

Pre-convention Bulletin #8 / January 2014

for members only

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Inside this Bulletin

This is the eighth 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 (to request

approval for guests wishing to attend the convention, contact the National Office at orgdept@gmail.com). 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.

Response to the ISO Renewal Faction

In New York City we are faced with myriad problems and challenges. No less than anyone else, we want to develop theory and strategies that help us make sense of our experiences, and that point ways forward. The Renewal Faction has raised a number of theoretical directions. They've certainly raised a number of problems they perceive to be facing our organization. We found what the Renewal Faction puts forward unhelpful to meeting any of the most pressing needs of the NYC district.

The faction has commented quite broadly on the activity and capabilities of branches around the country. We imagine there will be many responses. We were conflicted about whether to add to the pile, as we don't think the arguments of a dozen or so members should dominate our pre-convention discussion. In the end we thought it was important to explain why we think the faction's approach points away from, if not makes impossible, the discussions we need to be having.

It is our opinion that if the faction's recommendations were to be taken (and their behavior emulated more widely), it would lead to an organization less able to intervene in the world, and one that is not able to act collectively at all. We believe, based on our experiences in NYC, that the faction neither correctly identifies the key questions facing our organization nor offers a method for addressing them. It would be a terrible loss if our pre-convention period were not able to give fuller expression to the many important debates bubbling up across the organization, because the faction's proposals dominated discussion.

This document will lay out a few ways in which the Faction's recommendations fail to meaningfully address our strategies or our challenges. We will also argue that the ineffectuality of their proposals is not unrelated to their conception of cadre as those who stand apart from, and in challenge of, this organization. Rather, we will argue that it is precisely their absence from meaningful engagement with the rest of this organization, that produces their inability to offer useful theory that might move our organization forward.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive response to the faction documents. Instead, we will mostly confine ourselves to our experience locally as that is what we feel most qualified to speak to. We look forward to hearing from

other branches and districts about their own experiences -- questions, debates, challenges and successes -- during the pre-convention period.

Long-term implantation in NYC

The faction argues that our perspectives mean “consciously choosing not to do work that may not reap short-term dividends.”¹ This runs directly counter to our experience in NYC. If anything, over the last 5 years (the period in which the faction argues we have been mired in crisis) we have moved even further in the direction of long-term implantation - devoting significant resources, including the time of our most experienced cadre, to long-term projects. Most significant of these are probably our work in the teachers' union and in criminal injustice activism. But it also includes: our other labor work; forming the eco-socialist network; working with immigrant rights activists to build a network opposed to the comprehensive immigration reform bill; building a non-Stalinist Middle East solidarity network; working with Greek activists to build support for Syriza and against fascism; and the development of relationships with other left projects such as *Jacobin*, Left Forum and *Historical Materialism*.

These projects have increased our profile, depth of knowledge and ability to contribute to the building of both a practical and theoretical political alternative; however, none of them really “reap short-term dividends.” In fact, this implantation has created as many new difficulties for us as it has created opportunities. Many of these challenges were taken up in a document by two of our comrades for last year's convention - “The tension between branch building and implantation.”² Much of our long-term work has been led by our most experienced cadre who were trained in an earlier period and in an organization that looked very different. We have had more difficulty regenerating and developing a new layer of cadre. And while we have grown modestly (by about 1/3) over the last five years, we have found it increasingly difficult to achieve the quantitative growth we would want while also focusing on the qualitative growth of our membership and organization. We have not yet solved these challenges because they are not simple.

¹ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 13

² 2012 Preconvention Bulletin #9, pp. 1-4

“The political roots of the ISO’s organizational crisis,” they write, “lie in the group’s failure to adequately theorize the neoliberal phase of capitalism.”³ Certainly, our organization could benefit from a host of theoretical work. But in New York City, “under-theorization” of neoliberalism has not been the central barrier to our most successful implantation and longer-term work. Instead, the barrier has been the tension between implanting our most experienced comrades, and the need for those same comrades to train the next layer of cadre.

A faction committee member was until very recently on our district committee, where she had served for the better part of two years. During that time she was part of our bi-weekly discussions which frequently took up our many areas of implantation. For our teacher union and criminal injustice work in particular, the repeated refrains during those discussions were the need for patience, as these strategies were long-term. She also participated in discussions around the central need for more effective membership development. This need was taken so seriously the DC created a new Membership Development fraction, to which we would dedicate branch committee members from every branch in the district. We find puzzling the faction’s failure to make mention of these long term strategies in its criticism of our perspectives, or to identify our central political challenges in the way it does.

A program for our organization would be premature

Running through much of the faction's writing is the implicit notion that the right ideas can overcome the enormous obstacles we face. This notion is made explicit when the faction insists on the need for a program, similar to Trotsky's Transitional Program. “In our view, it is time for the ISO to develop a program, that is, a strategy for getting from here to the revolution, starting with the next substantial step in the development of struggle and class consciousness as expressed in the self-organization of workers and the oppressed.”⁴

“Such a program is essential,” the faction writes, “if we are to concretely counterpose ourselves to the liberal organizations, not by saying “we’re socialists and we know better,” but rather on the basis of what we call for on a range of questions, and how we act to realize those demands.”⁵

An organization of our limited size and implantation simply doesn’t have the means to generate a program that would meaningfully accomplish anything. A pre-determined program sidesteps the vital process of collaboration with allies and broader forces, risking a sectarian posture. In our most successful moments what our comrades have called for, and how they’ve acted, has been largely determined by the moment, the forces involved, and an ongoing dialog with allies (buffeted by an adherence to our principles), in which we have learned as much as we have contributed. If

the litmus test for collaboration had been an agreement with our pre-set program, we would have found ourselves awfully isolated.

Rather than asking questions about how we train a cadre to begin doing the hard work of engaging with activists that will hopefully become our long-term allies, the faction insists on “a plan to get from here to the revolution.” This seems to us to be the very definition of an overblown sense of what is possible.

