

Pre-convention Bulletin #7 / December 2013

for members only

<u>Documents</u>	<u>Page</u>
Inside this bulletin	1
Addendum to “Beyond ‘white skin privilege’” Pranav J., Columbus	2
Building city branches: A response to Brian C. Steve L. and Leela Y., Seattle	2
Why haven’t we grown? Steve L., Seattle	4
Is the ISO a failed political project? Avery W., San Diego	6
Factions and the Fourth International by Leon Trotsky Reprint submitted by Joel G., Chicago	8
On the importance of cadre Ben S., Atlanta	10
Boston response to “Appeal for Shaun” Akunna E., Alpana M., Amanda A., Amirah S.G., Ann C., Bill K., Chris M., Judea B., Kay S., Khury P.S., Lindie N., Michael F., Sofia A., Boston	10
Questions for the Renewal Faction and former members Nate M., Eastern Connecticut/Providence	13
Critique of the Renewal Faction documents Bekah W., Atlanta	14
Seeing the trees but missing the forest: Fixing our flawed approach toward recruitment Sharon S., Chicago (first published October 1, 2007)	17

Inside this Bulletin

This is the sixth 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@internationalsocialist.org so we can plan bulletin production. Documents themselves can be submitted to the same address.

Thanks!

Addendum to “Beyond ‘white skin privilege’”

This was originally written in January 2008, and does not therefore reflect the current discussions on the topic. I think the language of intersectionality greatly pushes the argument forward, and needs to be incorporated into the framework presented here. That said, I think this document

offers a response to the question of how we can bring together the acknowledgement of benefits with Marxist principles, that ordinary people have a common material interest in overthrowing oppression.

Pranav J., Columbus

Building city branches: A response to Brian C.

Announcement of the ISO Renewal Faction

Brian has written an extremely thought-provoking document and one that raises important suggestions for city branches. Among some of the most important ideas he raises are 1) Development of concrete propaganda. Each city branch needs to have specific analyses of city politics and struggles. 2) Developing more sensitive and better utilization of working class members with families etc. who are not able to be as active as other members 3) Addressing the issue of child care for political functions 4) Allowing some comrades to not be in a particular fraction to allow flexibility to relate to new movements. 5) Exploring campuses where we don't already have branches. 6) Maintaining connection to issues that are not currently movements through articles and continuing contacts with key activists and 7) Finally, Stressing centralizing political work by regular reporting of political activity by members--especially political work that has not been prioritized by the Branch.

We would like to comment on some of the issues he raises from the experience of Seattle. (We want to make clear that this is our opinion and is not necessarily shared by other Seattle Branch members.)

Brian's document rightly raises the goal of the ISO becoming rooted in the working class. The question is how to do so. In the period between the late 40's and late 70's,, at the height of union power, there were millions of relatively stable union jobs. There were many sectors in which workers were in the same industry for life, often with the same company. In fact, several generations of the same family often worked in the same plant. At least through the 70's, there was a relatively high level of struggle compared to today. In many industries there were stable rank and file caucuses for long periods. The I.S. (the organization the ISO originated from) had a strategic orientation to key sectors ---Auto, Teamsters, Telephone, Steel and Teaching. The radicalization of the 60's and rank and file revolt of the late 60's, and early 70's lasted in some cases into the late 70's. Already by the founding of the ISO in 1977, a

downturn in struggle had set in which as Brian points out led to the ISO's campus orientation.

Is the similar focus on strategic sectors now on a city by city basis as Brian proposes appropriate? For several reasons, I don't believe it is any more: 1) The level of work place struggle is very low. There are only rare cases of sustained rank and file organizing going on. The stress on the day to day class struggle in a particular sector would in most cases leave little to focus on. 2) The Radicalizing Minority is not for the most part focused in key sectors. It is spread widely across the population. 3) Neo-Liberalism has broken up the long term pattern of employment. A stable layer of working class militants is less likely to be in a particular industry over a long period. This undercuts the ability to have a long term relation to a particular group of workers in a particular industry. 4) Key sectors that we need to have organized in a revolutionary situation are likely to change significantly between now and the revolution. Certainly, the IS's key sectors are not for the most part the key sectors today---with the exception of Teaching. 5) Neighborhoods are also unstable. Working class neighborhoods are gentrifying. Workers are being driven from central cities to suburbs. This makes a long term orientation on a particular working class neighborhood more problematic. 6) Working class struggle today is at a higher level around broadly political issues than it is on work place issues. 7) Along with this, the working class has changed. It is made up of more service workers with higher turnover. It includes more white collar workers and more formally educated workers. The class is more diffuse even as clear class consciousness is low. A general pre-class conscious left populism or rudimentary class consciousness is high.

These changes necessitate a different approach to recruitment of future working class cadre than the I.S. had in the 70's or Brian proposes today. 1) Since struggle is still the greatest radicalizer, we need to focus on struggles---whether they be workplace centered, generally political or as in many cases a combination of both---for example the struggle to save the Post Office or the Fight for 15. We can win people to Marxism from struggles, whether those struggles win or lose, maintain momentum or fall away. To do so, we need a high focus on revolutionary strategic and tactical intervention and winning people to revolutionary politics. 2) Since we are still at the level of "primitive accumulation of cadre", we need to find people open to revolutionary politics wherever we can. This puts a high premium on the public presence of the ISO---through banners, tables and contingents at demonstrations, websites, use of Social Media, public tabling, participation in struggles etc. 3) Since class consciousness and pre-class consciousness is less work place centered than before, and since the level of workplace struggle is low, we need to focus on the struggle over political issues---all of which reflect working class interests as a whole. This is where Brian's stress on concrete propaganda is so important. Of course, workplace struggle is very important when it breaks out. However, it is better to relate to it where it does break out than to spend resources in an area that we believe it should break out in. 4) Long term implantation in political struggles makes sense since these are areas that are most

likely to attract the radicalizing minority.

Of course, in the long run, and especially in a revolutionary situation, the Party needs to be rooted in work places as well as in the working class as a whole. In the short term there will be work places and even industries that are more amenable to the concentrated approach that Brian proposes. However, the best way to get there is to recruit as many of the radicalizing minority as we can from wherever we can. Brian underestimates the numbers of working class people who are part of the Radicalizing Minority. There are even many people out there today who are independent Marxists or incipient Marxists. We need to find and recruit as many of these people as possible. As we win over more and more of this group, we may find that a few branch members work in a particular industry or company or union. It then becomes feasible for them to develop a concrete perspective for that sector. Several Marxists in one area can be the catalyst for rank and file organizing, a rise in struggle and therefore an openness of more people to revolutionary ideas. This is the model we have followed in teacher work---an organic growth of members in a particular sector which allowed broader organizing. This model is also more likely to be effective than a more artificial concentration on "key" sectors. Overall, the energy put into focusing on key economic sectors would be better spent on finding the radicalizing minority wherever they are. They are unlikely today to be concentrated in a particular economic sector. This does not preclude all work place sales. It only means that they should fit into the broader perspectives of the branch, rather than the more concentrated sectoral approach.

Finally, Brian is too pessimistic about the ability of the ISO to integrate people who we did not recruit out of key sectors or movements. Countering his own argument for concentration, he notes that people we recruit out of movements find it difficult when that movement fades. Whether we recruit people from a workplace, a movement or a street sale, the key to integration and development is education and involvement in activity, including as much as possible in struggle. Contact meetings with people we meet on paper sales don't have to be abstract. Besides socialist politics, we need to discuss how the contact could participate in branch activities and struggles. Also, the pace of struggle in most working class sectors today is unlikely to be high enough to sustain the more rooted approach Brian proposes for working class contacts and members.

Every branch is different, but in Seattle of the 7 members who have joined and stayed in the organization over the last 2 years, 2 were directly recruited out of Seattle Clinic Defense (SCD), one was recruited out of a work place where we had a member, 4 came to the Branch in a much more general way. Even those recruited out of SCD were not long term, patient recruits. They joined quite quickly after coming around the Branch since they were already in the radicalizing minority before meeting us. The workplace member was recruited on the basis of political discussion, reading Meaning of Marxism etc. not out of work place struggle. At least in Seattle, none of our new members, and really hardly any of our members overall fit Brian's long term recruitment approach. In the nearby Everett "twig", all

3 of the new members are people who sought out revolutionary politics and found the ISO. The growth of new branches across the country in general is a sign of this. None of our new branches came out of concentrating on key economic sectors. All of them came to the ISO the way the Everett comrades did.

This is NOT to denigrate long-term recruitment! It is part of the process of building long term allies in movements and unions. It can be strategically very important for the organization both locally and nationally. However, MOST of our recruitment is likely to be short to medium term---i.e. not instant recruitment, but also not recruitment over a year or longer.

For right now, most of our recruits will likely be more

general than out of particular economic sectors., even in those branches that apply the key sector approach. Even our movement recruits will more likely be politicized activists than long term activists only slowly politicizing. A large section of the radicalizing minority are young people, whether high school and college students, college grads or just young working class people. The road to deeper implantation in the working class will primarily through this layer. Building cadre out of this layer will allow deeper implantation in particular sectors later as our teachers' work shows.

Overall we need a more class-wide and less sectoral approach than Brian proposes.

Steve L. and Leela Y., Seattle

Why haven't we grown?

There is a consistent theme in the criticisms of the ISO that have come from ex-members and even in some of the contributions to the Bulletin: The ISO leadership has been over-optimistic about the period, expecting various events to become turning points etc. This continuing error has contributed to the disorientation in the ISO that infects the left worldwide. This disorientation and the difficult nature of the current period has resulted in making it hard to recruit and retain members. As the ex-members from SF put it:

[W]e found an increasing gap between our experienced reality and ever rosier predictions of growth, postulates of "leftward shifting consciousness" and claims of an ever-growing "radicalizing minority" and developing class consciousness...within the working class.

Further, there has been an ongoing problem in the ISO of equating attitudes on social questions...with class consciousness...

...we find the ISO's formulation of a "leftward-moving consciousness" fundamentally flawed. Consciousness ...vacillated in both directions continually over the last decade."

This is echoed in Sid Patel's contribution in Bulletin #3—saying that the ISO needs to realize that we are in a "tough" period.

I believe that these criticisms are wrong in many respects, but this document will focus on two. 1) We are not in a "tough" period (a period in which it is hard to recruit people to revolutionary Marxism). 2) These criticisms assume a direct correlation between big national political changes and the ISO's ability to recruit.

1) Is it a tough period?

