

Pre-convention Bulletin #10 / January 21, 2013

for members only

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Inside This Bulletin

This is the tenth 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 a day off on that Monday 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 months in order to ensure the fullest and most democratic debate possible. Branches should hold discussions of documents and debates as necessary between now and the convention date.

All members who are in good standing are invited to contribute documents and/or resolutions to the pre-convention discussion bulletins. We will produce as many bulletins as necessary. 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.**

Please submit your documents and/or resolutions to bulletin@internationalsocialist.org and cc Sharon at the national office (sharon@internationalsocialist.org) if you plan to submit a document and/or resolution, so we can plan bulletin production. Thanks.

A reply to the Renewal Faction

The ISO Renewal faction launched itself November 25 on a web site that includes multiple documents with an analysis of the ISO's internal life, an attempt at a political perspective and a statement of rules that allow nonmembers to join the faction while mandating ultra-strict discipline within the faction itself. All this was done before the group submitted this material to the Pre-Convention Bulletin, which, according to the rules, customs and practice of the ISO, is the established means of internal discussion in our organization.

As was stated in Pre-Convention Bulletin #6, the way in which the faction was formed and its operation violates the rules and practices of the ISO. This document will take up those issues below. First, however, we will take up the arguments of Renewal as they are presented in the faction's documents. Given that Renewal's founding statements total more than 10,000 words, this response will necessarily be nearly as lengthy.

A "crisis" in the ISO?

The faction claims that the ISO is in crisis. The evidence offered: in 2009-2011, there was a "departure" of six members in the Bay Area, seven in Chicago; eight in Washington, D.C., (following a "very possibly justified" expulsion), "several" in Boston, followed Shaun J.'s resignation in Boston in 2013. We are told that, for an organization of seven to eight hundred, the loss of perhaps 30 members in multiple cities over a four-year period constitutes a crisis because of the long experience of several of those former members. (In fact, one of the Chicago ex-members dropped out of activity in 2006; another only just ended dues check off a few months ago.)

In fact, aside from the expulsion—which was undertaken because of activities that put the ISO at risk—all of these former members left of their own volition. Many have made their political divergence from the ISO quite clear in their public criticisms of the organization, ranging from the Bay Area former members who denounce "all of Trotskyism" as having a fatal, idealistic flaw and which taxes the ISO with holding back the Chicago Teachers Union strike; to Scott J. (aka Victor Toils), who argues that, among other things, the ISO should stop collaborating with liberals and orient on anarchists and other activists that he considers to be more radical, and the Chicago-based Socialist Outpost group, which accuses the ISO of tailing "some of the worst elements of the Democratic Party" because we mobilized for the March on Washington in an effort to relate to African American workers angry over attacks on the Voting Rights Act and the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin.

These former members were not "bureaucratically excluded," to use the phrase favored by Renewal. In fact, some continued to collaborate with the ISO well after they left the organization. Two of the signers of the Outpost document have worked closely with ISO members on trade union/workplace matters literally up the day before their document appeared. Another spoke at Socialism and wrote for *Socialist Worker* as a nonmember. This is hardly an indication that the ISO wanted to drive away these former members. On the contrary, we actively sought opportunities to work with these individuals and rebuild our political relationships.

Having amalgamated these disparate developments to try to portray an organizational crisis, Renewal then adds to the mix a debate in the New York district over a 2010 document on developing members of color into cadre. It is worth noting that the New York district committee, far from suppressing debate, took the initiative to reopen that discussion, which continues.

The circumstances of Shaun J.'s resignation have already been addressed and documented in Pre-Convention Bulletin 6. To summarize: The Steering Committee, seeking to avoid a repeat of the polarization that occurred around Shaun in Boston, reached a consensus in the Boston district that the SC would be involved in creating a process to reintegrate Shaun into the organization if he decided to do rejoin.

Instead, the Cambridge branch committee, without informing the Boston district or the SC, voted to readmit Shaun on the eve of the launch of the Renewal faction, an approach that was bound to further damage political relations in the Boston district.

But, the Renewal faction claims, there's more: "Even in branches where we cannot identify any particular cataclysm, we observe serious organizational problems." The Los Angeles teachers are a "fully independent detachment," they inform us; the Seattle branch is really a "series of related clubs."

Given Renewal's prescriptions for the ISO to overcome its alleged crisis, these are curious criticisms indeed. After all, in its section on perspectives, Renewal declares that "branches—meaning workplace/sector branches, movement formations, and campus chapters—need full autonomy to implement organizing strategies that work for them." They add: "Federalize the initiative, centralize the political lessons." So why, then, does Renewal bemoan the allegedly "fully independent" LA teachers and the "clubs" run supposedly run by Seattle comrades? Isn't this how Renewal wants the entire ISO to function? Or could it be that Renewal is so intent on conveying a sense of crisis in the ISO that the faction wants to quickly pass over this rather glaring contradiction?

Instead of dealing with this problem, Renewal tries to change the subject. It relies on sweeping—and false—generalizations to portray a downward spiral in the ISO, stating that the Texas branches "have shrunk significantly or collapsed." This will be news to the Texas comrades, who will have the opportunity to set the record straight in their own contributions to the pre-convention discussion and at the ISO Convention.

Perhaps the Renewal members realize that these scattered allegations don't really convey a sense of immanent disaster. So they up the ante still higher. They assert that, "taken altogether, it is likely that the majority of ISO members have experienced some form of organizational crisis, at least among those who have been members more than three years." Thus the departure of less than 30 members over four years—in an organization of seven or eight hundred—is transformed into a grave predicament for a "majority" of ISO members.

Renewal lays blame for this at the doorstep of the Steering Committee, which "should have communicated these arguments, disagreements, and problems to the whole of the organization." This gets the issue the wrong way around. If former members themselves had criticisms over the direction of the ISO, why didn't they themselves make use of previous pre-convention discussions to voice them? If they felt wronged by other comrades in violation of ISO rules, why didn't they lodge any complaints with the Disciplinary Committee, which is elected at large by the convention, with no nominations by the Steering Committee?

Certainly members of the ISO sometimes leave because they adopt political positions and orientations that differ sharply with our politics and practice. The public criticisms written by Scott J./"Victor Toils" and other former members in the Bay Area highlight just such a political divergence from the ISO. But Renewal ignores this, instead pushing the untenable notion that if some longstanding members leave the ISO, then it must be a crisis for the organization, no matter what the political differences involved. In this way, Renewal, by sleight of hand, amalgamates disparate and contradictory political points of views from both former and current members and packages it as a crisis with a common root.

Renewal's "theory" of ISO crisis

Renewal tells us:

The organizational crisis in the ISO is therefore an *immanent* crisis; that is, a failure to progress even by the organization's own metrics of success, especially membership growth and retention. Comrades who accuse us of "crisis-mongering" merely shut their eyes in the face of objective realities, many of which are admitted by the leadership, even if they fail to put the pieces together themselves.

Clearly “something happened” around 2009. To fully understand what that was, though, one needs to put the preceding 30-odd years of ISO history into some perspective.

The Renewal document proceeds to take us through a long detour into the ISO's past that is replete with errors of both fact and interpretation. Given the omissions and mischaracterizations in the Renewal document, this will require some detail.

Renewal declares that the "theoretical capital" of the ISO was the "downturn" perspective developed in the early 1980s by Tony Cliff, the longtime leader of the SWP-GB. Cliff used the term to characterize a period in which the working class in the Western countries was on the defensive from a concerted attack by employers, led politically by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Leaving aside this rather odd characterization of "theoretical capital"—excluding the theory of state capitalism developed by the IS Tendency, or the IS/ISO's own contributions on Black liberation, for example—the Renewal account of the ISO's development is simply wrong.

Renewal summarizes ISO work in the 1980s as:

...a shift from agitation to propaganda, a shift from workplace to campus, and rejection of “regroupment” efforts on the far left. These strategies were implemented and met with success, becoming the standard practice of the group, the “routines and methods” that we recognize today: individual recruitment, branch meetings, paper sales aimed primarily at the “general public,” educational conferences, a certain standoffishness to the rest of the far left, etc.

This account provides only the barest outline of how the ISO functioned in the 1980s, with zero political content. It further makes the unsupported claim this is the "standard practice" we use today. Renewal, despite its authoritative-sounding claims, is ignorant of how the ISO built in the 1980s, what we achieved, and the many ways our practice changed in the very different circumstances since the early 1990s. Renewal's summary of this history, put forward as a foundation for its own perspectives, has little to do with the ISO's actual experience. What follows is a brief attempt to correct the record.

