Pre-convention Bulletin #5 / December 2013

for members only

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Inside this Bulletin

This is the fifth pre-convention bulletin to be published in preparation for the ISO's 2014 National Convention, which will be held in Chicago on February 15-17. (Please note that these dates are the Saturday, Sunday and Monday of Presidents' Day weekend, which will hopefully make it easier for delegates who have Monday off from school or work.)

The national convention is the organization's highest decision-making body. It is our main opportunity to generalize the experience of local branches across the whole organization, review and assess the ISO's work over the past year and map out our tasks for the coming year. The convention also elects the ISO's national leadership bodies.

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.

The convention is open only to delegates and invited guests,

subject to approval by the steering committee. This is why the *pre*-convention discussion period is so important—it lays the basis for the discussion at the convention and gives all members an opportunity to contribute to it.

Every member should be involved in the pre-convention discussions that will take place in the coming weeks in order to ensure the fullest and most democratic debate possible. Branches should begin discussions of documents and debates beginning with this first bulletin. We will produce as many bulletins as needed as other documents are received.

All members who are in good standing are invited to contribute documents and/or resolutions to the pre-convention discussion bulletins. Please try to keep your contribution to 2,000 words or less. We can make exceptions to this rule for documents on major political issues, but experience has shown that comrades are far less likely to read a longer document than a shorter one on most subjects. So the shorter your document is—and the sooner it

arrives—the more likely it will be read and considered by the largest number of members.

Your branch can choose to hold pre-convention discussions at branch meetings or as events separate from branch meetings. **Please be sure, however, to limit all pre-convention discussions (and documents) ONLY TO DUES-PAYING MEMBERS OF THE ISO.** If you believe that close contacts will benefit from the pre-

convention discussion, then encourage them to join the ISO and take part!

If you are planning on submitting a document and/or resolution, please send notification to bulletin@internationasocialist.org so we can plan bulletin production. Documents themselves can be submitted to the same address.

Thanks!

Theory, cadre, and continuity: Building revolutionary organization today

We are living through a peculiarly contradictory historical period. World capitalism experienced its worst crisis since the 1930s, a crisis that even in the recovery is devastating the lives of workers and dispossessed throughout the world. While the crisis brought neoliberal policies into question not only among ordinary people but even in mainstream circles—and prompted many of us to see the crisis as the beginning of neoliberalism's demise—the ruling class response to the crisis has been to reinforce (albeit modified) neoliberal restructuring strategies and to push through even more intensive assaults on the living standards and organizations of the working class.

At the same time the crisis has provoked a substantial resistance, from the Greek general strikes to the Arab revolutions, and from the Chilean and Quebec student rebellion to Occupy and the Brazilian mass transit protests. This resistance is not yet of a sufficient size, level of organization, and political weight yet to weaken or reverse the ruling class offensive; even in Greece, which has experienced a much higher level of class struggle. In Egypt, where a movement of millions successfully toppled the Mubarak dictatorship, counterrevolution is now ascendant, as the generals reassert political control. In Egypt, where a movement of millions successfully toppled the Mubarak dictatorship, counterrevolution is now ascendant, as the generals reassert political control, and the Syrian revolution has devolved into a seemingly intractable military conflict that is being exploited by regional and international powers. In addition, the rise in popularity of far right forces, for example in Greece and France, show how the mass disillusion in traditional politics leads not only to a leftward radicalization, but also to the growth of the right.

 A striking feature of this period has been the continuing decline of the traditional left. Stalinism, as we know, has largely dwindled to insignificance in most of the world (Nepal and India notwithstanding). Social democracy has fully accommodated itself over the past decades to neoliberalism. The far left has not yet, on an international scale, experienced rebirth, and in some cases is in retreat, exemplified by the crisis the New Anticapitalist Party in France, but also, and perhaps most prominently for us, the fragmentation of the Socialist Workers' Party in Britain. Moreover, many (though not all) of the efforts to create new

broad left alternatives to the betrayals of social democracy have run aground.

When class struggle is ascendant and widespread, it gives hope and naturally spreads ideas of solidarity, unity, and self-confidence. Such was the case during the height of the Egyptian revolution, and during Occupy's brief meteoric rise and fall. Unfortunately, these struggles have subsided or are in a phase of retreat, and new mass struggles are yet to appear on the horizon—though movements that do not yet have a mass character, like the low-wage workers' struggles at Wal-Mart and at fast food restaurants, are yet another sign of what may be to come.

We have had in the United States a virtually uninterrupted onslaught on the working class and its organizations for more than three decades. There have been significant new shoots of class struggle, such as the CTU strike, but they have not yet translated into the kind of sustained resistance that could revitalize the labor movement and its organizations. A new consciousness of class inequality, of rudimentary anticapitalism, is beginning to emerge. But the state of the class struggle and of the left, both organizationally and politically, is as of yet insufficient to illuminate a clear political alternative.

In this complicated setting, many left-wing activists today feel that the "old models" don't work anymore. In some cases, this means a casting about for ideas that are equally as "old" as those they are rejecting is beside the point—for example, varieties of anarchism and autonomism. What is certain is that Marxism (and therefore the ISO) is often part of what is identified as "old" and outdated.

The relative weakness still of the politics of class solidarity means that much of the radicalization today is overladen with middle-class moralism and infused still with ideas that were common in the previous period, including postmodernism's rejection of "grand narratives" and the emphasis on personal experience. As the NC report back noted, there is a strong post-Occupy pull of "anarcho-liberalism," and of moralism and identity politics that permeates the new radicalization. These realities—as well as the demoralization that has followed our intense involvement in struggles that have now disappeared or

subsided—have also had an impact on the ISO.

What to reevaluate?

Many years before the latest crisis in the Socialist Workers' Party, the ISO had been reassessing its political practice and its theories. Indeed, the ISO's divergence from the SWP and the International Socialist Tendency (IST) led to the expulsion of the ISO from the tendency in 2001, after which it has spent more than 12 years reassessing its approach to building a revolutionary organization. Though some critics of the ISO today are arguing that the ISO has suffered from a similar malady to the SWP—an overblown evaluation of the period combined with an unwillingness to come to terms with it—these arguments are in fact borrowed from the very same case we made in 2000 regarding the problems of the SWP. We wrote, for example:

> *The perspective developed by the SWP over the latter half of the 1990s—summed up in the phrase the "1930s in slow motion"—and the political and organizational conclusions that were derived from this view, have been a disaster in Britain and internationally….As Lenin said—and Cliff always emphasized—revolutionaries should not fear to make mistakes. The danger is failing to admit and correct them. Tragically the SWP leadership has never done this—even though its catastrophist perspectives led to a massive decline in its membership…. Unwilling to come to terms with its failed perspective—with its catastrophism—the SWP leadership has pushed a series of organizational formulas to try and solve its problems.*

The decade that followed saw the ISO reassess its policies and practices that it had adapted while it was part of the IST. As a result, we developed sharply different approaches, both in terms of our theory and our political practice, for example in our understanding of capitalist crisis. More recently, the ISO has undertaken re-examination of aspects of our theory of women's oppression, as Sharon Smith and Tithi Bhattacharya incorporated the work of Black and Marxist feminists on intersectionality and social reproduction.

In the midst of this reevaluation of our theory came the most recent crisis in the SWP—which defends its deplorable practices in the name of Leninism—taking place against the broader background of the decline of the revolutionary left and the ongoing weakness of the organized working-class in the advanced countries.

This has led to somewhat of a disorientation of the ISO—including of its cadre. The result is that some members are questioning our basic political assumptions. What is it that remains valid in our theory, our politics, and our practice? What should be questioned, what should be changed, what should be reaffirmed? What are the core features of our project? Often comrades have found it difficult to decide how the appropriate lines should be drawn in order to assess and answer these questions.

The necessity, and limits, of theoretical re-evaluation

Capitalism is not static. Its core feature—competitive accumulation based upon the exploitation of wage labor—means that it is by nature a system alternating between dynamism, disequilibrium, and decay. Both objective changes in the structure of capitalism--in elements of the superstructure, in the relations between classes—and the subjective way people experience those changes and the developing interplay between those aspects, requires the application of new analyses by Marxists. Marxism is of necessity a dialectical theory, which sees capitalism as a system whose own inbuilt dynamics and contradictions will lead either to its ruin or its revolutionary transformation. As Marx once wrote, the Marxist dialectic "regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence."

Throughout its history, Marxism has been able to study and absorb the best of bourgeois science and academic thought, while discarding those aspects that, because of their tendency toward apologetics or obscurantism, must be critiqued and rejected. We are fond of quoting Marx on how political economists, who at an earlier stage produced important though limited insights into the nature of emerging capitalism, had became bourgeois "hired prizefighters." Marxism has been open to studying and drawing out what kernel of truths and insights are useful in the so-called social "sciences."

Marxism is also historical, and understand that its own theories were, and continue to be developed, in the cauldron of struggle. Marxism both reacts to and reacts back upon those movements. There had been no serious discussion of the mass strike until they exploded onto the scene in Russia between 1903 and 1905. The development of deeper Marxist insights into the role of the family and social reproduction under capitalism—came after the rise of the women's movement in the 1970s. The same can be said for the development of a Marxist analysis of gay oppression.

Yet it must also be said that Marxism abhors eclecticism: the amalgamating or combining concepts and theories that contradict each other and are based on competing premises; or the arbitrary selection of arguments that are not organically linked in reality, or that contradict Marxism's key premises. As Lenin wrote in *State and Revolution,* "The substitution of eclecticism for dialectics is the easiest way of deceiving the people. It gives an illusory satisfaction; it seems to take into account all sides of the process, all trends of development, all the conflicting influences, and so forth, whereas in reality it provides no integral and revolutionary conception of the process of social development at all."