Reading the faction’s documents, we are reminded of Duncan Hallas’s “Towards a Revolutionary Party”:

One of the negative features of the leadership/betrayal syndrome is the assumption that the answers to all problems are known in advance. They are contained in a programme which is definitive and final. To safeguard the purity of the programme is seen as one of the main tasks of the selected few. That there may be new problems which require new solutions, that it is necessary to learn from one’s fellow workers as well as to teach, are unwelcome ideas. And yet they are fundamental. Omniscience is no more granted to organisations than to individuals. A certain amount of modesty, of flexibility, of awareness of limitations is necessary.⁶

Although Hallas was writing in 1971, he seems to be describing twin tendencies we see running through the faction’s documents. We don’t believe the challenges facing us are so simple as “the leadership got it wrong.” None of us have “gotten it right” - if by right, we mean finding a way to break through to a revolutionary organization “capable of steering the course of events”. The challenges facing us (and the entirety of the international Left) cannot be overcome by a mythical perfect leadership or perfect program.

Considering some of the faction’s proposals

In our view, the faction's concrete proposals about what our organization should do suffer in two main ways. First, they misdiagnose the actual challenges facing us which leads to recommendations inconsistent with our needs. Second, their arguments lack internal consistency.

The faction wishes to “develop a strategy for moving the ISO in the direction of implantation in key economic sectors and workplaces, social strata, and geographic locations (e.g. the South)...” This argument is re-emphasized shortly afterward: “We should expand our horizons systematically, by developing a strategy for organizing the South (and putting resources from northern branches into that organizing), as well as areas of logistics (transportation, telecommunications) and any other areas we think might be significant on a national scale.”⁷

If one just looked at this part of the faction's plan (and nothing else) it could be described charitably as

³ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 9

⁴ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 13

⁵ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 13

⁶ <http://isreview.org/issues/24/Hallas.shtml>

⁷ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 14

“ambitious.” With any material assessment of the state of the working class and the left after decades of neoliberal onslaught, the plan might be described more accurately as “unrealistic.” If one has read and takes seriously the faction’s assertion that our organization is in crisis, has grossly-inflated membership claims, and is unable to set perspectives, it is unclear how anyone could come to the conclusions the faction has arrived at.

“A plan for organizing the South, as well as the transportation and telecommunications industries,” seems well out of reach for an organization supposedly in “crisis since 2009.” The faction describes this crisis as both a “general” crisis,⁸ and an “immanent” crisis.⁹ “Even in branches where we cannot identify any particular cataclysm,” the faction writes, “we observe serious organizational problems.”¹⁰

The “plan for organizing the South, as well as the transportation and telecommunications industries” becomes even more unlikely if the faction accepts its own membership estimates.¹¹ By their guess we are 30-40% smaller as an organization than we think we are. This should have dramatic implications for our long term strategic vision: ie the need to scale back our work and goals to align more appropriately with the capacity of a group of 500 (rather than of 800). Instead, the faction recommends we get (far) more ambitious.

It is unclear which of the remaining “resources from northern branches” the faction thinks we should “put into that organizing.” The vast majority of members in those northern branches are contributing what they can in the little

⁸ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 7

⁹ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 8

¹⁰ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 7

¹¹ The faction’s charge here is a serious one; but the method for their membership estimate is entirely unserious: “The NYC district has 120 members on paper, but the number of members active on a week-to-week basis is lower, with turnout at district events usually between 70 and 80. The Bay Area claims 75 members, but at most 40 attended the recent Pre-Convention meeting. This suggests that our true membership--comrades who pay dues and take an active role in the organization--is more like 500.”

Given the faction’s preoccupation with “bureaucratic exclusion,” it is strikingly hypocritical for them to disappear 30-40% of our organization because a handful of meetings were under-attended. There are all sorts of reasons we may not see a member from time to time, particularly in a city as demanding as New York City. It can be difficult to know to a certainty whether every member is actively building the organization, taking a more passive role because of some personal issue, or has bigger disagreements with our politics and whose membership should be revisited. These assessments require engagement with the individual comrade(s), whose membership status can certainly not be decided on the basis of attendance at a single meeting. For more on these questions, in the context of the Austin branch, see Snehal S.’ public reply to faction estimates of their membership: (<http://newredindian.wordpress.com/2013/12/16/a-response-to-the-renewal-faction-on-events-in-austin/>).

time afforded by their jobs, classes, families, or other responsibilities. This strategy would totally fail to address the most pressing problems facing our district in New York City, that of developing new layers of cadre. It would in fact exacerbate this problem, by either diluting our pool of experienced members, or of plopping undeveloped members into wildly unfamiliar settings, or some combination thereof.

Whatever resources the faction has in mind, they are no doubt woefully inadequate for the tasks of organizing the South or new industries. Unions, with hundreds of millions in the bank and memberships larger than us by many times, have failed to organize the South for half a century. This is not the case because no one has thought of this before. There are enormous obstacles to organizing in the South. Sending our members to organize workers in right-to-work states, where organizers are frequently met with intimidation and/or violence, with no organic ties to any existing efforts, doesn’t seem very sensible.

Again, this seems to us to be the very definition of an overblown sense of what is possible. The factioners should decide if we are in crisis, hemorrhaging members and hobbled by a national leadership which can do little well (aside from projecting optimism and bullying dissidents); or if we have the capacity to send members to the south and new industry, as yet-unconquered by organized labor and forces with far more resources than we may ever have.

Unified organization rather than autonomous branches

We also have difficulty squaring the faction’s call for an overarching strategy for the whole country with their simultaneous call for “full autonomy” for branches. The faction references a debate held in NYC over our district structures. We agree that “the entire organization would benefit from a generalization” of that discussion. But that would mean precisely the kind of collaborative relationship between branches and the center, and between cadre and leadership, that they seem to reject. The issues we are navigating are challenging. They include but are not limited to: how best to organize movement work that crosses branches while still generalizing that experience throughout the district; how to make sure that student work doesn’t get cut off from the broader life of the district; how to set priorities collectively when there are so many individual specifics involved in comrades’ work; the role of geographically based branches; how to balance engaging a broader audience drawn to socialist politics with longer-term movement work; how and where best to train and develop new cadre.

These are precisely the kind of concrete questions that the faction seems uninterested in. We expect there will be documents by NYC comrades exploring these questions - likely from different and sometimes opposed perspectives. In our mind this is precisely the kind of discussion that we should be having during this pre-convention period and we are committed to contributing to that. It seems to us that if the faction thinks the NYC discussion should be generalized, then their member from NYC ought to write a

concrete assessment of these questions. For our part, we are looking forward to assessing our local work in light of the collective experiences and needs of the entire organization. If there is one thing we've learned from all our experimentation, it is that there are no easy answers - and if we are going to be able to assess and move forward, that won't be done "autonomously."