In the 1980s, the political climate was dramatically more hostile to socialists than it is today. The ruling class had a consensus supporting a hard right turn under the Reagan administration. Anticommunism and a revived Cold War, along with economic nationalism, was a key feature of this period. While there were far more strikes than today, it was often difficult for socialists to relate to them. Indeed we were often ejected from picket lines by anticommunists. Social conservatism was adopted by large sections of the white working class, underpinning the Republicans' electoral success.

In this period, the ISO recognized that the audience for socialist organization would be limited. Our "routines" reflected this. Branch meetings were held on a biweekly basis, and were usually lengthy, and were usually held on Sunday afternoons. They featured sessions on political education for which comrades did several weeks of reading and preparation, often followed by a considerable discussion of an important current event. *Socialist Worker*, then a monthly publication, had a mix of both news of the struggles but was anchored by lengthy articles on labor history and Marxist theory on a variety of questions. The ISO Internal Bulletin regularly featured theoretical articles, as there was no *International Socialist Review*.

Growth was slow. Contacts—usually no more than two or three—were invited to branch meetings once they'd shown some interest in the ISO through public meetings, held once a month or so, or through weekly sales of *Socialist Worker*. It was not uncommon for people to take months to decide to join the ISO, as a high degree of political agreement and commitment was necessary to be a revolutionary socialist in that period. New members had to be formally voted in at branch meetings.

The ISO, with around 150 members in that period, was not a student group or a Marxist circle, however. We were deeply involved in the struggle to defend abortion rights (weekly clinic defenses were usually part of our "routine"); campaigned for solidarity with the Central American revolutionary movements; immersed ourselves in South Africa anti-apartheid work; and were part of the networks active around HIV/AIDS that formed ACT UP. Labor solidarity—support for strikes—was another staple of activity.

Participation in protests and activism against racism and police violence was automatic. As for our alleged "certain standoffishness" in relation to the far left, the ISO was in fact cutting against the grain of the post 1970s ex-Maoist left that had dissolved itself into the Democratic Party in the name of political realism.

Renewal gets the 1990s wrong, too. The ISO didn't carry forward our "routines and methods" of the previous period. On the contrary, we broke from them decisively. The reason was a qualitatively changed situation: a short-lived but big mass movement against the 1991 Gulf War, followed by recession and the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992, and the ending of the electorate's support for Reaganism with the election of Bill Clinton later that year. To better relate to this new radicalization, the ISO changed its "routines and methods." Branch meetings were shifted from a biweekly pace to weekly gatherings, on weeknights, and the time allotted to them was cut almost in half. Contacts were welcomed to join, and we stopped requiring new members to be voted in. The organization doubled in size between 1992 and 1994, and *Socialist Worker* became a biweekly in that period. War, economic crisis, and the collapse of Stalinism had opened a wide new audience for the ISO. At the same time, the organization set itself the task to develop itself politically. To that aim, ISO members launched the *International Socialist Review* in 1997. We also systematically expanded the reach of *Socialist Worker* sales into working-class communities, particularly in African-American neighborhoods, in a way that had not been possible in the previous era.

This transformation of the ISO doesn't register with Renewal. Instead, we are told:

From the mid-1990s, the SWP and, following the SWP, the ISO, abandoned the downturn perspective in favor of the "transitional period" perspective (TPP), stating that the downturn was over and an upturn in class struggle was in the future. This new perspective did express some important new realities in US politics, in particular the fall of the USSR and the turn away Reaganism; however, the downturn in class struggle continued, as Shaun J has shown (see <http://torepeat.wordpress.com/2013/10/31/through-which-period-are-we-passing/>). Hence the perspective was basically wrong.

There are a number of mistakes here. First, the transitional period formulation was that of the ISO, not the SWP-GB, to describe a new radicalization and the changing character of working-class struggle. These changes could not be reduced to the number of strikes. As this writer put it in 1997, strikes and lockouts of the period were only a "mere fraction" of the level of 1970s:

Nevertheless, the strikes of the mid-1990s revealed a new growth in working-class consciousness. In the "War Zone" struggles of central Illinois—the lockout at A.E. Staley and strikes at Caterpillar and Bridgestone-Firestone—"road warriors" visited hundreds of union locals across the country to appeal for solidarity. Several leading activists become socialists. It is this changed character of the struggle, not strike statistics, that distinguishes the current period as one of transition from the downturn in struggle of the 1980s to the future upturn.

Yet workers' confidence and self-organization have not yet caught up to their new consciousness. They continue to accept union leaders' argument that it is impossible to shut down production by stopping scabs, even when the officials' passive approach leads to disaster.¹

This just one example of many such formulations we made through the 1990s and 2000s. However much we wished it were different, we never underestimated what was needed to rebuild the labor movement. And the "transition period" idea at least had the virtue of recognizing the shift in consciousness from the 1980s, even if the level of organization never caught up to it.

The Renewal faction, though, excludes the possibility of such an analysis. Instead, Renewal, like the former ISO members in the San Francisco area, offers a peculiar, rigid and fatalistic theory that working class consciousness cannot advance unless organized labor attains an unspecified level of trade union density or strike levels. Any socialist would agree that these are crucial measures of the advances of the working class.

¹ Lee Sustar, "A New Labor Movement?" *International Socialist Review* 1, Summer 1997. Available at http://www.isreview.org/issues/01/new_labor_movement.shtml

But it isn't the whole story. Strikes and unionization rates were high in the 1950s relative to today, but would Renewal really argue that class consciousness was higher then than it is now?

Even a brief look at the last 20 years of labor struggle shows that working class consciousness has advanced in important ways. Consider the epic struggle at Caterpillar, where the United Auto Workers waged an inconclusive five-month strike in 1992, followed by a series of wildcat strikes over the next year, and another 18-month strike that began in 1994. The strike ended only when UAW officials threatened to withhold strike benefits. The UAW had absorbed a terrible defeat. Yet even then rank-and-file workers refused to ratify the final contract unless workers who were illegally terminated for strike activity were returned to their jobs.

But the determined struggle of rank-and-file Caterpillar workers and that of other "War Zone" workers highlighted a shift in the political situation since the 1980s. Failing to recognize the importance of a shift in consciousness by industrial workers in a historically conservative part of the country is major error, one that cuts off socialists from relating to workers in struggle who are breaking from lifelong assumptions about society and politics. Anyone who was involved in these struggles, as well as the Midwest Network to Stop the Klan, which organized rallies of multiracial, but largely white working-class, people in medium-sized industrial towns to protest Klan activity, knew that consciousness had shifted from the period of the 1980s to the mid-1990s. The obvious measure of this was that we, as socialists, were welcomed onto picket lines, and socialism was no longer seen as a dirty word.

The widespread popularity of the UPS strike of 1997—which gets no mention at all in the Renewal version of ISO history—demonstrated that the wider U.S. working class was prepared to embrace a major labor struggle in classic confrontation. On the picket lines, the ISO found a receptive audience for *Socialist Worker* as the organization threw itself into solidarity efforts. The strike's slogan, "part-time America doesn't work," anticipated the themes of the Ralph Nader presidential campaign of 2000, and even Occupy nearly 15 years later. Teamster President Ron Carey, a lifelong Republican, said a few weeks after the strike, "Some politicians ought to wear the logos of their corporate sponsors on their suits, just like athletes wear them on their uniforms."

The employers got their revenge when Carey was forced out of office on charges of which he was eventually cleared. But the UPS strike resonated through the labor movement. As the *New York Times* Steven Greenhouse wrote the following year: "The recent strikes at Northwest Airlines, General Motors, Bell Atlantic and US West represent the biggest surge in major walkouts in years and, industrial relations experts say, point to a new aggressiveness on the part of the nation's labor unions."² Unions gained 100,000 new members that year, though it was not enough to keep pace with population growth.³ If the ISO saw new possibilities for a revival of organized labor in the late 1990s, we were not alone.

Certainly one can make the case that the "transitional period" formulation is no longer useful, in that it seems to imply a particular timescale for an upturn in struggle. But it is another thing altogether to assert, as Renewal does, that the U.S. working class consciousness has been static since the 1980s because the levels of unionization or strikes remain at historic lows.

Having mechanically equated working class consciousness or radicalization with strike statistics and unionization rates, or lack thereof, it is perhaps unsurprising that Renewal makes no mention of the key developments of the 1990s that did confirm a growing radicalization. This was reflected in the late 1990s global justice movement, from the 1999 protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and against the International Monetary Fund in Washington several months later, to the Ralph Nader campaign of 2000. The ISO was deeply involved in this movement, and grew both organizationally and in terms of experience. But to Renewal, all this appears to be so much background noise to an unrelenting period of defeat in which working-class consciousness did not advance. If the ISO advanced either numerically or in terms of

² Steven Greenhouse, "Unions, Growing Bolder, No Longer Shun Strikes," *New York Times*, September 7, 1998. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/07/us/unions-growing-bolder-no-longer-shun-strikes.html>

³ AFL-CIO, "Union Membership Rises in More than Half the States in 1998," January 29, 1999. Available at <http://www.aflcio.org/Press-Room/Press-Releases/Union-Membership-Rises-in-More-than-Half-the-State>

political development and implantation, they declare, it was because our "routines and methods" didn't vary and "because the political period had not fundamentally changed—we remained in the neoliberal phase of capitalism."

