

# Pre-convention Bulletin #11 / January 21, 2013

for members only

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## Inside This Bulletin

This is the eleventh 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](mailto:bulletin@internationalsocialist.org) and cc Sharon at the national office ([sharon@internationalsocialist.org](mailto:sharon@internationalsocialist.org)) if you plan to submit a document and/or resolution, so we can plan bulletin production. Thanks.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill C. was an active member of the ISO until he moved to London to attend graduate school last fall.

## Response to Bekah W.'s "Critique of the Renewal Faction Documents"

This document is a response to Bekah W.'s "Critique of the Renewal Faction Documents," contained within pre-convention bulletin No. 7. I will structure my rebuttal by briefly summarizing key points made by Bekah and then responding to them in detail.

**1.) In her document, Bekah argues that the ISO Renewal Faction (of which I am an endorsing member) provides a "mechanical formulation for how ideas change." The Renewal Faction, Bekah claims, does this by distorting Marxist theory to claim that human consciousness only changes as a result of action – not as a result of our lived experiences in general. In contrast to this, Bekah counters that, "Our daily lives, without any struggle, shape our ideas profoundly both the routines of the workplace and the 'real material relationships' we have outside of the workplace." She goes on to imply that the formula presented by the Renewal Faction attributes the development of ideas solely to "the physical labor one engages in" and "collective action."**

This analysis distorts the Renewal Faction's actual understanding of the development of consciousness. In reality, the Renewal Faction does *not* claim that consciousness only changes as a result of action. Nor do they deny the importance of general lived experience in altering people's ideas. The real substance of the Renewal Faction's argument is this: *advances in working-class consciousness are the product of collective action – i.e. class struggle.*

Significantly, Bekah's distortion of the Renewal Faction's understanding of consciousness appears to be – at least in part – the result of the group's rhetorical emphasis on *action* as the force behind the development of class consciousness. Thus, Bekah seems to be responding to the following passage, contained within the document, "The role of perspectives":

"The point is that for Marxists, it is not simply that consciousness arises from the situation in which people find themselves, but rather that human consciousness transforms through the process of engaging actively with the world. We learn by doing – that is, we do first, then extrapolate the lesson. In that sense, Marx really is saying, 'action determines consciousness.'"<sup>2</sup>

This passage is used to explain the way that *major shifts* in consciousness – in particular, the development of working-class consciousness – take place. The reason for this emphasis on *action* as opposed to *experience* stems from the Renewal Faction's rebuttal of one particular argument that has, in recent years, become increasingly prominent within the ISO. This is the claim – summarized by the Renewal Faction – that "people radicalize in mass numbers and collectively, simply on the basis of the experience of racism or homophobia or bad bosses or speed-ups at work."<sup>3</sup> While the Renewal Faction agrees that these phenomenon do, at least to some degree, alter people's ideas and consciousness, they argue that such experiences are extremely unlikely to produce radicalization:

"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 a 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 – even then, that individual as an individual is still presumably atomized and cut off from any possibility of collective action."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> ISO Renewal Faction, "The role of perspectives," *External Bulletin* (blog), November 26, 2013. <http://externalbulletin.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/the-role-of-perspectives/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Bekah appears to be unaware of the Renewal Faction's actual understanding of the difference between action and experience as factors in the development of consciousness. Thus, she bases her argument on refuting a strawman. In contrast with her distorted portrayal of the Renewal Faction's argument, Bekah asserts that "Our daily lives, without any struggle shape our ideas profoundly." She goes on to provide a list of examples that are intended to prove that ideas can also "change through 'life'" in addition to action. She cites the following hypothetical cases:

"A couple who divorces because they can't stop fighting about who does the laundry; the family that has hated in-laws who move in because there's nowhere else for old people to survive; the rape survivor; the parolee."

I completely agree with Bekah that these experiences are bound to alter the ideas and the consciousness of the individual people affected. I'm certain that the rest of the Renewal Faction will also agree with this. But, the thing is, *an alteration in ideas is not the same as a "radicalization" or a surge in class consciousness.* What's more, the specific cases cited above are, in actuality, extremely unlikely to lead to radical conclusions on the part of the individuals involved. For instance, a woman that splits up with her husband as a result of disagreements about laundry is not likely to instinctively conclude that women need to build a collective movement in order to challenge the inequitable distribution of household responsibilities under capitalism. In the vast majority of instances, such a divorce will lead primarily to personal conclusions: the divorcee will conclude that her former partner was lazy and misogynistic. This conclusion – while undoubtedly justified and largely true in most cases – is not indicative of a "radicalization."

The key thing to keep in mind here is that people only develop radical conclusions on a mass, collective level through the experience of resisting oppression and exploitation on a mass, collective level. On an individual level, the experience of ever-rising oppression or exploitation is rarely enough to encourage workers or oppressed people to radicalize, even on an individual level.<sup>5</sup>

What's more, the experience of undergoing brutal oppression can actually lead people to become more timid and less prone to collective acts of resistance (i.e. less radical). Indeed, this is the reason why acts of oppression and brutality are useful to the ruling class in the first place: they tend to discourage people from resisting the status quo. In this way, under capitalism, oppression functions as a means to frighten people into submission and quiescence. This doesn't mean that acts of oppression don't often backfire and set off mass resistance. Indeed, with the right structural conditions – and with the right balance of class forces – this is often exactly what happens. Nonetheless, it needs to be understood that on an *objective* level, the very point of oppression under capitalism is to create the necessary social conditions required to ensure the continued accumulation of capital.

I could cite innumerable historical examples to prove this point. To cite just one, in the Jim Crow South, the phenomenon of lynching served as a means to psychologically terrorize the Black population. Essentially, acts of lynching sent a message to all Blacks: *if you step out-of-line, you're at risk of being brutally murdered and lynched, as well.* Tragically, this despicable practice proved to be an extremely effective means of keeping people in their place for a prolonged period of time.

With this said, it is clear that rising rates of oppression and exploitation only tend to spark increased levels of radicalization and working-class consciousness when these phenomenon lead workers and oppressed people to engage in collective struggle. And people are only apt to engage in struggle when they see collective resistance as a viable way to improve their conditions. Thus, the specter of boosting working-class consciousness hinges on the viability of mass struggle. For this to change, it will require a shift in what Marxists have usually referred to as *the balance of class forces.*

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<sup>5</sup> From this paragraph forward, the rest of my response to this particular point is drawn from an earlier document – "A response to 'Convention discussion document' by Tom G." – that I wrote and sent out to the ISO Atlanta branch on December 10 in preparation for a branch pre-convention discussion meeting.

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With this being said, there is, in fact, one particular segment of society that does tend to exhibit increased levels of radicalization as a result of passively perceiving the outbreak of economic crisis. *This is the intelligentsia*. The reason for this relates to the peculiar way this group tends to interact with society. As a result of their training, intellectuals perceive their primary social function as developing and presenting an understanding of society. On this basis, capitalist crises – which tend to expose the inherent contradictions and moral depravity intrinsic to capitalism – often lead many intellectuals to draw radical conclusions. This is especially true in cases when increased levels of oppression and exploitation affect intellectuals on a personal level.

It is imperative to note, however, that the type of radical consciousness that intellectuals tend to develop is fundamentally different than the type of consciousness that workers come to through the course of struggle. Most notably, in contrast to workers, intellectuals become radical as atomized individuals. This phenomenon is pointed out by Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky in his 1910 essay, “The Intelligentsia and Socialism”:

“A worker comes to socialism as a part of a whole, along with his class, from which he has no prospect of escaping. He is even pleased with the feeling of his moral unity with the mass, which makes him more confident and stronger. The intellectual, however, comes to socialism, breaking his class umbilical cord as an individual, as a personality, and inevitably seeks to exert influence as an individual.”<sup>6</sup>

This insight helps to explain the “ideological radicalization” thesis that has become an increasingly common-sense assumption in the ISO since the onset of the Great Recession. To the extent that this is true, this process has been largely confined – in the United States, anyway – to academics, professional writers, journalists, college students, and recent college graduates. Significantly, one of the reasons why the current crisis is producing sharp levels of radicalization among this milieu relates to the wave of recent neoliberal attacks against public universities in general and university social science programs in particular. What’s more, the economic crisis has also led increasing numbers of recent college graduates to become proletarianized. This stems from the ongoing decline of well-paying white collar jobs as a percentage of the total U.S. workforce – a process that has dramatically accelerated since 2008. In previous periods, these types of jobs used to be available to large portions of the college-educated workforce. Over the past several decades – and particularly since 2008 – more and more college graduates have been pushed into the ranks of the low-wage service-sector economy. Through undergoing this process, many intellectually-minded former students have been compelled to draw radical conclusions – albeit on an individual, intellectual level. To speak for myself, this is my personal life story in a nutshell.