For many years, we have noted the growth of a "radicalizing

minority". Dissatisfaction with the ongoing concentration of wealth, attacks on oppressed groups, declining living standards, and a generally deteriorating position of ordinary people etc. has fueled this radicalization. The onset of the Great Recession intensified this trend. Here are just a few signs of this:

- The embrace of Occupy by a majority of the 99%
- The widespread support for workers in Wisconsin
- The opinion polls showing consistent support for socialism, especially among young people
- Increasing interest in Marxism, including rising sales of the *Communist Manifesto*.
- ISO branches springing up across the U.S. in the last few years.
- Recently, 3-400 activists working on the Sawant Campaign in Seattle and 90,000+ voting for a socialist candidate. The near election of a socialist in Minneapolis.
- Even more recently: "Ohioans Elect Two Dozen City Councilors on Independent Labor Ticket," see more at www.labornotes.org/2013/12/ohioans-elect-two-dozen-city-councilors-independent-labor-ticket#sthash.FQqWyAJc.dpuf

The SF ex-member comrades seem to think these are all irrelevant because workplace struggle and unionization have not risen significantly. They have a mechanical view of consciousness.: First you struggle with a low level of consciousness and then your low level is changed by the struggle. It is really a much more dialectical process. "Being determines consciousness" But being is not struggle alone. It is every aspect of life—the racism and sexism people face, the shitty jobs, the nasty bosses, the poor housing and schools etc. People are verbal creatures. Their

ideas shift to the point where they see the need to struggle, struggle in turn changes ideas etc. People's attitudes are actually the basis of struggle. Further as Todd and Ragina pointed out in their SW response, excluding attitudes to oppression from class consciousness is narrow and un-Marxist. CLASS consciousness includes opposition to oppression. They are further wrong about vacillating consciousness. Yes it vacillates on particular issues but it has by and largely shifted to the left over the last decade—and probably most on economic issues—hatred of the concentration of wealth, seeing a division between rich and poor etc.

Related to this is something we haven't noted enough. Not only is there a radicalizing minority but within that is a smaller layer of incipient Marxists and independent Marxists. Especially since the Arab Spring, we have found more people who are considering Marxism on their own, or are already Marxists.

Even the level of struggle is more significant than the SF comrades make out. Setting aside Occupy and Wisconsin, there are a tremendous amount of on-going low level struggles developing across the U.S. In the aftermath of Occupy, there are more movements against foreclosure, against racism, ecological destruction etc. The attack on unions and their failure means that some class struggle has morphed into low level struggle around political issues.

2) National/International Politics and Recruitment

All the critiques identify supposed toughness of the period with our failure to recruit. This is wrong. A mass revolutionary party with deep roots in the class will more directly feel the forces of overall national politics on its membership. A great depression in class struggle will directly impact the ability of a mass party to recruit or retain members. This is not so true for a small revolutionary organization.

The ISO grew slowly in the conservative 80's. We suffered some losses after 9/11 but bounced back quickly. The early years of the Great Recession were confusing and coincided with Obama's election. Many activists took a wait and see attitude. The decline of Occupy and the red-baiting that sometimes ensued made some people reluctant to join a socialist organization. This faded quickly. These overall issues had an impact, —i.e. they might have slowed recruitment, but didn't prevent it—if we could grow in the 80's, we could certainly grow in the recent period!

Recruitment was possible, and has been especially possible since the end of Occupy. In Seattle, since Occupy we have recruited and held 7 people and recruited and lost 3 more. A twig in Everett, north of Seattle has also developed. (By the way, recruitment happened even when our routines suffered as they did in many other branches.)

So if the period is ripe for recruitment, why haven't we grown significantly?

As the NC report noted, there has been demoralization and

disorientation on the left. Mass struggles in Europe haven't ended austerity. The Arab Spring has stalled. The confusion about why this is has impacted us as well. It has led to an over-pessimistic assessment of the possibilities of this period, as reflected in the pre-convention debate. It has also generally sapped the confidence of some comrades. It has led to some discouragement and pessimism about the worth of maintaining our routines. Some branches have for example had problems filling crucial positions. Further exacerbating this problem is the uncertainty about the role of our hitherto most important outreach tool—*Socialist Worker*. This overall situation meant the decline of basic branch building routines. This in turn made it harder to recruit and integrate new members.

The existence of a growing radicalizing minority creates a firm basis for recruitment. It does not however solve all our problems. To recruit and integrate any significant number, we need to be on top of our game. We need to be organized, outgoing and confident.

Most people in the U.S. have little experience with political organization, or even political debate. To retain excited people, we need to show them that their efforts will be rewarded. We have to have branches that have a clear structure and expectations. Of course we will be constantly debating national and local politics and how they impact our organizing, but this must be founded on solid organization and a solid understanding of Marxism. If we have solid organization, such debates can be exciting and energizing to new people.

We need to have strong routines especially including member education, as the NC report argued for. In confusing times, education is needed more than ever. We need this stress on education, not just to be better able to explain the Marxist project to new people, but also to rebuild the confidence of our members.

However, the failure to integrate and retain members due to poor routines in the past is not an excuse for failure to reach out and recruit now. The opportunity to meet and potentially recruit the radicalizing minority has never been better. Besides solid education, we need publicity, outreach and high visibility. We need to be as many places as we can where the radicalizing minority are likely to be—primarily in small struggles, but also in political meetings etc.

Education and outward activity are related. The more we understand our politics, the more confident we feel to explain our views to others. The more we are trying to explain Marxism to others, the more we feel the need to educate ourselves.

Overall, in order to recruit solidly we need to re-emphasize branch building, even as we engage in the exciting and challenging process of figuring out this period.

There is no objective barrier to our growth today. To realize that potential, we need to act on that understanding.

Steve L., Seattle

Is the ISO a failed political project?

To lead a socialist revolution, a vanguard party must be large enough in advance to be capable of exponential growth during a revolutionary period. The Bolsheviks went in to 1917 with 20K members, and grew to 400K by October. Deep and prolonged economic crisis create the most favorable conditions for the growth of revolutionary groups: The US Communist Party went from a low of 7K members in 1929, to 25K by 1934, to 83K in 1938. Proportionally, the tiny US Trotskyists grew similarly.

Astutely, the ISO has always held that we are not the organizational embryo of a future vanguard party. But growth has always been a top priority for us. Starting with about 80 (and soon after many less) members in 1977, we grew to 250 or so by the early 90s. The 1991 Gulf War, collapse of the Soviet Union, LA Rebellion, and end of Republican dominance of the White House in 1992 opened a period of rapid and qualitative growth. By the mid-90s we were the largest street presence among US revolutionary socialists, with a more stable and national spread of Branches. We claimed about 1200 members by 2000-1, the Global Justice/Nader era.

The last 12 years have been confusing, but a common pattern of slowed numerical growth has been constant. 9/11 caused a sharp drop in membership. Since then we have spread to much more of the South, and to smaller college towns nationally. The Bush years were polarized and volatile, the Obama/Great Recession era has deepened and broadened the emergence of class consciousness. I believe our organization to be qualitatively stronger today than 12 years ago. But if we knew then that by the 2012 Convention we'd be around 800 members, 4 years into the worst economic crisis since the 30s, we would have judged our project a failure. Growth at this rate isn't credibly leading toward revolutionary capacity. Meanwhile, we correctly argue that the environmental crisis demands revolutionary social change in the next few decades. But if a large vanguard party is a precondition for that revolution, than given our growth rate our solution appears no less utopian than pro-capitalist reformism.

Revolutionary socialists have also failed to break through internationally in the Great Recession, even where they are biggest. France's NPA and Britain's SWP have declined. Brazil's PSOL and PSTU have declined or stagnated (though Brazil has not been in deep recession). Even in radicalized Greece and revolutionary Egypt, the DEA and the RS have not reported breakthrough growth, despite impressive and even high-profile work. I don't have anywhere near a global knowledge set on this, but if there are counter-examples, we need to know and study them.

There has been much speculation on the failure of revolutionary socialism to grow. The ideological impact of the fall of the Berlin wall and the cultural impacts of neoliberalism no doubt play a role. Yet these explanations

fail to incorporate a key truth identified by Alan M in this year's initial Perspectives Document (Bulletin #1). I refer to the new militancy and broad resonance, in the Great Recession era, of class politics, seen in Wisconsin, Occupy, and the CTU strike (I would add the Sawant/Moore elections to the same list). How to reconcile dawning mass class consciousness (inevitably highly immature) with our numerical stagnation?

Two contradictory trends emerged from the Reagan/Thatcher counter-revolutions. Neoliberalism was born in aggressiveness and arrogance—the ascendant sections of the ruling class believed that they could smash the organizations, politics, and culture of working class resistance head on. Others worried that working class immiseration would bring back pre-War social instability. It took decades to see it clearly, but both are turning out to be true.

On the one hand, left struggles, organizations, and ideas, which existed as the concrete but stagnant inheritance of early 20th century struggles, were routed, and their worldview progressively de-legitimized. This trend continues to advance today: witness rolling austerity, the continued rightward drift of social democracy and liberalism, the prolonged death spiral of farci-Communist North Korea.

In the 1980s, this was the only visible aspect of the two sided process, in the rich countries. But seeds of rebellion germinated even then. Meanwhile neoliberalism began to produce rebellion first in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, where austerity hit hardest and earliest. Duvalier's overthrow and the 1989 Venezuelan Caracazo, for example, were not defensive struggles of a declining left like PATCO or the British Miner's strike, rather they heralded re-emerging class consciousness and the building of a NEW left. But the new left didn't reflate Stalinist or social democratic parties.

1998-2006 produced insurrections in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Venezuela and Argentina, with formidable mass movements in Mexico. Entire countries polarized on class lines. Working class consciousness gained mass electoral expression in the "pink tide" presidencies, which created new parties/independent candidacies in Venezuela, Peru, and Ecuador. Despite above-average sized Trotskyist groups across the continent, so far the revolutionary left hasn't gained any mass hearing or membership breakthrough (the recent Argentinian elections are a hopeful but still inconclusive case.) All of this is generally understood as a reaction to the drastic IMF-led neoliberalism of the 80s and after, which has begun to hit Europe and the US more deeply in the Great Recession. And so far the early stage re-emergence of class consciousness, organizations, and struggles here doesn't diverge from the Latin American pattern.

I think our greatest immediate barrier is the growth of anarchist culture since the 1999 Battle of Seattle. This represents the actual creation of a new (ostensibly) revolutionary left that is relatively small but significantly larger than us. The fact that it eschews concerted organization, yet manages to attract new activists and create millieux in many US cities, underlines the magnetism they have. We lack this. In earlier ideological conditions, the tempestuous Bush years and increasingly class-conscious Obama years might have benefited Marxist groups. On the whole, the ultra-leftism and cliquish sectarianism of the anarchists give them no future. Their relative success reflects the tentativeness, based on insufficient experience, of the new class consciousness to radicalize toward serious revolutionism, and its tendency to feel separated from the mass of our class in its radicalization.

The rise of a new, if fatally flawed, revolutionary culture separate from and suspicious of us has fueled frustrated disorientation. Ex-member critics writing in SW, Counterpunch, and at Socialist Outpost echo anarchist critiques of the ISO as tactically reformist and hesitant to undertake bold organizing. It appears to be true, as they charge, that we recruit few people from the new revolutionary millieux. But our post-Occupy immersion in anti-eviction, anti-police brutality, and low wage workers' campaigns belies the "hesitant to initiate and organize" charge. I contend that our failure to grow with the anarchist milieu reflects its weaknesses more than our own. But I think it important to name and analyze this new revolutionary culture, to prevent further disorientation.

While the Great Recession has vindicated the potential of the working class to restart the process of attaining class consciousness in the richest capitalist countries, the field of organization so far provides few models. In this context, it is incumbent on us to take most seriously those models that do exist. Internationally, revolutionaries have begun to reach the new mass class consciousness only through elections. SYRIZA may not have provided the DEA or other Trotskyist participants with explosive membership growth yet, but it has shown the inspiring capacity of a new mass working class left to congeal behind a party. The Sawant/Moore campaigns showed that left third party efforts can challenge within big city politics in a way that begins to re-legitimize socialism. It is not the case that we are "still in the early stages" of the economic crisis- we're 5 years in. In this context it would be a mistake not to begin to follow in the footsteps of the successes, despite the huge uncertainties and risks of electoralism.