Similarly, the ISO's involvement in the anti-war movement following 9/11—in which we were immersed in anti-war activity around both Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the defense of Arabs and Muslims from racist attacks— gets not even a sidelong glance from Renewal. The faction does allow that the "post-9/11 reaction" provided "an obvious and true explanation for any difficulties the organization may have been experiencing." Nowhere is there a mention of the contribution to the antiwar movement that the ISO made on campuses, in US Labor Against the War, and elsewhere. Nor is there a comment on our decision to challenge the lesser evilism prevalent in the 2004 election with our support for the Nader-Camejo presidential campaign.

Even more revealing is Renewal's complete disinterest in the ISO's significant work to implant itself in various social movements as part of long-term effort to rebuild the left.

For Renewal, all this seems to be a kind of random series of accidents. "Practically, a bunch of students recruited in the 1990s are going to be a bunch of non-students in the 2000s; so a campus focus stops fitting the membership."

Thus Renewal, while making rather sweeping pronouncements about the need for the ISO to have a strategy, has no assessment of the strategy of implantation that the ISO *did* pursue. For example, the Campaign to End the Death Penalty and work around criminal justice issues has established key relationships and, more important, contributed to key victories such as the end of capital punishment in Illinois and the prevention of some executions. Work around racist police violence developed in branches around the U.S.

The 2006-08 period saw the ISO play an important role in building immigrant rights formations at the local and national level, including helping to organize a national conference of the left wing of the movement. In 2009, ISO members played a leading role in organizing the National Equality March, which gave a major boost to the marriage equality movement. ISO comrades also emerged as key leaders of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign for Palestine solidarity. Other comrades became key figures in a revived climate justice movement. In Wisconsin, members of the Madison branch had the credibility, after many years of work, to initiate a coalition of union militants to challenge union officials' conduct of the 2011 uprising. ISO comrades' key role in the Chicago teachers' strike of 2012 was the result of more than 10 years of work in the teachers union in that city and across the country. The same is true of ISO comrades' role in the teacher test boycott in Seattle and its impact around the country, which is still being felt.

Does Renewal really believe that it all this long-term, painstaking work of implanting the ISO in a variety of struggles is simply the result of the autonomous efforts of ex-students looking to be involved in some political project or another? The fact—as the more experienced Renewal members well know—is that the ISO engaged in this work after debate and discussion about the ISO's priorities at past conventions.

In any case, Renewal argues, those efforts don't matter, because the political period determined that defeat was inevitable on virtually every front: "Public sector unions are defeated without a struggle almost everywhere," they declare, and "Occupy comes 'out of nowhere' in the fall of 2011—and seemingly goes back to whence it came several months later." The ISO leadership was remiss, we are told, because it stated a return of the "two-sided class struggle" and predicted a "wave of public sector strikes."

The Renewal members seem to confuse the rather obvious fact that, in Wisconsin, the class war had indeed become two-sided, with a prediction of a labor victory in the offing, which in fact we did not make. On the contrary, in the immediate aftermath of the protests, *Socialist Worker* stated that: "The great labor mobilizations in Wisconsin showed that unions have the potential to win. So how come labor's still losing so badly?"⁴ The article cited Democratic governors' success in extracting steep concessions from public

⁴ See <http://socialistworker.org/2011/03/29/labor-movement-after-wisconsin>

sector unions, and did not predict an increase in struggle—although in Ohio, the unions successfully mobilized for a referendum to overturn a Wisconsin-style law, a major political win for labor.

Indeed, the Renewal documents never pause to take the measure of the Wisconsin uprising—the biggest protest mobilization by U.S. labor in decades—to try and understand how the years of accumulated bitterness and the shift in working class consciousness made such a protest possible—and creates the potential for similar resistance. Never mind that the Madison teachers' union came within a handful of votes of refusing to return to work, or that thousands of union activists took up the call for a general strike. In the fatalistic view of Renewal, the effort by the ISO and others on the left to shift the course of the struggle in Wisconsin was irrelevant and doomed.

Similarly, Renewal manages only a single sentence about Occupy, which came "out of nowhere." In fact, Occupy's emergence may have been surprising, but origins are not at all difficult to understand. It was primarily a movement of radicalizing young people in response to the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, a depressed recovery, and widening inequality. The weakness of organized labor and the left, and the "horizontalist" politics of key movement leaders, made the movement impossible to sustain amid a police crackdown. But the conditions that gave rise to Occupy still exist, and lay the basis for future struggles.

Renewal, however, is blind to all this. The faction apparently believes that since the young Occupy activists failed to organize unions and take strike action, their movement can't be said to have contributed to working-class consciousness. The big, multi-racial, working class protests of Occupy Wall Street—even the 100,000 who took over Times Square on October 15, 2011—simply don't register in Renewal's measurement of working-class consciousness. Instead, they abruptly consign the movement back to "nowhere." Renewal fails to even consider the historical experience, often remarked upon by revolutionary Marxists, that in its initial phase, radicalization often takes semi-anarchist forms, based on the idea that the old forms of politics have failed. This helps explain why such a radicalization does not immediately transfer into growth of revolutionary organizations.

Instead of assessing the state of the class struggle, Renewal moves on to what it considers to be the real issue: the ISO's supposed failure to "adequately theorize the neoliberal phase of capitalism" under a leadership "impoverished in ideas."

However, Renewal cites no example of the ISO's analysis of neoliberalism, inadequate or otherwise, so that comrades can judge for themselves. In fact, even a brief look back at the *International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker* and the Internal Bulletin show that the ISO has, since the mid-1990s, analyzed the emergence of the U.S. economy from the crisis of the 1970s on the basis of the restructuring of U.S. industry, privatization, deregulation, globalization and a resurgent U.S. imperialism.

In the 1990s into the 2000s we rarely used the word "neoliberalism," which was mainly an academic term in the U.S., using instead phrases like "corporate globalization." But we were clear in articulating that the world economy was in a new period of capitalist expansion, a view that put us at odds with the Socialist Workers Party-Great Britain. We argued that, in the U.S., the boom was based on rising inequality and a transfer of wealth from the working class to the poor (see Joel Geier and Ahmed Shawki, "Contradictions of the 'Miracle' Economy," *ISR* 2, Fall 1997). The *ISR* also made a contribution to the movement against corporate globalization by taking up the analysis of corporate neoliberalism, imperialism and prospects for the international left in *ISR* issues 11, 12, 16, 17 and 18, with the entirety of issue 19 turned over to theorists and activists in the global justice movement. More recent issues have covered the ways in which neoliberalism has shaped the economic crisis (see, for example Joel Geier's articles in *ISR* 62, 66, 71 and 88, along with contributions from writers within and outside the ISO). Similarly, the *ISR*, in articles derived from pre-convention bulletins, has explored the profound impact of neoliberalism on the working class from boom to bust (for a sample, see *ISR* 1, 25, 28, 34, 42, 66, 77, and most recently, a two-part article in issues 88 and 89).

One may indeed view all this as nevertheless failing to "adequately theorize the neoliberal phase of capitalism," as Renewal puts it. And the authors of the articles cited would very likely agree. After all,

theory and analysis in a revolutionary organization are meant to be a guide to action, and therefore open to revision and correction. The point of theory is not to predict the future, which is of course impossible, but rather to assist active revolutionaries in the project of changing the world. Renewal has every right to comment on the adequacy, or lack thereof, of the ISO's theoretical work. Yet rather than seriously debate the strengths and weaknesses of our analysis of neoliberalism, Renewal offers only unsubstantiated assertions that fail to advance the debate.

Working class consciousness and socialist perspectives

Renewal claims that the problem with the ISO's perspective is that "the goal seems to be to keep the membership activated and (ultimately) trained, so that when the big struggles break out, comrades will be tested and steeled and able to act decisively."

Well, yes. A key tenet of Leninism is the building of an organization of revolutionaries *before* decisive struggles break out in order to maximize the effectiveness of the working class when it goes into motion. But for Renewal, this is a problem, because it points the organization towards immediate issues: "The ISO's perspectives, then, are structurally biased against having an accurate reading of the world and a strategy that flows from that."