Unlike other scientific theories, Marxism, for reasons that should be clear, constantly comes under attack from all sides. As the "theory and practice of proletarian revolution," to use Lenin succinct summary, it is not like, for example, quantum physics, which poses no threat to the existing order. Therefore as important as developing and extending Marxist theory is, maintaining the integrity of Marxism against its detractors is an equally important task. What makes this task more difficult in the history of the Marxist

movement is that often attacks on the integrity of Marxism are garbed in the clothing of Marxism. Such, for example, was "revisionism" at the turn of the last century, whose main proponent, Eduard Bernstein, presented his substitution of moralism, reformism, and gradualism for materialist Marxism as merely a necessary "revision" based on changes in the nature of capitalism. More recently, many of the post-modernist adaptations of Marxism stripped Marxism of all its essential features, and in some cases, took the logical plunge into "post-Marxism."

We should therefore be critical of the mechanical, sectarian Marxism that treats it as a series of sacred texts, as a theoretical monolith—or those that clings to theoretical or organizational shibboleths that don't fit with reality, as the SWP has done. But we should also be critical of those who are eager to entertain the kind of "revisions" of Marxism that threaten to gut it from the inside of what is essential to it.

There is difference between the development of new and necessary theoretical insights to advance Marxism, and celebrating theoretical innovation for its own sake. As Lenin wrote in *What is To Be Done?*, against those who extolled "freedom of criticism" in the Russia socialist movement as part of an ecumenical acceptance of all trends, including reformist trends, in the Russian socialist movement: "High-sounding phrases against the ossification of thought, etc., conceal unconcern and helplessness with regard to the development of theoretical thought. The case of the Russian Social-Democrats manifestly illustrates the general European phenomenon (long ago noted also by the German Marxists) that the much vaunted freedom of criticism does not imply substitution of one theory for another, but freedom from all integral and pondered theory; it implies eclecticism and lack of principle."

Developing Marxism in order to tackle new questions that need answering, such as the class character of the USSR under Stalinism, or using Marx's theory of labor power and reproduction in *Capital* to develop a fuller understanding of *social* reproduction; or making sense of new developments in world capitalism in regard to financialization and the relationship between state and capital—these things are absolutely essential to a living Marxism. The celebration of new theories for their own sake, on the other hand, reflects a kind of intellectual eclecticism rather than theoretical clarification for the purposes of intervention in the world.

Taking up the tasks ahead requires a strong grounding in Marxist theory in order both to defend it and extend it in fruitful ways. "There can be no strong socialist party without a revolutionary theory which unites all socialists," Lenin wrote in 1897, "from which they draw all their convictions, and which they apply in their methods of struggle and means of action. To defend such a theory, which to the best of your knowledge you consider to be true, against unfounded attacks and at tempts to corrupt it is not to imply that you are an enemy of all criticism. We do not regard Marx's theory as some thing completed and inviolable; on the contrary, we are convinced that it has only laid the foundation stone of the science which socialists

must develop in all directions if they wish to keep pace with life."

We should always strive for clarity as to what it is in Marxist theory that needs developing and what doesn't. It is also important to make a distinction between *how we argue* and the *content* of *what we argue.*

Take, for example, our discussion on women's liberation. Sharon Smith has argued that it was mistaken for Chris Harman to downplay as "marginal" the benefits that men receive from women bearing the brunt of housework. On the other hand, her criticism did not entail an acceptance, or reevaluation of "patriarchy theory." The term "patriarchy" is often used by feminist activists in the same way "sexism" is used. This does not mean, however, that we as Marxists should entertain *theories* of patriarchy, which are in contradiction to Marxism. Though today we are not often engaged in a debate with proponents of these theories, that does not mean that we now accept them.

Two letters in *Socialist Worker,* one by Haley Swensen and John Green, and the other by Hector Agredano, state that we are "coming to grips" with, or "rethinking our strategy around," patriarchy theory. We "came to grips with" patriarchy theory years ago, and largely what we wrote about it then remains true today. Though there were variations in the theory, they all had the conceptual premise—that "patriarchy" is a separate system of oppression that is independent from capitalist social relations, in which all men share an interest in the maintenance of women's oppression. As Sharon Smith has recently written:

> *Different variants of patriarchy theory emerged during the late 1960s and 1970s. Some rooted women's oppression in biological differences, while others emphasized psychological or cultural phenomena. But all privileged women's oppression over all other forms of oppression, while the possibility that women and men share a common interest in the fight against racism, homophobia, national oppression and/or class inequality was ruled out. ["Radical feminism," from he forthcoming book.]*

We therefore are not seeking to combine patriarchy theory with Marxism, but to situate women's oppression within an analysis of capitalist social reproduction. We do not see women's oppression as being based on a *separate system of oppression that overlaps with class exploitation.*

This is by way of example only. The question of the parameters of Marxist theory, what should be preserved, reexamined, or extended, are *concrete questions* that must be evaluated concretely.

Preserving the best of our tradition

Throughout the history of the socialist movement worldwide, revolutionaries have built on the foundations of revolutionary Marxism that developed in the high points of the international workers movement, from the European

revolutions of 1848 to the Russian Revolution, the first years of the Third International, and the experiences of subsequent workers struggles around the world. Without Trotskyism the thread of genuine Marxism would have long been buried by Stalinism.

What made the IS tradition so important is that preserved from Trotskyism the centrality of working-class self-emancipation. The theoretical contributions of the International Socialists (IS, the forerunner of the British SWP) were crucial for developing a new generation of revolutionaries free from the distortions of Stalinism and Third World nationalism. The IS had its origins in an effort to come to terms with key questions facing the left: the nature of Stalinist Eastern Europe and the prolonged post-war boom. In its earlier years, the IS emphasized a sense of realism, and cut against the toy-Bolshevism and toy-internationalism that was prevalent on both the Stalinist and Trotskyist left at the time. Its focus on the working class as the agent of revolutionary change helped orient a new generation of British students and youth, as the IS made impressive breakthroughs in organizing in the industrial unions.

It proved less capable of coming to terms with new developments after the 1970s—the rise of neoliberal globalization, of new centers of capital accumulation, and the return of economic growth to the system after the crisis of the 1970s. The group—which became the SWP in 1978—drifted towards a a perspective of economic catastrophism in the 1990s, and adopted some of the practices that in its earlier years it had rejected, including its own version of toy internationalism in the IST, where the SWP heavily pressured member groups to adopt its perspectives.

We should not look at the degeneration of the SWP as a reason to reject the entire International Socialist tradition, without which we would not exist today. The need to preserve the fundamentals of revolutionary Marxist theory and organization is especially keen in this country. We in the ISO have long said the one of the greatest weaknesses of the US left is that movements rise rapidly and spectacularly, only to end in defeat, leaving very little by way of organizational and political continuity, and then requiring that the wheel of revolutionary organization be reinvented.

A blanket rejection of all that is "old" in revolutionary socialist groups can easily lead to an abandonment of the foundations of Marxist theory and the attempt to build a coherent and cohesive organization. There is a danger of this happening on an international scale.

As much as new conditions require the development and enrichment of our theory and practice, it also requires the careful preservation of revolutionary theory and organization. This cannot be achieved except in and through organizations consisting of cadres—comrades who not only have a grasp of Marxism, but who are practical leaders implanted in the class struggle in its various forms—in the unions, community organizing, movements of the oppressed, antiwar activism, and more. Having absorbed the

experience and traditions of Marxism and revolutionary organization, these cadre are capable of utilizing their knowledge and organizational capacity to relate to new conditions and changing circumstances. We will come back to the question of cadre. But first we must reestablish what our project is.

What we get from Lenin and Leninism[1]

The need for a revolutionary party to achieve a socialist transformation of society derives from the contradiction between the tendency for capitalism to unite workers and compel them to struggle as a class; and the contrary tendencies for capitalism to oppress and divide the working class.

If the working class was homogenous and developed a socialist consciousness simultaneously as a mass, then leadership and party organization would not be necessary. However, as Trotsky wrote in 1932, "The class itself is not homogeneous. Its different sections arrive at class-consciousness by different paths and at different times. The bourgeoisie participates actively in this process. Within the working class it creates its own institutions, or utilizes those already existing, in order to oppose certain strata of workers against others."

It is this situation of uneven consciousness that necessitates the coalescing of the best socialist militants together so as to exert a positive influence on the class as a whole to win less advanced layers to socialism.

The accumulated historical experience of working-class struggle has proven again and again that without the existence of a mass revolutionary party of the working class, bound together by a common tradition and revolutionary commitment, and with an experienced cadre capable of quickly assessing and adapting to circumstances and opportunities, capitalism cannot be successfully challenged, no matter how developed in other ways the crisis of the system may be.

"[D]uring a revolution, i.e. when events move more swiftly, a weak party can quickly grow into a mighty one provided it lucidly understands the course of the revolution and possesses staunch cadres that do not become intoxicated with phrases and are not terrorized by persecution," wrote Trotsky. "But such a party must be available prior to the revolution inasmuch as the process of educating the cadres requires a considerable period of time and the revolution does not afford this time."

The most difficult task is for revolutionaries in a period of long working-class retreat, yet deepening capitalist crisis and radicalization, is to figure out how and what kind of organization needs to be built *now* that can contribute to the development of such a party. For there is no general formula

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[1] This section includes passages by this author that were written for 2008 internal bulletin document on democratic centralism, and another earlier document titled, "What kind of organization do we want?"

for how a revolutionary party is created, and no single organizational formula.

But regardless of the period, the state of the class struggle, and the size of the revolutionary left, what is absolutely essential is the *training of cadres* capable of thinking and applying Marxism creatively and able to both learn from and provide leadership in struggle. The particular *form* such an organization takes depends upon a whole number of shifting factors. The ISO, for example, is not itself a revolutionary party: it is not nearly large enough or rooted enough in the working class to be one. However, whatever stage of development the revolutionary movement finds itself, revolutionaries must be organized to accomplish this task. No revolutionary party can be built without the conscious, collective efforts of revolutionaries toward achieving it. And no organization can build effectively that does not have as its goal the creation, development, and sustenance of cadre.