Even if successful, electoral interventions may not soon end our long lull in growth. What is needed at this time is a re-affirmation that we are not the embryo of the future vanguard party, and a more concretized understanding of the different roads to building one. 1990s style growth might resume tomorrow, 1930s style will have to happen at some point. But until the scissor movement of (1) left delegitimization and (2) organically reconstituting class consciousness ceases to define the terrain of a left simultaneously dying and being reborn, and until mass working class struggles demonstrate the necessity for

revolutionary politics more directly than their scope and lifespans have so far allowed, new radicals may continue to spontaneously eschew Marxism as emblem of the dying and not the gestating left. Of course we'll have to keep recruiting just to maintain or modestly grow the ISO. And our considerable strengths will continue to attract those we work with. But the greater numbers, who we remain too small to meet, may continue to gravitate to anarchism.

As long as those conditions obtain, comrades need to have a vision of our current work as a bridge to a fast growth future. Work in electoral coalitions, if the Sawant/Moore model can be repeated, means reintroducing socialism to the mass of our class. If sustained this must sooner or later translate into greater active interest. Ecosocialist coalitions may help us find an audience whose political concerns favor revolutionary socialist answers more than others. Existing organizations can radicalize (like Synapsismos before SYRIZA, the Greens in the Nader era, and scattered teachers' locals since the CTU strike), creating opportunities for us to collaborate or enter to play a disproportionately leading role with a much larger audience. Entirely new organizations may emerge with similar possibilities. And we must defend the reality and importance of qualitative growth. It isn't self-delusion to say, as only one example among many, that the 2001 ISO of 1200 members lacked the crucial mass leadership role in CORE and the CTU strike that today's ISO of 800 members actually has.

Sometimes a revolutionary group can act as a small wheel turning a larger wheel, which turns an even larger one. In so doing, it can lay the basis to become a larger wheel itself. Marx and Engels' careers, with their small coterie of close collaborators, illustrate this well in August Nimtz' *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough*. For comrades steeped in the histories of Bolshevik growth in 1917 or of the CPUSA in the 30s, it offers a hopeful model relevant to our current dilemma.

There remains no conceivable solution to the social and ecological crises of 21st century capitalism short of socialist revolution, which history conclusively shows requires a revolutionary party. The neoliberal era, while routing the 20th century left, organically and in parallel recreated working class insurgency, starting in Latin America. The Great Recession proved that workers in the rich countries, including the US, retain the historic potential for class consciousness. The ISO is not a failed political project. Our growing political capacity and literary reach demonstrate our relevance. But a decade and beyond of numerical stagnation must be explained to a membership that, aware of the size problem, grows increasingly frustrated and confused.

Postscript: On the Renewal Faction

In this document and my previous submission ("For a Structure and Culture of Frank Criticism", Bulletin #4), I have ventured an analysis of the culture and politics of our impasse. I argued that we have had an underdeveloped culture of debate at the level of national discussion. And

that existential questions for our organization have matured over more than 10 years. The Renewal Faction attempt to address these concerns of fundamental perspective, and have been among the first to do so. For that reason, the conclusion in the Steering Committee's document on the Faction that it attempts to "test" and "provoke", rather than engage an honest debate, seems hasty. I also disagree with the criticism that the Faction was founded in secret. With virtually no experience of nationally organized dissent, whether in the form of tendencies, caucuses, or factions, I confess that I (and I suspect most comrades) am unaware of

any alternative procedure the Faction could have used to form itself more openly. While I agree with the Steering Committee's other critiques, I think that a constructive approach to the Faction's challenge should start with the assumption that any of its errors reflect first a desire to engage with urgently necessary debates, and second our collective lack of experience with dissident internal organizing.

Avery W., San Diego

Factions and the Fourth International

The work of building the Fourth International is now already being developed on a significantly wider basis than was the work to build the Bolshevik-Leninist faction. Under the impetus of the decay of reformism and Stalinism, the intensification of the class struggle, and the impending danger of war, groups with a variety of origins will be knocking on the door of the Fourth International.

The Fourth International will not allow anyone – of this we have no doubt – to take lightly either our principles or our discipline. But what this discipline will entail cannot be decreed beforehand: it must be hammered out in a common struggle; it must be guided by the experiences – well thought out and critically examined – of the overwhelming majority of the participants. In this sense, it should be acknowledged that the [Belgian] Spartacus group's adherence to the Fourth International is a – positive factor. It opens up serious opportunities for this group to free itself from the pitfalls of sectarianism, and thereby promises to win uncorrupted and devoted workers back into our ranks.

Now, with a new International in formation, the question of factions inside the revolutionary party takes on enormous importance. But it is just this issue that caused such terrible trouble and demoralization in the years of the Comintern's ascendancy.

In the Comintern, factions were forbidden, and this police ban was alleged to be in keeping with the Bolshevik tradition. It is difficult to imagine a worse slander on the history of Bolshevism. It is true that in March 1921 factions were banned by a special resolution of the Tenth Party Congress. The very fact that this resolution was necessary shows that in the previous period – i.e., during the seventeen years when Bolshevism arose, grew, gained strength, and came to power – factions were a legitimate part of party life. And this was reflected in practice.

At the Stockholm Party Congress (1906), where the Bolshevik faction was reunited with the Menshevik faction, there were two factions inside the Bolshevik faction involved in an open struggle at the congress itself over a major question, the agrarian program. The majority of the Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, had come out for

nationalization of the land. Stalin, who spoke at the congress under the name Ivanovich, belonged to a small group of so-called "partitionists" that advocated the immediate partitioning of the land among the small property-owners, thus restricting the revolution beforehand to a capitalist-farmer perspective.

In 1907, a sharp factional struggle was fought over the question of boycotting the Third State Duma [parliament]. The supporters of the boycott subsequently aligned themselves into two factions which over the next few years carried on a fierce struggle against Lenin's faction, not only within the confines of the "united" party, but inside the Bolshevik faction as well. Bolshevism's intensified struggle against liquidationism later on gave rise to a conciliationist faction inside the Bolshevik faction, to which prominent Bolshevik practical party workers of that time belonged: Rykov, Dubrovinsky, Stalin, and others. The struggle against the conciliationists dragged on until the outbreak of the war.

August 1914 opened a period of regroupment inside the Bolshevik faction on the basis of attitudes toward the war and the Second International. Simultaneously a factional group was being formed of people who opposed national self-determination (Bukharin, Pyatakov, and others).

The sharp factional struggle inside the Bolshevik faction in the first period after the February Revolution and on the eve of the October Revolution is now well enough known (see for example, L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*). After the conquest of power a sharp factional struggle broke out around the question of the Brest-Litovsk peace. A faction of Left Communists was formed with its own press (Bukharin, Yaroslavsky, and others). Subsequently, the Democratic Centralism and the Workers' Opposition factions were formed. Not until the Tenth Party Congress, held under conditions of blockade and famine, growing peasant unrest, and the first stages of NEP—which had unleashed petty-bourgeois tendencies – was consideration given to the possibility of resorting to such an exceptional measure as the banning of factions. It is possible to regard the decision of the Tenth Congress as a grave necessity. But in light of later events, one thing is absolutely clear: the

banning of factions brought the heroic history of Bolshevism to an end and made way for its bureaucratic degeneration.

Beginning in 1923 the epigones extended the banning and stifling of factional struggle from the ruling party in the USSR to the young sections of the Comintern, thus dooming them to degeneration before they had time to grow and develop.

Does this mean, however, that the revolutionary party of the proletariat must or can represent simply the sum total of its factions? In order to better shed light on this question we will take for the sake of comparison the French Socialist Party, which has legalized factions in its statutes, introducing the principle of proportional representation for all party elections. In this sense the French section of the Second International passed itself off for a long time and not without success as the purest expression of "Party democracy." And formally it is, or rather it was. But just as the pure democracy of bourgeois society acts as a cover for the actual rule of the upper echelon of property-owners, so the most ideal democracy of the Second International hides the rule of an unofficial but powerful faction: the parliamentary and municipal careerists. This faction, while keeping a firm grip on the apparatus, allows the left-wing faction to make very revolutionary-sounding speeches; but as soon as the genuine Marxist faction, for whom word and deed go hand in hand, begins to expose the hypocrisy of the party's democracy, the apparatus faction quickly takes the course of expulsion.

Because the Bolsheviks joined this reformist party not for adaptation but for a fight, a collision with the ruling faction was determined beforehand. The threat of imminent war and the social-patriotic turn of the Comintern hastened the conflict and right away lent it an exceptional acuteness. If the social patriots expel the revolutionaries instead of vice versa, it is the relationship of forces that is to blame – about this no one has the slightest illusions. Entry into the Socialist Party made it possible to achieve a little, but by no means did it achieve everything. It has allowed our French section to considerably expand its influence. The struggle between internationalism and social patriotism was posed with remarkable clarity. As regards organizational balance sheets, it is still too early to draw them up: the struggle inside the French Socialist Party is still far from over.

There are a few sagacious individuals (frequently they are former opponents of entryism) who say: the Bolshevik-Leninists are behaving in too reckless a manner inside the Socialist Party – for example, in advancing the call for a Fourth International, and so forth. This mistaken political vision is often encountered in politics; success is so alluring that one wishes it could develop in an uninterrupted manner. At times like this it is easy to lose sight of the fact that there may exist in the world an adversary who has eyes and ears. Only quite hopeless simpletons can think that the call for a Fourth International frightened Blum and Company. This is utter nonsense! It was the imminent threat of war and the Comintern's undisguised treachery, tremendously strengthening the position of social patriotism, at least for

the time immediately ahead, that compelled Leon Blum and Company to assume the offensive. To think that one "ill-advised" expression or another – and such are inevitable in the heat of struggle – could play a serious role in the question of expulsion means to be too superficial and flippant in evaluating the opponent.

If the leadership clique made a decision in favour of expulsion, in defiance of the traditional myth of democracy, it must have had serious and pressing reasons for doing so. It is not difficult to find a reason: not only Mussolini but Blum as well always has his Wal-Wal for an emergency.

We have but to review the most recent experience of the French Socialist Party to see precisely why the party cannot be simply the sum of its factions. A party can tolerate those factions that are not pursuing goals directly opposite its own. When the traditional left wing in the French Socialist Party was innocuously marking time, it was tolerated; more than that, it was encouraged. Blum never referred to the margarine revolutionary Zyromsky as anything other than "my friend." This title, used also with reference to Frossard, meant: that person was needed as a cover for the ruling clique, either from the left or from the right. But the Leninists – for whom word and deed are not at variance – were something the democracy of the social-patriotic party could not tolerate.