The problem, we are told, is that the ISO focuses "one-sidedly" on the prospects for victory in the struggle, thereby reducing us to "cheerleaders" for the struggle. What follows is a rather belabored summary of the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci's famous statement (in the original Italian) about a revolutionary's need for pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. However, Renewal members would do well to consider Gramsci's 1924 article, "Against Pessimism:"

What difference would there be between us [the Communist Party] and the [reformist] Socialist Party, between our will and the party's tradition, if we also knew how to work and were only actively optimistic in periods when the cows were plump, when the situation was favorable? What difference would there be between us if we were only actively optimistic when the working masses advanced of their own accord, because of an impulse they could not fight, and the proletarian parties could take up a prime position and grab hold of the reins of their own accord?⁵

Renewal seems to include Gramsci for the sake of gravitas rather than to strengthen their political case. They cite as their authority not Gramsci, but the former members of the ISO from the Bay Area who, in a sectarian diatribe against the ISO published on Counterpunch, claim that genuine working-class consciousness can advance only *after* a struggle is won and consolidated in the form of greater unionization rates, etc. Renewal agrees. The faction states that "class consciousness in the Marxist sense of the term is indeed a product, and not an antecedent, of class struggle—and that the ISO has tended to invert this relationship."

Renewal claims support for this position through a subsequent long quote of Marx—but that doesn't change the fact that Renewal's understanding of class consciousness is undialectical, rigid and ahistorical. They forcefully claim that neither individual struggles against an employer nor struggles against oppression can lead to an advance in working class consciousness except in "exceptional circumstances:"

Indeed, under neoliberalism, the tendency has been for workers and the oppressed to become atomized, and thus the experiences of exploitation and oppression are interpreted as individual experiences. Those experiences all put the individual in a position of passive object of the phenomenon. A worker getting bullied by a boss, or a person of color being harassed by police, may develop a level of anger toward the boss or the police, but only in exceptional circumstances will this spark generalize into an clear consciousness of oneself as a member of the working class, in opposition to the ruling class, and the need for collective class action against the rulers—and even then, that individual as an individual is still presumably atomized and cut off from any possibility of collective action.

⁵ See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1924/03/pessimism.htm>

Renewal's formulations on class consciousness are similar to those of Chris Cutrone, the guru of the Platypus Society, a group notorious for its sectarian diatribes against the left that it pronounces "dead," its abstract posturing and its support for U.S. intervention in the Middle East. Cutrone writes:

What Marxists once meant by "class consciousness" is no more. This lends a certain melancholy to the experience of "class" today. Privilege and disadvantage alike seem arbitrary and accidental, not an expression of the supposed worth of people's roles in society but only of their luck, good or bad fortune. It becomes impossible to derive a politics from class position, and so other politics take its place. Conflicts of culture, ethnicity and religion replace the struggle over capitalism. Impoverished workers attack not orders whose privileges are dubious in the extreme, but rather each other in communal hatred. Consciousness of common class situation seems completely obscured and erased.⁶

In taking a Platypus-like approach, Renewal fails to recognize the ways in which class position, race, gender and other identities are shaped by life under capitalism—how racism or sexism can lead workers to question the wider workings of class society and consciously struggle on that basis. To take but one example: the civil rights and Black Power movements in the U.S. preceded, and directly contributed to, the upturn in working class struggle in the late 1960s and early 1970s, given Black workers' key role at the point of production in basic industry. Similarly, the rise of the women's liberation movement spurred greater women's activism in the unions in that period.

That leaves Renewal with a workerist and economistic version of class consciousness that is mechanically derived from strike statistics and unionization rates. That is quite different from the view that Lenin expounded at length in *What is to be Done?* which includes a polemic against the socialist trend known as the Economists, who argued that the trade union struggles were the essence of working-class consciousness. It is worth quoting at length:

The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social-Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding — or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding — of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of the economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our Economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance.

For Lenin, working class consciousness cannot be reduced to strike statistics or unionization. In the U.S., Lenin's contribution has been crucial: any socialist worth her or his salt understands that the class struggle has to be connected to the fight against racism. Renewal may wish to argue that Lenin was mistaken, and that the ISO and other revolutionary socialists in the last century have been wrong to follow his approach. Yet rather than elaborate on its sweeping theoretical and historical claims about the nature of working class consciousness, Renewal abruptly narrows the focus to teachers in the U.S. over the past few years to discuss "radicalization in any way that has meaning to a revolutionary organization."

Faced with the acceleration of education reform under Obama, we are told, teachers didn't fight back and "conservatism—also known as 'duck and cover'—reigned supreme among teachers." It isn't clear why teachers' alleged failure to fight back equals "conservatism," which suggest an actual agreement with the

⁶ Chris Cutrone, "Class consciousness (from a Marxist perspective) today," *Platypus Review* 51, November 2012. Available at <http://platypus1917.org/2012/11/01/class-consciousness-from-a-marxist-perspective-today/>

retrograde polices of corporate education reform. In any case, Renewal is incorrect to state that teachers knuckled under and that "a successful teachers' strike is something most teachers in this country cannot imagine themselves taking part in, even in their wildest dreams."

There are many examples to the contrary. In Pennsylvania alone, there were eight strikes in the 2009-10 school year; by 2011 the right-wing Commonwealth Institute was exercised enough to pronounce that state to be "the teacher strike capital of America," with an average of about 12 strikes per year since 1992. In Orange County, Calif., teachers at the Capistrano school district waged a successful strike in 2010 against a pay cut. In Tacoma, Wash., teachers defied a court injunction to win a 10-day strike in 2011 in a battle that anticipated the showdown in Chicago the following year. In the spring of 2012, teachers at two districts in East Multnomah County near Portland, Ore., also went on strike. This is only a very partial list.

To be sure, these are defensive battles, and teachers are still being hammered by education reform and the loss of teacher jobs. The point here is that the Chicago Teachers Union strike was an expression of a much wider discontent among teachers across the U.S. In fact, the CTU has become a model for teacher union militants across the U.S., and the Chicago teachers are collaborating with the Portland teachers who were preparing for a possible strike in February 2014.

Renewal, however, is disinterested in looking at the scope and scale of developments in the teachers unions. The faction shrugs off the extremely narrow vote of Madison teachers to return to work during the Madison uprising as if it were preordained: "instead of continuing their actions and declaring themselves consciously as independent actors, they were led back into reliance on the Democrats." Besides being fatalistic, this formulation reflects an idealized conception of the way working-class consciousness develops. After all, workers can "continue their actions" in struggle and still look to the Democrats as their only viable political outlet. Workers' willingness to break with the Democrats depends on a number of factors, not least the activity of socialists and radicals.

Renewal is also dismissive of the Seattle MAP test boycott, contending that "without concrete organization on the ground to carry it out in other places—or even to generalize it to all other Seattle schools—the initiative was not able on its own to transform the action into a larger organizational form such as could crystallize and expand the gain made by the action. Again, the role of organized socialists was quite notable—but not sufficient to advance the struggle to a higher overall level of organization that expressed the heightened consciousness resulting from the action."

The faction has not been paying attention. The Seattle test boycott received the backing of the presidents of both teachers unions, which have encouraged affiliates to join with parent groups to push back against the testing mania. In New York State, a parent rebellion against the new Common Core standards is a further expression of this sentiment, which has spurred anti-testing groups in several cities.

Somehow, for Renewal, all this isn't good enough. The faction dismisses every manifestation of struggle against education reform as not good enough, rather than seeing such fights as contributing to an accumulation of forces of a nascent movement. That's symptomatic of Renewal's entire approach. Rather than starting with what's positive in the struggle and trying to generalize it (apparently, that's just "cheerleading"), they begin from what's ultimately necessary and "speak truths" about the inadequacies of the method to date. They would do well to acquaint themselves with a point made by Marx in 1845, when he argued that those who wish to educate workers in struggle must learn from the struggle itself: "circumstances are changed by men and...it is essential to educate the educator himself."⁷

Indeed, Renewal sets a very high bar for teachers' success in the class struggle. Teachers' fights "have been sporadic, locally isolated, and thus far unable to move a significant section of the teaching force in the direction of a political break with the Democratic Party—a crucial step in the development of class consciousness in the Marxist sense." Essentially, Renewal argues that if a struggle is insufficient to overcome the historic weakness of the U.S. working class—the failure to create an independent labor

⁷ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (III) (1845). Available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

party—it has failed to advance class consciousness. One wonders how the faction would have assessed the rise of the CIO in the 1930s, which despite the massive upsurge in strikes, failed to break politically from President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. Did workers then, too, lack "class consciousness in the Marxist sense?"

Idealist perspectives?