This concept of cadre—as leaders and organizers in struggle, as an "intermediate" layer capable of training others, and capable of thinking on its feet—also influences our conception of leadership.

The unevenness of consciousness outside a revolutionary organization is also reflected inside it, in the sense that the party contains within it more experienced, tried and tested cadre, as well as newcomers and less-developed members— all involved in different arenas of struggle. Precisely because there are different degrees of experience, consciousness, ability to grasp Marxism, etc., the organization itself must choose amongst itself leaders who can guide the practical work of the organization. This is the reason why we do not, for example, have automatically rotating leadership, or thrust the newest member into leadership positions.

At the same time, there is no rigid division between elected leaders and the rest of the organization, or between cadre and others. The task of the most developed leaders and cadres is to aid in raising the consciousness and capabilities of all members, to expand the number of cadre members, and thereby increase the number of people capable of competently leading various aspects of the work. *Simply put, the role of leadership in a Leninist organization is to develop the next layer of leaders.*

This commitment is one of the most important lessons that we take from the Bolshevik experience, despite the very different conditions under which we operate. As Ahmed Shawki explained at Socialism 2006: "The main thing that's been lost from the classical Leninist model is how you actually begin the process of the retraining, re-educating, and re-launching a revolutionary cadre, no matter what the organizational structure. How do you take a new generation of people and transform them from isolated or individual militants against the system to what is a self-conscious revolutionary cadre?"

Such a cadre, what Hallas refers to simply as "an experienced layer of party members, apart from the top

leadership," cannot be built in the heat of revolutionary upheaval. It has to be built and tested in the "preparatory" period when revolutionary change is not on the agenda.

This is a project rejected by most of the left. For despite our best efforts, radicals today understand, however vaguely, "Leninism" to mean the Maoist and Stalinist caricature of it.

Many on the left, even on the far left, for a number of reasons (including the experience of Stalinism and Maoism in the late 1960s and early 1970s), have concluded that any Marxist organization that adheres to an agreed-upon set of principles, organizes its activity around one or two central publications, and takes collective positions for the purposes of concerted action, is *by definition* a sect.

One such organization that drew these conclusions we know well: Solidarity, whose founders included people from both the IS and Fourth International traditions. The timeline of Solidarity's history closely follows the ISO's. Solidarity argued that Leninism tout-court was a dead-end; it concluded that workers weren't "ready" to hear socialist arguments; it decided that a socialist organization should not have a central newspaper or have one single "line" on key questions, but several competing and coexisting tendencies.

Of course to accept the need to build a revolutionary organization in non-revolutionary periods necessarily raises the possibility of sectarianism: that is, of becoming isolated from broader currents in the movement and becoming sterile and ineffective. The art of revolutionary politics always consists in finding a way to build an organization of revolutionaries is able to relate its own politics to the broader forces at play around it without either demarcating itself too sharply or liquidating itself into the movement.

Such an organization, as Duncan Hallas notes in his essay *Toward a Revolutionary Socialist Party*, "must be more than a mere collection of individuals giving general adherence to a platform. It must also be a center for mutual training and debate…that takes place in an atmosphere where differences are freely and openly argued."

The purpose of such free debate is to come to decisions about the character of the world around us and how we should act in it. So while we eschew, as Hallas point out, the "heresy hunting characteristic of certain sects," neither are we a talk shop that enjoys debate for its own sake. "The limits of membership are democratic collective control by the working class over industry and society," writes Hallas." Within these limits a variety of views on aspects of strategy and tactics is necessary and inevitable in a democratic organization."

The problem with the SWP is that it moved away from these precepts and tried impose discipline bureaucratically. It is not the precepts of Leninism that need reevaluation, but SWP's departure from them.

A wrong conception of cadre

The conception of cadre and leadership outlined here are entirely at odds with that put forward by Shaun Joseph in his rather pretentiously titled "Valences of the united front." According to Joseph, cadre must "stand apart" from the leadership, and be, "in a dialectical sense, *contradictory* to the leadership." Not only that—it must be "an *independent* and *irreverent* layer." The ISO's cadre, in fact, "is, in this sense, not a cadre, because it is too deferential to the national leadership. This is not because the veteran members are generally lacking in skill and intellect; rather, there is a culture of deference that is the ironic consequence of the false equality between cadre and Center."

Joseph uses the same Duncan Hallas quote about cadre being "apart from the top leadership," and attributes to Hallas the same theory—that is, that the word "apart" signifies being "contrary to," and "irreverent" toward, the leadership. Joseph continues, quoting Hallas:

> *"Lenin, returning in April 1917 with his theses, would not have been able to shift the political line of the Bolshevik Party alone. There had to be a layer of politically experienced party members who could respond to the arguments, and respond quickly." Without the cadre "standing apart" from the top leadership, it would have never been able to respond productively to a division among the leadership.*

It isn't clear why Shaun Joseph would conclude from Hallas's words that cadre must as a rule be "contradictory to," and "irreverent" toward, leadership. Hallas simply refers to the importance of the existence of a intermediate layer, capable of forming its own opinions, whose experiences meshed with Lenin's views.

Lenin was himself one of the most, if not the most, respected leader of the Bolshevik party. Here is how Trotsky describes this layer in his *History of the Russian Revolution* and why it responded to Lenin's arguments in April*:*

> *Against the old Bolsheviks Lenin found support in another layer of the party already tempered, but more fresh and more closely united with the masses. In the February revolution, as we know, the worker-Bolsheviks played the decisive role. They thought it self-evident that that class which had won the victory should seize the power…. These worker-revolutionists only lacked the theoretical resources to defend their position. But they were ready to respond to the first clear call.*

To consistently apply Joseph's "theory of cadre," this layer of experienced worker-Bolsheviks should have had an equally "contradictory" attitude to Lenin as it did toward the other leaders that disagreed with Lenin in April 1917. Instead, they responded to Lenin's arguments positively. What deference! Then, after Lenin, with support of the cadre, rearmed the party under the slogan "all power to the soviets," should this slogan have been treated irreverently, since it was now being put forward by a united leadership?

Joseph's approach artificially counterposes cadre and leadership, and then considers this counterposition to be the very definition of cadre. If his "theory" is drawn out in all its logical implications, then the task of the "intermediate layer" is to always second guess and question whatever decision the party makes, not just what its leaders argue. But the rightness of wrongness of a perspective has to be *tested* in practice, not arbitrarily critiqued for its own sake based on a specious notion of a a permanently-contradictory cadre.

Leadership and cadre are not identical, but neither is, nor should there be, there a gulf between them. Leadership emerges out of the cadre (itself a layer of intermediate leaders) of an organization; just as cadre emerges out of less experienced but active and committed members.

Hallas's point, one made by many Marxists since the Russian Revolution, is that without an intermediate layer of experienced members capable of independent thought and initiative, there can be no effective revolutionary party. In his defense of Bolshevik methods against Stalinist bureaucratism, Trotsky wrote, for example, that the party does not need "sycophantic functionaries but men who are strongly tempered morally, permeated with a feeling of personal responsibility, who on every important question will make it their duty to work out conscientiously their personal opinion and will defend it courageously." And he wrote in 1933: "A supporter of the theory of scientific communism does not take anything on word. He judges everything by reason and experience…. Revolutionary discipline does not exclude but demands the right of checking and criticism." Nowhere in Marxist literature of our tradition can Joseph's oppositional conception of the relationship between cadre and leadership be found. Trotsky writes in 1932, for example, that an element in the strength of a revolutionary party lay in the "unbroken connection between the cadres and the mass, between the leaders and the cadres."

Someone cannot be considered cadre who is not capable of formulating her or his own opinion, sizing up the various arguments and positions, and drawing her or his own conclusions. Joseph, however, wants us to include in the very definition of "cadre" that it set itself apart from the leadership and be "irreverent" toward it. The definition of irreverent on Google is: "Showing a lack of respect for people or things that are generally taken seriously." If we are to take his arguments seriously, Joseph is saying that the cadre should treat the arguments of leadership with disrespect. It isn't clear why, in this schema, the leadership shouldn't extent to the cadre the same courtesy—that is, to treat *its* views with equal disrespect. This leaves us not with a collaborative process of debate whereby the end result of open debate is unanimity followed by collaborative action, but with institutionalized mutual distrust.

Debate, in this scenario, is not intended to clarify what the various shades of views are within the organization in order to determine a point of departure, but as a litmus test of the cadre's bona fide status as cadre. Good cadre should observe debate and watch carefully to see who stands where in it; and wherever the formal leadership stands, real cadre

must "stand apart."

And once a decision is made by the majority and the organization is expected to act on it, is this the point when the irreverence for whatever is decided ceases? Not at all! By Joseph's logic, the majority decision—the one that the leadership is entrusted to carry out—must be treated with equal irreverence precisely because it is a line being put forward by the leadership, and no self-respecting cadre should defer to the leadership.

This concept of leadership may find a welcome home in an anarchist organization, such as they exist, but not in a Leninist one. We are attempting to create an organization of like-minded revolutionaries who are able to debate and confer, to share our differences, in order to collectively move forward in our mutual work. Such debate can only be conducted in an atmosphere of *mutual respect*. Indeed, mutual respect between revolutionaries—including between leaders and cadre—is a precondition for creating the kind of professional political culture necessary to carry on serious, sometimes heated, because important, debates. Seeing yourself as the court jester, or the constant vigilant critic, of "leaders," as always setting yourself in an "irreverent," i.e., disrespectful relationship, toward them, makes you a professional cynic, but certainly not cadre by any serious definition of the term.

Are we a "line" organization?

Ahmed Shawki's speech on perspectives for building a revolutionary organization at Socialism (2013) notes that we do not seek to "have a common line on every question." Does that mean that we should not have a common line on *any* question? No doubt, the ISO has moved away from the IST practice that compelled its sections to have agreement on all question, from the nature of the crisis to the nature of the period. Moreover, what an organization considers to be a central tenet and one that is peripheral to its practice depends on changing circumstances. In the immediate postwar period, adherence to the theory of state capitalism was a legitimate litmus test for building a serious revolutionary organization. Today, however, we do not require as a condition of membership that individuals accept the theory of state capitalism—only that they are committed to socialism from below.