The revolutionary party presents a definite program and definite tactics. This places definite and very distinct limits on the internal struggle of tendencies and groupings in advance. Now, after the destruction of the Second and Third Internationals, the guidelines take on an especially graphic and distinct character. The very fact of membership in the Fourth International cannot but be contingent upon observance of a certain body of restrictions which reflect all the experiences of previous working class movements. But although the limits on the internal ideological struggle are thus established in advance, the struggle itself, carried on within the limits of general principles, is not at all denied. It is inevitable; and when it is within the prescribed limits, it is fruitful. It is not discussion, of course, that gives the life of the party its fundamental content, but struggle. Where endless discussion feeds endless discussion, there can only be decay and disintegration. But where discussion is rooted in the common struggle, where it puts the struggle under a critical light and prepares for its new stages – there, discussion is an element that is indispensable for development.

The discussion of serious questions is inconceivable without groupings. But under normal conditions they are subsequently dissolved into the party organism, especially because of new experiences, which always provide the best test in cases where there are political disagreements. The conversion of groupings into permanent factions is in itself a disturbing symptom that signifies either that the struggling tendencies are totally irreconcilable or that the party as a whole has reached a deadlock. It is impossible to avert such a situation, of course, by simply banning factions. To wage a war against the symptom does not mean to cure the disease. Only a correct policy and a healthy internal

administrative structure and procedure can prevent the conversion of temporary groupings into ossified factions.

The health of the régime depends to a great degree on the leadership of the party and its ability to lend a timely ear to the voice of its critics. A stubborn policy of asserting bureaucratic "prestige" is destructive to the development of the proletarian organization and to the authority of the leadership as well. But goodwill on the part of the leadership alone is not enough. The opposition grouping is also responsible for the character of inner-party relations. In a faction struggle against the reformists, revolutionists frequently resort to extreme measures, although as a general rule in faction fights, the reformists conduct themselves in a much more ruthless and decisive manner. But in this case for both sides it was a matter of preparing to make the break under conditions that would be most advantageous. Those who transfer such methods to work inside a revolutionary organization reveal either political immaturity and the lack

of any sense of responsibility; or anarchistic individualism, more often than not concealed beneath sectarian principles; or, finally, that they are alien to the revolutionary organization.

A sense of proportion in a faction struggle grows with the increased maturity of the organization and the increased authority of its leadership. When Vereecken tries to make it appear that the "sectarians" expelled him because of his loyalty to Marxist principles, we can only shrug our shoulders. In fact, the Vereecken group displayed political immaturity in making a break with an organization that had proven its loyalty to Marxist principles for many years. If Vereecken now has the opportunity to join in the work of building the Fourth International, he owes this opportunity – above all – to the international organization which he broke from by the force of his quick sectarian temper.

Leon Trotsky, 1935

On the importance of cadre

In his document, "Theory, cadre, and continuity: Building revolutionary organization today," Paul D. advances a number of claims about cadre that I find to be somewhat troubling. Rather than writing a detailed response to his document, I want to summarize one particular point and respond to it by asking a hypothetical question.

The particular point that I refer to is presented in Paul D.'s critique of a recent article by Cambridge comrade Shaun J. As part of the critique, Paul D. provides an alternative assessment of a quote by Duncan Hallas that deals with Lenin's relationship to Bolshevik cadre during the Russian

revolution. Paul D. claims that the real meaning of Hallas' quote is as follows:

Hallas simply refers to the importance of the existence of an intermediate layer [i.e. cadre], capable of forming its own opinions, whose experiences meshed with Lenin's views.

With this in mind, here's my question: What happens when the cadre's experiences are in contradiction with the views of the leadership of the Party?

Ben S., Atlanta

Boston response to "Appeal for Shaun"

In responding to the "Appeal for Shaun J." (IB #3), we begin by expressing our surprise at a petition for the reinstatement of a member who voluntarily resigned from the ISO. It is also unclear to us to whom a national petition within a revolutionary organization would be addressed, given our tradition of political discussion and debate with each other.

The petition alleges that the circumstances under which Shaun resigned from the ISO include a variety of factors. In this document we will refute the main allegations in the petition and assess Shaun's membership during his tenure in Boston.

Failure to defend Shaun against the racist criminal charges?

A furtive but extremely serious charge in the petition alleges "a failure of comrades to mount an effective campaign to defend Shaun from criminal charges related to his arrest at an anti-war protest, including the failure to properly prioritize testifying at the trial." **We reject this charge only now coming to light and with no proof attached.** When Shaun was targeted and arrested by Boston Police at an anti-Rumsfeld protest, comrades in Boston did mount a campaign to demand that Shaun's charges be dropped. We do feel that this campaign should have been discussed more in the entire District and not just in our Civil Liberties fraction, but we feel similarly about another trial being faced at the same time of members Khury PS and Yuval S, arrested at an Occupy Boston protest the same month as Shaun.

The campaign for Shaun was more thorough than the one for the other comrades. It began immediately after his arrest. Nearly the whole district showed up at the police station on the night he was arrested on less than an hour's notice to demand his release, including abruptly cutting short a District Committee (DC) meeting happening during the arrest. Two DC members, Alpana M and Nick C, posted Shaun J's \$500 bail that very night. At his court date on Feb 28, many comrades, including Khury, the district coordinator, and Ann C, the branch organizer, attended to support Shaun.

When the trial was moved farther back to March 2013, the civil liberties fraction which included Shaun J, Dave F and Kay S, planned how best to organize supporters to come to Shaun's trial dates and testify as needed. With regards to in-court support, Shaun specifically said that he was not too concerned because he believed he would win the case anyway, but if comrades didn't have work, they should prioritize the second day of his trial on March 8th. Comrades began prioritizing taking March 8th off. On March 7th, comrade Amanda A, a witness to the arrest, came to court to testify. Lindie, another witness, planned to testify on March 8th. Shaun's case was dismissed on March 7th and Shaun sent out an email announcing this dismissal and thanking his lawyer, his comrades in the ISO, and allies in other organizations for their support. Never once before October 2013 did Shaun ever raise the idea that the ISO didn't do enough to defend his case to anyone, including to Kay S, who was heading up the Civil Liberties fraction during his trial, or during branch meetings; **indeed, comrades did mobilize to defend him and his charges were successfully dismissed.**

A campaign against Shaun?

The petition refers to "...long-running attacks on Shaun's political position in the organization by the regional organizer, including numerous comments to leading comrades in other branches." As with the rest of the petition, no proof is given. We cannot speak for discussions in other branches, but we can speak for ours. The regional organizer, Ashley S, was part of discussions with our branch and district leadership about assessments of our district. He has every legitimate right to disagree with Convention documents and raise discussion about them, and he disagreed with Shaun's arguments in a comradely, open and principled fashion around the 2013 Convention period. Similarly, in 2010, Ashley responded in a public and disciplined way to Shaun's arguments around anti-war work ("The Pitfalls of Ultra-leftism: a Response to Shaun J.", Convention Bulletin, 2010). The implication behind "long-running attacks on Shaun's political position" is that there has been a campaign directed against Shaun. **We absolutely reject this.**

No one ever attempted to silence Shaun's political disagreements; indeed, he has had much more time than most members to present his arguments. For instance, for the January 2013 Convention, Shaun submitted five Pre-Convention documents—more than any other member in the entire national ISO. During the Pre-Convention period,

Shaun waged a set of arguments locally that dominated the Boston district email list for weeks.

Shaun also had ample time to put forward his perspective in meetings. Despite the fact that his arguments at that time were representative only of himself and not a group of comrades, Shaun argued that he should have time to present an alternative political perspective from the front of the room equal to the district coordinator at Boston's last Pre-Convention discussion. The district voted in favor of granting Shaun this equal presentation time at the January 17, 2013 district Pre-Convention discussion, and he made his presentation.

While Shaun had ample space to present his ideas in writing and in person, most people in the Boston district disagreed with his political arguments pertaining to the transition period, the 'disarticulation' of the working class, the united front, and where the ISO should organize. When our branch elected Convention delegates, Shaun's branch did not elect him because Shaun did not convince comrades of his arguments and therefore the branch did not think that he should be a Convention delegate to represent the branch on a political basis.

Contrary to the idea that there was a campaign against Shaun, Khury PS, the district coordinator, argued that the Steering Committee invite Shaun as a guest to the 2013 Convention as someone who had a minority opinion that should be represented; the Steering Committee, of course, agreed and invited Shaun to Convention. What did Shaun then do at Convention, having published five Pre-Convention documents and submitted a resolution for consideration? When the time came for a final discussion of his resolution, Shaun withdrew it, avoiding the discussion at the only point during which sentiment about it could be gauged through debate and a vote. We recount this anecdote at length because it belies the notion that Shaun has been a victim of the ISO or its leadership, either at the local or national level. The evidence points to the ISO "*trying to actively support and construct just such a democratic organization and Left culture,*" which the petition for Shaun implies that our organization has not done.

Indeed, Shaun conveys this in his email to the Boston District List-serve on January 13, 2013 ("Midnight in the garden of ascent and upturn: A reply to Khury PS and Alpana M"). He begins the email by saying, "*Before starting in earnest, I want to thank Khury and Alpana for their reply to my document. Although I do not find it politically satisfactory, for reasons I will describe in detail below, I do appreciate the comrades' seriousness in pursuing the debate.*" He goes on to add, "*My disagreements have been treated in a quite comradely fashion, though I have criticisms of how the debate has been handled at times.*"

Shaun has raised his disagreements and has been heard out in the Boston District, but most members of the Boston District disagree with his political arguments. In response, Shaun has done three things which have resulted in the current crisis: begun factional organizing outside of the

District, increasingly turned to his blog and the internet to carry out debates instead of in person, and increasingly insulted members of his own branch and district in an un-comradely fashion.

Shaun has increasingly turned to his blog as the main outlet for gathering support around his ideas. On his blog, he has put internal discussions of the ISO public, a violation of ISO rules. Yet, contrary to claims that Shaun is being persecuted, no disciplinary action was taken against him for this.

On-line insinuations of racism and sexism?

Shaun has displayed continuous hostility towards ISO members in Boston. Shaun's mocking of members and their political arguments both in person and online is a regular feature of his conduct in Boston. During his membership the district coordinator received weekly calls from people feeling undermined by Shaun's derisive and un-comradely argumentation with them. Along with various day-to-day interpersonal situations of bullying by Shaun towards individual members, here are a few specific instances of Shaun's approach to comrades who were women and people of color:

- In conversation with Amanda A., a newer woman member at UMass Boston who had co-authored their first ever document for ISO Convention 2013, Shaun called that document "boring" and "anodyne."
- When Shaun posted an article by Sofia A ("I remember the solidarity", SW, August 5, 2013) on Facebook, he included this un-comradely prefatory comment: "In which Sofia A takes a heroic swipe at Comrade Straw-Man."
- In a discussion with Alpana M and Ann C at a District dinner during Convention 2013, Shaun stated to the two comrades that "the only people who politically understood" his arguments were Khury PS and Alpana M. This was a clear and open insult to Ann C, Shaun's branch organizer at the time and in that role for the first time.

These are not just aspects of abrasive or elitist character traits. Rather, they are examples of a *political approach* to argument in which Shaun belittles and attacks members in an effort to score points. Such a method is poisonous for building the open, collaborative political culture of trust and respect in debate that is necessary to work in a profoundly collective project, and it has been destructive in Boston.