Standing on this questionable theoretical ground, Renewal moves on to the "philosophical idealism inherent in the Perspectives document by Alan M." The problem, we are told, is that Alan offers Occupy's success in popularizing the 99 percent vs. the 1 percent as evidence of that radicalization. Occupy's mass support and its success in changing the popular debate is remarkable, given the context of the bipartisan neoliberal consensus and the weakness of the left. It is difficult *not* to interpret Occupy as a sign of a shift in working class consciousness in a direction favorable to socialists and the left. Tens of thousands of activists who endured the crackdown on Occupy encampments learned a lesson about the nature of the Democratic Party and the state. But that isn't good enough for Renewal, which demands: "what has been the result, in concrete terms, of the learning of these lessons? How have these lessons been concretized in organizations or individuals who have remained active since?"

It isn't too difficult to answer those questions. Occupy Chicago Labor Committee members were central to organizing solidarity for the CTU strike. The widespread support for the Fight for 15 campaigns by workers and their supporters is based on the same political framework as Occupy, and Occupy supporters have participated in these efforts. Occupy activists have also moved on to other projects, with Occupy Wall Street veterans launching Occupy Sandy for 2012 hurricane relief in 2012. In Seattle, Occupy activists participated in Kshama Sawant's socialist election victory on the city council, which itself is further evidence of Occupy's political echo. Bill de Blasio's "two cities" theme, however cynical, got him elected mayor of New York, in no small part because Occupy had plowed the political ground for him. None of this registers with Renewal, however, given their undynamic, binary conception of how working class consciousness develops. Occupy, for the faction, is not a sign of radicalization taking an organizational form, however briefly, but rather of the non-existence of a genuine radicalization. Such an approach leads to either an abstention from the struggles, or a defeatist perspective within them.

Renewal's perspectives and program

The faction's proposals are a puzzling mix of sweeping proposals and calls for the ISO to do things that it already does. We are told, in urgent terms, that the ISO "absolutely must be open to the broadest possible range of opinion on the Marxist Left" and "those who disagree with the ISO's accepted line on such questions should not under any circumstances be automatically labeled as 'hostile' to the organization." Indeed, that is why socialists outside the ISO have, for many years, been regularly published in *Socialist Worker* and the *International Socialist Review*. Many figures on the Marxist left, who have differences with the ISO on major issues, have spoken at the annual Socialism conferences on a wide range of topics, including Lars Lih, Barbara Ransby, David Bacon, Claudio Katz, Dan LaBotz, David McNally, Dianne Feeley, Barry Sheppard, John Riddell and Gonzalo Gomez. The ISR has also published autonomists like Raul Zibechi and Benjamin Dangl, to say nothing of regular interviews with Noam Chomsky, who identifies himself as an anarchist. Furthermore, the ongoing discussion in the ISO on women's liberation has drawn upon a range of Marxist writers on women's oppression. Renewal would like to deny all this, but these are the facts.

Renewal also calls for "an extended period of discussion on the current political and economic conjuncture of global capitalism, the shape of the global working class, etc." The faction also urges us to "devote the intellectual resources of the ISO to the development of a theoretical framework for understanding capitalism at the end of the neoliberal era."

It is hard to know what to make of this. *Socialist Worker* and the ISR have been engaging on all of these questions since the late 1990s. It was our independent analysis and political conclusions about the world economy and the state of the working class that led us to a conflict with the SWP-GB and our expulsion from the International Socialist Tendency. Our publications have made important contributions about the

economic crisis and its aftermath, the state of the labor movement, and the impact of neoliberalism on politics and society. This, to be sure, is an ongoing process as we join with the wider revolutionary socialist left attempt to generalize revolutionary Marxism to address the questions of a new era.

More substantially, the faction takes the ISO to task for "looking for immediate next steps," which, they argue, "means consciously choosing to not do work that may not reap short-term dividends. It fosters an outlook for the group that's not just lacking in strategy, but that is actively anti-strategic. This aversion to strategic planning and implementation needs to be corrected."

In fact, the ISO has for many years undertaken "strategic planning and implementation" on a number of fronts, including implanting itself in unions, criminal justice work, climate change activism, and more. This shift was spelled out in a document by Sharon S., originally published in Pre-Convention Bulletin #1 in 2007, is reprinted in the current Pre-Convention Bulletin #7. In that article, Sharon argued for a break from "instant recruitment" and argued that the development of a revolutionary organization cannot be judged solely on numerical growth. Also crucial is how well rooted the organization has become in different areas of struggle. Seven years on, it is clear that the ISO has made progress in this regard.

Remarkably, Renewal says virtually nothing about all this. Instead, they move on to call for an ISO program, citing Trotsky on the need for a plan of action to provide a "real framework for answering that question of 'what to do next'." Apparently, Renewal thinks that it's not ok for the ISO to focus on "immediate next steps," whereas it is fine when that advice comes from Trotsky.

It is within reason to propose a formal program for the ISO that, as Renewal puts, would "include a strategy to make the organization a material actor, steering its members toward implantation in key sectors, workplaces and movements, as well as concrete demands that can connect the immediate struggles of workers and the oppressed to our larger vision of socialist transformation." Here, Renewal, however, is moving the goalposts. Having earlier taken the ISO leadership to task for "a failure to progress even by the organization's own metrics of success, especially membership growth and retention," Renewal now wants to use a different criteria for long-term implantation in which immediate growth is not necessarily on the agenda.

Without pausing to acknowledge this contradiction, Renewal moves on to propose that the ISO "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."

This writer is all for organizing the South, and is open to serious proposals to advance that effort. Renewal's, proposal, however, is not serious. After all, the failure of the U.S. labor movement to confront racism and organize the South, despite some valiant efforts by the CIO's left-led unions in the 1940s, is labor's greatest weakness. Socialists throughout the 20th century struggled to meet that challenge, and halting efforts by the big unions to move into the South have met with little success.⁸ Renewal, however, seems to believe that an organization the size of the ISO can solve this enormous historic problem by "putting resources from Northern branches into that organizing."

In reality, an effective strategy to organize the South on the scale suggested by Renewal would require much more than say, having all the members of Cambridge, Mass., ISO branch move to Canton, Miss., to organize the Nissan auto plant there. As the United Auto Workers has discovered, years of patient work is necessary to simply build a union presence in communities that have scarcely had a connection to organized labor. The UAW has yet to organize a single foreign-owned auto plant, and other unions have fared little better in other industries. No doubt, the UAW's policies of making concessions to the Detroit automakers have contributed to this failure. But the difficulties are huge: racism, anti-union "right-to-work:

⁸ Wade Rathke, an ACORN founder and longtime New Orleans labor official, outlines this history in his article, "Labor's Failure to Organize the South." Available at <http://chieforganizer.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/failure-to-organize-the-south.pdf>

laws, company-town politicians who front for management, and the general decline of labor over the past 30 years.

If the ISO decided to take on this challenge directly—say, moving comrades to Tupelo, Miss., (population 34,546) to relate to workers at the new Toyota plant under construction there—it would require far more resources than Renewal has bothered to consider. First, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for comrades to get jobs in the plant itself, as management and temporary staffing agencies vigilantly guard against hiring union "salts." It would also be difficult to approach workers outside the plant or even in the community, as newcomers who are politically active in small town auto plants will automatically be presumed to be union organizers, and workers who talk to organizers are immediately targeted for firing. Indeed, it would be hard for new arrivals from the North to get any kind of decent job, given that local employers wouldn't want to do anything to offend Toyota. As a result, the two or three comrades who took on this assignment would need to be supported financially by the ISO for several years—which could only be undertaken with a major increase in members' financial contributions. This would be a substantial investment in a project that is unlikely to lead to a union contract or growth for the ISO for a minimum of several years, and quite possibly longer.

This is not an argument against the ISO having a serious focus on the South. The ISO needs to continue its project build branches in the region with a years-long perspective of taking part in union organizing drives, participating in social movements and building socialist organization. Comrades who wish to take up this challenge should be encouraged to do so. But the ISO's approach to building in the South should be sober, systematic and planned in detail, rather than tossed about casually, as Renewal has done.

Renewal is on much stronger ground when it proposes that the ISO target the logistics industry for organizing. Here, however, Renewal's organizational prescriptions for the ISO—"federalize the initiative"—would undermine the effectiveness of such an effort. If the ISO is to have any impact on such organizing, its work would necessarily be centralized at the national level. Then there is the matter of deciding who should take such jobs, which are poorly paid, lacking in benefits and often dangerous. Should the ISO simply encourage comrades to take such jobs and offer them support and political direction, as has been our practice? Or, in the name of the better "strategic planning and implementation" and branch autonomy that Renewal calls for, should ISO branches have the power to vote to assign someone to quit a job as a computer programmer and go work at an Amazon.com warehouse? The faction is silent on this point.

What Renewal offers to the ISO is not a real program or strategy, but a rather some bold sounding phrases without political content.

Restructuring the ISO leadership?

Renewal proposes several changes in the structure of the ISO that, while motivated as increasing democracy in the organization, are in fact highly bureaucratic.