Why the crisis thesis is not helpful

The faction's starting point is that the ISO is suffering a crisis so deep and protracted that to bring it to light requires extraordinary measures on their part. On this basis they grant themselves the power to decide for themselves questions of membership, what internal matters to publish externally and to comment freely on other branches regardless of their level of direct knowledge. This has several severe and damaging consequences.

First, posing the question in such dramatic terms inevitably raises the temperature and short-circuits important discussions. In the past several years, we have opened up several political questions and experimented with our organizational forms. We are attempting to take stock of these experiences and attempting to rush through that process does not bring clarity but panic. We want comrades to speak openly about their successes and difficulties; but this becomes impossible if your successes are derided as "cheerleading" and your difficulties are levied as proof of a "crisis." We feel that the faction's assessment of our own district is inaccurate and misleading; thus, it does not give us much confidence in their ability to pronounce on the state of the organization as a whole.

Second, they make it harder to distinguish various arguments and assess them on their own terms. In their long list of issues that they present as evidence for their crisis thesis, they have brought several different debates, discussions and issues (and possibly non-issues) - spanning a range of at least 5 years - under one heading. But if one thing has become clear from reading the open letters of various former comrades, and the different responses in *Socialist Worker*, each case involved separate issues and political arguments. Our understanding of our organization is not furthered by lumping all of these together. Even if we are to accept the faction's accounting of all of these different situations, we don't believe that a theorization of neoliberalism, however sophisticated, could have prevented all of these problems.

Third, they give equal (if not more) weight to the views of comrades who have been outside the ISO for several years, and are not currently engaged in trying to put our political perspectives into practice, than they do to current members. While they are conducting this debate publicly and widely, the ones who will have to live with the consequences of that debate are our members. Whatever damage is done to the reputation of the ISO will be borne by its members rather than those outside it. Whatever decisions we make about how to proceed will have to be carried out by our membership. Thus we should be shaping the debate and discussion around those questions. Instead, much of our pre-

convention discussion has been taken up by the need to respond to critics outside the ISO. While the faction is not solely responsible for this situation, they have helped to amplify the voices of these critics.

Why we think the faction gets it wrong

The purpose of a socialist organization is to raise us all beyond the work we could do as individuals. This happens when our members bring their experiences in movements and workplaces into the organization, a socialist perspective informed by those experiences back out with them, and so on... There is simply no way to know what next steps are unless we have the input and collaboration of members who are simultaneously engaged with people beyond themselves (and no way to properly assess the outside world unless we have a sizeable, trained cadre).

To again quote Duncan Hallas, "People often talk about the need to 'develop theory.' In fact Marxist theory is not developed on the basis of some general wish to theorize. It grows in response to actual problems facing Marxists."¹²

Understanding and responding to the actual challenges facing us does not require a pre-set strategy or program. Rather, our strategy should flow from collective discussion that engages the entire membership. The work ahead of us is to enable larger layers of the membership to participate in discussions over the strategic direction of the organization. This is both a practical task and a political one. That is, it is not just a matter of developing better ideas. It is also a question of increasing our influence, relationships and practical work so that we can better assess the concrete next steps for us. Developing our members as individuals is a central task. So too is developing a culture in which our members engage each other as allies and resources. One is not possible without the other.

The faction seems to take the opposite approach, in a number of ways.

The faction has taken our conception of cadre, built on trust and collaboration, and inverted it. Initially this was described as their self-identified need to be a constant "check" on leadership. But this position has become even more developed over time. In a document on the Faction's public blog, Shaun J. explains "why the Faction Rules are so strongly centralistic, with so much decision-making power invested in the Faction Committee":

It is not true that to fight for greater democracy in the organization, the faction has to be internally greatly democratic. That is a 'prefigurative' principle that the history of all class struggle invalidates. Unions (partially) democratize the workplace, but those who start a union organizing drive are obliged to work initially as a compact group, even in secret. A comrade who refused to join an organizing drive because the organizers were 'undemocratic' (secrecy is indeed not democratic) would not be thinking

¹² <http://www.marxists.org/archive/hallas/works/1973/06/intro-isj.htm>

very realistically.¹³

This is, frankly, a stunning comment from people who insist they are interested in building the ISO. Not to state the obvious, but bosses are literally the people against whom we spend our lives plotting to defeat, demoralize, and expropriate. Does the faction equate *this* leadership with management, or *any* leadership? If the former, their organizational recommendations seem insufficient, and they should motivate a fresh slate. If the latter, we can expect the faction would extend their assessment - of the need to organize against leadership - as long as there is a leadership. Paul D. was absolutely correct when he wrote:

This concept of leadership may find a welcome home in an anarchist organization, such as they exist, but not in a Leninist one. We are attempting to create an organization of like-minded revolutionaries who are able to debate and confer, to share our differences, in order to collectively move forward in our mutual work. Such debate can only be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect.¹⁴

Disinterest in mutual respect has led to an indifference to alienating other comrades in the organization.

Perhaps the most visible way this has manifested is when the faction has published internal bulletins on their public blog. The threat of documents being leaked online makes our national discussion period less fruitful and democratic. It precludes sensitive internal matters from being raised, and the expectation that a contribution must be ready for the world means all sorts of members may be less likely to contribute. This is true for both less confident members and for members who don't wish to see an experimental idea, argument, or question live forever on the internet.

Other examples of indifference to alienating other comrades include: deciding unilaterally to override Steering Committee decisions about membership; commenting on internal (NBC) calls on public Facebook walls; publishing accounts of meetings with our national leadership intended to publicly embarrass them (and by extension, the rest of us); commenting on the state of branches that they have little or no direct knowledge of; and so on. When members have responded with their own assessments of their own experiences and branches, faction leaders have not listened but instead accused these comrades of "deluding themselves."¹⁵ We don't see how a productive discussion in the organization can proceed on this basis.

The practical outcome of a posture that is hostile to the membership is a lack of engagement with actual problems

¹³ <http://externalbulletin.wordpress.com/2013/12/04/a-note-on-the-faction-rules/>

¹⁴ For more on questions of cadre's relationship to one another and the leadership, comrades should refer to Paul's entire document "Theory, cadre, and continuity: Building revolutionary organization today" (Bulletin #5), particularly the section "A wrong conception of cadre."