We directly addressed with Shaun the effect that his tone and style of argumentation was having on members, pointing out that instead of encouraging collaboration, his manner tended to bully, put down, and diminish in order to gain a platform for his "dissent". Alpana M, Ann C and Khury PS met with Shaun in the days following Convention 2013 for such a discussion. In that meeting, we argued about the specific effects of his tone on women and said that

it was sexist to undermine women comrades in the way he did. Shaun asked to know if he was being disciplined, to which we responded that we were not seeking formal disciplinary measures. Rather, we were initiating a discussion with him to politically win him away from a problematic method. After being requested to do so, Shaun apologized to Ann C for actions that were "perceived by Ann" as sexist. He did not concede that his method was unacceptable.

The charge by Shaun and the signatories of the petition on his behalf is that he has been framed as a racist and sexist. **We completely reject that charge.** No one on his Facebook wall wrote that he was sexist or racist. What did occur is that on August 27, Shaun posted an article called "liberalism and the united front" from Socialist Worker, making fun of the article and incorrectly claiming that the Boston ISO's only interaction with the NAACP was to have a conference call, "and then their speaker never turned up for our forum. Behold, the united front!" (This was incorrect; Boston ISO members actually had many more conversations with the president of the NAACP and worked with them to charter and fill buses to DC.)

Several comrades, including people outside the ISO who were not part of the elected branch leadership, weighed in saying that Shaun's comments were un-comradely. Shaun further stated, "We've been organizing in Dorchester for a year and have nothing to show for it," which was entirely dismissive of our anti-racist work and the women of color leading that fraction and of our work around the March on Washington. After over 7 posts by other comrades, two elected branch leaders, Khury PS and Alpana M, also weighed in on Shaun's un-comradely behavior, saying that Shaun's approach to debate involving insults and attacks is "discouraging for the people in our society who are most discouraged to speak up anyway—people of color and women." At this point, when comrades were publicly holding Shaun accountable for his un-comradely behavior, Shaun resigned.

Elected branch leaders did NOT call Shaun a racist or sexist or use the terms "racist" or "sexist". Indeed, when a comrade from another city stated that that was the charge being made, Khury PS went back and explicitly said that that was not his argument. The above were and are the substance of our critiques. We regret raising the arguments on Facebook because we think it's unrealistic that we can have any productive discussion about something so serious, and charged, there. **However, we defend the idea that Shaun's insulting behavior contributes greatly to a toxic culture in the district that is bad for everyone, but particularly undermining for the people who tend to be most discouraged from speaking up and participating in activism--women and people of color (and, we would add, working class people in general).**

We absolutely defend the right of comrades to politically challenge each other, including when their behavior and actions diminish others who face social oppression. This is an important component of politically winning each other to moving forward together.

In conclusion

We reject this national petition where allegations exist without proof. Remarkably, after submitting a petition directed towards the national membership, involving comrades from other branches, signatories from Boston sought to resolve the question of Shaun's membership by simply re-admitting him on their own without discussion with the rest of the District despite a fraught situation. This

is unacceptable. We also sincerely hope that ISO members consider the undemocratic nature by which signatories outside of our District sought to interfere in the internal life and discussions of our membership.

Akunna E., Alpana M., Amanda A., Amirah S.G., Ann C., Bill K., Chris M., Judea B., Kay S., Khury P.S., Lindie N., Michael F., Sofia A., Boston

Questions for the Renewal Faction and former members

Political perspectives over the past decade, and results

ISO has, in my opinion, accurately depicted the objective developments over the past decade that characterize the current political period: an increased radicalization, a low level of class struggle, a weak organized left unable to combat austerity over the past three decades, reinforcing a lack of left political culture and class politics in the US. Initially the ISO coined this period as a "transition" that anticipated an upturn. More recently, to deal with the complicated mix of objective factors listed above, the ISO adjusted the characterization of the political period as a "new era."

The ISO assumed that the organization would grow within the current context, emphasizing continually the radicalization taking place in society. However, the organization has not grown but stagnated: Ahmed recognized as much at Socialism 2013 referring to the NYC district, comrade Paul L. has observed the loss of membership in Pittsburgh, and Sid P. has noted stagnation in San Fran. In addition to quantitative paralysis, cadre members have left the organization citing political disagreements with the leadership.

Why the gap between the growth expectation and reality?

The ISO has had difficulty squaring its subjective relation to the current objective political period. Political demoralization among the membership has resulted from an argument that increased radicalization would produce an increase in membership. The reality is the ISO has not grown. Why? This question remains unanswered and so self-blame sets in among the membership (i.e. we can't win people toward us even when more people are moving in our political direction). Brian C. attempts to answer this question in his document concerning the challenges faced (and necessary ones!) in the building of branches in cities over the long-term. A central challenge to growth has been the difficulty of recruiting people for long-term struggle in communities and workplaces. Long-term relationships need to be built. This requires stability, patience, persistence, and modesty in political work. Political propaganda alone is insufficient because there are so many issues to sort through that recruiting large numbers of people on ideas alone still does not wholly answer questions like: Can we reverse the

attacks now? How do we struggle when most are not? How do we win people to socialism when struggle is low and we are not well rooted sufficiently in the working class across the country?

Is the ISO leadership "to blame"?

Ahmed's presentation at Socialism 2013 ("Perspectives for the Left") was a very sober look at the world that did not present overly exaggerated or rigid conclusions about what will take place in the near future: only that the ISO is in a better position today to grow than it has ever been as disillusionment with Obama will push people to us in the coming year. Nevertheless, the question remains: how can the ISO relate to world around it in order to grow and strengthen in the current political period? This question is open and the ISO leadership (SC) does not have to have articulated every last word and answer to this question - to think so is assuming the omniscience of the SC and dogmatic dictates passively integrated by the membership. Long-standing cadre members' relation of their experience to the current perspective is crucial in order to clarify opportunities and difficulties in the current political period; after all, they are on the ground, involved in routine branch and movement work and have much to say about perspective. However, some members' have chosen to argue their political perspective from outside the organization (former comrades of ISO in Chicago, and San Francisco), while others have formed a faction within the organization (Shaun J., albeit unwillingly still a non-member, Providence members, among others) cited political hostility by branch leadership, regional organizers, and individual SC members.

Questions for former members and the "Renewal Faction"

There are a number of questions that I pose to former members and those who have formed the "renewal faction". These questions are rhetorical but I ask them with the honest intention of understanding why current members have chosen "faction," and former members, desertion, as their avenue for presenting disagreements on political perspective:

- Are the views unanimous between the SC and branch leadership/regional organizers on political perspective and practice as implemented at the

branch level? If they are, would the SC intentionally sideline and suffocate views that attempt to clarify or contradict current positions maintained by the SC on political perspectives throughout the organization?

- Had long-standing/cadre members disseminated their political perspective persistently and patiently enough through branch-level channels and organization-wide levels (i.e. an internal bulletin) before leaving? To my knowledge, the renewal faction's political perspectives were aired to the organization after the faction was formed and not before the debate had received a hearing through the entire organization. Therefore, is the forming of a faction not premature?
- Was Ahmed's presentation at Socialism 2013 "Perspectives of the Left" disingenuous which advocated democratic and open debate within our organization as well as providing a space and a home for those on the left to debate and discuss politics?

To conclude: answers to rhetorical questions

Serious thinking needs to be done to figure out how we in the ISO can grow as an organization. This will inevitably lead to a more clarifying discussion about the current political period, its uniqueness and challenges, as well as opportunities. To imagine this project could happen without debate, discussion and friction is utopian. Such discussion and debate is a reflection of the incredibly fluid, complex, and contradictory world we live in. However, for the discussion to be most fruitful and beneficial to the organization it should take place *within* the organization. My experience at Socialism 2013 demonstrated to me that the ISO is doing a lot of critical thinking and debating at the theoretical and practical level. I do not see the SC taking a unanimous hard-line on any aspect of perspective, let alone dictating to comrades what the perspective is and how it should be implemented practically. As Leninists we should be patient, modest, and persistent in presenting our views and disagreements, utilizing all avenues of democratic debate within the entire organization. Only by doing this can we really test our ideas and better clarify our individual views and those of the entire organization at the same time, and in doing so, work together to build the ISO.

Nate M., Eastern Connecticut/Providence

Critique of the Renewal Faction documents

Un-Leninist (in the full theoretical sense)

How does change occur? This is the biggest political question that has ever existed. People who want any kind of change or want to preserve any status quo have asked this. Marxists have a particular answer, one that has been elaborated on since the writing of the German Ideology and continues to be refined. The ISORF puts forward a deeply mechanical formulation for how ideas change. Ultimately their concept of the relationship between ideas and activity resigns those of us who want revolutionary change to passivity.

According to ISORF, "class consciousness in the Marxist sense of the term is indeed a product, and not an antecedent, of class struggle." And later,

The point is that for Marxists, it is not simply that consciousness arises from the situation in which people find themselves, but rather that human consciousness is transformed through the process of engaging actively with the world. We learn by doing—that is, we do first, then extrapolate the lesson. In that sense, Marx really is saying, 'action determines consciousness.'

This is a huge leap from the content of the German Ideology. There, "it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness." Is it merely semantics to distinguish life from action? Not even slightly. Our daily lives, without any struggle, shape our ideas

profoundly, both the routines of the workplace and the "real material relationships" we have outside of the workplace. The Florida man who was arrested almost once a week for a year, sometimes removed from his workplace for "loitering," that man's ideas are most certainly shaped by those experiences. His boss is actually helping him stand up to the cops. And yet, it would be ludicrous to argue that this man has not radicalized because of his experiences. A couple who divorces because they can't stop fighting about who does the laundry; the family that has hated in-laws who move in because there's no where else for old people to survive; the rape survivor; the parolee; all of these people's ideas have changed through "life" but not "action" in the narrow sense put forward by the ISORF.

The context of this book must be remembered. One of the most central arguments was that ideas alone do not change the world. You cannot eat ideas, ideas do not fall from the sky but have a definite relationship with certain material and productive relationships. This piece was written in order to smash a view of the world that left out the lived experience of people in the equation of how people think and behave the way they do. There is a special emphasis on the argument most urgent for their needs. However, elsewhere Marx and Engels do add in something that bring the arguments of the ISORF to a head.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling

intellectual force...The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations.

Let's unpack this. Life experience determines consciousness, ideas about what's both desirable and possible. But ideas are determined by the ruling class because of their material rule. These are two different sources for ideas, both with a material basis but neither constrained completely to something so narrow as the physical labor one engages in or the amount of collective action. Now add these sources for ideas into this Marxist tenet.

The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.

So how is a proletariat that is crushed by daily activity, inundated with bourgeois ideas, and generally oppressed, going to reflect the interests of the immense majority (for Marx, this included elements outside the working class too) and accomplish the overthrow of the profit system? ISORF sees the problem too:

Of course, on a daily basis, the "action" of the vast majority of workers is simply to feed their families and get through the work day. This sort of action is highly unlikely to lead people to a heightened consciousness of themselves as members of the working class, with broad interests separate from and opposed to their bosses. If there is not already an independent working-class political party, they are highly unlikely to form one themselves. It takes an experience out of the ordinary, a dramatic change in their material conditions, to change their understanding of and relationship to society—hence, the importance of engaging in struggle, an all-too-unfamiliar experience for workers today.