The first problem, in Renewal's view, is the absence of detailed accounting about the paid staff of the organization, in particular the Steering Committee: "These comrades are employees of the entire organization; their standing as such should be at the discretion of membership of the entire organization, and routine reports of their activities must be made available to the membership, in particular to the National Convention."

Here it should be pointed out that the ISO Steering Committee is already accountable to the organization as a whole. It is elected on an annual basis, and is subject to recall at any time through a Special Convention, which can be called whenever two-thirds of branches vote to do so. (This procedure was in fact used to change the leadership of the ISO in 1983.)

As for "routine reports of the activities" of ISO full-timers: their activities are already thoroughly documented through the publication of *Socialist Worker* and the ISR, as well books. Others, who are responsible for organizing, are in regular contact with branches and/or visit them. The ISO Notes further

communicates the experience of the organization and the motivations for particular political activities. It is difficult to see the political benefit of an activity log of this or that full-timer—a list of phone calls, perhaps, or travel itineraries.

The core of Renewal's proposal is to:

substantively and practically subordinate the Steering Committee (SC) to the National Committee (NC). Currently, the SC is the true political leadership of the organization, even though the NC is formally superior. Because the SC is dominated by the full-time staff—nine of the 14 current SC members are full-timers—the formation of the organization's perspectives and strategies are dominated by a narrow and tight-knit group that lacks implantation in the working class. This increases the tendency to idealism and voluntarism. Furthermore, the NC does not perform the "control" function essential to a superior body. Formally, it has no power to recall and reconstitute the SC: since the SC is elected directly by Convention, only Convention can change the SC's composition. Subjectively, the NC does not function as superior to the SC. In practice NC slates are nominated by the SC.

Here Renewal is claiming that the SC has, by means of subterfuge, pretended to be subordinate to the NC so that a tight-knit group of non-workers can dominate the ISO. Leaving aside the class-baiting of SC members (no one is asking to see the proletarian credentials of Renewal faction members, after all), the fact is that the ISO rules have always been clear that the SC is elected to be the day-to-day leadership of the ISO. The NC is also elected at convention, in parallel to the SC, and SC members are a minority on the NC. The NC is within its rights to take different positions from the SC. Given limited resources, the NC has in-person meetings only about three or four times per year, at which the experiences and views of NC comrades shape the ISO's perspectives.

Renewal wants the NC to become, "in form and in fact, the political leadership of the group," and proposes that it meet quarterly. Yet it is impossible for an NC that would meet so infrequently to play such a role. For these reasons, the ISO has opted to have a residential Steering Committee, based on a difficult experience in the 1980s when SC members lived in different cities and could meet only monthly. Even in the era of the Internet, there is no way that an NC that meets, for example, monthly, to carry out the tasks of day-to-day leadership that are handled by the SC.

Also unworkable are Renewal's proposals for regional structures, and the insistence on the election of regional organizers. The ISO operates in a continental country of some 300 million people. To be effective, its leadership needs the prerogative to select organizers who have the experience and capacity to carry out "strategic planning and implementation," to use Renewal's formulation. The national view of the SC allows for a more complete understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and needs of branches and districts in a way that individual branches can't always see. The SC appoints organizers on that basis. In practice, district organizers have been voted upon in various localities as a statement for support—or lack thereof—for those particular comrades. If a district voted to reject its assigned organizer, this would be a clear signal to the SC of an urgent problem.

Renewal correctly notes that districts have no formal standing in the ISO rules. This is because the organization needs the flexibility to create structures that suite multiple branches in New York City and scattered branches across the Midwest and West. The faction's proposals to formalize this through Regional Committees are mechanical and bureaucratic: what region, for example, would the Denver branch be in, given that hundreds of miles separate the comrades from other branches? To be sure, branches in given regions may need to have conference calls or meetings to coordinate their work, and the regional Marxism conferences help develop such organizational ties.

Of course, this is not a question of principle. The ISO may indeed decide to implement more formal regional forms of organizations as it grows. Such efforts, however, would not be well served by Renewal's one-size-fits-all approach to regional concerns. The Renewal motivation appears to be to strip the Steering Committee of its authority, rather than to develop an effective structure for the ISO.

Renewal wraps up its organizational proposals with an appeal to Leninism: "Only by putting the reins of the organization firmly in the hands of the members can we become a truly democratic centralist organization." In fact, what Renewal advocates is not Leninism, which depends on the dialectical interaction between the leadership and the membership of a revolutionary organization, but a system of checks and balances based on the assumption that the leadership will inherently tend towards bureaucratism and anti-democratic behavior. Renewal's conception of leadership has more in common with anarchism and liberalism than it does with the Leninist tradition.

The Renewal faction rules

Perhaps the most striking, even shocking, feature of the Renewal document is the strict centralism and harsh discipline that it spells out for faction members. The elective principal, which Renewal advocates for every position in the ISO, doesn't apply to the faction itself. Instead, it is ruled by an unelected, self-appointed Faction Committee. Faction members are "obliged to promote and defend the faction's views; to organize local bodies of the faction; to observe faction discipline in relevant votes and elections; and to work under the direction of the national Faction Committee." Further, "faction members may be removed from the faction at their request; or by decision of the Faction Committee, if it determines that members are not carrying out their responsibilities as faction members." The Faction Committee also has final say over which documents get to be faction statements—apparently, the political openness that Renewal advocates for the ISO has no place in the faction itself.

The ISO, accused by Renewal of being undemocratic, has never had rules or practices remotely resembling this stringent factional regime. One would be hard pressed to find a more hardline approach to organizational discipline in the revolutionary Marxist tradition. Somehow, a grouping that has a stated mission of democratizing the ISO is on record as opposing its own internal democracy.

This method calls into question the aims of the Renewal faction. Traditionally, factions in revolutionary organizations seek to win over or influence as many comrades as possible in order to change the group's perspective or alter its leadership. Renewal, by contrast, seems to prize its own internal discipline more than engaging the members of the ISO. This is a sharp divergence from the practice of the ISO, which has always urged branches not to mandate delegates to take particular positions at conventions, so that delegates are free to influence one another on all the questions of the day. This is not an original practice in the ISO. The revolutionary socialist movement has traditionally rejected such "imperative mandates" so that comrades can freely share their experiences and ideas, and generalize from them.

Renewal also departs from the norms of the ISO and the traditions of revolutionary organization when it arrogates for itself the right to include as faction members those who it deems as "bureaucratically excluded" from the ISO, such as Shaun J. To restate the facts that have been documented in previous bulletins, Shaun resigned of his own accord amid his longstanding arguments with Boston comrades. Shaun did not accept an offer from Steering Committee members to develop a plan for his reintegration into the ISO. Instead, several weeks the Cambridge branch, without knowledge of the Boston district, the regional organizer or the SC, voted to readmit Shaun as a member in a manner that would inevitably create debilitating tensions in the district. The Steering Committee therefore did not accept Shaun's membership. The Renewal faction appeared very shortly thereafter with its lengthy documents. If members of the Renewal faction disagree with the SC's decision, they are free to make their case to the ISO Convention, which will have final say on the matter. Unless and until that happens, Shaun is not a member of the ISO and thus has no access to its internal publications or internal meetings. The same applies to other former members cited by Renewal.

Conclusion

In the tradition of revolutionary socialist organization, the formation of factions is a basic democratic right. It is the means by which a group of comrades who conclude that the internal problems are so great that they must formally join together to argue for a change of leadership and/or perspective. The aim of a faction is to have its proposals voted upon by representative, delegated bodies (in our case, the ISO Convention).

The decision to constitute a faction therefore carries a great deal of responsibility. Factions are not catch-all vehicles for every question and disagreement that may exist. Traditionally, they focus on the critical questions before the organization. If factions are to succeed in influencing the wider membership, faction members must act in a principled manner and put forward their specific proposals before the organization clearly and systematically, and then accept the democratic decision of the organization on those questions.

The Renewal faction has not met that standard. Its account of the ISO's history and perspective is rife with errors. The faction's perspectives, resting on a faulty theoretical foundation, are poorly formulated and lack political substance. Renewal's organizational proposals are impractical and inappropriate for a Leninist group. Further, Renewal's undemocratic organizational methods are outside the revolutionary socialist tradition and the norms, rules and practice of the ISO. It is unprecedented in the ISO, or of any revolutionary organization that this writer is aware of, to form a faction that consists of both members and nonmembers.

For of all these reasons, the Renewal faction does not provide a way forward for the ISO.

