to carrying out the perspective of prioritizing the struggle against anti-Black racism. Both through instilling these politics in struggles that we engage in (the CTU strike and battle against school closures) and through a fraction of individuals established in the wake of Trayvon that has related to many projects in the city from the establishment of a chapter of the Illinois Campaign to End the New Jim Crow, to a district project on doing weekly paper sales on the majority Black south side of the city.

Through endorsing, building and participating and having a speaker at a march against the school-to-prison pipeline we were invited to an initial organizing meeting in June of 2014 with a number of individual activists and groups for a formation that would come to be called We Charge Genocide. This clarified for the district that the orientation of the work was best through the audience attracted by this grouping as opposed to a reliance of a geography-only approach. This first meeting was attended by 38 people from a variety of political tendencies from anarchist prison solidarity groups, pacifist and social justice NGOs such as Amnesty and American Friends Service Committee, to campaign groups like Chicago Coalition Against Racism and Political Repression, and the Sex Workers Outreach Project, to liberal groupings like Chicago Votes. Of importance was also that Black Youth Project 100 had a strong presence in the group. The call was initiated by an activist and writer who is a fixture in the abolitionist scene in the city and is involved in a number of education and workshop based projects. Two comrades attended and it should be noted that 30 of the 38 were people of color. The basic outline of the work to be carried out emulated the 1951 We Charge Genocide campaign that took a report and testimony to the United Nations and made complaint to the body for explicit and complicit responsibility by the U.S. government in racism and violence committed against Blacks. (It should be noted that the 1951 campaign was initiated by the Civil Rights Congress, a successor to the International Labor Defense group founded by the CP.)

Throughout the summer organizing was conducted via monthly meetings that drove the work of generating a report about police practices in Chicago, an aggressive fundraising campaign that resulted in the most successful activist fundraising I have ever witnessed, a series of public forums designed to both gather testimony from youth who encountered the police violence and to publicly promote the campaign, a social media campaign, and a series of Cop Watch trainings. All of the work, and how much it resonated would gain further significance when Ferguson broke out in the late summer.

We as the ISO (until Ferguson broke out we were the only far-left group that had a presence) were able to build strong relationships and take on positive role in the organizing by doing the following:

1. Doing the work: From the first meeting we had an approach (developed through pre-meetings and assessments) of always taking on tasks both in meetings and outside of this. This allowed us to demonstrate a commitment to building the group and gave us ability to play an active role in politically and organizationally shaping it. We took an active role in two key areas, doing the Cop Watch trainings, and organizing the forums and rallies.
2. Finding places to contribute politically: Much of the organizing space was de-politicized in the sense that specifics of the day-to-day of doing the work and report backs. We attempted to inject as much politics into space that we could in ways such as in “check-ins” bringing Palestine during Israel’s assault on Gaza, to arguing to for lead-ins at forums and the like to always lay out the political context. We have also firmly argued for more political actions such as protests and forums which has cut against a political tendency that diminishes these activities in favor of trainings and service provision.
3. Demonstrating solidarity and the importance of Black cadre: While much of the politics present in this organizing is infused with different forms of identity politics we were able to go about demonstrating solidarity in building political relationships in the long term. Of the two comrades who related one of which was of color. This paired with the approach described above of a political understanding of why Black voices should be centered was effective in arguing for solidarity in a concrete fashion. This has greatly diminished any race or red baiting (though not extinguished) that we have experienced in some other areas and led us to playing an active leadership role. The gains we made we pre-established through a conscientious process of developing of the Black comrade over the first year of his membership in the organization and a long term approach to working with and building strong political relationships with key people in the organizing.
4. A tactical and continuous approach to projecting the ISO: We continuously tried to build upon the relationships we built by announcing ISO meetings and public forums. During this time we were able to have two forums on Ferguson one of which had an ISO speaker and a BYP100 speaker which drew approximately 90 people, we had a forum with Aaron Dixon that was publicized by WCG which drew nearly 140, and had a rally for Mike Brown that we as the ISO organized with BYP100 and Students for Justice in Palestine. We organized joint forums with aldermanic candidates we were working with and an ISO endorsed candidate was the first endorser of the BYP100s ‘Agenda to Keep Us Safe’ political programme. An active approach in looking for platforms for collaboration continues to deepen political relationships.

Buoyed by very successful monthly organizing meetings (consistently attended by around 30 people), and electrified by the Ferguson uprising We Charge Genocide was able to send a group of youth of color as a delegation to the United Nations to both testify and engage in protest tactics that drew [considerable media](#) attention because of both what happened in Geneva, Switzerland and what was going on in Ferguson, MO. A comrade was a part of that delegation which serves as a testament to the role we played in the organizing. He also was invited to be a member of BYP100 as an open member of the ISO.