¹⁵ <http://externalbulletin.wordpress.com/2013/12/15/a-reply-to-snehal-s/>

facing the organization and with the real strategies we are deploying. It has prevented them from generating useful work. Relative to the many words over their numerous documents (internally submitted and publicly posted to their blog), there is precious little that we find useful to the problems facing us.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we believe the Renewal Faction orients us on all the wrong questions. The faction tells us that the crisis we face is an immanent one, which they helpfully explain means "a failure to progress even by the organization's own metrics of success - especially membership growth and retention."¹⁶ But this comprises an incredibly narrow (at best) description of how we would define success. In the recent history of the ISO we have been very clear that numerical growth is not the basis on which we should judge our success. In fact, we have explicitly moved away from a model of "instant recruitment," which was focused on numerical growth, to one based on long-term base building, cadre development, the development of political relationships and implantation in struggles. In a document written in 2007, when we abandoned the method of "instant recruitment," Sharon Smith laid out an alternative for how we should understand our aims:

The by-product of "instant recruitment" is a misplaced emphasis on the size of our *membership on paper* 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...

Our perspective for building a revolutionary organization involves a long-term strategy of implantation inside movements, on campuses, in workplaces and in neighborhoods... 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.¹⁷

We believe that these formulations remain a useful framework for assessing our progress. It is a daunting task to determine to what extent we've been able to develop: cadre; a long term periphery of contacts and allies around each branch; implantation inside movements, campuses, in workplaces and in neighborhoods; and our political

¹⁶ 2013 Preconvention Bulletin #6, p. 10

¹⁷ 2007 Preconvention Bulletin #1, p. 24

influence. We'll need concrete and political assessments from branches and movement fractions. We'll need collaboration and trust between members and between our cadre and leadership. We'll need to estimate the possibilities in various places.

Determining how to advance to the next step based on this assessment is even more challenging. It is a process that resists easy or simplistic answers. In the remaining weeks of our pre-convention period, we hope that we can focus on a concrete and realistic assessment of the challenges and possibilities before us. We aim to contribute to that

discussion in forthcoming documents and look forward to the contributions of our comrades across the country. We believe that we have much to assess locally and much we wish to learn from other branches and districts.

The NYC District Committee

Aaron A. (Queens), Geoff B. (Midtown), Nisha B. (NYU), Kyle B. (Uptown), Lichi D. (Uptown), Blair E. (Brooklyn), Jason F. (NYU), Emily G. (Brooklyn), Dave G. (Uptown), Julian G. (Queens), Brian J. (Uptown), Danny K. (Queens), Leia P. (Political Education Organizer), Jen R. (District Organizer), Natalia T. (Brooklyn)

The significance of the fossil fuel divestment campaigns

On college campuses throughout the US, students are building growing campaigns calling for their school's endowments to divest from fossil fuel companies. The divestment campaigns began fall semester 2012 after a push by 350.org that has spread the campaign all over the country after an initial divestment campaign at Swarthmore College a year or so earlier. The Swarthmore campaign was founded on politics of climate justice, that is a focus on how climate change affects people and disproportionately marginalized communities. The campaigns kicked off by 350 were founded on the politics of the environmental movement (focus on the amount of CO2 in the air, NGO model of change, green capitalism, etc.).

Because of the campaigns roots and the nature of the environmental movement, a strategy of collaborating with school administrations has dominated. Using an NGO model of building a passive base of support and using these numbers to ask those in power to make appropriate changes has, of course, not worked. But the way the climate justice/environmental movement is growing means that divestment campaigns are growing anyways. Failure of administrations, academic or political, to do anything serious to address climate change is forcing a left turn in the movement. This is expressed in Bill McKibben's Rolling Stone article published on December 17th, where the 350.org founder and leader stops defending the Obama administration, stating that "Obama loyalists argue that these [steps Obama has taken] are as much as you could expect from a president saddled with the worst Congress in living memory. But that didn't mean that the president had to make the problem worse, which he's done with stunning regularity." He goes on to list ways Obama has actively contributed to growing fossil fuel use and industry.

The Environmental youth activist conference, Power Shift, contributed to politicizing the divestment campaign. Thousands of divestment activists went to the three day conference this October in Pittsburgh where anti-oppression and anti-capitalist politics were on full display side by side green capitalism and mainstream environmental politics.

In the campaign at the University of Vermont this recent history and our political involvement has led to real changes in the group. For a year the majority of the divestment

coalition worried about appearing confrontational to the administration, but after failed work with the administration we finally marched on the board of trustee's meeting and chanted with intent to disrupt. Organizing meetings had been meetings where people could come and be given tasks to fulfil plans developed in the open steering committee meetings the day before. Now they are meetings to discuss as a group current events, politics, and next steps for the campaign. And sexism in the group, expressed through the regular suppression of female voices in the meeting, was finally taken up by female leaders in the group through open dialogue and privilege training. While this last aspect included a lot of naval gazing, it also opened up space to address sexism in the group and space for us to engage in dialogue about the relationship between the current war on women and the war on the earth.

The Divestment coalition meetings on campus are the only activist meetings on campus that are regularly more than 25 people and include at least one new person every week. We sell at least one SW a meeting, and need to buy more than the regular five for me's each month.

While there are a couple of contacts developed in the campaign, we have not recruited anyone from the campaign. Our campus presence is small and we have not had a formal fraction relating to the campaign. Instead, one or two members go each week without an organized intervention. There is definitely space in the movement to win folks to the need for a social revolution and the need to build a revolutionary party but it will take fraction that can politically lead in the movement and that has a focus on party building that can make use of this potential.

It is clear based on few SW reports and the low number of members on ISO Environmental conference calls, that few branches are a part of local divestment campaigns.

The climate justice movement and divestment campaigns are fertile ground for putting our politics into practice. The climate justice and environmental movements are growing, not retreating, and are coming up against limitations of their political perspectives. Branches forming fractions and putting resources into these campaigns set us up to lead in the struggle by pointing to the limitations of collaboration

with administrations and lets us put anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist politics in the fore. The radicalizing layers in the campaigns are open to the argument for party building. Recruiting these people can strengthen the ISO which is weak in its politics of ecology, and can strengthen the movement by having more organized socialists involved.