We will set aside the inconsistency here (dramatic change in material conditions changes consciousness when earlier, only collective struggle could) and focus on the question of how struggle ever begins. If workers only struggle when they are familiar with struggle, if they only form strong organizations having already raised their own expectations and consciousness, then the existence of struggle is impossible. It's turning Fredrick Douglas "on his head": "Without Struggle, there is no struggle." This is why the mechanical formulation of the ISORF, "class consciousness in the Marxist sense of the term is indeed a product, and not an antecedent, of class struggle" is in fact a recipe for passivity.

According to the authors, the dominant stance in the ISO is idealist, thinking that class consciousness can arise before mass struggles. The "idealist" ISO has argued that we should engage in all areas possible (with optimism, more on

this later) to meet these new more conscious (the term we used was radicalizing) people. But if struggle is a pre-requisite, these people do not exist. Therefore in the eyes of the ISORF, the ISO should not engage in these areas. Instead, the authors put forward the idea that we should be focusing on "theoretical capital" and an increased emphasis on reading our leaders' meeting minutes and filling out regional organizer performance evaluations. This is my definition of passivity.

The missing link here is actually an essential component of Leninism (separate from but related to prizing and trusting leadership): working class consciousness is UNEVEN. The authors pretend that we are all in political and intellectual lockstep with each other (except for them of course, who understand the disarticulation of the working class during late neoliberalism). Without mass struggle, there is no *mass revolutionary* consciousness. This is quite true. Historically there has been no force strong enough and fast enough to create revolutionary consciousness other than mass democratic grassroots struggle. This does not imply, however, that there can be no radicalization, no increased *class consciousness* outside of a period of mass struggles. It occurs in a minority (frequently referred to within our organization as a radicalizing minority) of people through a variety of means. If you talk to the people in the ISO, they have incredibly diverse paths to revolutionary ideas. Some voted for Bush, some were libertarians, other like me, thought Hillary Clinton for President would end sexism forever.

Going back to Marx, consider his life/elite determines consciousness and the proletariat is inherently revolutionary. This is the central motivation put forward by Lenin for a revolutionary party. How can you have a successful overthrow of the profit system by people who, two months ago, thought Sarah Palin was awesome? (Even though these folks are ESSENTIAL components of a revolutionary working class.) Somebody needs to be thinking about it, learning, planning, trying, in advance of mass struggle. This body needs to pull together those with the most class conscious ideas and strongest will to fight. It allows them to learn from each other, generalize from their organizing experiences, and, if all is as it should be, increase the minority in society who can envision and actively fight for a socialist future.

In dismissing these few, in suggesting that we should never "overestimate" our opportunities to grow or struggle, in saying we are too "optimistic" about ideas changing, the authors are unknowingly projecting, into the realm of philosophy, their own disappointment. They allow their own unhappiness and impatience to inhibit their ability to continue a revolutionary project. But when they run around calling me and my comrades "un-Marxist," "idealist," "bowing to spontaneity," and suggesting I'm a sheep blindly following a scheming and duplicitous leadership, they inhibit MY ability to continue a revolutionary project. You go on into that marsh if you must.

On optimism and cheerleading (and Leninism)

The ISORF quotes an article by ISO members Regina and Todd (below) and responds:

To focus one-sidedly on the limitations of any struggle is to passively bow to what exists—rather than to figure out what can lead the struggle forward, and attempt, within our limited capacities, to act on that basis.

There is no similar counter warning about “focusing one-sidedly on the possibilities of any struggle.” Isn’t it equally or more politically passive to focus one-sidedly on the potential of any particular struggle or protest? To do so risks turning our participation into the equivalent of cheerleading for this or that struggle; or as Lenin puts the case against the Economists, to bow down before the spontaneity of the masses and to cede the ground of the class struggle to bourgeois ideology.

First and foremost, it is important to separate out the contingent and essential components of this critique. The contingent parts deal with the assessment of the prospects of particular events. Why would socialists support The March on Washington? Should we have been more cautious about throwing our resources into Occupy? In order to do away with individual cases, the general content must be seen beneath this. Although the ISORF seems to assert that the ISO leadership overestimated the possibilities for struggle over the last five years, they put forward that this is a methodological error. The ISORF say that the ISO’s approach to perspectives, the immediate possibilities and political/economic landscape, supports voluntarism.

If we simply will it, the class struggle will happen. Build it, and they will come. What happens, then, when we are building year-in and year-out, repeating the same routines without a long-term strategy...and they don’t come? The continual focus on “optimism” without intelligence, without a realistic assessment of the conditions of the class struggle, must inevitably lead to exhaustion and demoralization

So synthesizing these two parts of the documents an image coheres: The current practice of the ISO over-emphasizes what can go right, is structurally “optimistic” and this has meant that increasing layers of members are demoralized and exhausted. It also means that we fail in our function of leading politically, instead “bowing to spontaneity” like the Economists of the turn of the century (the one before last). They suggest that we must use more “intelligence,” be more “sober” about movement work in particular (actually only one small part of a perspective).

The problem here is the object of focus. The authors want to make sure that ISO members know that Occupy will not bring about the revolution, that we don’t get our hopes up too high? Not only do ISO members not expect victory in the vast majority of the struggles in which we engage, our purpose is not solely to win a reform, whatever it may be. Winning a reform, no matter how small, can be amazing, liberatory. It can raise expectations and spur on the next struggle. But it can also stall momentum and allow cooptation, serving as a “hush puppy.” We don’t fight for

reforms just to win them, to go up and down with the struggle. Our eyes are on the longer-term prize. To quote Joel Geier:

If revolutionaries don’t reap what they have sown, others will. Democrats, anarchists, social democrats, authoritarians, elitists, sectarians, and opportunists will all present their alternatives. In the course of struggle—at its high points and at its culmination—activists search for a channel, an organized expression for their newfound radicalism. Without socialist organization, a vacuum is left that some other political tendency is going to fill. Many activists who don’t join socialist organizations are going to disappear (from activity).

“Well of course,” replies the ISORF. However, their emphasis on the dangers of “focusing one-sidedly on the possibilities of any struggle” suggest they may have forgotten this. Although we very much hope to contribute ideas and argue politics that can help the struggle win, our size and scope inhibits our ability to do this. Emphasizing the possibilities attracts the right sort of political element to the ISO within these frail and transient social movements of the day. These are the people who’d been hoping for a way to fight back. They are raw, angry, and “really want to tear the head off capitalism.” Making a conscious decision to mirror that optimism is not to pretend that the struggle will be up up and away but to solidarize with the sentiment of our periphery. It is to prove ourselves useful to building the left in the long term, as opposed to fetishizing the right white paper analysis at the expense of the left of tomorrow. If primacy is placed on growing the small numbers of revolutionaries, then this clearly shows the danger of one-sided pessimism: it profoundly undermines why we engage in reforms in the first place.

And what of the danger of “optimism?” It is true that revolutionaries are (often) too sincere and have an overzealous spirit of self-sacrifice that can get them into trouble. I swore I was too stubborn to burn out. It took me just less than a year of non-stop feverish activity to collapse. All of us are still learning the political intuition needed to know when to quit your job for a struggle and when you can take that long weekend and miss a meeting no matter how “crucial.” But over the years one thing has stood out: the more integrated the party building project is in your activity, the less likely burn out is. Close connection and collaboration with comrades reminds you of why you are engaging in the work. Contacts’ enthusiasm can be infectious (thank goodness, jaded revolutionaries are useless). And if the method is really grounded in the long-term project, the end of the movement is less disorienting and your comrades can remind you of the long term, give you some (pun intended) perspective. It seems the dismissal of the role of building our organizations within and as part of small struggles is not a simple omission. Instead it is an explanation for why the authors have been so profoundly disappointed. Their eyes were on the reform, not on the party-building process.

This is what makes it a bit insulting to be told that we, the ones outside their faction, are actually Economists. That Lenin would have disapproved of our cheerleading. Focusing on the possibilities in the ISO includes the advance of socialist ideas within the struggle and increasing the number and quality of socialists in the process. This is the EXACT opposite of bowing to spontaneity. An attempt to engage, and shape in a socialist direction, anything and everything we possibly can is the only sincere way forward. Bowing to spontaneity can actually take several forms (politically very similar despite external appearances). Socialists can say, “oh isn’t that struggle wonderful! Let’s not try to bother the workers with big revolutionary ideas, it might distract them.” Another form with similar results is, “oh what a silly struggle, let’s not bother ourselves with attending because it’s only going to be over in a month.” Or, if I’m a little more fair, socialists can say to the first person

at the protest, “so this is pretty cool but it’s gonna meet police repression within a few months. Wanna join?” These stances are the ones that cede ground to bourgeois ideology. They isolate us from our ability to effect change. One hides our politics, the other obscures our organization.

So yet again, we see that the comrades of the ISORF have forgotten or disagree with a central part of Leninism, the relationship between the (pre-pre) party and the class. Lenin advocated involvement in bourgeois parliament, not because he thought he’d be elected instead of Kerensky! Every possible avenue to meet our audience as their ideas are changing is, in the most intelligent and sober analysis, the only road to the kind of growth that will allow us to fulfill our purpose.

Bekah W., Atlanta

Seeing the trees but missing the forest: Fixing our flawed approach toward recruitment

First published October 1, 2007

As comrades are well aware, the ISO’s organizational routines have evolved considerably over the last several years. Based upon our own branches’ experiences and difficulties with the integration of new members, we have made a number of changes, including:

- Much greater emphasis on building a long-term periphery around each branch and recruiting from it.
- Larger stress on reading and discussing Marxist politics, with the understanding that political development as Marxists is key to new members’ integration into the organization.
- A three-week branch meeting rotation (organizational/public/study group) with the aim of allowing members the time and opportunity for successful ongoing study groups and discussion of branch activity during branch meetings. Now the NC is recommending that the branch meeting rotation be changed to a four-week rotation (organizational/study group/organizational/public) to further these goals.
- A four-part new members’ study series and a revamped *Members’ Handbook*.
- Suggested topics and readings for intensive study groups, including further reading for more experienced members who have already read the basics.

It is worth knowing that branches—not the national leadership—suggested most of the changes that have been

made nationally over the last two years, responding to concrete needs on the ground. For example, the suggestion to shift to a four-week branch meeting rotation described above came first from Chicago’s Pilsen branch because comrades felt they did not have enough time for all the organizational discussions that needed to take place as a branch. The NC then took on that suggestion as a national initiative.

It is also worth noting that the organizational changes made over the last few years were preceded by a set of changes made between the mid-1990s and 2000, through a similar process and for a similar reason: people who signed a membership card the first time they came across the ISO (at a paper sale, meeting, or protest) often dropped out once they discovered more about Marxist politics and what was actually expected of them as members. By 1995, we began to recognize the problem as a “revolving door” of new members who left as suddenly as they joined. Our membership numbers remained even because we were able to recruit new members very quickly, but most of them also soon went out the revolving door. To be sure, we were also able to develop a layer of cadre members in this process—but most new card-signers were not really members, demonstrated by their willingness to leave as quickly as they joined. For this reason, our organizational routines evolved as follows during the 1990s:

- *Every branch meeting was a public meeting in the mid-1990s!* But no one can properly publicize a meeting every single week, resulting in “public meetings” that were frequently made up only of ISO members. Moreover, organizational discussions were tagged on during the last 15 minutes at the end of each meeting—hardly enough time for an in-depth discussion. By the end of the 1990s, the ISO shifted to a two-week

rotation (public/organizational), which remained the practice until the three-week rotation was introduced a few years ago.