A recent article in *New Statesman* – a Left-wing British magazine – provides some insight into the radicalization that has taken hold of the intelligentsia of late. Written by Max Strasser, the article offers the following description of recent developments in New York City:

“There is a revival of left-wing intellectual thinking on a level unseen since the 1960s. Young people are starting magazines and engaging in serious, substantial critique of the status quo. In addition to *The New Inquiry* there is *Jacobin*, “a magazine of culture and polemic” launched in late 2010 with an avowedly socialist perspective. *Dissent*, a socialist journal founded in 1953 has seen a revival, with a new crop of young staff. The hip literary magazine *n+1* has also taken a decidedly political turn in recent years. And while many people launch publishing projects with earnest enthusiasm only to see them fail quickly, this new crop of journals seems to have enjoyed unprecedented success. At the same time, a new cohort of journalists has emerged, young and

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Trotsky, “The Intelligentsia and Socialism,” 1910, published online at the Marxist Internet Archive. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1910/xx/intell.htm>. I originally came across this article courtesy of Paul D., who posted it on Facebook in the late fall.

enterprising reporters devoted to covering labour, poverty and inequality, and they see interest from the old guard of left-liberal magazines peaking.”<sup>7</sup>

In general, the growth of a Left-wing intelligentsia should be seen by the revolutionary Left as an extremely important development. It should not, however, be conflated with a society-wide “ideological radicalization.”

**2.) Bekah argues that the Renewal Faction’s understanding of the relationship between action and consciousness leads to a vision for social change that is profoundly pessimistic. On this basis, she insists that the Renewal Faction fails to adequately assess “the question of how struggle ever begins.” Bekah argues that, “If workers only struggle when they are familiar with struggle, if they only form strong organizations having already raised their own expectations and consciousness, then the existence of struggle is impossible.” In other words, if prior experience in struggle is a prerequisite for future struggles, then how does this cycle begin in the first place? In this way, Bekah claims that the Renewal Faction’s analysis implies that the outbreak of struggle will never take place.**

As the Renewal Faction understands it, the development of class consciousness requires workers to come to the conclusion that it is in their interest to fight back as a group. In order for this to happen, groups of workers tend to have to go through the experience of engaging in collective struggles – in particular, collective struggles that are successful in bringing about real-world gains. What’s more, in order for such advances in consciousness to be sustainable, they have to be consolidated in the form of class organization. (It goes without saying that the fundamental form of working-class organization is the trade union.) Crucially, increased class organization allows for greater latitude in terms of working-class action and working-class consciousness. Through this process, workers can come to realize their interests as a class. The key thing to understand here is that the *act* of engaging in class struggle necessarily precedes the growth of class-conscious *ideas* – at least on a mass level. This conforms with Marx’s understanding of epistemology. As summarized by the Renewal Faction, “We learn by doing – that is, we do first, then extrapolate the lesson.” On this basis, only through the process of advancing their interests through struggle will workers develop “clear consciousness of [themselves] as a member of the working class, in opposition to the ruling class, and the need for collective class action against the rulers.”<sup>8</sup>

With this said, it is important to note that the existence of class struggle is not dependent on the pre-facto existence of working-class consciousness. In cases where workers are already class conscious and have strong organizations to back them, then they’re far more likely to engage in struggle in an effective and coordinated way. But this doesn’t mean that workers that lack a history or knowledge of class struggle are incapable of collective resistance. This point is humorously summarized by Hal Draper in the second of volume of Draper’s *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*:

“To engage in class struggle it is not necessary to ‘believe in’ the class struggle any more than it is necessary to believe in Newton in order to fall from an airplane. ... The working class moves toward class struggle insofar as capitalism fails to satisfy its economic and social needs and aspirations, not insofar as it is told about struggle by Marxists. There is no evidence that workers like to struggle any more than anyone else; the evidence is that capitalism compels and accustoms them to do so.”<sup>9</sup>

But, as already noted, in order for struggles to lead to major breakthroughs in terms of consciousness, they must be successful – at least to some extent – in advancing the collective interests of workers. Furthermore, short term gains in consciousness must be consolidated through the establishment of class organization in order have a lasting effect. In this way, workers are able to alter *the balance of class forces*.

This theoretical understanding helps to explain the pitiful state of working-class consciousness and

<sup>7</sup> Max Strasser, “Who are the new socialist wunderkinds of America?” *New Statesmen*, November 9, 2013.

<http://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/2013/11/who-are-new-socialist-wunderkinds-america>

<sup>8</sup> ISO Renewal Faction, “The role of perspectives.”

<sup>9</sup> Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Volume II: The Politics of Social Classes* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 42.

political development in the United States during the current period. Over the past forty years, workers have experienced a dramatic decline in organizational strength. This is the product of an ongoing employers' offensive, which began to take shape in the 1970s in response to the outbreak of a major crisis in the international capitalist economy. The primary aim of this initiative has been to reduce the living standards of workers and weaken trade union power. As a result of the ongoing ruling-class offensive, union density in the United States has been driven down to historically low levels. Without union backing, workers have been systematically discouraged from taking the risk of entering into struggle with their employers. Naturally, low-levels of class struggle and low-levels of class organization have served to dramatically circumscribe the development of class consciousness. With only limited, scattered instances of collective struggle over the past three decades, most workers have not had the necessary experience to develop conceptions of their collective interests as workers. This process has created something of a positive feedback loop; the demise of trade union power has led to a decline in struggle, which – in turn – has reinforced the further atrophy of trade union power.

As it stands today, it's not clear how this process will come to an end. Historically, dramatic shifts in class power have tended to come about during relatively brief periods of time, characterized by outbreaks of mass struggle. This is the essence of Lenin's famous saying that "There are decades where nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen." Indeed, to give one historical example, the balance of class forces that existed in the United States during the thirty-year period following World War II was largely the product of a series of dramatic struggles waged from 1934 to 1938. Following this, the structure of post-war labor relations was then solidified during the course of World War II – a process facilitated by the bureaucratization of the trade union movement.

In order for a fundamental shift in class power in favor of workers to take place in the United States during the current period, it will require an outbreak of mass struggle of comparable magnitude to the upheaval of the 1930s. Only a mass working-class movement will be able to burst through the many political, legal, and social barriers that are currently hindering the further development of class struggle and class organization in the United States. If historical precedent is any example, such a development will require the involvement of Leftists and radicals of all stripes. This was the case of the mass struggles of the 1930s, where socialists, Communists, and various other radicals played the pivotal role in building working-class organizations and leading mass struggles.

The documents presented by the ISO Renewal Faction approach the question of movement work by emphasizing the need to develop a strategy to break through the structural gridlock imposed by the current balance of class forces. In the "Organizational perspectives" document, the Renewal Faction calls for the development of a program designed to orient the ISO to "key economic sectors and workplaces, social strata, and geographic locations... where we expect the contradictions of capitalism to be most ripe for the development of class struggle."<sup>10</sup> The point of such a program would be to develop an *effective* strategy, aimed at pushing the class struggle forward. In so doing, this would also put the ISO in the position to build itself and the Left in general.

**3.) Bekah argues that the ISO Renewal Faction's pessimistic theoretical understanding of the relation between consciousness and struggle has practical implications for revolutionary socialists. This understanding, she claims, "resigns those of us who want revolutionary change to passivity."**

As already noted, the Renewal Faction's understanding of the relationship between ideas and activity is not pessimistic. Rather, it's an assessment grounded in a Marxist understanding of class struggle. Such a theoretical basis provides for the formulation of a practical program aimed at pushing the class struggle forward.