If other branches are already participating in these divestment campaigns, we need their participation in the ISO Environmental conference calls and SW reports after national days of action if we're to better generalize from

these struggle.

The emphasis on cadre building this preconvention period has been useful. The emphasis on learning our politics is right. It goes without saying that this has to include practical organizing and working with broader layers as well. The fossil fuel divestment campaigns and the environmental movement are one place that we can develop ourselves as Marxists by building the movement and recruiting to the ISO.

Alex B., Burlington, Vt.

The fossil fuel divestment movement

This document will attempt to familiarize comrades with the fossil fuel divestment movement, the basics around it and the political opportunities that it presents. For those already familiar with the movement, this document will hopefully make a case for trying to take advantage of the fact that we are an organization, and not just a group of solo socialists.

The divestment movement has come about in the context of a fracking boom, which has allowed for the newfound energy independence the administration is celebrating, and the pending approval from the state department of the KXL pipeline to bring tar sands oil into the US. For a layer of people in the environmental movement that would have previously shied away from more frontal kinds of activism and struggle, it has become clear that the Obama administration is not just "not doing enough" but actively moving in a direction of increasing fossil fuel extraction and dependence. It is in that context that fossil fuel divestment campaigns started around the country.

There are currently 380 student campaigns for fossil fuel divestment, and around 100 more in cities, communities and churches, involving thousands in environmental work. The purpose is to get institutions, mostly universities, to divest from fossil fuels in order to weaken the industry. The campaign was started by 350, one of the most prominent green NGOs, but now has a life of its own. From the start it took direct and explicit inspiration from past divestment campaigns. and the two demands are 1) to freeze any new fossil fuel investment immediately and 2) to divest from direct ownership and commingled funds on fossil fuel in five years. The 200 most polluting companies that institutions are to divest from are determined by Carbon Tracker Initiative.

One can partly trace the origins back to the summer of 2012. Back then, Bill McKibben wrote an article for Rolling Stone about how "scientific warning [has been followed] by political inaction" to bring us to a point where we have 5 times the amount of carbon reserves that scientists think are necessary to put us over the famous 2°C limit. McKibben takes a step further in the article and calls for a student movement in the spirit of the one that called for divestment from South African apartheid. "These companies don't

simply exist in a world whose hungers they fulfill – they help create the boundaries of that world," he says, and thus make the case for why trying to convince said companies or the government will be futile since we are running against time. After that, 350.org held the Do The Math tour throughout the country, starting fossil fuel divestment campaign chapters in most of the places the tour stopped. It's worth noting that since then, other important articles have shown further shifts in the anti-climate change community towards activism. Naomi Klein's recounting of last year's meeting of the American Geophysical Union shows how some academics, after the experiences of years after years of unkept promises by governments, have come to the conclusion that activism and a strong movement will be the only way to put a stop to climate change.

Though all of these points beg a conversation about capitalism and the profit motive, 350 doesn't go anywhere near criticizing the system in a direct way or even breaking with the Dems. This leaves the door not only open to but with flashing signs and giant arrows inviting a Marxist analysis of society to come in. Still, while far from Marxist, this was a significant shift to the left for 350. It boosted the still weak environmental movement quite a bit. Not only have they started many campaigns, they've also provided (albeit almost uniformly NGO-oriented) organizers to train student leaders over the summer and many materials to help get the campaigns going. They have argued for big, creative campaigns to pressure their board of trustees to make the commitment to divestment, and consciously tried to steer students away from the 'recycle your way into a green future' kind of things.

Limitations and possibilities

There is however, a limit to their efforts. 350.org has a set of politics, liberal, that have resonated with many students and have grown after launching these campaigns. But because of a question of their resources on the ground and students wanting to take the reigns, they have not been able to lead the movement across the board. Most importantly, a group of explicitly radical students, a clear left wing in divestment work, have started the Divest Fossil Fuels National Network which aims to create a bottom up network

of all student divestment campaigns, explicitly alternative to 350. Formally kicked off at this year's PowerShift, the largest national environmental activism conference, the network had been started by ~50 students earlier in the year, in the February PowerUp conference in and organized by Swarthmore College. At its core were several students from the college for whom divestment and environmental justice organizing against mountaintop removal had been a focus since 2010, and other radical activists from other schools.

Crucially, several of the students present at the PowerUp, who would then form the Network, did not only want to create their own organization to coordinate divestment, but, which is no coincidence, they wanted to put climate justice in the forefront of the divestment struggle. This has already had ripple effects. Organizers of PowerShift were present at the PowerUp conference, and they heard these arguments, and, perhaps, saw the importance of talking and organizing around how communities are affected by changes in the environment. In any case, this meant that there were over 50 workshops about different aspects of climate justice in Powershift. Comrades can imagine the mindblowing opening that is for socialists. The workshop that System Change not Climate Change put together was arguably the only one tying it all together in a holistic way, and had in it 225 people who were bursting into applause after every few of Chris W's sentences.

In turn, PowerShift, far from a radical conference, allowed the Network to have an audience that would have been impossible for grassroots activists to get on their own. Around 150-200 people gathered in between sessions to hear what these students had to say. This ranged from envisioning what a national network could do, like coordinating statewide university sit-ins, to explicit solidarity with prison divestment and BDS campaigns. In a parallel way, it would have been impossible for students interested in fighting against climate change to kickstart 380 campaigns around the country on their own, even though 8 fossil fuel divestment campaigns, including Swarthmore's, predate 350's efforts. There seems to be an ongoing dynamic where this big green NGOs are pushed to the left, both by their base and by decades of political inaction.

Lessons learned

It is also very interesting that campaigns themselves seem to be going through a process of their own tactics shifting left in the face of their administration's reactions to their efforts. This is what we can glean from what we know of 3 campaigns where we've been able to talk to comrades involved and further campaigns to which we have connections.

In the face of "No's" by the administration, the top heaviness of college bureaucracies and in general the lack of urgency that all the people in charge feel for climate change there are two possible reactions. Student divestment groups can either get demoralized and feel there's nothing to be done that's in their power, or they can radicalize and start seeking tactics that are more about confronting power and

less about back door negotiating or waiting for Board of Trustee votes.