This set up the organizing after the non-indictment decisions both in Missouri and New York in which the brunt of the organizing came from WCG and BYP100. They have thus become *the* groups that are doing the work in the city. While in the weeks after the non-indictment a number of spontaneous protests popped up, they were not sustained. WCG and BYP100 became the place where people went to get the lead on what next and a near continuous series of requests for speaking and endorsement of projects now lays before us.

Forward

The landscape of the Black Lives Movement in the city in the months to come has settled back into the major players taking on campaigns. We Charge Genocide’s energy has focused on a bill in the City

Council to get reparations for victims of police torture meted out under ex-police superintendent Jon Burge. BYP100 is very busy with integrating a large new membership, an orientation towards the upcoming aldermanic elections, and a burgeoning campaign against racially discriminate marijuana arrests. The ongoing Black Lives Movement will undoubtedly breathe more life into these campaigns. However cohesion as a movement is important and spaces like the Watching the Watchers conference that WCG hosted that drew 350 people in late January is the way ahead. Arguing for political spaces to assess and talk about the politics and perspective of the movement and attempting to integrate new activists into playing a day-to-day role in building the movement will be key. The next plan for WCG is to do this very thing and we are importantly positioned to collaboratively be a part of carrying this out. The Black Lives Movement has a decidedly pro-organizational character though the definition of the organization is far from established. Our orientation on developing cadre of color, building organization and patiently constructing strong political relationships set us up to be at the very center of organizing. What is to come is not certain but we will certainly have a role in shaping it.

Brian B & Todd S, Chicago

Ups and downs of campus branch building at UC Berkeley

The Bay Area decided to launch stand-alone branch in fall of 2012 after recruiting a couple of promising students at UC Berkeley (Cal) toward the end of Occupy. Over the next two years the branch struggled to cohere and was ultimately paralyzed by personal and political conflicts. We decided to retreat and regroup as a fraction of the Oakland branch just as the organization as a whole attempted to reorient to campuses. There were - and remain - serious objective challenges to building at Cal in particular; one of which being that it is an extremely dynamic atmosphere with no shortage of activities or organizations, political or otherwise. These challenges will not be overcome in a semester or year but we have moved in this direction by launching an independent branch again at the beginning of 2015.

We recognized in 2012 that it would not be enough to simply be the only radical group on campus to attract radicalizing young people: there are two other serious but small Trotskyist groups on campus, along with a smattering of other left-sects. There are Black Student Union, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Fossil Free Cal chapters along with a center-left Student Government, a militant left-led Graduate Student Union, active staff unions (one of which I am a member) who hire student organizers, and a shape-shifting left/progressive coalition that brings many of these forces together to fight the neoliberalization of the university in various forms.

Our branch attempted to relate to many of the groups listed above - each with their own challenges that I won't try to expound here - in various ways at various times, although I would argue without a real collective agreement or understanding of what we were trying to accomplish beyond 'implanting' ourselves on campus, building relationships with other groups, and trying to meet and recruit radicalizing students. We were not able to successfully recruit *and* attempt to implant ourselves in broader campus organizing - at least partly in my view because we lacked a framework for understanding how recruitment fit into a larger strategy for leading struggles on campus and how that fit into the larger project of the ISO.

Our launch meetings each semester - which varied from 'Case for Socialism' to 'The Global Struggle Against Rape' - generally brought out a dozen or so non-members but the few promising contacts at the beginning of each semester all gradually drifted away. We only recruited one person over this period who quickly left but remains a very active member of the graduate student union. Our few student comrades threw themselves into broader organizing but we struggled to plug in the entire branch, who were mostly non-students. This led to political conflict in the branch that was expressed in interpersonal conflicts that could ultimately not be resolved.

We re-launched as a standalone branch this semester after recruiting 2 new members as a fraction last-semester and within a month have recruited 3 more with still another layer who we hope to recruit later this semester. Why did things seem to turn around for us so quickly? For one, a week-long building occupation

followed by massive student protests in support of Black Lives Matter at the end of the year definitely raised political consciousness on campus. We also were more aggressive about setting up contact meetings and asking folks to join - being pleasantly surprised to find willing new members in place of the ambivalence we'd experienced in past semesters. This has come at the cost of stepping back from active participation in broader campus organizing, which is something we hope to return to later this semester.

Despite the initial success of our new campus perspectives, challenges and questions remain: How to strike a balance between recruitment, membership development, and participating in broader organizing on campus in the short-term? How do we develop a strategy for building a student movement as part of rebuilding the left in the US in the medium-term?