Beyond her claim that the ISO's vision of struggle is "a recipe for passivity," Bekah also attempts to disparage the Renewal Faction in a more deceptive manner. In several instances throughout the document, she attempts to depict the Renewal Faction as a group of jaded arm-chair intellectuals. Most ridiculously, at

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<sup>10</sup> ISO Renewal Faction, "Organizational perspectives," *External Bulletin* (blog), November 26, 2013. <http://externalbulletin.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/organizational-perspectives/>

one point in her document, Bekah states that the Renewal Faction puts “forward the idea that we should be focusing on ‘theoretical capital’ and an increased emphasis on reading our leaders’ meeting minutes and filling out regional organizer performance evaluations.” This is an utter distortion of the actual practical program advanced by the Renewal Faction. Sadly, I suspect that Bekah was well aware of the erroneous and deceptive nature of this assertion when she wrote her document.

With this said, it is true that the Renewal Faction does, in fact, reject a certain type of movement work: namely, the variety of aimless, anti-strategic movementism that has characterized much of the ISO’s participation in struggles over the past several years. As the Renewal Faction summarizes, the ISO’s approach to movement work has become detached from our ultimate goal of workers’ revolution. Rather than consciously participating in and conducting practical work that’s intended to push the struggle forward and set increased numbers of working-class people in motion, we’ve adopted a strategy of orienting to whatever movements appear at any given time without any insight into how our participation in these struggles relates to our goals as an organization. On this basis, we’ve tended to approach these movements in an utterly uncritical way. As the Renewal Faction puts it, we “emphasize the possibilities inherent in every political moment while downplaying the real challenges.”<sup>11</sup> Underlining this problem is the group’s understanding of the function of movement work in general. Rather than conceiving our role in participating in movements as helping to consciously drive the class struggle forward, we tend to approach it with two primary goals: a.) recruiting movement participants to join the organization and b.) gaining practical experience in order to prepare ourselves for future struggles.

The detachment of our short-term movement work from our long-term goals as an organization has dovetailed with a theoretical understanding that tends to reduce class struggle to a largely spontaneous phenomenon. As near as I can tell, many people in the organization have come to believe that the next mass upturn in class struggle will take place as a result of a sudden and unexpected burst of popular anger – a development that is likely to be set in motion by an ongoing process of “ideological radicalization.” Such a view removes the role of conscious action by revolutionaries and radicals in helping to lay the *organizational* groundwork for “upsurges” in working-class struggle.<sup>12</sup>

Bekah’s document actually provides a number of clear examples of the problematic approach that has come to dominate much of the ISO’s movement work in recent years. To begin with, in describing her own personal experience as a movement activist and ISO member, Bekah provides an apt summary of the organization’s frequently directionless and anti-strategic mode of operating. True to form, Bekah admits that – in the past – this approach to struggle has led her to “burn out.” She notes that, “I swore I was too stubborn to burn out. It took me just less than a year of non-stop feverish activity to collapse.”

Based on this experience, Bekah claims to have learned that burnout is less likely when participation in movement work is integrated with “the party building project.” In such circumstances, “the end of the movement is less disorienting and your comrades can remind you of the long term, give you some... perspective.” Apparently, Bekah now sees the primary purpose of the ISO’s participation in movement struggles as being party building – or, in more concrete terms, recruiting new contacts to the ISO. At one point in the document she calls for placing “primacy... on growing the small numbers of revolutionaries.” At the same time, Bekah downplays the viability of participating in movements as a means of pushing the class struggle forward. She writes that, “Although we very much hope to contribute ideas and argue politics that can help the struggle win, our size and scope inhibits our ability to do this.” In this same vein, Bekah goes on to critique the Renewal Faction for the lack of focus it places upon “the role of building our organizations within and as part of small struggles.” The Renewal Faction, she argues, is excessively oriented toward pushing the movement forward and lacks a focus on insular party-building. As she puts it, the Renewal Faction’s “eyes [are] on the reform, not on the party-building process.”

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<sup>11</sup> ISO Renewal Faction, “The role of perspectives.”

<sup>12</sup> Bekah’s understanding of class struggle as a spontaneous phenomenon is most clearly evidenced in a passing comment contained in her description of the importance of a mass revolutionary Party in helping to push a revolutionary situation to victory. In the course of making this argument, Bekah ponders, “How can you have a successful overthrow of the profit system by people who two months ago thought Sarah Palin was awesome?”

Bekah's separation of the goal of winning "reforms" from the "party-building process" here is extremely problematic. In general, the tendency to place the goal of *party-building* above the goal of advancing the *class struggle* is congruent with the definition of *sectarianism* as traditionally understood within the International Socialist Tendency. As outlined in a 1985 article by Duncan Hallas, the defining feature of a sect is the tendency to justify its existence in terms that are detached from "the course of the development of the real class struggle and the development of class consciousness."<sup>13</sup> To place party-building and internal growth as the central goal of the ISO is to reduce the organization to an idealistic sect, which sees its primary function as self-expansion. In reality, if the ISO is ever to expand in a meaningful way and make good on its party-building aspirations, it will have to play a useful role in pushing the class struggle forward. This is the only way for the ISO – or, for that matter, any other small group of revolutionary socialists – to prove its worth to the working class and convince substantial numbers of militants to join the Party.

Bekah's emphasis on the "primacy" of party-building leads her to provide a principled defense of the ISO's tendency to approach movement work on the basis of unjustified optimism and voluntaristic zeal. Essentially, Bekah argues that such an approach is useful because it is *attractive* and *appealing* to novice movement participants:

"Emphasizing the possibilities attracts the right sort of political element to the ISO within these frail and transient social movements of the day. These are the people who'd been hoping for a way to fight back. They are raw, angry, and 'really want to tear the head off capitalism.' Making a conscious decision to mirror that optimism is not to pretend that the struggle will be up and away but to solidarize with the sentiment of our periphery."

In this way, Bekah thinks that the ISO should mimic the outlook of movement novices *because we want them to like us!* This is intended as a means of advancing the ISO's central goal of party-building.

There are a number of reasons why this formulation is problematic. *Firstly*, such a strategy is – in actuality – not likely to lead to any long-term gains in terms of membership. In cases where the ISO is able to win an audience of "raw, angry" movement participants on the basis of a shared allegiance to unfounded optimism, then these contacts are bound to be discouraged when they realize that the ISO is filled with hot air. As I see it, the ISO would be far better served by adopting a strategy that is aimed, above all else, at pushing the class struggle forward. Such an approach would allow the ISO to prove in praxis that we have the politics capable of advancing the movement. In so doing, we'd be able to boost the appeal of the organization in the eyes of serious, dedicated movement activists. Beyond this, the *second* shortcoming of Bekah's strategy of "emphasizing the possibilities" in order to appeal to movement novices is that such an approach has the potential to be detrimental to the interests of the movement. For one thing, a strategy based on mirroring the outlook of "raw, angry [militants that] 'really want to tear the head off capitalism'" sounds like a surefire recipe for ultra-Leftism.

**Ben S., Atlanta**

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## **Bureaucracy and Revolution: A Report on the Faction Fight in the British SWP**

Comrades,

What follows is an admittedly lengthy and (for those without the patience for such matters) perhaps somewhat tedious account of the faction fight in the British SWP. I am aware as I write that it is highly unusual for someone who is not an active member of the ISO, let alone someone who doesn't live in the US, to contribute to its pre-convention discussion. My reasons for doing so are likewise extraordinary, for the ISO is going through its first official factional issues in long memory. Why I wrote this document may be

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<sup>13</sup> Duncan Hallas, "What is sectarianism?" in *Party and Class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2003), 94.

found in some documents of the ISO Renewal Faction, especially the following, from the Faction Announcement:

“The international revolutionary Left is in the throes of a serious crisis. This crisis has manifested itself most clearly in organizational terms in the debacle of the Socialist Workers Party in the UK; in the splits in the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste in France; and in the attack on the revolutionary Left within SYRIZA... While the SWP’s crisis is far more serious than ours, we believe both crises (as well as the others mentioned) grow out of the same general political background common to the entire revolutionary Left.”

That the problems of the ISO and those of the SWP are linked to a global crisis of the left is truistic to the point of telling us nothing, leading me to question why such a highly charged comparison has been made by comrades who recognize the distinction between these two organizations. While I do not write the following to respond to specific claims made by members of the Renewal Faction, I believe their linking of the ISO and its supposed “crisis” with that of the SWP is symptomatic of a troubling belief or thought process, held alike by members of the faction, ISO comrades not in the faction, and of course people on the left outside the ISO.