There are other theoretical questions that fall into this category. Some ISO members, for example, are adherents of "political Marxism." The ISO does not have a formal line on this trend, insofar as what position one takes on this set of ideas does not impinge on our fundamental precepts regarding revolution, reform, the role of the Democratic Party, and so on. The same applies to differences over the Marxist theory of crisis, philosophical questions, and so on.

Yet we do have a set of fundamental politics—call them a line if you like—that define who we are and what we aim to achieve: the self-emancipation of the working class (and consequently opposition to all forms of substitutionism); the necessity of creating a party that unites a working class vanguard to achieve the overthrow of capitalism; the need to combat all forms of oppression as a condition for working-class unity; the rejection of reformism. These, and many other precepts, constitute a political "line" to which we as revolutionaries hold each other accountable. On this basis, we would not accept as a member someone, for example, who defended the Assad regime in Syria as a bulwark against imperialism or North Korea as a last remaining bastion of socialist construction, or who believes that working-class unity can only be achieved by setting aside issues of oppression.

There is also a more immediate way in which any serious political organization of the left, if it is to be effective, must have an agreed-upon line—and that is in regard to perspective, or what it plans to do next. On the most basic level, an organization involved in a movement, a strike, a demonstration, must in order to act decide a line of action, and then test its ideas in practice. Of course, none of this matters if we are a book discussion group or a stamp collecting club. But we are building of a fighting organization that seeks both to teach and to learn from the struggle, neither of which can be done by an organization of many trends and tendencies working at cross purposes with each other.

Does this mean that there can be no minority positions or that everyone must agree to every decision? No. There are different sides in the debate, and that at a certain point, one side or another is going to win the debate, after which the decision must be acted on. Only on such a basis can the particular course of action be evaluated. Our ideas, as I've already stated, must be tested, and evaluated, by experience, and experience can tell us nothing if we are not acting in unison, and working diligently to achieved our agreed-upon goals. Only thought this method can our perspectives be assessed, adjusted, or changed altogether. This is the heart of democratic centralism, and it still applies to the ISO.

There are, of course, some ex-members who believe that the ISO actively discourages debate. As the Chicago "Socialist Outpost" document puts it, "Dissent has been tolerated only to a minimal degree and simple questions have been treated as dissent." The Counterpunch critique by San Francisco ex-members is even more categorical: The ISO leadership "isolates, marginalizes and silences dissenting voices." Shaun Joseph, incidentally, has expressed his agreement with the contents of both of these document. "I agree with it totally and thank the comrades for publishing it," he wrote on his Facebook page of the Chicago document. "I thought this was an excellent contribution all in all," though "I don't subscribe to all of the movement criticisms," he wrote of the SF document. Joseph, it appears, has decided to reserve for his own writing the *milder* criticism, that the lack of genuine debate in the ISO is caused by the cadre "deferring" to leadership, and to leave the sharper, more damning arguments about ISO heresy-hunting to his co-thinkers on *Counterpunch* and the "Outpost."

These descriptions of the ISO as being little better than a Stalinized sect are offered without a shred of evidence, though their propounders aver to be offered them with the best of intentions. The fact that Shaun Joseph wrote five

documents during last year's preconvention critical, in various ways, of the national perspective; that, though not elected as a delegate, he was invited to the convention to present his views; and that a member of the steering committee stood up on the floor of the convention and *agreed* with him that the concept of the "transition period" (the topic of one of Joseph's documents) was not a useful one; that his proposal for a monthly internal bulletin was accepted by the national leadership—none of this *concrete* evidence counts for anything. That his arguments were respectfully discussed and debated—and most of them rejected—proves nothing except that Joseph failed to win over most of the delegates to most of his positions.

We emphasize the necessity of free debate. As part of this, however, comrades (leadership, cadre, or otherwise) must expect to be *disagreed with* by other members. This may seem a silly thing to have to say, but it seems that some comrades' conception of debate leans more toward a desire *not to be argued with*, or wanting their ideas to be accepted or *tolerated*, than it does toward a genuine conception of what debate entails. Polite toleration of different opinions is in fact the opposite of debate. It is also not an example of non-toleration of debate when ones arguments are heard out but not accepted by the organization. Of course, losing a debate is not the end of the question. Sometimes we can make wrong decisions, and we can revisit an argument and find validity in an argument we had previously rejected.

We debate in order to decide, not for its own sake. A corollary to this is that we do not *avoid* debate on the specious grounds that all opinions must be "respected." To put it succinctly, freedom of debate—the necessity, indeed the responsibility of all members, of completely airing all shades of opinion in a discussion or dispute, is quite different from "freedom of opinion," which implies a kind of ecumenical toleration of different views, whatever they may be. Lenin spurned the "live and let live" attitude to unity based on "reconciliation" of different trends. "To 'stop up' the sources of disagreement, to keep silent about them, to 'adjust' 'conflicts' at all costs, to neutralize the conflicting trends—it is to this that the main attention of such 'conciliation' is directed," he argued.

The emphasis for Lenin, as it should be for us, was on the *open expression of differences as opposed to gossip and innuendo.* Throughout his political life, Lenin would repeatedly argue against what he called the "circle" mentality that thrived on gossip but feared the open, public discussion of differences in the socialist movement without which a unity based on principles and clear lines of demarcation could not be achieved. He wrote, for example, in 1908,

> It is our duty *to bring our disagreements out into the open…. We call on our Bolshevik comrades for* ideological *clarity and for the sweeping away of all backstairs gossip, from whatever source it may come. There are no end of people who would like to see the*

ideological struggle on momentous cardinal issues side-tracked into petty squabbles…. Such people must not be tolerated in the ranks of the Bolsheviks. The Bolshevik working men should strongly discourage such attempts and insist on one thing, and one thing alone: ideological clarity, definite opinions, a line based on principle.

Conclusion

The thread running through this document is the centrality of building an organized cadre of revolutionaries no matter the conditions; inextricably linked to this process is the necessity of mutual training and debate around a common set of politics, based upon a freely agreed-upon discipline and mutual respect.

The best of our past, embodied in movements and organizations, must not only be preserved, but disseminated. We must strive to revive genuine Marxism, just as our predecessors strived to do in difficult circumstances. Earlier generations of Marxists had to preserve the idea of working class self-emancipation despite Stalin's attempt to annihilate not just that idea, but Trotskyists themselves. In the long economic boom period following the Second World War, revolutionary Marxists had to withstand the enormous pressure of the seemingly commonsense idea that capitalism could be gradually reformed. Our generation faces its own challenge in maintaining the Marxist focus on the centrality of the working class as the agency for revolutionary change at a time when unions are weaker than they have been for decades and the international working-class is being restructured.

This does not at all mean that Marxism is the study of texts. On the contrary, Marxism must be continually renewed and reapplied to new conditions. Our task is, after all, to overthrow capitalism, not understand Marx better. A renewal of Marxism does not mean rejecting the past, but building upon it. That means superseding what is no longer relevant and absorbing and readapting what is, without ever losing sight of Marxism's working-class centered, emancipatory core. The onset of deep crisis, the concomitant ideological crisis of the system, and the reemergence of mass struggle and revolutionary change, makes the it even more urgent that we built a strong, growing, rooted Marxist current in the United States as part of a worldwide revival of Marxism. Despite the setbacks in Egypt and Syria, the revolutions in the Arab world, as Gilbert Achcar has noted, is part of a revolutionary process that will continue for years. The crisis in Greece—polarized between the growth of the left-wing Syriza party and the surge of the Nazi Golden Dawn—also underscores the challenges in this period. And amid these ups and downs in struggles, there is a developing ideological crisis that is producing wider layers of people who are open to socialist ideas. The question of working class revolutionary organization will continue to be posed internationally.

Paul D. for the Steering Committee

What does it mean to chair politically?

Many ISO working meetings start by explaining a set of rules about how the meeting will work. Raise your hand if you want to speak; maybe a fist if you have a question. No one will be called on a second time until everyone who wants to has spoken a first time. We will employ a progressive stack.

Anyone who has spent a lot of time in certain other activist settings is probably intensely grateful for these norms. Our meetings are rarely as dispiriting as the four-hour coalition meetings in which decisions are never reached because everyone talks over each other, or because a single person blocks the group from moving forward; or as enraging as the bureaucratic union conventions where delegates who are leading the union on the ground can barely participate in a discussion about its future.

But in my view, any procedure—even one founded in generally useful principles about how to have a democratic meeting leading to decisions that can be tested in practice—can have unintended consequences. Our chairing norms are intended to make the meetings more democratic and participatory by limiting the amount of time any one person can speak. But because of that, they can also have the consequence of preventing the back-and-forth that is the key to conversation. When those norms are followed rigidly, in some circumstances, they make the meeting less effective: they limit the scope for clarifying misunderstandings, they create a perverse incentive to fit as much into each comment as possible, and meanwhile, people in their first meeting are bemused that a group of seven people won't let them say anything without raising their hand.

I think the first key to chairing politically is to treat the "rules" of chairing as means, not an end. What's the end? Well, it depends: what's the point of the meeting?

Chairing as a means to an end

Chairing flows from goals. At our national convention, it makes sense to have a very formal set of rules: the stakes are high, since the body won't meet again for an entire year, and any sense that decisions were made unfairly would be highly destructive to our organizing. These are settings where you want the process to be as transparent as possible, and that requires that clear set of procedures be agreed on and adhered to, which limits the scope for individual chairs' discretion to influence the meeting outcomes. (A meeting making a decision on which there are deeply entrenched opposing positions similarly needs transparent, formally fair chairing so that all parties trust that the process did not determine the outcome.)