Lee S., Chicago

The Reorganization of the Western Ma - ISO District Through Consolidating

I. Introduction: From 1 to 3 to 1 Branches

Four years ago, from the "let it breath perspective" the Western Ma - ISO, originally at UMass, split to also include Hampshire College and later Holyoke Community College (HCC). This move produced many successes. We were able to cover more terrain and involve ourselves in more community struggles. Some members were able to assume new leadership. Still, the split proved challenging. Cadre became isolated and stretched. This was intensified when several leading cadre left the area shortly after the split. This past year we aimed to solve this weakness through consolidation. HCC folded into UMass at the beginning of the fall and Hampshire did the same in November.

Sections II and III of this document were the arguments written for the Hampshire to UMass consolidation. Its aim was to open the conversation about how consolidation could better achieve the goals of developing cadre and strengthening routines, two areas we identified as weaknesses resulting from the split. Section IV will conclude with the results of this reorganization.

II. How the National Perspective of Struggle and Organizational Needs affects Western Ma - ISO

This September the National Committee (NC) of the ISO released a report analyzing the national and international level, and character of political struggle, drawing conclusions that impact the perspectives of our organization. Though movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and the uprising in Madison, Wisconsin — combined with the economic crisis and harsh austerity measures it unleashed — have radicalized new waves of people, the Left remains fractured and disorientated, unable to articulate a coherent vision for future struggle. Given this climate and the current lull in national movement work, the NC put forward a perspective of strengthening both the ISO's Marxist roots and our organizational core — through cadre development and routines.

The goals of individual branches should reflect this perspective. We should use this time to strengthen our "core" branch routines, including SW tabling and contact work. We should also strengthen our education in Marxism to develop new cadre who can weather the ups and downs of movements during this volatile period and win new layers of radicalizing activists to our politics. Without strengthening our core at this trying moment we would be building on sand. Strengthening our core will put us in a stronger position as a Western Ma district, able to better incorporate new members and contacts, and also more able to move with the national organization when new widespread struggles emerge. We should use this time to have honest and sober assessments of our district and individual branches. The structure of our district is, first and

foremost, determined by the needs of our members and our organization. If a branch at Hampshire is not meeting our immediate needs; allowing members to develop, recruit contacts, and relate to movement work and party building as a team, than we must have a discussion on reorganizing our district to meet those demands.

The Hampshire College branch of the ISO has witnessed a fracturing and disorientation of the Left similar to that described by the NC. Though we have been active in anti-sexism, Palestine solidarity and climate justice movements on and around campus, the Left on campus is far from united. Hampshire students are isolated politically and apt to radicalize around the “anarcho-liberal” ideas mentioned in the NC report. After the graduating of a leading cadre and the resignation of a newer member our ability to organize and sustain the branch has been limited. Though we have a handful of committed members, we lack the political experience and Marxist foundation needed to win new members and grow the branch. Maintaining branch routines has proven difficult and serious education has taken a backseat to day-to-day tasks. Our ability to relate to the Left on campus and the surrounding area is limited. With four members graduating in the Spring, this pattern will continue.

Given this, the Hampshire College branch proposes that we consolidate with the UMass, Amherst branch. Though consolidation will limit the ISO's ability to organize on the Hampshire campus, it is in the long-term interest of our members, who will be able to further develop, focus on party building and relate to movements via a functional branch. Consolidation will help create the members that the ISO needs if it is to expand and strengthen.

III. The Pros and Cons of Consolidation for Western MA - ISO as they Relates to our Goals

As stated, we recognize a key goal of the ISO in Western Mass is to develop members' understanding of Marxism and the ability to lead around socialist politics. This means putting ourselves in the best position to develop critical thinking. Group cohesion around our core politics is needed to have healthy debate and discussion within the organization, all for the purpose of democratic initiative and members' ownership over their organization. This is only possible, however, with a high level of confidence spread evenly across the group.

As an example, a group of health care workers can discuss and debate the best way to heal a patient, but their conversation will only be productive if they each have a core understanding of science and medicine. There may be different opinions on the best way to cure the illness, but those opinions are based on a basic agreement of how cells and body systems work, and the benefits and drawbacks of different medicines and treatments. To reach this level, this group of workers had to read, do case studies, practice, and go through clinical experience and mentor-ships - all things supported by people who had been through the same experience in the past. If only one person in the group had gone through such training, they would be in the position of dictating to the others, and the best possible outcome for the patient would not likely be reached. The other group members would not understand the decision made, would lack the ability to work independently towards the common goal, would lack ownership over the plan and feel less loyal to the group. Not only is a group of minds better than one, it is necessary for democracy and effective group action.

Likewise, we want to create the conditions within our district best suited for members' learning the science of Marxism - the method of analyzing history as a materialist, dissecting different social forces and events, and applying the correct strategy and tactics to confront real situations for the purpose of strengthening the working class movement and its potential for leading a socialist revolution.

When considering consolidation we should look not only at the benefits of such reorganization, but what potential challenges this presents to the group. How will such challenges be solved collectively so we achieve the desired goals of consolidation? One concern consolidation raises is our ability to relate to Hampshire without a branch on that campus. Another concern is that a large branch would provide less space for newer members to step up, take leadership roles, experiment, make mistakes and learn.

These concerns are legitimate, and without a clear plan, their realization is possible. However, in considering them, we do not believe they outweigh the benefits of consolidation. We also believe these potential hurdles can be jumped if we approach them with a clear plan. Consolidating the Hampshire branch into UMass does pose a challenge for Hampshire members relating to their campus. However, we believe that for those who take us seriously and want to get involved in politics extending beyond Hampshire, we can make the motivation for Hampshire students to come ten minutes away to UMass. This will not be automatic and members at Hampshire will have to make a conscious effort to get their periphery off campus, following up with contacts more in advanced to do so and providing carpools. However, these are all logistical details that can be figured out. At the core of our argument is a belief that certain Hampshire students can be won, and will even be excited, to engage with a branch more able to build professionally and relate to a greater range of people and ideas. After all, we want to win contacts to a concept of the ISO that is not limited to any one campus or community, but which extends across the country with a unifying set of politics able to relate to a diverse range of struggles and people. When discussing consolidation (or anything), we should view ourselves as part of the ISO first, and not an individual branch. This allows us to consider the possibilities in Western Massachusetts in a more flexible and dynamic way.

On the question of having the space for newer members to step up, experiment, make mistakes and develop as leaders, this too has legitimacy. In the past few years we can point to many members who were forced to take on leadership because branches were small and stretched thin, and some of these comrades learned and grew as a result. However, it is important not to forget the drawbacks that accompanied this. Several members did learn to stand on their own feet. But they also faced burn out and at times substituted themselves for roles other members were unable to take on. Members were often forced to learn outside a cultivating support network. Going back to the health care analogy, one might learn how to heal patients by being thrown into a hospital and left to experiment through trial and error. However, it is better for everyone if that person is first mentored and trained in a supportive environment.

Over-stretched branches also meant contacts and newer members were not always followed up with, as cadre were preoccupied with day-to-day tasks. Some of these contacts and newer members may have dropped away as a result. Thus, by consolidating there is actually more opportunity for the new to step up. Leadership and cadre, not having to substitute themselves to keep over-stretched branches running, can instead take a step back and act in supporting roles, offering guidance when needed, but letting the new learn through doing, which often includes making mistakes. Routines that often fall by the waist-side in over-stretched branches can be sustained in a larger, more experienced branch, with the new learning from cadre in how to write for or to sell SW, how to conduct contact meetings, how to engage with movements, give talks, set perspectives or any number of tasks. The most experienced surgeon often never touches the patient entering their operating room. They stand quietly against the wall in the corner of the OR while the resident doctor from med school leads. Of course, when the resident heads towards a fatal mistake, the more experienced doctor is ready to step in with advice.

The question of next steps for us is not based on the accomplishments or challenges of individual members, but on a collective assessment of ourselves as a whole and the material conditionals and level of struggle surrounding us. We believe in focusing on subjective factors, such as membership development. But such things cannot be accomplished through will alone. We need a strategic plan to organize and structure ourselves in such a way that makes our subjective development the most possible. Having a wider support layer of cadre does not only equal better guidance. It also means having a core of cadre to which other members and contacts can relate to and strive. This is more ideal than having one or two cadre in a branch. Out of the later situation can develop a dynamic of newer members not seeing cadre as a collective team, towards which they can strive, but instead as individuals. Part of developing our culture as the ISO in Western Ma means winning comrades to seeing their advancement not in individualist terms, but in terms of raising the whole group to a higher level.

Our assessment is also based on objective factors. If the student body at Hampshire was on the move we might be making a different argument. For the most part it is not. Nationally and internationally the level of struggle is relatively low. But this is not to say struggles are not happening. For us in Western Ma we are currently relating to Justice for Ayyub and the pending MNA strike at Baystate Franklin Medical Center.

However, these are community struggles we are relating to as a district. We are not relating to struggles on our individual campuses. Thus, it makes sense to consolidate, not only to improve membership development (an important goal during low periods of struggle), but also so we can figure out struggles we are relating to as a district anyways.