I write this document because I believe any comparison of the ISO’s problems to the current crisis of the SWP is incredibly harmful. As someone who shares the RF’s concerns for the future of the ISO, though I vehemently disagree with their diagnosis and proposed cures, I seek to discredit any such comparison so as to help place the current discussions in the ISO on the firmest footing.

What I write will proceed in a more or less chronological order. After describing the SWP’s crisis of perspectives of the 1990s to the split in the RESPECT Party, I will try to draw a broad anatomy of the (recently past) faction fight, from a year ago up until the SWP’s conference the weekend of 13 December. As I know many comrades will not be aware of the crisis except in broad strokes, I will try to be as transparent as possible while obeying necessary length constraints.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should briefly describe my own minor role in the faction fight. I moved to Britain in September to attend grad school, and joined the SWP upon arrival. I admit to being recruited on a factional basis; my activities in attempting to build the SWP and its student organization on my campus ceased after I realized I couldn’t in good conscience build an organization whose leaders had not apologized for the criminal behavior of Martin Smith, much less begun to address the severe organizational and political issues underlying the crisis.

I had attended branch meetings, participated in party discussions alongside the Rebuilding the Party (RtP) faction, and fulfilled the basic responsibilities of SWP membership for two months when I received an email from the current National Secretary stating that I was not a member. The reasons for this are transparent: I was due to be elected as a delegate from Central London, one of three opposition-majority districts in the country. What the leadership accomplished by this aside from preventing one opposition delegate from attending conference I’m not sure, but my protests went unheeded and since the opposition was defeated at conference, as we knew it would be, I no longer saw a point in my membership of the SWP. I resigned from the party along with over one hundred other members of the faction shortly after the conference.

What I write is a synthesis of my own experiences and a long-term engagement with the written materials on the SWP. I hope the following help clarify matters in the long-term goal of making the ISO a healthier organization.

### **The Downturn: From the 90s to Stop the War**

“Discussion, which is dangerous to the leadership, can be checked by hyperactivity; and this, in turn, is justified by the nearness of crash. The membership, driven at a frenzied pace, has a high casualty rate. A large proportion is always new – and therefore does not remember the non-fulfillment of past prophecies. A vicious circle is set up which makes the correction of the line

more and more difficult. “Building the leadership” – which is, of course, identified with the organization – becomes a substitute for serious political and industrial work... The leadership, which alone has much continuity, becomes unchallengeable and finds it less and less necessary to check its policies and practice.”

--Duncan Hallas, “Building the Leadership” (1969)

Many comrades will be aware of some of the problems in the SWP which caused the expulsion of the ISO from its international tendency in 2001. What I write in this section I hope will not be entirely unfamiliar.

The SWP emerged in the 1990s having survived a major crisis of the British left. The Communist Party had split and collapsed with the death of the Soviet Union. The two other main organizations on the British left had also collapsed, the Militant Tendency with its expulsion from the Labour Party and the Workers’ Revolutionary Party as a result of horrific revelations of the sexual abuse of female comrades by its leader.

The SWP, which claimed up to 10,000 members during the decade, had survived the crisis of the left intact, and had even grown. It did so by virtue of two main traits which it alone on the left possessed: unlike the CP or indeed many Trotskyists, it did not share the faith that the Soviet Union represented a superior form of society to Western capitalism, and so its members were steeled to its decline. More importantly, the SWP unlike the rest of the left had correctly predicted the downturn in class struggle at the end of the 1970s. The downturn thesis gave the SWP a leg up that would enable it to weather the years of Thatcher, the defeat of the Great Miners’ Strike of 1984 and the devastation of working-class organization.

However, these two advances contained the seeds of a future regression. The SWP, while it could claim having been right on the nature of the Eastern bloc, failed to foresee the catastrophic demoralization that affected much of the left after its demise. Secondly, the downturn thesis was only a partial assessment of a new period (that of neoliberalism) whose features were not fully evident at the time of assessment—an assessment which would never be completed. This problem continues to affect the SWP down to the present day.

If the analysis of a “downturn” in class struggle was correct on its own, then, reasoned most SWP comrades, surely it was only a matter of time until a corresponding “upturn.” The leadership around Tony Cliff, who had painstakingly built the organization from a small core over four decades, certainly believed this to be the case. In its turn, this belief would facilitate the spread of the bureaucratic method of leadership that the SWP is now universally known for.

Cliff had written in the first volume of his biography of Lenin that the method used by the revolutionary leader could be reduced to “bending the stick” polemically toward addressing the key question of the movement. In a time when Cliff was the leader of an organization with a mass membership of industrial workers and students whose instincts were to question, and when class struggle was on the rise, this approach made a certain amount of sense; a stick could be bent one way only by the stronger hand when more than one hand pulled on it. In a period of declining class struggle, however, it could easily become a justification for the leadership to swing a passive and demoralized membership in increasingly more frustrating and demoralizing directions.

The size of the SWP apparatus may be somewhat hard to appreciate for American comrades. I can’t speak to its appearance during better times, but currently it is likely that of around 1,000 active members, about one hundred of these work full-time for the SWP in some capacity: as district organizers, in the national office, in the industrial and student offices, in campaigns associated with the party (Unite Against Fascism, Unite the Resistance, and Defend the Right to Protest), at Bookmarks, on the publications (*Socialist Worker*, *Socialist Review* and *ISJ*) and of course on the Central Committee.

Having such a strong apparatus would of course be more justifiable in the “small mass party” of 10,000 which the SWP could once aspire to be. Even now, the efficacy of the SWP as an activist organization that dominates the British left is largely down to this apparatus, which works with amazing efficiency. I know an organization like the ISO could benefit greatly from having an apparatus of comparable size. In the end

it is not the quantitative size of a party bureaucracy but its role in the organization that matters. Indeed, many prominent oppositionists today had worked full-time for the party in some capacity, before they resigned or were dismissed by the CC for their convictions.

Throughout the 90s, the bureaucracy took on an increasingly larger role in the day-to-day life of the SWP. From facilitating the activity of members it came to direct them. When the apparatus itself fell under the direction of a leadership whose concerns were first and foremost those of advancing the struggle and saw itself as accountable to the organization at large, the apparatus was not necessarily an obstruction to the building of real revolutionary organization. When that went, however, so did the rest.

In the late 1990s the perspective of the downturn was suddenly reversed and the inevitable upturn was proclaimed. Tony Cliff predicted after the election of Tony Blair's Labour government in 1997 that there would be "no honeymoon for Labour," but instead rising class fightback, and a period in which the SWP would race the far right for the most members in coming waves of revolutionary struggle. The 1990s was assessed as "the thirties in slow motion"; it was this disastrous perspective which led to the breakdown in relations with the ISO culminating with its expulsion from the IST.

It was during this period that the SWP proceeded to break up its branch structure. The rise of the anti-globalization movement across Europe meant that SWP comrades could be freed up to work in the movement and attract other activists toward the party if they were unencumbered by branch routines. The decision to dissolve the branches after breaking them down into smaller and smaller sizes was not necessarily illogical given the perspective; the ISO itself during times of high struggle, such as Occupy, has suspended branch routines in certain places to do the same. What is certain however about this instance is that it was a decision taken largely without input from the rank and file, and that it was never subject to a thorough assessment.

The effect of dissolving the branches is, in my opinion, crucial to an understanding of the SWP today and especially its recent crisis. The destruction of branch routines now meant that the bureaucracy had to take on *all* the functions of running the organization on the ground. Rank and file members, aside from the yearly national conferences, had no means of participating democratically in the direction of the organization. That job was taken on by dozens of district organizers under the guidance of an unaccountable Central Committee.

During the mid-2000s this experiment was shelved and branches began to meet again. However, the branch structure never really recovered. Today in the SWP, although there are branch committees, they do not meet regularly and their leadership is not readily visible at meetings. Branch roles such as running *SW* sales, fixing meeting topics and coordinating interventions in local campaigns will typically be assigned or volunteered for, and coordinated with the appropriate comrade at the national office.