Our weekly working meetings are usually very different from that. In that context, I have come to feel that there is no single best process, but rather, that political chairing means doing whatever is going to help the branch do what it needs to for that week. Specifically, chairing politically requires four things: 1) Goals; 2) A plan to meet those

goals; 3) The ability to adjust the plan on the fly as needed; and 4) Feedback.

In short, the chair (and really, the whole branch) should be clear on the purpose of each part of the meeting; they should have a lot of authority/autonomy to do their best to set up the meeting to meet those goals; and their efforts should be assessed.

In this document, I make the case for this model of flexible working meeting chairing by, first, giving examples of the wide range of things we use working meetings to do, and, second, identifying what I see as four dilemmas built into chairing. The document is also meant to solicit other branches' experiences and approaches to branch meetings.

Goals

The one and only point of chairing is to help a meeting accomplish its purpose, whatever that may be. I first learned this from a comrade in New York. She didn't tell me; she just chaired that way.

We were doing a study group on Marxist economics, and we'd identified a key question. Although a bunch of people were on stack, the chair announced that we weren't going to take more questions until we'd fully answered the one on the floor. Answering it ended up taking up most of our time.

I was one of the comrades who, as a result, never got to ask my own question. The reason I didn't mind was that I learned so much from the more focused discussion that ensued that I left the meeting feeling much clearer and inspired to want to learn more.

Here's the key: this comrade could only chair that way because she understood Marxist economics really well—well enough to have excellent judgment about what the really key questions were. Had she subordinated the rest of the discussion to a question that was less important, or that wasn't really answerable (or clarifying to try to answer) within the parameters of the discussion group that we had (with the level of knowledge that the participants had), her choice would've been intrusive and unwelcome. It could've been disastrous. But as it was, it was exactly what we needed.

Similarly, a comrade chairing a working meeting has to know the purpose of each section. That means that, at a minimum, the BC also needs to know the purpose of each section. I find that it often helps me to ask, not: what's the topic of discussion?, but: what are we trying to use this discussion to either figure out or change?[2]

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[2] Relatedly, I think that approaching meetings this way helps to ensure that the discussions are organized around *our actual questions*, which undercuts a tendency in some branches to have "discussions" that are more demonstrations for the newest people in the room. Ironically, I think the people we want to

Here are some examples of some working meeting goals:

- Assess a recent public event. Who were we hoping to bring, and what did we hope the event would accomplish? Did it?

    —Here the goal is to learn any lessons that would make us either shift course, or build on what we did. During the discussion, the chair is paying attention to whether these basic questions are actually being answered, what lessons are being distilled, and whether there seems to be disagreement about the assessment that needs to be further crystallized.

- Decide our relationship to an activist coalition. Should we join it, or work together as allies? How many resources should we devote to it, vs. what alternative priorities? What would we hope to gain either way?

    —Here the goal is to reach a decision (likely formalized with a vote), and to set a basis for assessing our work down the road (we have to know what we were trying to do to know whether or not we succeeded, and why). During the discussion, the chair is paying attention to what choice needs to be made, what issues comrades are seeing as central in deciding that, and where the points of agreement and disagreement seem to lie. As in all meetings, she is on the lookout for questions or disagreements that are not yet being fully voiced, but that might undermine the work in practice if not resolved by the group. She will be thinking ahead to what the vote is going to be and to whether the discussion is clarifying the terms on which someone would vote one way or another, and if it is not, she will be thinking through options for improving that without stilting the flow of ideas (more on this below).

- Discuss a political development or debate.

    —Here the goal is to clarify positions and/or questions. For some topics, the branch might have enough knowledge that it is a reasonable goal for a discussion to crystallize conclusions, for example, on the consequences of the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and how socialists should relate to the ouster of Morsi.
    —For branches where the level of previous engagement with the topic has been low, this goal may be unrealistic, and might produce a discussion characterized by stilted silence or, worse, posturing. For a branch in these circumstances, a more reasonable goal might be to identify a set of questions that comrades would like to learn answers

to ("Are there revolutionaries standing up to the crackdown on the Brotherhood, and what kind of a hearing are they getting among the Egyptian populace?"; "How are socialists around the world now relating to these developments?"), with a comrade volunteering to seek out further info and bring it back to the group at the next meeting, or over the branch listserv or Facebook group.

    —Sometimes a combination of these goals will be most appropriate.

Having a clear expectation about a meeting's goals should affect everything about how the discussion is organized, from its structure to the content and format of how it is introduced in the meeting. My experience is that clearer discussion goals, that are identified explicitly and agreed on by the branch, almost universally produce better meetings.

Dilemmas

Chairing is fraught with tensions and dilemmas—choices where each option solves one problem while exacerbating others—and the art of chairing is navigating between them. For this reason, I don't think there is a single best chairing procedure. There is only clarity about goals, and good judgment based on experience, applied creatively in a particular meeting.

1. Conversational norms vs. meeting norms

One of the biggest tensions is between conversation and the artificial, non-conversational norms that we have developed to equalize participation in our meetings. For example, we often require people to raise their hands because free-for-all discussions tend to be dominated by the people who are most confident to speak, whereas we are dedicated to developing the leadership of the groups of people who are most systematically taught that their opinions don't matter. But the hand-raising norm can itself become a barrier to participation when it reinforces a sense that comments must be full-fledged interventions. It also stifles aspects of the conversation—such as brief back-and-forth exchanges that clarify the terms of a debate—that might sometimes be exactly what is needed for the conversation to move forward.

Similarly, we have a very good norm—no one speaks a second time until everyone has spoken a first time, if they want to—that in practice can create a perverse incentive to cram too many arguments into a first comment.[3]

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recruit are usually more engaged with discussions that we're more genuinely engaged with than with ones we put on for their benefit. (Just to be clear, I'm not arguing against organizing discussions specifically for new people, e.g., Meaning of Marxism series; I'm just arguing against treating branch meetings as places to "show off" our politics rather than to use them to figure out what we're doing.)

[3] For example, here is a scenario. Assesma is giving her assessment of an area of work. Cadriel, a cadre who is trying to learn not to make long speeches in the meetings, is concerned about the direction of the work, but not completely sure she's right—she doesn't know a ton about this area of work since it hasn't been discussed for a while. If she were having a conversation with Assesma, just the two of them, it would be easy enough to ask her questions and go from there. But they're in a meeting. Cadriel has a few options, all of them dissatisfying.

There are lots of ways that chairs might navigate this tension: allowing limited back-and-forth while also maintaining a stack; splitting the discussion into a part that gets clear on the facts and a part that decides what to do; prioritizing important disagreements even if a comrade has already spoken. Since these measures to limit the causes of speechifying might exacerbate the problem that some comrades speak far more often than others, a chair might combine them with other measures to mitigate that: small-group discussions, cold-calling comrades with specific questions, go-around brainstorming. Different approaches will fit different contexts. But the key first step is to acknowledge that the tension exists, so that the chair can try *some* approach to dealing with it.

2. Consensus, compromise, and voting

Meetings (especially in small branches) often achieve consensus or compromise through conversation, and I think this is often a good goal to pursue. But sometimes it's much better to formalize a disagreement than to compromise it away. This is especially true when the disagreement is entrenched, or when the stakes are high. In those cases,

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She could use her speaking turn just to ask her questions to find out if her concerns are warranted, and follow up to elaborate if they are. But Cadriel knows that if she does that, her concerns won't be heard until the end of the discussion, if at all. Because the branch is trying to make the meetings more participatory, the chair, Charity, has renewed her commitment to not calling on any comrade for a second time until everyone has spoken a first time. For the same reason, Charity is also discouraging Assessma, who gave the intro, from speaking again until toward the end of the section. So, practically speaking, if Cadriel doesn't raise her concerns in her first comment, they aren't going to be taken up in the discussion.

So instead, she tries to cram all of her assessment into her first comment. Now she's trying to convince Assessma that the comrades in this area of work are making mistakes, before she even has all the facts. Assessma naturally finds this off-putting, and isn't particularly inclined to seek out the useful question or principle animating Cadriel's concern. The discussion becomes unhelpfully polarized around some issues on the surface of the disagreement.

Or maybe the discussion just doesn't engage with Cadriel at all. Because meanwhile, all the other comrades have their own issues they want to see addressed, and after Cadriel's long and confident comment, they're even more worried about asserting their own perspectives. So they do the same thing she did, and no one actually replies to her at all.

The point of this stylized example is that *even when everyone in a branch is trying to improve the meetings, chairing strategies can backfire if the content of what comrades are trying to bring to the meeting (Cadriel's combination of questions and concerns) doesn't neatly fit in the format being used (speaking in rounds).*

(In general, I think that a lot of irritating cadre behavior—whether it's overly long and bombastic interventions or, conversely, sitting silently in passive judgment—arise when cadre aren't confident that the meeting will effectively resolve the branch's main issues. The irritating behaviors are poor strategies to deal with frustration that may be best addressed by improving the meetings.)

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seeking consensus can mean in practice only that the position that more people happened to speak up for (or spoke most loudly for) is accepted by default. And it can prevent us from ever learning from experience, so that disagreements are never resolved by the group.

For particularly important, or contentious, decisions, voting is a precondition for accountability in two ways. It makes the minority accountable to the majority's decision: if we're going to try out a strategy, we want to go all-in and really try to do it right. It also makes the majority accountable to its own vote: it establishes an expectation that is the guide for our future assessments ("We thought that doing X would result in Y; were we right?"). Even when a vote is not required, clarity is: if decisions were reached, the section should end by saying very explicitly what they were, to make sure everyone is on the same page.

I find that my own biggest challenge in chairing is when it's not immediately clear whether a disagreement is speaking to wider issues and, if so, what they are. The reason this is so challenging is that you neither want to polarize a discussion artificially around a question whose stakes are actually quite low, nor do you want to have the meeting *not* decide (or decide only by default) the real question that needs to be answered. But because we're human beings who often figure things out *through* discussing them, it's rare that the participants in a debate are immediately clear on its stakes. When we all agree at a high level of abstraction, and disagree at a very concrete level that is not in and of itself that meaningful, how can we tell when there's actually a meaningful disagreement at a middle level of abstraction that is what we should be debating?