Of course, these two kinds of strategies are not mutually exclusive or occurring sequentially, but, at this early stage and with this small sample size, it seems to be a trend. In the case of Columbia, we are still in the process of trying to go through all the correct channels, but this has been accompanied by a ballot for divestment that over 2/3 of the students that voted approved.

There is still far to go in terms of climate justice.

Divestment from fossil fuels sounds to many people like something quite separate from human lives, and on first impression it looks more like the middle class environmental movement trying to protect some abstract notion of the planet, something which is abstract enough to not attract more than small numbers. As well, unlike other areas of work, awareness of climate change and fossil fuel contamination is taught in school and referenced often enough in the mainstream that it is not rare for most people to be against both. Thus, the people involved in the divestment movement tend to come to it without a radical view of the world, in a way that would be impossible to think of those in SJP or SAMI chapters.

It's on divestment campaigns, and the radicals in them, to make clear connections between the fossil fuel industry and the way human beings will be affected, overwhelmingly working class people of color around the world. The Divest Fossil Fuels National Network is trying to actively do this, pushing for connecting divestment campaigns with climate justice, which can go from fighting against pollution from truck depots, access to food, toxic waste disposal facilities, demanding protection for those in Zone A, etc. It seems clear that for many organizers the goal is to turn the campaigns for divestment from fossil fuels into ones for climate justice, of which fossil fuel divestment is just a component. It seems clear that any hope for forging a strong environmental movement lies on frontline communities being at the head of it. The student divestment movement stands a chance in contributing to that goal, though it seems too early to say if it will be able to be a movement for climate justice and achieve that goal or not.

"Isn't the strategy of divestment a little bit problematic?" is a common question among radicals. According to 350's pamphlet on student divestment, they consider that divestment from apartheid "not only applied direct economic pressure, but also helped reveal the immorality of apartheid, galvanizing a movement of concerned citizens around the world", and they see divestment from fossil fuels in the same light. For many of us, both inside and outside the ISO and System Change, it's less about the direct economic pressure. Divestment is not the end goal in and of itself, rather a tactic for building a stronger movement and further tarnishing the image of the fossil fuel industry. The question of reinvestment is usually posed by administrations to throw off the divestment groups, and the usual answer, that of the most liberal wing of the movement thinks it should be up to the administration to decide where to reinvest. Sadly, that could mean opening the doors to

something like Monsanto, for example. The more radical wing thinks we should demand it be in community projects and environmental justice; even though this would be unlikely it raises the question of what the university's budget is for and why it can't be used for projects like those. Once again, it begs an explanation of the profit motive.

The ISO and FFD: Next steps

Right now, those of us in New York, which has the largest ecosocialist fraction, are only aware of comrades' involvement in 4 universities: UVM, Columbia U, the New School, and Brown U. We need to take advantage of the fact that we are a national organization, and centralize the places where we have comrades involved in campaigns, so we can have a better idea of where the movement is at, what the actual possibilities are, and what is a strategy that makes sense in terms of our environmental work. For example, students involved in divestment work could have semi-regular conference calls to share experiences, strategize on how to advance the new Divest Fossil Fuels National network from below and develop links between student campaigns and System Change not Climate Change. In particular, the next PowerUp conference will be happening is happening April 4-6 at San Francisco State U - the largest school to divest (from tar sands and coal) so far. The idea is that last year it was at Swarthmore, a private east coast school, so this year it's at a public west coast school. Campaigns will probably be limited to the number of members they can send (last year it was 3) because of space, so if we are looking to be a part of that, which we absolutely

should, we should make sure we have the largest amount possible of very active members in the campaigns and give comrades the resources to become national leaders in the movement.

As well, if a shift to environmental justice indeed occurs, and we should be part of pushing for such, this will provide opportunities for students to get involved directly with organizing in their communities, and forming relationships and waging struggle that will still be important for the left after graduation. Without knowing what kind of resources we have, and with a small sample size skewing our view of the movement, it's hard to say if student branches should prioritize divestment work over campaigns they are a part of. What seems clear is that climate change is constantly pushing people to ask themselves why this is happening and how we will stop it; we have an answer to the first question and much to offer for creating an answer to the second.

If you are involved in a student divestment campaign, please e-mail zach.zill@gmail.com so we can get a sense of where we are at.

PS: If possible, we should communicate to the people we know in CERSC that BP, one of the companies that is being divested from, should **not** be part of the stocks that the non-profit owns/receives, as it listed in the last public report. If this is no longer the case, a brief explanation would be quite useful should this come up with fellow activists.

Nurit M., New York City

Educating ourselves about indigenous issues

This document is intended to give people a starting point on educating ourselves in reference to the document *The ISO and the fight for Native American rights* by Ragina J. and Brian W. published in the Internal Bulletin #2 in September 2013.

The ISO has an opportunity to show and develop analysis around how Marxism is not counter-posed to Native American liberation. By having more of a focus on Native rights, we can help create a space for natives and non-natives on the left to discuss and debate these issues and come up with contemporary analysis and theory.

The ISO is already starting to do this with four Native American talks at Socialism over the past two years with the highlight being Alex Wilson, one of the founders of Idle No More in Canada, coming to speak. She is building a relationship with us coming out of conference and has approached us to help build Idle No More. Ragina J. and Brian W. are working on year anniversary of Idle No More interview with Alex Wilson for Socialist Worker. These issues are also starting to be incorporated into the EcoSocialism organizing, Brian W. from D.C. spoke on a panel about indigenous rights at the EcoSocialist conference in NYC earlier this year.

In each one of the talks at Socialism Conference over the last two years, many questions were raised which couldn't begin to be answered in one meeting or two. Many comrades do not even know where to start with learning native resistance and how that relates to the history of American Capitalism, not to mention how to understand institutionalized oppression of native peoples today. Many on the left either romanticize native peoples (ie. native people know instinctively how to use the land sustainably) and on the other side, put forward dogmatic Marxist ideas which try to prescribe what native self-determination will and should be, without engaging in real struggles alongside indigenous people and seeing what they are really demanding today.

We are now integrating this into our System Change Not Climate Change work. Our analysis on imperialism and colonialism is vital to those in the environmental movement that are radicalizing. Educating ourselves is the first step to providing this backbone.

Below is suggested readings that comrades can do in addition to the Socialist Worker article that Ragina and Brian have been publishing. Think about having a study group on some of these readings to start educating ourselves.