The weakness of local structure in the SWP is just one aspect of a worrying dynamic. Young SWP members, in my experience, do not ordinarily have the skills and knowledge the ISO expects from its cadre and (unevenly) tries to impart. People are recruited on an incredibly shallow basis. Leaving the many aside who sign a membership card without knowing what it means and never turn up to a meeting (though hundreds of these are still counted as members officially), there is typically no attempt to train new comrades in the Marxist tradition in even an abbreviated form. Members are not encouraged to read widely in politics, as we tend to be in the ISO, and extensive learning typically happens only among the extremely self-motivated. Members will not typically write for *Socialist Worker*—there is no need for them to do so when eight comrades work on it full time already, and, in any case, their articles might deviate from the party line, which at the best of times is somewhat unclear to many members. Thus a whole generation of revolutionaries has never been imparted with the faculties of critical Marxist thought.

Despite the atrophy of its branch structure, the SWP was able to play an outsized role on the British left. Even after the decline of the anti-globalization movement, the SWP was able to move on to build mass campaigns against the rise of the far right (in the relaunched Anti-Nazi League, and then UAF) and lead the largest mass mobilizations in British history as the core of the Stop the War Coalition in 2003 during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq by the US and Britain.

The SWP's role in these mass movements came, however, at the cost of increasing the influence of the leadership's bureaucratic methods. At a certain point the method began to dominate the politics it had been intended to serve. From being the most forceful proponents of a rank-and-file strategy in the trade unions, the SWP came to almost unconsciously adopt a strategy that saw alliances with left-leading union leaders, and electing some of their own members to national union office, as the key to advancing resistance against cuts.

The Party itself had begun to appear in practice more like a trade union than a revolutionary party founded on democratic centralism. The party's activities usually failed to mobilize even a fraction of the membership numbers it claimed—and increasingly, it was learned to expect this rather than to adjust membership numbers. In fact, it does not really matter whether you claim to have one thousand members or ten thousand members when the party apparatus effectively substitutes for the rank and file. Thus the bizarre claim of 7,200 members, or about seven times the highest likely total of active members, is completely logical from the position of the SWP's leadership, which increasingly finds itself in the position of working alongside the trade union bureaucracy rather than the rank and file of the unions or even its own party. A paper membership of thousands means much more to these people than it would to any of us.

### **Prelude to a Crisis: From RESPECT to 2012**

“There [are] no shortcuts like transitional programmes or calls for general strikes. Instead work has to be adapted to the actual level of the struggle on both the ideological and industrial planes.”

– Tony Cliff, *A World to Win: The Life of a Revolutionary* (2000)

The RESPECT Party was a new initiative that sought to unite the far left, especially the SWP, with broader forces to the left of the Labour Party, and especially the Muslim community in light of the worrying rise of racism in the British National Party and the English Defense League. It was taken up by the leadership of the SWP under National Secretary John Rees, and had former left-wing Labour MP George Galloway at its head.

RESPECT was not necessarily a failed endeavor from the beginning, despite the tension in interests between the different groups composing it. Considering the period in Europe in which the far left in Italy, France, Portugal, Germany and other countries had begun to experiment with forming broad-left parties as a way to appeal to wider audiences, RESPECT might have even seemed promising as such an initiative that would pay special attention to combatting racism.

There were several problems, however. First, as with the SWP's mobilizations since the 90s, the membership had no real input into the RESPECT project. Secondly, although there is ample room on the left for experimentation in these sorts of strategies, Rees proposed that RESPECT, rather than being a small reformist political party (which it actually was) was a “united front of a special type.” This led to a profound confusion as to the SWP's role within the project—particularly dangerous when those doing the work of building it on the ground were almost all SWP members.

The departure of the SWP from RESPECT occurred because of this basic tension. Building it had forced revolutionaries to substitute for a mass reformist activist base, but the real reformists were not so comfortable in a situation where all their strength was derived from the activity of a group they did not really trust. The split between Galloway and the SWP leadership precipitated the first large crisis in the SWP in three decades.

The RESPECT crisis had already attracted some rumblings from the rank and file members about the unaccountability of John Rees, Lindsey German, and others in the leadership who were willing to continue on as if nothing had really happened. Their fellow CC members, including Chris Harman and Julie Waterson, were not so happy either, but had bitten their tongue for years after the gradual introduction of bureaucratic imperatives to “not let the children overhear” their disagreements.

The SWP conference in 2008 saw Rees and German forced out of the leadership. Although they had predicted being able to take a significant part of the SWP with them, in the end they took less than one hundred members to form Counterfire, plus leadership of Stop the War. Chris Bambery, the former National Secretary and destroyer of many branches, left soon afterwards to form a different group in Scotland.

The architect of Rees' defeat was Martin Smith, who became National Secretary after him. Smith had joined the SWP during the 1980s and shown talent in anti-racist organizing as a district organizer in East London. During the 2000s, he was taken onto the CC. He became increasingly central to the work of the SWP's industrial office and of the party's work in UAF. He developed a wide network among his generation of SWP members, mainly trade-union militants recruited during the eighties like himself. His able work done to dismantle Rees' disastrous leadership, followed by the establishment of a democracy commission and a proclaimed period of rectification of the SWP's methods would set the seal on many comrades' idea that Smith was just as essential to the SWP as Rees had thought himself.

It's not certain how far back Smith's abuse of female comrades goes, but it was certainly rumored of around 2010, the year relations between the SWP and the ISO finally began to warm up and Smith himself gave two talks at Socialism in Chicago.

During 2008-9, Smith had a relationship with a female comrade, later known as W. Smith was in his forties and W, seventeen when their relationship began. Their relationship inevitably went wrong, and W later realized that she had been raped by Smith at some point during the period. At this stage, all most comrades heard about the matter was that Smith had had a relationship that ended badly, and that he sent some inappropriate text messages to the woman involved as a result. Nothing was known about W or any of the real circumstances, leading to the conclusion that this was a narrative Smith and his supporters put out to get ahead of the story.

It seems that other members of the CC had approached Smith over his behavior after they had heard about W's allegations in 2010. They encouraged him to resign as National Secretary, however his network of supporters had already mobilized behind him and with the CC unwilling to go to the membership over the matter for fear of the SWP's and their own reputation, no leverage was applied against Smith on this occasion. Eventually he did resign, giving a speech at the national conference afterwards in which he claimed that he was "no angel" – at which his supporters started a standing ovation for him. He remained on the CC afterwards.

W resigned from the SWP, but re-joined in September 2012, after the Julian Assange affair, when the SWP criticized George Galloway and others for casually dismissing charges of sexual abuse that had been made against Assange. This and the SWP's generally good record on women's liberation gave W enough confidence to invoke disciplinary procedures against Smith. But she and her supporters were met with a campaign of slander and vilification coming from members of the CC and many rank-and-file militants that forever destroyed the SWP's reputation on women's oppression.

W's case against Smith was heard by the SWP's Disputes Committee a month before the national conference in December 2012. On the committee were several members of the CC, who had worked with Smith long-term, and other friends of his. Much has already been said about the structural faults of the procedure; it should be enough to say that the head of the committee subsequently became an advocate for W, joined the opposition and headed the effort to reform the procedures.

W was faced with a hostile committee, some of whose members were determined to salvage Smith's reputation from the beginning. One member of the DC asked her if it was possible she had misunderstood his behavior, as he was known for being very friendly, while another asked her if "it was true [she] liked to have a drink." Smith in his own hearing was allowed to see her evidence, while W was not allowed to see his. The final verdict was that it was "not proven" that Smith had raped W, a decision which had several fortuitous aspects: the CC could claim that W had received a fair hearing, and Smith's supporters could claim he had been vindicated.

What explains the wide support for an alleged rapist in the SWP, and the leadership's recalcitrance in bringing him to account for his actions? I believe that this is mostly to do with his role as the "indispensable man" in the SWP, the person who had gotten rid of John Rees, and even after his leaving the leadership continued to have a large influence on the SWP's trade-union and anti-fascist work. Many comrades, especially in these areas, who had lost the ability to think for themselves relied on Smith to direct them. They were prepared to dismiss the allegations against him, to write it off on a feminist deviation or else tolerate his behavior in order to preserve his role. The CC, likewise, was willing to tolerate his continued presence for fear that if he was exposed, the trade-union cadre dependent on his leadership might leave, or that it would wreck the party in some other way.

### **The Crisis, 2012-Present**

"A false political theory bears within itself its own punishment. The strength and the obstinacy of the apparatus only augment the dimensions of the catastrophe."