3. Who decides which issues are most important?

The chairing model I'm advocating gives a great deal of authority to the chair to prioritize among the issues that arise in a meeting. In general, I think that's fine: let the chair exercise their best judgment, but make sure to assess it afterwards. But there also has to be room in the meeting for comrades to reframe the room's sense of what the key issues are. Your job as chair is to *facilitate* other comrades' leadership in the meeting, not to preclude or supplant it.

One way I manage this tension is to check in about my chairing decisions during the meeting. "OK, it seems like we need to resolve X question before we can figure out Y. I'm thinking we spend the next 15 minutes on X. Anyone object?" This also must be done judiciously; no one wants to spend half the meeting talking about how the meeting should work. Part of chairing is managing the tension between your responsibility to exercise your political judgment about the priorities for the meeting, and your responsibility to sometimes let other comrades change your mind about what those priorities are.

4. Clear goals vs. emergent wisdom

I've been describing a model where the BC sets up an agenda with a clear set of goals for each section of the meeting, and the BC and chair plan a meeting that'll meet

those goals. But sometimes the BC doesn't know in advance of the meeting what the key issues in an area of work are, and the only way to find out is to have them emerge from the discussion.

In my experience, this is especially common when an area of work hasn't been discussed in a while (e.g., a campaign that just a couple comrades are involved in); when a situation is developing unusually quickly (so that comrades might want to call into question previous assumptions or decisions about our goals or strategy); or when the branch as a whole is reimagining the way it approaches some aspect of its work (in a campus branch that merges with a city branch for the summer, this often describes the meetings when we first reemerge as a separate campus branch and start to make fall plans).

The challenge in these cases is to give enough unstructured space for the real questions to emerge, without being so aimless that the questions never develop any specificity. When I suspect that a meeting will be like this, I usually advocate a flexible agenda. For example, a 50-minute section might be planned as 15 minutes of free-form discussion, followed by five minutes collectively identifying one or two key questions to resolve in the remaining half hour.

Conclusion

Political chairing is a lot like every other political task: it works best when comrades have a clear set of goals that are shared collectively by the whole branch; have considerable autonomy to experiment and figure out their own ways of achieving those goals; and get regular, good-natured feedback on how it's going. It does not work well when comrades are not set up well to succeed by having a clear direction on what the group is trying to accomplish and adequate time to develop their plan, or when comrades treat the job as following a set of rules by rote instead of creative problem-solving.

There is another argument running underneath this chairing model: take branch meetings seriously, because they really matter. I was heavily influenced by Jason F.'s document on NYU last year: in a healthy branch, the meetings are the political center of the week for comrades and contacts. They're the place where we actually get to figure out the burning questions we all have about what's going on in the world and what we can do about it.

The approach I'm describing here takes a lot more effort than showing up at a meeting and asking someone if they mind chairing. If BCs feel that they are too busy, overwhelmed, and run ragged with other responsibilities to do this, this document is emphatically not meant to chastise them. I believe comrades in that position that they are too busy to simply add another weekly responsibility. But I would submit that, if the BC and branch really are too busy to set clear goals for a branch meeting well in advance, take some time to mull over how the meeting can achieve them, and have a comrade make this their mission that week, then the branch should consider whether it's focused on the right things.

Elizabeth W.-F., Madison campus branch

Socialist Worker: Not just for tablings

This document is in response to National Committee report resolution #3, specifically the proposal to, "re-establish a routine around regular sales of SW" as well as the document on Socialist Worker in Pre-convention bulletin #1.

We agree that as an organization we need to reemphasize reading and selling Socialist Worker. However, while the NC and SC documents do not argue it specifically, we believe some comrades have interpreted them as saying that we need to prioritize weekly street tablings, of the type community branches have traditionally held on street corners or at public transit stops. We are unconvinced that regular street tablings should be the priority everywhere. Instead, we want to start a conversation about criteria for when branches should choose to organize such tablings, and when they might be better off prioritizing something else.

Our experience in Oakland

To be sure, there are many examples in which public SW tablings work well to build our profile: on campuses, at political rallies and events, and at some large cultural events. In some cities, community branches have implemented successful weekly tablings in areas where there is high foot traffic and a concentration of workers.

Here in Oakland, for example, we have had success setting up a tent at the monthly First Friday Art Murmur gathering and selling Socialist Workers there. Our successful tablings at this event have occurred when we have a large number of comrades to staff the table, a variety of relevant visuals, and a clear political focus with current Socialist Workers and flyers. We have found that simply setting up a table with a stagnant set of materials does not necessarily attract a crowd. We also have a small weekly tabling during evening rush hour at the West Oakland BART station, which has also been somewhat successful. However, for comrades who are not available during the evening rush, we have struggled to find a suitable tabling location rooted in a working class neighborhood with sufficient foot traffic.

At the same time, we do have quite a large periphery around

our branch, but who we have not yet been able to recruit. There are a number of union members who regularly buy Socialist Worker from our members at their workplaces, we have a number of contacts through our work with Our Walmart, and we have met dozens of contacts through previous First Friday events and political rallies, many of whom we are still in touch with. On some occasions, when we are building particular events, we may want to do more targeted outreach to a wider audience, but the consolidation of the dozens of contacts and allies around us seems more promising than a search for better locations to meet potential new contacts through tablings.

Street tablings and other uses for Socialist Worker

This is not to say that we don't have a lot of work to do to shore up our Socialist Worker routines. For one thing, we need to encourage both members and contacts to read both the online and print edition of SW. This can be accomplished through bringing Socialist Worker discussions into branch meetings and organizing SW reading circles in workplaces and before or after coalition meetings in which we have several contacts. We should also encourage members and contacts to write articles for SW that can help analyze and connect to local issues in the absence of sustained movements.

Since there is a discussion about reviving street tablings, we should explore possible reasons to prioritize street tablings specifically. Here are some of the arguments we've heard:

● We meet people, some of whom are interested in socialism and come to our events, and identify them by their purchase of a newspaper;

● We train our members to talk to strangers about politics and defend the positions of the ISO;

● We build the profile of the ISO as an organization as well as socialism as an idea, so people become accustomed to seeing us and the SW logo and website and associating them with a clear socialist perspective, even if we don't talk to them again for a long time;

● We learn what questions and issues people are thinking about, and how they respond to different slogans and events;

● We keep to the tradition of Lenin, Malcolm X, and other revolutionary activists through history;

● We keep our organization together by establishing a regular routine of activity, and logistical work;

● We discipline our members by getting them to carry out an activity that few enjoy (this was suggested to one of us by a comrade at Socialism 2013 as perhaps an unspoken function of paper sales).

Some or most of these may be good reasons--and some less so.

One thing we have heard emphasized recently is the need for training. In situations where weekly public tablings make sense, they of course should remain a training ground, but in situations where we struggle to meet contacts through tablings, it seems unlikely that we will train any new members this way. Instead, we should see study groups, branch meetings, contact meetings, coalition meetings, and political rallies as alternative training grounds.

Similarly, we have plenty of logistical challenges without artificially making more for ourselves, in circumstances where we derive little other political benefit.

Setting and tracking goals

When we do decide to sustain a weekly tabling, we should have clear goals and expectations for it, and we should keep track of whether they are being met. Otherwise, not only might we get our priorities wrong, but it's hard to give our members more than a moralistic or bureaucratic motivation to keep coming.

In theory, selling SW regularly is a condition of membership in the ISO. In practice, many of our members sell it neither on the street, nor to individual contacts. Voting with our feet differently than we have voted in a branch meeting is never a good thing, but it is often a symptom of a poorly motivated decision rather than simply indiscipline. Moreover, because of the traditional emphasis on street tablings as the main venue for selling SW, we often don't know whether and to what extent our members sell papers in other venues and it is often difficult to quantify how many papers we sell outside of tablings. If we are more explicit in prioritizing SW sales in other venues, we will have a more accurate picture of our organization's reach.

We should be able to keep track of numbers that will tell us roughly how many people we are meeting when we sell SW, both contacts and sales, and how many serious conversations we are having even when we do not get contact information or sell a paper. And we should take these numbers seriously. When a tabling doesn't go well, it is usually possible to point to real logistical and political failures--we didn't have good enough topical signs, we didn't call around to bring members out, we didn't plan in advance the political theme for our sale that would make it feel like part of a campaign--but this should not prevent us from looking for longer-term patterns. On the other hand, if we do not put real thought and energy into a sale but simply show up out of habit, it can be difficult to assess whether the challenges lie with the theory or the execution, leading to a vicious cycle of unsuccessful tablings without sufficient reassessment.

The Steering Committee acknowledged in 2010 that "the organization has seen a long-term decline in the number of papers that we can expect to sell at public sales, no matter how well organized." It would be useful to track this locally as well as nationally, and to be able to share these numbers among branches and districts so we can better judge what works and take advantage of our size to

generalize from experiments. Too often, we don't write or read reports of any kind about sales--and even when we do, it's hard to know if a successful experience someone reports is a one-time fluke or something they've figured out how to repeat.

Individual branches should be empowered to make tactical decisions about the best ways to use Socialist Worker to develop our politics and build our organization based on an analysis rooted in local conditions, and we should have clear--where possible, quantitative, stated and shared--goals and expectations and assessments to help make sure we are doing so.