Top three suggestions

Roots of Oppression: The American Indian Question by Steve Talbot, great marxist read about the role of American Indians in the development of capitalism. Available from Amazon.com.

“Leonard Peltier and the Indian struggle for freedom,” Michele Bollinger, <http://isreview.org/issue/67/leonard-peltier-and-indian-struggle-freedom>

Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples by Donald Grinde and Bruce Elliot Johansen. This book had a huge influence on me about connecting the environmental destruction of the world and the destruction of native people. Howard Zinn does the foreword for the book. Available from Amazon.com.

The Full List**Articles**

Elsipogtog Everywhere by Leanes Simpson, <http://leannesimpson.ca/2013/10/20/elsipogtog-everywhere/>

Leonard Peltier and the Indian struggle for freedom by Michele Bollinger, <http://isreview.org/issue/67/leonard-peltier-and-indian-struggle-freedom>

A new blow to Native Sovereignty by Jeremy Wood, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/07/09/new-blow-to-native-sovereignty>

Tecumseh and a united Indian Resistance by Paul D'Amato, <http://socialistworker.org/2010/06/24/tecumseh-and-indian-resistance>

Canada is "Idle No More" by Brian Ward, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/01/09/canada-is-idle-no-more>

A First Nations fight against frackers by Brian Ward, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/12/16/first-nations-fight-the-frackers>

The Colonialism denialists by Derrick O'Keefe, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/10/23/the-colonialism-denialists>

The new plunder of Native Lands by Ragina Johnson, <http://socialistworker.org/2013/05/16/new-plunder-of-native-lands>

How the Cheyenne beat big coal by Brian Ward, <http://socialistworker.org/2012/07/06/how-the-cheyenne-beat-big-coal>

Also see these sources:

Indian Country Media Network for updates: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/>

The Last Real Indians: <http://lastrealindians.com/>

Indigenous Environmental Network: <http://www.ienearth.org/>

Idle No More: <http://www.idlenomore.ca/>

Socialism Talks

They Fought Back: American Indian Resistance Leaders from Popé to Geronimo by Ragina Johnson <http://wearemany.org/a/2012/06/they-fought-back-american-indian-resistance-leaders-from-pop%C3%A9-to-geronimo>

The Seminole Wars: How Slaves and Native Peoples Revolted Against Empire by Ragina Johnson <http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/seminole-wars>

American Indian Resistance and Environmental Justice by Brian Ward <http://wearemany.org/a/2012/06/american-indian-resistance-and-environmental-justice>

Native American Resistance: From Idle No More to KXL by Alex Wilson <http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/native-american-resistance>

Books

Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction of Indian Lands and Peoples by Donald Grinde and Bruce Elliot Johansen. This book had a huge influence on me about connecting the environmental destruction of the world and the destruction of native people. Howard Zinn does the forward for the book. Available from Amazon.com.

Roots of Oppression: The American Indian Question by Steve Talbot, great marxist read about the role of American Indians in the development of capitalism. Available from Amazon.com.

Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement by Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall. Available from Amazon.com.

Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown. Available from Amazon.com.

Indian Country by Peter Matthiessen, He is also the author of *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* about the Peltier case. *Indian Country* goes to different areas of the country and examines the history in the past and the current issues. Available from Amazon.com.

Prison Writings: My Life is My Sun Dance by Leonard Peltier. Available from Amazon.com.

Blood Struggle: The Rise of the Modern Indian Nation by Charles Wilkinson. This is an excellent comprehensive piece bringing in past struggles to the issues natives face today. Plus looking more at the termination policies of the 1950s.

Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto by Vine Deloria Jr, pretty much anything written by Deloria is suggested.

Peace, Power and Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto by Taiaiake Alfred. Available from Amazon.com.

Kivalina: A Climate Change Story by Christine Shearer. Available from haymarketbooks.org.

Killing Custer: The Battle of Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians by James Welch, it's one of the only accounts of Custer written by a native. it takes on the myth

of Custer and the fight against Custer being one of a great win but lead to a huge lose. Available from Amazon.com.

The Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of American Indian Resistance by Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. Available from Amazon.com.

I encourage comrades to start reading pieces that make sense for your branch and your work. This is only the tip of the iceberg. For more suggestions, thoughts and questions please email me at brian.ward.j@gmail.com.

Brian W., Washington, D.C.

For the publication of minority reports

The recent crisis in the British SWP and the dip in struggle after the demise of Occupy have opened up a whole series of debates and discussions with the ISO. Everything seems open to re-evaluation, including long held practices and beliefs. I regard this as a positive development, one we can ultimately learn from and from which we can build a better organization, although I certainly agree with Paul D. (PCB #5) that we should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and that we need to hold on to (and strengthen!) our core Leninist practices.

Democratic centralism

But Leninism itself can be open to interpretation. As we have seen from the events in Britain, different organizations have different interpretations of what it means to be "Leninist". This is particularly true with the concept of "democratic centralism". All Leninists (or at least all Trotskyists) would agree with the description of democratic centralism as "freedom of discussion, unity in action." We need discussion because, as Tony Cliff used to say, we don't know all the answers. We need input from all parts of the organization and all points of view in order to come up with a course of action that makes sense based on the objective and subjective circumstances we are facing. We need unity in action because we are much weaker, and less effective if we do not act together. Comrades have probably seen this in coalition after coalition that has splintered simply because the members could not agree on common action.

But beyond these basic precepts, how democratic centralism operates becomes much more complicated. Is there such a thing as too much discussion? Can talking an issue to death impede action? How do you judge when the organization is not acting in unity? The SWP leadership has interpreted democratic centralism to mean: "freedom to discuss during a specified period designated by the leadership, followed by a vote and then an end to all discussion." This is hardly our interpretation. One can also imagine an organization in which there was constant hostile debate and factioneering to a degree which I do not think we would tolerate in the ISO today. Indeed, the Bolsheviks carried out heated and public

debate with each other (to the point where key Bolshevik leaders publicly criticized the insurrection *as it was being planned!*) If you read James P. Cannon's accounts of the early American Communist Party you also get a sense of an organization riven by heated and open factioneering, which, in Cannon's view, made for a much less effective party.

Unity of leadership

While we have rejected much of the current undemocratic practices of the SWP, and seemed to never really adopt some of the worst of their skewed ideas of leadership, I think there are some lingering distortions of democratic centralism to which we still adhere. A major aspect of this is the notion of a united leadership.