– Leon Trotsky, "The Tragedy of the German Proletariat" (1933)

A crisis, however, could not be averted by their balancing acts. News of Smith's behavior spread quickly within the SWP, and comrades organized to defend W. A month before the national conference in January 2013, four comrades, three of them full-timers, were expelled from the party for a Facebook conversation in which they had arranged to be elected as delegates from their districts to make sure her case was heard on the conference floor. Afterwards, the Democratic Opposition (DO) faction emerged as the first oppositional grouping to challenge the leadership directly. Another grouping organized calling itself the Democratic Centralist (DC) faction, for the purposes of addressing the issues the DO had raised and to unite the party.

But the DC and DO were not the only factional groups that emerged during the crisis. Though it was not immediately obvious, Smith's supporters had also constituted themselves as an undeclared faction, which held internal meetings, issued communiques and fought for its position in the crisis. This group had perhaps several hundred members and included a minority on the CC. Calling themselves the "CC ultras," they would press for a hard line against the opposition, certainly including many expulsions, and the vindication of Smith. As time went on some of these comrades would make themselves infamous for introducing the crudest possible sexism and rape myths into the faction fight.

The majority non-opposition of the SWP was divided between the ultras and the more moderate elements around Charlie Kimber, who succeeded Smith as National Secretary, and Alex Callinicos. As previously mentioned, both Kimber and Callinicos had allegedly played a role in pressuring Smith to resign from behind the scenes. However, when it came to the factional crisis, faced with Smith and his supporters, they lost their nerve. Throughout they would treat the opposition rather than the ultras as the biggest danger. Callinicos as the leading party intellectual proceeded to paint a narrative of the opposition as abandoning Marxism for feminism, autonomism, movementism and other sins that would hold the alliance between his supporters and the ultras together during the crisis.

To cut a very long story somewhat shorter: the opposition had nearly gained a majority of the SWP to its position during the January 2012 conference. After losing the vote to defeat the report of the disputes committee on Smith's case by a razor-thin-margin, they united to form the In Defense of Our Party (IDOO) faction, forcing the CC to resign itself to calling a special conference for March 2013. In the run-up to the special conference bureaucratic pressures would be applied in force, with the result that only about 1/5 of all delegates supported the opposition. After this defeat, about a half of the opposition, most of them formerly of the DO faction, resigned from the SWP to form the International Socialist Network (ISN).

It's not my place to judge whether this was right or not. Certainly the opposition left inside ended up much weaker for it, though many could only blame themselves for the moderate tactics they had embraced (such as voting down a demand to reinstate the Facebook Four). Either way, those left inside the SWP after March remained committed to reforming the SWP on a principled basis. In contrast to what was asked by many in the ISN and internationally—how revolutionaries could stay inside such an organization—many in

the SWP opposition had given decades of their lives and much of their energy to the party, and refused to leave the field when the battle had only begun.

The opposition during this past year was faced with incredibly steep challenges. Not only were we many fewer in number; we now swam in a current that had decisively turned against us. While the CC ultras (now known ironically as IDOOM, short for In Defense of Our Martin) rounded on us, making us unwelcome in many branches, the majority of the party was not IDOOM. Many more simply were tired of the faction fight. They did not want to hear any more about Martin Smith and the dispute; the CC's narrative that the opposition focused only on this narrow issue justified a denialist or ostrich-like mentality for many comrades. The opposition, under assault on all sides, was forced to focus on specific key demands. The most important one was for an apology to W and the other woman involved—for it had just come out that W was not the only complainant.

In November during W's hearing, another comrade (subsequently referred to as X) had come forward to give evidence against Smith. X had worked in the national office while Smith was National Secretary, during which time he repeatedly pressured her to sleep with him. After she complained about Smith's behavior to others, she was removed from her job in the national office and sent to work at Bookmarks. Despite having come forward in November, it took a full eight months until she was given a hearing of her own. During that time Smith's supporters, at least one of them on the CC, frequently denied that a second complainant even existed. During the factional crisis it also became clear that at some point X's email account had been hacked by a CC supporter, who had provided the CC a number of emails between oppositionists and had attempted to delete emails between her and Smith that were to be used as evidence at her hearing. Unlike W, X stayed in the SWP and continued to press for recognition of her case and an apology as a member of the opposition.

From March to December, the SWP opposition continued to attempt to rally and broaden out its slim forces. The job may have been doomed from the beginning, but our fight was conducted with honor to save a once-great revolutionary organization. The CC's attitude was contradictory; at times bowing to the will of IDOOM, and at other times striking a more conciliatory note. X was finally given a hearing in June, at which it was decided that Smith had "a case to answer." Alas, this had no practical effect since Smith had resigned from the party only days earlier. His supporters would continue to insist on his innocence, some claiming he had been the subject of a witch-hunt to drive him out of the SWP and agitating for his reinstatement. It is all but certain he continues to wield a great influence over his supporters in the party. Whether he will come back now, after our decisive defeat, is an open question—many want him back but there remain a few elements who recognize that the unity of the party now depends on the "moderates" just as much as it does on IDOOM.

At conference this December, the opposition was well and fully defeated. Though elected a delegate from Central London, for the reasons stated above I was not allowed to participate. Only 60-70 delegates voted for the opposition motions including an official apology to W and X, and for the opposition's CC slate which would have removed Charlie Kimber, Alex Callinicos and the ultras, replacing them with an opposition majority. Instead, the leadership that steered the SWP into the worst crisis in its history was reelected with an overwhelming majority. A weakly-worded motion from the CC that apologized to everyone who had suffered distress during the crisis (which, as many pointed out, could include Martin Smith) was also passed over the outrage of a few ultras, to whom any apology is anathema.

### **Toward the Future**

"It is often said that 'the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning.' Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs, a mass of other germs, and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious socialist revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in the corpse – and which he may have carried in him since his birth – is that very sensible?"

- Victor Serge, *From Lenin to Stalin* (1938)

Certainly a turning point has been passed in the history of the SWP. Most of the three hundred members of the RtP faction already have resigned from the party or will do so presently. For the most part we do not regard the organization as salvageable any longer. The handful of us who remain in the party should not expect a sudden awakening among the CC or any of the loyalists. I consider it likely that only those whose activism does not depend on the party—that is, those with strong platforms in the unions or campaigns—will be able to stay. For those of us whose bread and butter is building revolutionary organization, the SWP can no longer be the subject of our activity.

It is likely, however much we might wish it otherwise, that the SWP will remain dominant on the left. Its apparatus has served it well in the past several decades, and though it has suffered a severe blow to its reputation as an organization, it is likely that it will be able to preserve organizational unity and its hegemony in trade union work, anti-fascism and other areas of activism. The distrust the SWP is faced with on the left does not extend to many of its individual militants (even the ultras), a large number of whom will remain important in trade-union work and who anyone who has left the party but wants to remain active will have to work alongside.

The SWP will not collapse as many (including myself) have predicted. It has lost many of its best members, including almost all its students, and probably will not be able to attract many more on a long-term basis. However, its decline will look more like the drawn-out scenario of many Communist Parties in the west, which retained a strong industrial cadre and continued to hegemonize the left, than the epic collapse of the WRP or the American SWP. It will look like the British or American CP in decline—increasingly old, unattractive to the radicalizing minority, and pulled closer toward the only material force that has a real influence on its cadre, the trade-union bureaucracy. But it will remain a significant part of the left.

Hence, it is of central importance that those of us who have left the party overcome sectarian attitudes toward the SWP that the current crisis has given certain elements a chance to raise. While the SWP's leadership must be the first recipient of blame for ultra-left attitudes against as a result of the crisis, acts such as turning over SWP stalls, driving paper-sellers away, and setting copies of *SW* on fire need to have no place on the left. Whatever the SWP is guilty of, the attitude taken by some former members and many anarchists that the party should be driven out of the left has to be decisively smashed. Anyone coming around the left would rightly see persecution of the SWP as insane. Our attitude, whatever our grievances, needs to be one of willingness to cooperate with members of the SWP as honest activists and militants. How likely they are to reciprocate will likely vary from person to person, but anyone on the British left will likely have to reckon with the SWP for quite some time.