David J. and Stephanie S., Oakland

Dues and democracy

This document will provide some historical examples demonstrating that dues are (however we specifically decide to amend them or not) not only the norm on the revolutionary left, but they provide the indispensable condition for any meaningful political independence and internal democracy. It ends with some brief comments on Alan P's "Dues Document and Resolution" from Pre-Convention Bulletin #4. I hope to show that, to paraphrase Lenin, "There can be no revolutionary democracy without revolutionary dues." As is stated in the preface to the proposed revision to the ISO Rules and Procedures:

> *The ISO is a disciplined, activist, democratic centralist organization. It is democratic in reaching its decisions and centralist in carrying them out. The lower bodies of the organization are subordinated to the higher bodies, and all are subordinated to the delegated convention. ISO rules are binding on all members of the organization.*

One of our most important rules is the requirement to pay regular dues as democratically determined by the organizational as a whole as a prerequisite of members. Why is this so?

Dues: Political independence

In 1965, Malcolm X spoke on the importance of dues and self-sufficiency for revolutionaries in the Organization of Afro American Unity:

> *I attended the NAACP convention Friday in Washington, D. C., which was very enlightening. And I found the people very friendly. They've got the same kind of ideas you have.... And one of the things I learned is they only charge, I think, $2.50 a year for membership, and that's it. Well, this is one of the reasons that they have problems. Because any time you have an organization that costs $2.50 a year to belong to, it means that that organization has to turn in another direction for funds. And this is what castrates it. Because as soon as the white liberals begin to support it, they tell it what to do and what not to do.*
>
> *This is why Garvey was able to be more militant. Garvey didn't ask them for help. He asked our people for help. And this is what we're going to do. We're going to try and follow his books.*
>
> *So we're going to have a $2.00 joining fee and ask every member to contribute a dollar a week. Now, the NAACP gets $2.50 a year, that's it. And it can't ever go anywhere like that because it's always got to be putting on some kind of drive for help and will always get its help from the wrong source. And then when they get that help, they'll have to end up condemning all the enemies of their enemy in order to get some more help. No, we condemn our enemies, not the enemies of our enemies.*

Self-financing gives our organization political independence. And dues must be sufficiently high to achieve this. We must determine our needs and our goals, and then figure out what is necessary to achieve them. In 1965, Malcolm calculated this at $4.00 per month as minimum dues for membership, which after adjusting for inflation, would be $29.66 in 2013, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Dues: Requirement for membership rights

In 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World explained the relationship between paying dues and democratic rights of membership.

> *ARTICLE II, SECTION 3. The initiation fee for members of Local Unions, as provided for in Article I, Section 2 (c), and Article II, Section 5, shall be $2.00. The monthly dues shall be 50 cents per month, together with such assessments as may be levied...*
>
> *ARTICLE VIII. SEC. 2. Monthly dues are payable on the first day of each month. Members who do not pay dues or assessments for current month before the last day of the succeeding month shall be in bad standing. Members in bad standing are not entitled to benefits of any kind from the local union nor from the Industrial Workers of the World.*
>
> *SEC. 3. Members who become delinquent for dues and assessments for sixty days or more, shall not again he entitled to any benefits until thirty days after such dues and assessments shall have been paid.*

Paying dues is the basis for the democratic rights of membership. The IWW did not mess around. Not only were democratic rights and benefits revoked after thirty days, if those dues were 60 days late, a sanction period of 30 days was imposed even after back dues had been paid up. In 1905, the IWW calculated this to be roughly $12 per month at a *minimum* in 2013 money, *plus* a $50 initiation fee and additional "assessments as may be levied." Again, using BLS inflation converter for 2013 conversion.

In 1919, the Communist Party of America 1919 was founded and followed the IWW's example on dues and membership.

> *Section 2. Each member shall pay forty cents per month in dues...*
>
> *Section 4. Special assessment may be levied by the National Organization, Federations, or the Central Executive Committee. No member shall be considered in good standing unless he purchases such special assessment stamps.*
>
> *Section 6. Members unable to pay dues on account of unemployment, strikes, sickness or for similar reasons shall, upon application to their financial secretary, be furnished exempt stamps. Provided that no State or District Organization or Federation shall be allowed exempt stamps in a proportion greater than 5 percent of its monthly purchase of regular stamps.*
>
> *Section 7. Members who are three months in arrears in payment of their dues shall cease to be members of the party in good standing. Members who are six months in arrears shall be stricken from the rolls. No member shall pay dues in advance for a period of more than three months.*

Just like the IWW, the communists made limited provisions for specific and temporary hardships and unemployment, but very explicitly linked the expectation of regular dues payments to membership rights. In 2013 dollars, the Communist dues payments started at $5.50 per month, without accounting for special assessments. These may seem low compared to the OAAU and the IWW, but almost all members of the party also paid similar dues to what were called the Foreign Language Federations, so the actual minimum dues were closer to $50 initiation and $12 per month IWW minimum expectations. In terms of how many members might not pay dues, they capped it at 5%, so each branch of 20 members might have 1 member who cannot pay dues for a defined period, and this was only granted by the treasurer upon specific application for hardship exemption.

Minimum dues are necessary but not sufficient

Furthermore, the *reality* of revolutionary organizations has always rested on comrades making greater financial commitments than the absolute *minimums* described above. Here is how James Cannon, the leader of the early American Trotskyists, described the contributions above

and beyond the minimum dues (which were very similar to those in the Communist Party),

> *Our comrades who later gained great fame as labor leaders weren't always famous labor leaders. In those days they were coal heavers, working ten and twelve hours a day in the coal yards, heaving coal, the hardest kind of physical labor.* Out of their wages they used to dig up as high as five or ten dollars a week *and shoot it in to New York to make sure The Militant came out. Many times we had no money for the paper. We would send a wire to Minneapolis and get back a telegraphic money order for $25 or something like that. Comrades in Chicago and other places did the same things. It was by a combination of all these efforts and all those sacrifices throughout the country that we survived and kept the paper going.*
>
> *There was an occasional windfall. Once or twice a sympathizer would give us $25. Those were real holidays in our office. We had a "revolving rent fund" which was the last resource of our desperate financial finagling. A comrade with rent to pay, say $30 or $40 due on the fifteenth of the month, would lend it to us on the tenth to pay some pressing bill or other. Then in five days we would get another comrade to lend his rent money to enable us to pay the other comrade back in time to satisfy his landlord. The second comrade would then stall off his landlord while we swung another deal, borrowed somebody else's rent to repay him. That went on all the time. It gave us some floating capital to cut the corner. [my emphasis, available at http://reforgethefi.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/the-history-of-american-trotskyism.pdf]*

In 1934, the comrades Cannon is describing would be lucky to earn $1.00/hr, so their $5 or $10 a week constituted around 10-20% of their income. Today that would equal $300 to $600 a month. This may seem high, but here are some examples of what workers pay for dues in order to be members in good standing in their unions. These are 2004 average dues amounts *per month:*

NEA	$281
SEIU	$405
UFCW	$399
AFSCME	$269
IBT	$490
AFT	$236
UAW	$516
CWA	$369

[http://labornotes.org/sites/default/files/main/articles/averageDuesAndDuesGrowth270.jpg]

What lessons can we draw from these examples? First, regular dues payments are a normal part of the working-class and revolutionary movements. Without them, we become, as Malcolm stressed, beholding to liberal sources of funding. Traditionally, even the poorest workers and oppressed are not exempt from this responsibility although the scales have varied over time. Second, democratic

membership rights are premised on regular dues payments. Short-term exceptions can be made, but these are not the rule. In all but the rarest circumstances, revolutionary organizations cannot accept the development of a "two-tier" membership – those who pay dues and those who do not. Everyone contributes, everyone has the same democratic rights. Third, whether formally written-out in a scale (as is the practice of the ISO) and/or through special assessments, voluntary contributions and dues payments to multiple party entities, a significantly higher financial commitment to financing revolutionary organization is necessary on the part of those most committed to the organization.

Conclusion

In his document, Alan P. rightly underlines Malcolm's point that we have no choice to be self-financing because we have very few millionaires in our branches and suggests changing the ISO dues scale to make it even more progressive than it is at present. I have no principled objection to this, although I think his definition becomes too technical. For instance, why should comrades who have student loans deduct that from their Monthly Net Income, but comrades who have credit card bills not get a similar break? I also think that $20 a month as a minimum (except for those who have children in which case it is $10) represents a realistic baseline as opposed to his proposal for $5 per month. I might even propose raising it to Malcolm's minimum monthly dues, or to include an initiation fee, but I think we should start with the basics and establish that our current minimum dues reflects a good starting point for membership.

I do think that the ISO has developed far too lax an attitude towards dues. Perhaps this can be partially explained by Alan's motivation for the change in dues scales when he writes, that dues are seen by some members as "money for the luxury of what is ostensibly an unpaid Marxism internship of indefinite duration" for which we "don't even get a tote bag." I think Alan is probably just trying to lighten the mood here, but to the extent that this sentiment exists, it is exactly the opposite of the argument put forth by Malcolm X and James Cannon. To the extent that this sort of "consumerist" (as Alan calls it) attitude influences some comrades thinking, then this is a political argument with them about the necessity of taking dues payment (and the necessity of an even greater commitment when at all possible) seriously as a *precondition* for both the political independence of the ISO as a whole and individual members' democratic rights within the organization.

As this is the pre-Convention period and branches should be soon having elections for delegates, this is an excellent time to review all members' dues payments and clarify if all members are in good standing as provided for in the *current* ISO dues scale and Rules and Procedures. These rules state that any member who has not paid dues for 6 months is no longer considered a member in good standing and that delegates for each branch to the Convention are awarded by the number of dues-paying members in good-standing at the time of the Convention.

Although this rule is more lenient than the one followed by the IWW in 1905, it is a good place to begin. After all, learning to develop, amend, and abide by our own rules and to build and finance an independent revolutionary organization is just a small step towards learning how to overturn capitalism and construct an entirely new social system in its place.

Todd C., Oakland

A proposal on dues

A significant drawback to the current dues structure, and to Alan P.'s proposal in Bulletin #4, is that they fail to account substantially for cost of living differences. This proposal, and the current structure, fail to take into account the largest expense for households: housing.