- *There were NO study groups built into each branch's routine in the mid-1990s. We began to correct that by instituting periodic internal day schools and study groups for the membership.*
- We also established by the end of the 1990s that a signed membership card with the "dues" entry remaining empty did not count as a new member—since a minimal financial commitment is also a minimal political commitment to membership.

But as is much more obvious in hindsight, these changes—while all moving in the same direction—were all merely incremental. We saw the trees, but missed the forest. All were aimed at the same problem, without recognizing the overriding issue: *genuine membership in a revolutionary organization cannot be based simply on simply signing a membership card.* New members must be won to Marxism and to the requirements of membership (meeting attendance, dues, fractions and selling *Socialist Worker*) through a series of political discussions and involvement in branch activities. And that process takes more time than signing a membership card.

One of the central underpinnings of Leninism is that, while revolutionary leaders are not expected to precisely predict the future (we do not have a crystal ball), mistakes must be acknowledged and corrected. It is time to acknowledge that the entire assumption that has guided our recruitment practices over the last 15 years has been based on a systematic underestimation of the recruitment process. This document is an attempt to help comrades who joined less than 15 years ago (the vast majority of members!) understand how and why this mistake was made and to propose how we can collectively correct it.

To be absolutely clear: we are NOT arguing that the ISO is in crisis—far from it. As we are all aware, the ISO has moved forward enormously as an organization over the last 15 years—at a time when the rest of the organized left has become much weaker. Nor are we suggesting that branches should begin purging themselves of members who have joined with less than full agreement on the ISO's politics and perspectives. ISO members should be entitled, as always, to make decisions about their membership themselves.

But we should nevertheless aim to begin to correct this problem over the next months and years, for in reality our approach to building the ISO has drifted away from the Leninist method of party building. This is no small matter. Indeed the Bolshevik/Menshevik split in 1903 was a disagreement over the definition of membership in a revolutionary organization—with the Mensheviks favoring a looser definition and the Bolsheviks requiring a higher level of commitment. The two sides' differences over

membership were related to much larger political differences that emerged fully only years later.

We believe that addressing this problem will allow the ISO to strengthen its current membership and move forward on a firmer political basis.

The mistaken perspective behind the mistaken recruitment method

The ISO's drift away from the Leninist method over the last 15 years can be directly traced back to our membership in the International Socialist Tendency (IST) from the time of our formation in 1977 until we were expelled in 2001. The IST was (and still is) led from London, with an informal leadership made up of the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The IST's politics and perspectives tend to mirror those of the SWP quite closely. And since the early 1990s, the SWP leadership has systematically exaggerated the degree of radicalization in the broader population while downplaying the centrality of building a strong revolutionary party based in the working class. Indeed, the SWP (and therefore the IST) continues to operate on the basis that a mass upturn in struggle is imminent despite the fact that 15 years have passed without such a development.

It is well beyond the scope of this document to examine the full implications of the SWP's exaggerated expectations for the 1990s, although such a document should be written in the coming months. Here, we will merely summarize the key political elements of its flawed perspective and the immediate organizational consequences.

In the early 1990s, the SWP correctly described a changing political period, in particular:

- The fall of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc regimes ended the Cold War. The stalemate between the U.S. and the USSR that had dominated the post-World War Two era was giving way to greater imperialist instability. The U.S.' invasion of Iraq in 1991 was just the first attempt by the U.S. to expand its global dominance as the world's lone remaining superpower.
- The election of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair finally ended the Reagan/Thatcher era in the context of rising class polarization. Mass consciousness was shifting leftward and class anger was rising.

The facts above were accurate and have withstood the test of time. The same cannot be said of the set of grand predictions on which the SWP's perspective was based. These included:

- *The end of the Cold War would usher in a new era of "wars and revolutions."* While there have been many wars since the early 1990s, the revolutions have been nonexistent,

with the exception of the downfall of South African apartheid after decades of struggle.

- *The fall of the Soviet Union would bring about the death of Stalinism—which would allow for rebuilding the left internationally on the basis of revolutionary Marxism.* But Stalinism (and Stalinist organizations) did not disappear, and the revolutionary left remains quite small.
- *The dynamic of the 1990s era was destined to be “the 1930s in slow-motion.”* The 1930s analogy implied a deep economic crisis, a sharp rise in class struggle, and the massive growth of both the far right and the far left. The 1990s instead witnessed an economic boom, a slight rise in class struggle (but which failed to halt the employers’ offensive), and massive growth for neither the far right nor the far left. The SWP eventually quietly abandoned the “1930s in slow motion” slogan, but without ever adjusting its perspective to adhere to material reality. On the contrary, the significance of the 1990s global justice movement, which the SWP called “the anti-capitalist movement,” was likewise exaggerated beyond recognition. In practice, the SWP fudged the difference between “anti-capitalist” and revolutionary politics, implying that the radicalization was both broader and deeper than it actually was.

But the global justice movement faltered in the aftermath of 9-11. In reality, its political character has been dominated not by revolutionary socialist politics, but by a conflation of anarchism and reformism—which *downplayed* the role of government in enforcing corporate rule, leaving the movement unprepared to confront the post- 9-11 assertion of U.S. imperialism. Since then, the SWP has developed other schemes, this time in the electoral arena—first through the short-lived Socialist Alliance and more recently through Respect (which is now in the midst of a bitter faction fight between the SWP and MP George Galloway).

Although the SWP’s track record has been poor over the last 15 years, its perspective lives on. And the party has the scars to show for it. After predicting large-scale growth, the SWP leadership has overseen large-scale shrinkage—from a claimed membership of 10-12,000 a decade ago to an estimated 1,500 active members today.

The SWP’s drift from Leninism—which we fought, yet followed

In hindsight, it is obvious that the organizational implications of the SWP’s exaggerated perspective represented a clear divergence from Leninism. Activists involved in the anti-capitalist movement, it was argued, had achieved such a degree of radicalization that they were already in “90 percent agreement” with revolutionary socialist politics—comrades need only convince them of the

remaining 10 percent to turn them into committed party members. And this could be accomplished through activism alone, given the high level of anti-capitalist struggle.

This was the political context in which “instant membership” was justified, achievable by merely waving a membership card at the end of meetings or signing someone up who we just met at a paper sale or demonstration.

But there were several serious deviations from the Leninist method of party building involved in the “90 percent/10 percent” approach to recruitment described above. Indeed, there would be no need for a revolutionary party if most activists came into struggle or even radical consciousness already 90 percent in agreement with revolutionary socialism. Most new activists are tied to reform in the first instance, and are only won to the need for revolution through a period of struggle AND political engagement with revolutionaries. The party is needed precisely because revolutionaries remain in a minority well into a pre-revolutionary period—and often in a tiny minority before there is a significant rise in class struggle.

In the late 1990s’ global justice movement, the “90 percent/10 percent” slogan did not fit reality. The global justice movement did represent the first significant rise in struggle in decades, but it was still in its infancy and did not involve a significant layer of the organized working class. Because the SWP exaggerated both the degree of radicalization and the level of struggle, it also exaggerated the possibility for short-term growth.

As discussed earlier, by the mid-1990s, the ISO (and the SWP) were experiencing a “revolving door” of membership. To be sure, the ISO leadership resisted some of the organizational changes demanded by the SWP:

- The ISO refused to adopt the “1930s in slow motion” slogan, but we did not argue publicly against it, since it was a test of loyalty within the IST.
- Although the ISO followed the SWP in completely abandoning study groups by 1993-1994, the ISO soon re-introduced internal day schools and occasional study groups when it became obvious that new members needed an introduction to basic Marxist politics.
- Whereas the SWP shrunk its typical branch size to 4-8 members per branch, the ISO maintained much larger branches (20-40 members) throughout the 1990s in order to place within each branch a group of experienced cadre members who could train and develop new members.
- We shifted from weekly public meetings to bi-weekly public meetings in response to the exhaustion of our own members in building a weekly public meeting.

But the SWP made none of these adjustments. The result was the effective liquidation of the branch life of the SWP, resulting in the disintegration of paper sales and branch meetings. Indeed, SWP public meetings have also since disintegrated after the disastrous experience of weekly public meetings in the 1990s. Its main focus as an organization consists of get-rich-quick movement schemes to advance the party's profile in (and often, control over) movements such as Stop The War and political coalitions such as Respect.

During the second half of the 1990s, the SWP leadership (which is also the de facto IST leadership) repeatedly attacked the ISO for all the adjustments we made to the "instant recruitment" perspective. We were described as "conservative" for underestimating the potential for growth that was so obvious to the SWP central committee (while their own organization was disintegrating). In a written attack on the ISO leadership in 2000, the SWP even claimed that "cadre" is an "elitist" term, despite the fact that it is central to Leninism.

These disagreements ultimately led to our expulsion from the IST in 2001. As the Wikipedia website aptly summarizes the reasons for our expulsion:

In 2001 the ISO was expelled from the International Socialist Tendency (IST) after a dispute between the majority of the IST and the leadership of the ISO. This dispute was framed by the SWP as a critique of the ISO's conservative approach to the anti-corporate/anti-capitalist movement. The ISO disputed this claim and criticized the SWP for maintaining an exaggerated perspective for the 1990's, which the latter organization termed "the 1930's in slow motion."

Returning to the Leninist method

We had spent years fighting against the SWP's disastrous political perspective during the 1990s—and even its most blatant organizational mistakes. But without realizing it, we adapted to it as long as we remained inside the IST. Only since our expulsion in 2000 have we begun to correct that adaptation—and we are not yet finished.

The result has been political schizophrenia. As the document, "Why is the transition period taking so long?" described, we did not share the SWP's "onward and upward" trajectory. Nevertheless, we continued to educate our members primarily through the lens of the SWP leadership—encouraging members to subscribe to the SWP's theoretical journal and monthly magazine, while also suggesting that comrades travel yearly to the SWP's week-long Marxism conference where SWP leaders trumpeted the "onward and upward" perspective. When we launched our own magazine, the *International Socialist Review (ISR)* in the summer of 1997, the first issued contained a lengthy interview with SWP leader Tony Cliff in which he argued the "1930s in slow motion" perspective:

I remember the 1930s, and I have the feeling that I'm seeing the same film for the second time -- mass

unemployment, a rise in racism, the growth of the fascists. But this time the film goes much slower... The crisis of reformism and the collapse of Stalinism has created a fantastic opening for revolutionary socialism. It is much easier to build a revolutionary organization now than it was 20 or 30 years ago [i.e. the 1960s or 1970s].

The ISO's expulsion from the IST in 2001 allowed us to formally break with the SWP's exaggerated expectations and "get-rich-quick" schemes. Indeed, the political environment post- 9/11 further exposed the absurdity of the "onward and upward" perspective.

But only now has it become obvious that we did not address the elephant in the room: the notion of "instant recruitment" and its ramifications. Even over the last year or so, while we argued that branches should "develop a long term periphery and recruit from it," we also continued to argue that comrades should encourage anyone interested in joining to sign up with the ISO, even if they know little or nothing about our organization or its politics beforehand. But these two approaches contradict each other. One assumes the need to engage and convince contacts of Marxist politics and the ISO's practice over a period of time while the other continues to assume that it is possible to recruit genuine members in the time it takes to sign a membership card.