What will the opposition do? I think it is too early to tell, but certainly you won't be hearing the last of us. There is a crying need for a principled organization that attempts to rebuild a tendency based on the tradition of International Socialism as a part of the left in Britain. This will likely take some organizational form presently. In my opinion it is crucial for us to initiate a discussion around the issues that the SWP crisis has raised, especially on women's oppression but also matters such as a proper understanding of neoliberalism and the role of revolutionary organizing in the current period, which our tradition has never really come to grips with. As the leadership of the SWP was quite successful in claiming the mantle of Leninism for its actions, this also brings up the need to reclaim and reassess the Marxist classics, and the IS tradition's role in our current theory and activity.

It is my hope that an organization like this, which combines the decades of experience that some opposition comrades possess with the youthful energy of many others, can adopt a realistic perspective of the primitive accumulation of cadre and carve out a niche as a small but exciting, idea-rich and firmly anti-sectarian project on the British left. At least in the medium term, unity with the ISN, or groups outside the SWP diaspora, is unlikely. This is not out of any sectarianism, but a simple recognition that we have traveled on a different road than the ISN for the past year, and need clarification on many questions we see as crucial while we work alongside other revolutionaries in practical activity before talk of organizational unity can begin.

## Conclusion

What do I intend for ISO comrades to take from all of this? As I found out very quickly after joining the SWP, you can't really develop a solid appreciation of the crisis here by just reading documents, however well-informed. I do hope however that I've been able to draw an account that brings some of the many disparate threads comrades may know about the SWP crisis together with a materialist understanding of the bureaucracy as the cause of the decline of the party.

Comparisons between the ISO and the SWP make sense coming from people hostile to Leninism and to the tradition we share with the heroic past of the SWP—but they are unbecoming of ISO members and those outside the organization who remain loyal to our politics. What problems the ISO does have are the product of a situation which is completely different than the one that has produced a horrific crisis in our erstwhile sister organization. Thus, even while I wrote a long document about the SWP crisis, I hope that a solid understanding of our situation can help to refocus American comrades on developing an understanding of the different dynamics which constitute yours.

In the ISO, despite its faults, a significant amount of the operational power resides at the branch level, which the leadership does not and cannot dominate in the same way as in the SWP. Furthermore, nothing about my experience suggests that the ISO's leadership wants to dominate in the same way as the SWP's leadership has their organization. They have shown themselves quite willing to opening up the ISO as we all think through the issues raised by the SWP crisis. Therefore even while many comrades have found themselves to be in an adversarial relationship with the Steering Committee, I hope all comrades will be able to overcome whatever divisions currently exist to work together on a principled basis in the future.

Having been a member of the ISO at the time when the crisis in the SWP broke, I know comrades treat the issues that have come out of it, including sexism and rape today, neoliberalism and the changing working class, and constructing a revolutionary party of the working class in the 21st century with an incredible amount of seriousness. Being in contact with the ISO today, I know this has not diminished.

Therefore even while I think the methods of the Renewal Faction are misguided, I know that they are comrades committed to helping the revolutionary left find a way out of its current impasse, just as are the ISO comrades not in the faction, and, importantly, just like the leadership of the ISO. Reading the documents from the beginning of the ISO's pre-convention discussion, I know that comrades on all sides of the current disagreements will conduct the arguments in a serious and comradely manner, and will avoid precipitating a damaging crisis like that which has occurred in the SWP.

Comrades in the faction will do doubt play a beneficial role in the process of reorienting the ISO, whatever my disagreements with them. So too will comrades in the national leadership, as well as rank-and-file comrades not in the faction. To all of you I send the greetings of the (former) SWP opposition, I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you directly, and I look forward to working with all of you as we proceed to renew the tradition of International Socialism, and to reconstruct the revolutionary left on both sides of the Atlantic.

In solidarity,  
**Bill C., London, UK**

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Document with Resolutions

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## **Fight for 15: Toward a National Strategy**

### Overview

Over the course of 2013, the Fight for 15 (FF15) movement went from a marginal organization in New York and Chicago to a national movement of low-wage workers. During the last national day of walkouts, on December 5, workers in more than 100 cities participated in walkouts and demonstrations.

Nationally, FF15 is primarily sponsored by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), but upon closer examination, in most cities the movement more accurately represents a coalition of forces in which SEIU plays the dominant role in determining direction. Other participating organizations include community groups, worker centers, churches, and other unions, including United Electrical workers (UE) and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

FF15 is primarily concentrated in fast food, but may include workers in other food service and retail depending on the city. It is also important that the low-wage workers movement is not contained to the “fast food strikes.” More broadly, the movement includes other organizing efforts. Some are national campaigns--Warehouse Workers for Justice, OUR Walmart. There are also more localized campaigns--Unique Thrift workers, Guitar Center workers, Peet’s Workers Group, domestic workers, car wash workers, and independent grocery store workers--all of which take place in the same political context and are characterized by similar working conditions: low wages, irregular scheduling, lack of benefits, and relatively high (though declining) turnover.

Without a doubt, the rapid growth of the FF15 movement has been incredibly exciting. However, it also raises questions for organized socialists attempting to rebuild a union movement in the United States. In this document, I will try to address some of the central questions in a way that open a conversation about how to develop a national orientation to this movement.

The purpose of this document is to argue for a national strategy toward this movement. Another forthcoming document from our fraction will address the specific experience and lessons of the organizing campaign at Whole Foods. We hope that comrades involved in this work in other cities will contribute reports and analysis to this discussion and raise disagreements so we can have as comprehensive a discussion as possible in the pre-convention period.

#### Political Character of the Fight for 15

Before the FF15 became a national campaign, local campaigns had slightly more autonomy in determining tactics and strategy, which in part helps to explain why the campaign looks so different city to city (more factors discussed below). Essentially, organizers had been charged with trying a bunch of different ideas to see what worked: what could get workers to sign cards? to attend organizing meetings? to walk off the job?

Beginning in August of last year, there was formalization of the movement’s national character through a “workers’ convention” in Detroit, though the convention was mostly a show to allow SEIU to reorganize the effort. Now the SEIU international is more directly involved in shaping the future of the campaign. This has not, however, resulted in a change of tactics. The order of the day is still one-day walkouts, increasingly nationally coordinated, with the goal to be large increases in the number of workplaces participating.

The focus has indeed been on the *number of worksites*. Not enough focus has been placed on deepening the level of organization once a critical mass of workers at a particular worksite have signed cards to join the union. Still this should not be interpreted as hostility to deeper organizing effort, but rather as a different orientation to how we can accomplish the campaign’s goals.

SEIU believes that we need neutrality agreements before we can begin card checks or elections, and that these neutrality agreements can be achieved through minority strikes in the largest number of work sites possible.

The SEIU strategy is rooted in decades of defeat, anti-democratic union practices, and business unionism. And yet, the political space that has been opened up by this movement has involved many new workers in the labor movement. In this context, the ISO can raise the expectations of workers rather than just tailing the politics and strategy put forward by the campaign leadership.

However, as suggested above, FF15 is a complex movement that both continues to grow while also facing questions about its future in fairly immediate ways. Politically and organizationally, the movement is highly uneven nationally, and even, in some cases, in different areas within one city. The thread that links

the movement together nationwide is the “Fifteen and a union” demand. Yet, after the victory of the \$15 minimum wage ballot initiative in Sea-Tac, it is clear the campaign is proceeding in such a way that these demands may not be achieved simultaneously. In fact, it points to FF15 as a movement with a dual character: both a social movement and a campaign to bring fast food workers (and in some cities, retail workers) into the organized labor movement. The demand for \$15 and a union is simultaneously a traditional trade union demand—to work collectively to negotiate the terms of our exploitation with our employers—and a political demand—that the government realign its priorities to aid working people and not corporations. In many ways, FF15 is bringing Occupy’s outrage over inequality out of the squares and public parks and into the workplace.

Because of this complexity, it is not adequate to simply assess the trajectory of SEIU, its goals and vision. Despite the top-down nature of the campaign, our experience in Chicago has been that when workers organize themselves, the campaign follows. This points to an important opening for comrades to become implanted leaders within this movement who can help organize our workplaces with a long-term, shop floor oriented vision of what FF15 could look like.

The consciousness of the workers involved is far outpacing the willingness of the union to continue to lead them, underlining what we already know—that the consciousness of workers is transformed through struggle. This is where socialist leadership can be so vital in helping to advance the campaign, but also in helping to train a new layer of militants in working class struggle, trade unionism, and socialist politics.