I believe that the concept of leadership within the International Socialist Tendency (IST) was flawed from the beginning. I think evidence of this abounds in Volume 1 of Cliff's biography of Lenin, *Building the Party*. This has long been touted by cadre in the ISO as an essential introduction to Leninism, and indeed, there is a lot you can learn from it. But Cliff's vision of Lenin as a leader is inherently problematic. Lenin is depicted almost as a super-leader, as someone who was way ahead of everyone else politically and someone who is always right. He may "learn from the class," but he seems to be the only one who really knows how to do that. He may sometimes be in the minority, but this is only because he has not convinced everyone of the "right" path yet. Victory comes when everyone else has been won to Lenin's ideas. Often, this version of Lenin had to sacrifice everything – unity, democratic procedure, promises, etc. – in the pursuit of ideas he knew to be right.

I do not believe this is an accurate picture of the historical Lenin, but far more importantly, it is a terrible guide for how leadership of a revolutionary organization should regard itself or behave. It seems to me that Cliff took this view of leadership on himself. In his years leading the SWP and its predecessors, one can see sudden shifts in politics (from Luxemburgism to Leninism) and sharp turns in organizational direction ("bending the stick" another

problematic IST concept), which reached a ridiculous degree in the 1990s, all from a top-down perspective and in the name of a leadership that was “right” always, even when it had not convinced the membership yet.

And I believe related to this concept of a (seemingly) infallible leadership is the concept of a united leadership. The leadership must appear to the membership as united and free from any internal debate. If the leadership does not appear united, the reasoning goes, then it will look weak in the eyes of the membership and our actions (and the organization as a whole) will simply be less effective. Thus, a kind of democratic centralism comes into effect within the leadership. There is freedom of discussion within the leadership. Then, when a decision is made, there is unity of discussion, because decisions made by the leadership are a kind of action. Therefore, it goes against principles of democratic centralism for a member of the leadership to publicly disagree with a decision of the leadership body.

As noted above, this was not the practice of the Bolshevik Party before the mid-1920s. It was, as far as I know, never the practice of the ISO at National Conventions. Issues that were debated in conventions were usually taken back to the branches and discussed. However, when I joined in the 1990s, this was the practice in branch committees (BC). Whether or not this was a national policy, it was understood that once the BC came to a decision on a course of action, as a branch committee member, you should never disagree with this decision at a branch meeting. Since then, we have changed this practice dramatically. In fact, the national leadership (sometime around 2000?) encouraged branch committees to bring all their debates into the branch meetings. I remember this made for more lively, more interesting branch meetings. Furthermore, the branch took more ownership over the success or failure of branch ventures since the decision to engage (or not) in these ventures (meetings, activity, etc.) was arrived at collectively.

Debate within the NC and SC

However, the one area of the ISO in which the united leadership concept still obtains is in the national leadership bodies, the National Committee (NC) and the Steering Committee (SC). We know about decisions these bodies have made, but have little idea of what kind of debates were had to arrive at these decisions. We sometimes hear rumors that debates have occurred, but we have little ability to evaluate these debates as we do not know much about the substance of them.

It seems that these leadership bodies still feel, consciously or unconsciously, that if the membership knew that the national leadership was not united, it would somehow weaken the organization. Maybe confidence in the leadership would be lost or the perspectives and decisions arrived at would not have the weight that they should. Of course, given that we are striving to build an organization of leaders, all of whom can think for themselves, this reasoning seems a bit preposterous.

Furthermore, if the membership had access to these debates and discussions, it would turn rumors into substantive discussion. The whole of the ISO could get a better idea as to how decisions are arrived at among the national leadership. Discussions about why we are taking a certain course of action or why we have adopted a certain perspective would become much clearer once the alternatives are clear as well. In general, it would contribute to a healthier atmosphere of discussion and debate within the branches.

Decisions of the SC or NC are often published in the ISO Notes or some other internal bulletin. I am proposing that the losing side in significant debates within the SC or NC be encouraged to publish a “Minority Report” in the Internal Bulletin detailing their arguments against the decisions being made.

Naturally, there are many instances where this is simply not a good idea. Often, I imagine, the leadership bodies come to a consensus incorporating different views so it would be difficult to identify a specific minority viewpoint. Also, when the issue involves personal details about comrades, it would not be appropriate to make them public. Furthermore, one can imagine situations where airing of disputes among the leadership really would harm organizational unity.

For example, I have heard a rumor (who knows whether it is true) that there was disagreement in the Steering Committee about whether to mobilize for the anniversary of the March on Washington this summer. I know that articles discussing this issue were published in Socialist Worker, but the debate involved people not in the Steering Committee (at least from the dissenting side). I imagine (if it was true) that the debate within the SC was of a different character than what we see in SW. If we did have access to both sides of the debate, those of us in the branches could have arrived at a much better assessment of our participation in the March. Of course, it would not have made much sense to publish these debates before the March itself. The decision was made by the leadership and we in the branches had to do an all-out mobilization if we were to really assess the usefulness of the March. It’s not that debate needed to be stifled before the March (obviously it was not in SW), but one can understand why the SC would want to put forward a united front as we are preparing for an action.

After the demonstration, however, publishing minority views would have been really helpful to assessment. In fact, it might have been useful to have a document from someone detailing why he or she disagreed with the mobilization and then describing how they were proven wrong!

So needless to say, the SC and the NC would have to decide for themselves when to encourage the publication of a minority report and when to discourage it, depending on the situation. Obviously, the membership does not need to know all of the small arguments that go on within these leadership bodies. I would not anticipate seeing these minority reports more than a couple times a year. However,

if there are serious debates within these bodies, then the membership should take part in the discussion as well.

[Since writing this I found out that this rumor is actually not true and no such debate occurred on the Steering Committee. Still, my argument stands. Of course, rumors, both true and false are somewhat inevitable, particularly in the age of social media, and there have been a lot of rumors circulating around the ISO recently, many of which are far more inflammatory than the one I mentioned. This actually helps to bolster my argument because I believe that the

more openness we foster as an organization, the less force these unsubstantiated rumors have.]

Resolution

Where appropriate, the National Committee and the Steering Committee should encourage the minority in any major debate to publish minority reports in the Internal Bulletin.

Jon V., Washington, D.C.