The notion of "instant recruitment" completely contradicts the Leninist method of party building—which clearly differentiates between the status of "members" and "supporters". Membership in a revolutionary organization requires a much higher level of commitment to building the organization than is demanded of supporters. In 1903, the Menshevik faction inside the RSDLP claimed that the Bolsheviks' desire to limit membership only to those who demonstrated a clear commitment to building the organization would make the party smaller and *therefore* weaker. But as Lenin argued in response in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904), a looser definition of membership makes for a looser (and *therefore* less effective) force in society:

*If we adopt Lenin's formula," Comrade Axelrod continued, "we shall be throwing overboard a section of those who, even if they cannot be directly admitted to an organization, are nevertheless Party members." The confusion of concepts of which Comrade Axelrod wanted to accuse me stands out here quite clearly in his own case: he already takes it for granted that all who help are Party members, whereas that is what the whole argument is about and our opponents have still to prove the necessity and value of such an interpretation. What is the meaning of the phrase "throwing over board", which at first glance seems so terrible? Even if only members of organizations recognised as Party organizations are regarded as Party members, people who cannot "directly" join any Party organization can still work in an organization which does not belong to the Party but is associated with it. Consequently, there can be no talk of throwing anyone overboard in the sense of preventing them from working, from taking part in the movement. **On the contrary, the stronger our Party***

organizations, consisting of real Social- Democrats, the less wavering and instability there is within the Party, the broader, more varied, richer, and more fruitful will be the Party's influence on the elements of the working-class masses surrounding it and guided by it.

Over the last few months, to be sure, we have explicitly moved away from card-waving methods of recruitment. At Socialism, we had no card waving but merely asked the meeting chairs to suggest that those interested in joining the ISO drop by the ISO office for a discussion. This fall, we openly discouraged campus comrades from approaching new contacts with membership cards, suggesting instead that we ask them to sign up for more information about the ISO's meetings and activities.

Now, it is clear that the next step must be finally ridding our organization of the notion of "instant membership" in the ISO.

How a different approach to membership will strengthen the ISO

The by-product of "instant recruitment" is a misplaced emphasis on the size of our *membership on paper* (number of card signers) as opposed to the number of ISO members who are actually committed to building the organization. Counting card-signers as genuine members gives us an inflated view of our size as an organization and also underestimates the need for patient base building as a means of expanding our political influence in the world around us. Thus, returning to the Leninist method of party building requires a much greater emphasis on our strategy for building a revolutionary party in the U.S. over the long term.

A recruitment process based upon building a longer-term periphery of contacts and allies around each branch is not a retreat. Such an approach will *strengthen* the ISO and our ability to influence those around us, for the reasons Lenin argued above. It should be no secret that we aim to convince people to join the ISO. But at the same time, we should not attempt to circumvent the recruitment process, which effectively soft-peddles the requirements of membership.

We do not aim to impose a time limit before contacts can join the ISO—which would be a mechanical approach to a political issue. But new members should join the ISO having *already* decided upon general agreement with Marxist politics. Contacts should be convinced of the reasons for selling *Socialist Worker* before they join the ISO—ideally they should already be reading *and* selling it. Likewise, the need for paying dues should be agreed upon *before* joining.

Viewed this way, it is obvious that many of the routines we have designated as "integration" for new members should rightfully be considered as part of the recruitment process. The four-week rotation we now consider to be new members' study groups should be required for contacts before they join the ISO. The members' handbook should be renamed "Introduction to the ISO"—and contacts should

have read and decided they are in basic agreement prior to joining.

Such an approach will raise the level of retention for new members, while raising the political level of the entire organization because all members will be convinced on the basics before they join. This will better allow us to focus clearly on cadre development among members through reading and internal education—a goal we have prioritized for the last several years.

The benefits of this longer-term approach to recruitment will not only strengthen the ISO internally, but will also allow us to intervene more effectively in the world around us. Our perspective for building a revolutionary organization involves a long-term strategy of implantation inside movements, on campuses, in workplaces and in neighborhoods. As the *ISO Notes* argued on September 2:

But we are also preparing for the future with a careful strategy that involves our own members' involvement in a set of grassroots struggles that will provide the concrete basis for the development of future national movements.

Our emphasis has always been on building local bases of grassroots activism. No genuine national movement can build itself simply on publicity (through the internet or otherwise), but must be based on the collective struggle of committed activists around the country.

The role of cadre in this process is crucial, for effective base building requires a conscious *socialist* intervention inside movements. Such a process takes place over a period of time, as a result of developing long-term relationships involving both collaboration and argument with other activists.

Socialist Worker must play a key role in developing and maintaining a set of longer-term relationships between our members and our periphery—in which each member develops a set of people who buy the paper every week, either from their workplace, on their campus, and/or from the branch's immediate periphery. This has been the stated intention of the "three for me" *Socialist Worker* routine, in which each member buys three papers each week—one to read and two to sell. But in reality, this has remained the weakest part of most branches' SW routines. Attached is a document summarizing concrete proposals from the national committee aimed at strengthening the use of "three for me" in every branch.

Finally, achieving a higher level of politics and commitment among the ISO's membership should raise the level of political confidence among members, by returning party building to its appropriate role—at the center of branch life. Too often, branches' "organizing" meetings revolve mainly around movement discussions, while *Socialist Worker*, dues, contact work and other important aspects of branch building are given much lower priority. This is inevitable when new members are encouraged to join before they are

convinced of branch routines such as selling *Socialist Worker* but should change as a result of greater commitment among branch members to the explicit project of party-building.

When members lack political confidence, moralistic argument can sometimes be used as a substitute for political argument. This can take a variety of forms – but most detrimental is a sense of obligation to become *directly* involved in every struggle that rises up, however suddenly. This approach downplays both the validity of placing party building at the center of branch life and the centrality of using *Socialist Worker* as the key means we have to build a periphery locally.

The Jena Six struggle, which has signaled a new phase in rebuilding a civil rights movement, provides a clear example of a political versus moralistic approach. For purely practical reasons, the ISO was unable to mobilize a significant section of our membership to attend the September 20 mobilization in Jena, LA. (This, of course, would have been different if we had a cluster of branches in the Deep South, but the vast majority of our branches are far away.) The Austin, TX branch sent a group of members (who traveled 8 hours each way for this weekday protest). So, as much as we would have preferred a larger mobilization, it was not feasible. And it would be moralistic to argue that the ISO “missed” the opportunities presented by the September 20 Jena protest, for several reasons:

- ISO members were involved in building solidarity protests with the Jena 6 in many localities around the country.
- *Socialist Worker* (and the *ISR*) paid close attention to the Jena 6 case from the beginning. In fact, as Toledo comrades reported of their local Jena 6 protest, “Our Nation of Islam ally was another one of the speakers, and from the podium told the audience that the *Socialist Worker* was one of the only newspapers to give coverage to the Jena case, that it is an uncompromising revolutionary newspaper that everyone should read, and that the ISO is a serious anti-racist, revolutionary organization.”
- *Socialist Worker* was able to send staff reporter Nicole Colson for a first-hand report (which appeared in this week’s *SW*)—providing every member across the U.S. with the opportunity to open a dialogue with local activists about the need for building a fighting movement against racism—not just in Jena, but everywhere.
- Comrades around the country now have the opportunity to take advantage of the heightened awareness around racism by organizing panel discussions on the issue (involving, if possible, an activist who did attend the September 20 protest); reaching out to Black student groups on campuses to coordinate further days of action; and investigating the possibilities for city-wide

organizing around the case with other organizations such as the NAACP, NOI, etc.

- Fighting racism has for many years been central to the ISO’s perspective, demonstrated by our long-term involvement in the fight against the death penalty. That project emphasizes the importance of the self-activity of death row inmates and their family members—and has been key to building a small but significant base inside the Black working class. Indeed, our members made a significant contribution (from inside the Campaign to End the Death Penalty) in the recent Kenneth Foster victory, a testament to the strategy of base building among inmates and their families.

A moralistic approach to movement building begins with the urgency of what is needed—without regard to our resources—while underestimating the potential of our publications as a crucial aid in local base building efforts.

If we operate in this manner, we will never fulfill our goals because there are many more urgent problems than we can adequately address—from homelessness to racism to healthcare to women’s and gay oppression and beyond. Moreover, the goal of building a working-class revolutionary party over the long term will effectively end up lowest on the list of priorities if we use this approach. Branch building routines are the first to suffer when ISO members are stretched too thin covering movement work.

A political approach begins with a discussion of our resources—without sacrificing the centrality of party building. The ISO’s level of involvement in movement building is limited by our own resources as an organization. We cannot build every movement and involve ourselves in every struggle. Therefore, we must make strategic decisions about which struggles to prioritize. As the *ISO Notes* argued on September 2:

The number and variety of struggles that exist today force us to make choices about what our members can and cannot prioritize as ongoing commitments to movement building. We do not have the membership resources to become centrally involved in every struggle without sacrificing our political commitment to building our own organization.

What next? Two proposals for pre-convention debate and discussion

The issues described in this document are too important to the organization’s perspective to be decided at an SC or NC meeting, but rather should involve the entire membership. Moreover, the needed changes cannot be accomplished overnight, but should be viewed as a longer-term correction that begins with our recruitment method and branch routines that will evolve over a period of time. The problems stemming from “instant recruitment” cannot be solved by “instant changes”!

The next opportunity we have for discussing and deciding upon any changes in perspective will be at the ISO's annual convention, planned for February 8-10, 2008 in Chicago.

We do not believe it would be productive (or necessary) to question every aspect of the ISO's organizational perspective, since the organization is healthy and already headed in the right direction. The aim is to finally (and formally) correct a mistaken method of recruitment and its consequences for branch life. We do not believe, for example, that the entire project of producing a weekly edition of *Socialist Worker* is in question, but rather how effectively we are using it—particularly the “three for me” routine—in developing a longer-term periphery for each branch.

With this in mind, the NC and SC have agreed to put forward two joint proposals for consideration at the ISO convention, which we believe represent concrete steps toward re-instituting the Leninist method of party building described above:

1. The ISO's approach to recruitment will no longer be based simply upon signing a membership card; membership should be the result of general agreement on Marxist politics and the basic requirements of membership (branch meeting attendance, SW sales and payment of dues).
2. All ISO branches will implement a 4-week branch meeting rotation: organizational/public/organizational/study group.

These proposals should be voted upon at the next ISO convention, the highest decision-making body of the organization. We welcome comrades' input into this discussion over the coming months and, because this is such an important issue, plan to open up the pre-convention discussion period (which normally takes place two months before conventions) immediately. This will allow the entire membership to really flush out this important debate, with a decision to be made at the ISO's annual convention in February.

As always, we ask that comrades who submit documents keep them as short as possible, with a clear set of proposed resolutions if you are submitting any. Please notify Sharon S. at the national office if you plan to submit a document at Sharon@internationalsocialist.org.

While the recruitment proposal requires much more discussion and will be decided upon by the Convention, branches and districts that want to move to the four-week rotation now should not feel the need to wait until February if it makes sense for them.

Sharon S., for the ISO steering committee and national committee