Housing costs vary widely by area. Including them in our dues scale is a simple change that would go a long ways towards accounting for differences in cost of living. This would reflect the reality that a salary that affords a relatively comfortable standard of living in the South or a rural area would be hard to get by on in a major city, particularly expensive coastal cities.

A standard measure of housing affordability is that households should spend no more than 30% of income after taxes for housing to be considered affordable. Using that as a standard, I propose the following. According to this proposal those who pay 30% of their take home pay on rent will pay the same dues as before. Those who pay more than 30% of their income on rent will see their dues go down relative to how much more they spend on housing, while those who pay less on housing will have their dues rise. This will go a long ways towards making the dues scale more accurately reflect differences in cost of living, in the interest of fairness.

Proposal:

Monthly Net Income, the income figure upon which the dues scale is based, shall be calculated as follows. Monthly Net Income = monthly take home pay + (monthly take home pay * 0.30) - monthly housing costs. "Monthly take home pay" is defined as gross pay minus taxes and deductions for benefits and union dues, while "monthly housing costs" refers either to the member's share of rent payments or their mortgage payment plus property taxes.

Gary L., New York City

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Toward a national anti-austerity campaign

The purpose of the following document is to outline a vision for a nationwide anti-austerity campaign organized through a broad coalition of independent left-wing forces. This document aims to generate a vibrant discussion over long-term strategic perspectives for resistance to austerity.

At the end is a proposal to the National Convention to sanction the formation of a special national fraction tasked with appealing to sympathetic organizations and allies for the formation of an organizing committee that will plan and build for a national anti-austerity conference.

Background

Under "Perspectives" from Pre-convention Bulletin #1, Alan M. described the "ruling class consensus" in the present period as "'smash and grab': take as much as you can, as quickly as you can, and resist even the slightest concession to workers."

The ongoing economic crisis has generated the precondition for exciting, dramatic, and heroic moments of resistance across globe. However, nowhere has the austerity tide been turned back. Austerity is likely to carry on into the foreseeable future.

The caving of the traditional formations of mass working class organization--the large union federations and social democratic parties--has been a global phenomenon. The U.S., of course, has been no exception and the labor bureaucracy remains tied to the Democratic Party, in spite of the fact that they have been the face of austerity since the election of President Obama. Even in extreme instances where labor has faced virtual extinction--such as the passage of right-to-work in Michigan--the bureaucracy has promised to carry on with business as usual and redoubled their efforts to support Democratic Party candidates in 2014.

The crisis has, in some instances, led to dramatic political shifts and exciting new developments. The ascension of SYRIZA in Greece, the organization of the People's Assembly and Left Unity in Britain, and the merger of the Revolutionary Socialist Party into Socialist Alternative in Australia, are just a few examples that point toward the potential for the crisis of austerity to generate renewed interest and new formations on the Left. The growth of left-wing and social democratic publications like *Jacobin*, *Dissent*, *n+1*, and *The New Inquiry*, reveals that the U.S. has not been excluded from this process.

There remains, however, no organizational or political expression through which popular hostility to austerity can be sustained in the United States. What we can learn from the developments abroad and our own circumstances in the United States is that *if there is to be any protracted*

resistance to austerity we must lay the foundation for that struggle ourselves.

We have seen that the crisis of austerity is able to produce sharp bitterness and anger that can generate powerful outbursts, such as those we saw in 2011. While these eruptions have been sporadic and episodic, *we should expect and prepare for more of these outbursts in the future.*

Revolutionary organizations—including our own organization—have made powerful contributions to the fight against austerity. It goes without saying, however, that the ISO is too small and politically narrow to act as the organizational scaffolding for a future anti-austerity movement. The vast majority of participants in the movements of 2011, for instance, were often *sympathetic* to the aims of revolutionary socialists, but were generally not prepared—for a multitude of reasons,—to commit themselves to a specifically Marxist organization such as the ISO.

If the Left is to prepare for any outbursts against austerity in the future, therefore, we must intentionally set out to lay down the broad foundation for a movement that can unite and sustain those forces.

Vision

What could such a foundation look like?

Imagine that in the near future we see an eruption like those we witnessed in 2011. This is not an unlikely scenario. Now picture the difference it would make if we were a part of a wider network of militants committed to the formation of a sustained and successful anti-austerity movement opposed to the policies of both ruling parties. This network would ideally be comprised of people from a diverse range of political tendencies and backgrounds--socialists, anarchists, social democrats, teachers, nurses, students, postal workers, and more. Consider the organizational weight and capacity it would add to our own efforts as revolutionary socialists if were able to construct such a network.

The objective of this coalition would be to give sustained political expression and organization to the widespread anti-austerity sentiment around us, and to eventually form the basis for a militant political resistance to austerity in the United States.

A successful, nationwide coalition would unite a wide range of forces reflective of the full scope of austerity's warpath. Revolutionary socialist and social democratic organizations; community organizations fighting foreclosures and gentrification; parents and students fighting against school closures; graduate and adjunct instructors at public and

private colleges and universities; women's groups resisting attacks on Planned Parenthood; workers in the Fight for 15; and locals in education, nursing, postal service, or public sector unions, etc.

Such a coalition would necessarily need a broad basis for political unity, such as:

1. Opposition to all forms of austerity (i.e., any attempt by the ruling class to reduce the "social wage," including service cuts, privatizations, school closures, anti-union legislation, etc.,)

2. Affirmative action against any attempt to divide the working class (that is, active opposition to racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, national oppression, and imperialism)

3. Complete political independence from the Democratic Party

This movement would engage not only in broad agitation and organization on both a local and national scale, but would also facilitate popular education on a mass scale on a wide range of topics including:

-   The roots and causes of the economic crisis and austerity
-   The intersectional costs and impacts of austerity on women, people of color, immigrants, queer people, disabled people, etc.
-   The role that racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and imperialism play in justifying and supporting austerity
-   The ecological costs of austerity
-   The global scope of austerity, and the political threats posed by the rising far right
-   The scale and the lessons of the global resistance to austerity
-   The political role of the Democratic Party in the U.S. and in carrying out the austerity agenda
-   Left-wing alternatives to austerity, and the kinds of organizations, institutions, and resistance needed to make them politically possible

This movement would utilize a range of tactics under a strategy that aims to unite and cohere anti-austerity forces to the greatest degree possible. Local campaigns could build for a mass occupation of schools being threatened with closure; run left-wing anti-austerity candidates against Democratic or Republican candidates; organize ballot referenda for minimum wage, rent control, or foreclosure moratoriums, etc.

In the long term, this coalition could publish its own website, a regular monthly newsletter, leaflets and pamphlets; host regular public forums, discussions, debates, study groups, classes, and even regional and national conferences.

Such an organization, of course, would need to finance itself. It would likely require formal membership and a dues structure.

The formation of a successful, broad coalition would lay the basis for long-term left unity and political organization (i.e., regroupment).

First steps

This movement will not come out of nowhere. It will be the result of hard, patient work of dedicated cadre. Our organization can play a critical role in spearheading this effort.

Our organization is in a special position to take the first steps in initiating this sort of project because of our record and our grassroots experience.

As a first step toward crystallizing this anti-austerity coalition, a nationwide anti-austerity conference could be planned that would bring together a wide variety of groups and individuals.

This conference could be organized by a planning committee that could include not only members of other revolutionary organizations like Solidarity and Socialist Alternative, but social democratic, community, labor, and other progressive organizations as well: *Jacobin*, for instance, as well as the Young Democratic Socialists, members of community anti-foreclosure and anti-gentrification organizations, feminist organizations, teachers' caucuses like CORE, MORE, the Bad Ass Teachers Association, etc.

The conference would host discussions, debates, and workshops on the politics of anti-austerity and strategies for resistance. We could invite familiar speakers that would attract a large audience, for instance: Kshama Sawant, Ty Moore, Jill Stein, Cornell West, Karen Lewis, Bhaskar Sunkara, and representatives from campaigns like the Fight for 15, OUR Walmart, etc.

If this conference is successful, the conference's organizing committee could take further steps through planning smaller regional conferences that would help cohere more localized networks.

If these are successful, in medium- to long-term future we could see the committee calling for a national founding convention that would discuss, debate, and vote on the political points of unity for a national anti-austerity coalition and elect a national steering committee.

Important considerations

In undertaking these first steps, there is the risk that the necessary energy and activity for this sort of project does not exist, and that might put us down the path of substitutionism. We cannot determine ahead of time, with scientific precision, if all the necessary energy for this project exists.

We do know, however, several important facts: 1) The ongoing austerity crisis will drive significant sections of the working class toward anger and will continue to open large ideological openings for the Left; 2) This bitterness will produce the conditions for future outbursts such as those we saw in 2011; 3) No structure yet exists to carry these outbursts past their initial, episodic and "spontaneous" phases, and 4) That such a structure will not be constructed through the traditional organization of the working-class, i.e., the unions.

With these considerations, I believe that the risks posed are outweighed by the costs of not adequately preparing for future outbursts.

Lenin was often fond of quoting Napoleon, saying, "*On s'engage et puis...on voit.*" That is, "first you engage; then you see." In this spirit, we should consider taking cautious first steps while making regular, honest, and sober assessments of our work, while making use of our cumulative experience from past attempts at building coalitions and networks to best avoid making substitutionist errors.

In assessing our work, we should consider the range of forces we are able to bring together, and the level of participation and commitment of each organization.

I believe the following proposal is well within the reach of our organization. However, for those comrades who believe this is too ambitious, I think that should lead to other questions and conversations for us to consider collectively: is this kind of movement desirable? If so, what kind of resources, institutions, practices, discussions, and debates do we need to have within the ISO and within the broader Left to make such an undertaking possible? What kind of a Left do we need and what does this mean for the ISO?

Proposed

The National Convention approves of the creation of a special national fraction empowered to draft an appeal for the formation of an organizing committee within the next 90 days that will plan and build for a national anti-austerity conference, after which the organization will evaluate the potential for further efforts toward developing a national anti-austerity coalition.

Aaron P., Detroit

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