Lastly, we must take into account that several members from Hampshire are graduating this year. To deal best with this turnover, we should be proactive and not wait to watch the Hampshire branch implode. This means having a plan to support the two members who will be staying on. These members, who will probably be in Western Ma for another two years, may again organize a branch at Hampshire. But they will be in a better position to do so after having gained the training through a branch with more cadre support.

Over the last few years we have experimented a lot with organizing the ISO in Western Ma. All our decisions were made in a certain context and point in time. Our history speaks highly to our open-mindedness and flexibility towards new possibilities. Many of these experiments have yielded positive results, all widening our political experience and footprint. Consolidating will be another experiment. While it is sure to present its own challenges, we believe it is the decisive turn needed today, and we are excited for the new possibilities it too will open.

IV. Conclusion: What Did We Achieve? What Challenges Still Exist?

1. Relating to Movements:

We have now been consolidated for a month. Already a positive difference is palpable. One positive change has been our ability to relate to movements. Before consolidation we were relating to the same movements, but as separate branches. Because cadre were stretched (and one role of cadre is to take leads on and disseminate generalized lessons of struggle) assessments were spread unevenly across the district. This equated a lack of cohesive plans and branches were unable to move together when needed. District wide meetings seldom happened (given their organizational strain), and District Committee (DC) meetings became the one consistent place where district assessments happened. Since branches were relating to similar projects, DC meetings began to substitute themselves for Branch Committee (BC) meetings. Consolidation has thus reduced redundancy in our district, led to more clarity in our assessments of common work and has allowed us to leverage our collective strength more consistently and effectively.

2. Party Building:

The aforementioned changes have made us a stronger pole of attraction. This in turn sets us up with better opportunities for party building. This is shown in two major ways: 1. We have been able to keep more contacts around our branch life, which is now more energized and engaging. Given that we have a stronger core of members, contacts can now see more clearly the commitments involved in membership. 2. We have been able to attract a larger audience at our public meetings, and have been able to hold public meetings more frequently. Last month we held two back-to-back public meetings, one on "The Fight of Union Nurses and the Labor Movement Today" and another on "Justice for Ayyub and the Fight Against Islamophobia". Both have included packed rooms exceeding 50 people (we are a branch of 15). Thus, in both the Nurses' struggle and our anti-racist work (our 2 current focuses) we have been able to raise our visibility and further solidify connections. People are now better able to see the ISO as a collective project in Western Ma, as opposed to separate branch projects.

3. Education and Developing Cadre:

Another immediate gain from consolidation has been our ability to do more collective education, and raise the level of learning and political clarity in the room. This worked well as we prepared for our regional Day School this fall. Newer members and contacts said in separate smaller branches conversations often stagnated or lost focus. When education took place in a larger branch, with the district cadre together, people said meetings felt more energized and questions from the floor were taken up more frequently. Because the new branch has attracted more contacts, this has meant a constant influx of new questions and thus, more relevant discussions.

3. Remaining Challenges:

Because we only consolidated a month ago, there are obvious challenges still remaining. One goal we had was to strengthen routines. While we have been able to do more systematic education and hold more public meetings, a weakness still includes SW tablings and sales. SW sales have been done consistently once a week, usually before branch meetings, but these sales often only include a small number of the same experienced members and do not include a table, which can act as a hub for interested people. If we want to train our contacts and newer members and win them to an outward approach to organizing, it will mean pulling them into this activity. Also, to build up newer members, we must seek space for them to make leads inside branch meetings, including giving assessments and reports, and using SW to do so. All members need to find their voice in the branch and cadre should actively help members with this search. Another goal is to hold more public meetings. We have done well holding public meetings that focus on movements we are engaged with, built in collaboration with other groups we are in coalition with. We should go further by also building meetings that we host alone, so we can put our politics front and center. Such meetings should tackle questions on the Left that extend beyond movements we are directly involved with by taking on history and theory, and topics of national and international concern. Our most consistent and longstanding contacts were met, not around movements, but at our initial fall kick-off meeting "Smash Capitalism, Fight for Socialism". While we have held several meetings tackling theoretical questions, we have not built them as public. Also, we chose to consolidate at UMass because this was the largest campus in Western Ma and where we potentially have the largest audience. However, we have brought few undergraduate students around our branch. We have largely been engaging with community struggles (little movement currently exists at UMass) and this may be partially to blame. However, a continued weakness around using SW and not actively building public meetings focused on our core politics also contribute. There are currently no undergraduate UMass students who are members, so this makes achieving the aforementioned tasks challenging. However, getting on the ground at UMass must be done to reach students who can someday run a UMass branch.

4. On The Importance of Long-Term Strategy:

A strategy is a plan of action meant to achieve a major goal. For example, BDS is a strategy to end apartheid in Israel. We often speak of theory leading our practice. Between the two is strategy: the plan for turning theory into practice.

Now that Western Ma is consolidated and somewhat stabilized we should begin to set long-term strategies for achieving the goals we set: membership development and reinvigorating party building routines and culture. We should also set strategies to better capitalize on the areas where we have some level of implantation, namely in the nurses' struggle and in anti-racist activism.

In general, why is having a long-term strategy important? A long-term strategy can ground and unite members around a vision for development. Realistic and concrete goals can be attached to a strategy, which allows the branch to measure its progress through the act of continual assessment and reorientation. Having a long-term strategy around activism and implantation also better ensures that we do not fall victim to movementism. With a longer-range vision we can more consciously attach party building objectives to the struggles we are involved in: How are we taking on this work collectively? How are we using SW? What about the ISR and Haymarket books? How are members positioned to relate? How are we developing to lead? What can the branch learn from this? Who is closest to us, how can we better engage with them and build up our relationships? Who can we recruit? ect. These questions require a constant revisiting for them to lead anywhere and for them to have a positive impact on our outlook and growth. This cannot be done without a long-term strategy. A long-term strategy creates a visible continuum along which plans and tactics can be implemented and their effectiveness periodically evaluated. Without a long-term strategy a branch becomes disoriented with a membership unsure of its purpose. The branch can fall victim to ambulance chasing: going from one protest or action to another. This in turn (especially in branches with a low level of political development) can lead to moralism: "We should do this because it's the right thing to do" (as opposed to how it fits into a larger vision discussed and planed by the branch collectively). Such shortsightedness is the direct result of a lacking long-term vision, which leaves little room for assessing

how the branch will build and grow from a routine, an action or orientation to a struggle. To assess, plan, build, do, and reassess takes time. A long-term strategy is needed to tie all these processes together. Otherwise, things become disjointed. Having a long-term strategy does not mean setting a stubborn course that cannot be altered or in some cases abandoned. In fact, having a long-term strategy makes necessary shifts more possible. Essential for any strategy is a continual assessment of its effectiveness at achieving its set goals. Without this process we are charting a course blind, bumping from one activity to another, with nothing against to gauge our success but speculation.

Lastly, a strategy is only effective insofar as it relates to the larger purpose of the organization implementing it. For us, this purpose is building a layer of Marxists who can act cohesively around a single program and thus lead, relate to, recruit and absorb the newly radicalizing minority in society. Where the newly radicalizing minority is developing can shift quickly, especially in this period that lacks sustained national movements. We need a sensitive eye to these shifts. Thus, the branch needs to be firm in its party building routines (using SW, contact work, tabling, public meetings, ect.) so it can both reach that radicalizing minority and once met incorporate them into the branch life. To keep party building firm, the branch should not be over-stretched in movements. Having a long-term strategy in the movements that are prioritized keeps the branch focused and less likely to over-reach or to hop from one movement to another unnecessarily. Having flexibility and openness in the branch, which comes from not being over-immersed in any one struggle, also saves the branch from being blinded to other erupting opportunities. Branch leadership requires a wide view to see how strategies fit into the larger purpose, so to suggest shifts or changes. In our original situation of three branches, the leadership was stretched thin in each branch and unable to see broadly. Consolidation has thus created the conditions necessary for leadership to develop and provide longer-term vision. Now able to step back from day-to-day tasks, leadership is also able to have a wider scope assessment of the progress and effectiveness of long-term strategies, and if they make sense or pull the branch away from other opportunities. The branch as a whole, on firmer footing and with membership less over-stretched in general, will be better able to respond to struggles where they emerge and connect with the radicalizing minority as they appear.

The fall in Western Ma has been an exciting time for us. We have made big changes to our organization and this has opened the door for new opportunities. We are less stretched, which allows us more flexibility in shifting our strategies. Our foundation is firmer, allowing us to better spring into the world and broadcast our message. Challenges exist, but we are now in a better position to strengthen our core and launch forward to take on our project of building a revolutionary socialist organization.

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