The gap between the leadership and the rank-and-file is clear. The workers involved tend to believe that much more is possible than the leadership conceives of in looking to structure the campaign. What is needed now is a strategy with which to approach this situation, considering both how it is alike so many union struggles of the past, but also acknowledging how it is different, and forming our perspectives on that basis.

#### Why is the character of the Chicago campaign different?

So far in the movement, Chicago has led in terms of depth and breadth of organization and worker militancy. Chicago has waged the five one day strikes, one two day strikes, and has well over 2,000 card holding members, with an active core of about 10-15%. Why is this the case here and not in other cities?

First, the city experienced a major teachers’ strike in 2012. Up to that point one of the only major victories for the working class, the teachers became a beacon of hope and struggle, but also taught concrete organizing lessons to workers in other industries, including fast food and retail, who saw teacher democratically debating their contract and using collective power against Rahm Emanuel and the city school board during the strike. While this experience is not directly transferable to other cities, the struggle for education justice—against school closings, in support teachers, opposing standardized testing and criminalization of students—is a nationwide struggle, and one intimately linked to the workers who participate in FF15.

Second, for more than a year now, comrades have been involved in the campaign in Chicago, initiating political discussions within the union, pushing for action on issues of racial and gender discrimination, highlighting the broader social and political dimensions of our struggle, leading worker-run organizing trainings, helping to initiate a women’s caucus, and more. We successfully initiated, organized, and *won* “Strikesgiving” (see <http://socialistworker.org/2013/12/04/on-the-line-for-strikesgiving>). During our year as members of this campaign, leadership has recognized as committed leaders and organizers, but more importantly, our fellow union members see us as leaders, and as people they can approach to discuss questions, talk about possible routes for the campaign, and plan action.

We coordinated these interventions through the use of a fraction, which was able to discuss the state of organizing, and assess our effectiveness. This is not unique in any way to Chicago, and can be replicated by comrades elsewhere.

#### Rank and File Consciousness

In our interventions in FF15, of primary concern has been the task of developing other leaders, both within our own workplaces, and within the union generally. As noted above, the consciousness of workers participating in this movement has been developing rapidly, and for many of the militant core (approximately 200 workers out of 2,000+), moving far ahead of union leadership. This subset of workers is who we have oriented toward. At the same time we build the movement as a whole, we also have to be one step ahead of this militant subset, and be ready to move the struggle to the next level when possible.

This meant, for example, when Snarf's Sandwich shop fired all of its workers, that FF15 comrades were on the phone daily with workers from the store, discussing possibilities that weren't even on the radar of the leadership—including occupation. We were then invited to their general membership meeting for the store, where we argued for continuing the struggle and not backing down on any demands—arguments which were central in shaping the final forms the demands took. If we had not been there, it is not at all clear that the Snarf's workers would have voted to continue their fight.

How has workers' consciousness changed?

An interesting, and perhaps unexpected by SEIU, result of the Fight for 15 campaign has been the way it has simultaneously developed political consciousness alongside trade union consciousness. In part, this owes to the highly polarized political situation that has been created by five years of crisis and the implementation of austerity, which is nationwide if not more acute in places like Chicago. But it also derives from the dual nature of the campaign itself. At the same time that FF15 is a workplace struggle, centered around the idea of unionism, it is also a political struggle, making clear demands of the government to raise the minimum wage and institute better protections for workers trying to organize.

Almost all participating workers have become increasingly militant. A significant subset has extrapolated that the strike can be used as a political weapon. One worker even said, during the December 5 walkouts, that FF15 should strike over the issue of school closings should the city attempt to shutter more schools. The citywide days of action have also led many to develop the instinct of a solidarity strike. Most critically, all workers participating in the strike are learning that striking is the best way to solve workplace grievances.

### Challenges

The gap between leadership and rank-and-file will almost certainly continue to increase as the campaign runs up against the limits of its strategy of minority one-day walkouts. As the campaign leadership pushes a crescendo of action as we move into spring, all the way heightening the expectations of workers with small victories and increased numbers, we know that minority walkouts will not by themselves achieve unionization (whether or not they can secure a \$15 minimum wage is debatable).

While obviously we fully support the demand for \$15 an hour, our primary goal must be to advance working class organization—in other words, to build lasting unions in the fast food and retail industry. SEIU is not hostile to the idea of unionization—it would add to their dues base, for one thing—but 1) they do not envision the kind of union we want to build and 2) they do not have a strategy capable of winning unionization campaigns against corporations like Whole Foods and McDonalds.

We do not have the option of electing a more militant union leadership—because we are not formal members and do not pay dues, we do not have democratically elected leaders. We have been able to push for more democratic practices to be used in running the campaign, most significantly in the Snarf's case where we helped pressure FF15 not to make any agreements with Snarf's without a democratic vote of the Snarf's workers.

When the SEIU strategy has run its course by the middle of this year (assuming it has not somehow succeeded), one of three things will happen:

1. SEIU walks away from the campaign

2. SEIU pursues the same strategy but extends the timeline
3. SEIU reorients and tries something else

Only one approach can prepare us for all eventualities, to try and deepen workers' self-organization, political education, and organizing training. At all times, our approach should be to focus our organizing at the companies and to let the campaign leadership get out of the way. So far, they have been quite willing to support worker backed initiatives.

#### Implantation and Solidarity Work

One question that has arisen and which we are still figuring out in Chicago is that of how to involve more comrades, have the ISO engage politically in this work, and win the most militant workers to revolutionary politics and socialist organization.

One clear method of involving oneself in the campaign is through implantation—getting a job in the fast food or retail industry, and if comrades are unemployed or already working in such a job, it may be feasible to begin organizing at your workplace or to get a job where it would be possible to organize. Whole Foods should definitely be considered by any comrade looking for a job in this sector, since it is slightly better paying and has better working conditions than McDonald's (though they are certainly far from idyllic).

In Chicago, we were already employed at Whole Foods when we began organizing. We joined FF15 even though we were not directly in their purview of organizing, which mostly concentrated on fast food and retailers located inside the Chicago loop. If you are working in any sort of retail or food service job, it may be possible to join FF15 chapters in your city. We should also remember that FF15 exists as an SEIU campaign, but also as a political idea. Just because there is no FF15 in your city, or because your workplace is not a fast food restaurant doesn't mean you can't appropriate the model and apply it at work.

Finally, comrades who have other jobs can still support the campaign through fraction work: helping workers flyer for union meetings or demonstrations outside their store or at bus stations; holding public meetings; writing regular reports on actions and organizing for *Socialist Worker*, whose coverage has been indispensable; forming FF15 solidarity groups in your union, neighborhood, or on your campus; holding tablings and helping with ballot initiatives and petition drives; making yourselves available for emergency demonstrations in the case of retaliation.

#### Recruitment

Our work in building FF15 is not separate from our projects of building class struggle and the ISO. FF15 workers are for the most part newly political people who have been thrown into the school of struggle. They are developing as workplace and political leaders, and they are also questioning ideas they may have held for a long time. Many actively seek out political discussions. All are open to having them. In Chicago, they sought FF15 comrades out because they admired our leadership during strikes, our commitment to anti-oppression work in the union, and our strategy for continuing to organize. These workers are looking for political engagement, experienced activists with whom they can discuss tactics and strategy, and they are asking questions that extend far beyond FF15 about the nature of capitalism and the possibility of an alternative.

Winning these workers to revolutionary, socialist politics and organization should be a priority, because it simultaneously strengthens workers' position to push for a fighting strategy within the movement and strengthens our organization's connection to a rapidly growing area of class struggle, as well as training new revolutionaries.

In Chicago, several FF15 workers have attended public ISO meetings on a range of topics, from "The Case for Eco-Socialism" to "Why Low-Wages Don't Work" to "Hands off Syria." We have done reading groups on books like *The Case for Socialism* and *The Meaning of Marxism*, as well as Dana Frank's pamphlet on the Woolworth's sit-down strike of 1937. Workers regularly buy *Socialist Worker* newspaper, attend marches with ISO contingents, and regularly attend branch meetings. Close contacts participate in

paper sales. Some attended the Socialism conference (we hope to significantly increase the number this year). FF15 workers are interested in our politics, and we should engage with them with the utmost seriousness.

In this vein, we should also increase our coverage of FF15 in *Socialist Worker*, with reports from as many actions, demonstrations and strikes as possible, as well as profiles of the struggles of low wage workers, reports on ballot initiatives and their reception, and localized organizing.

We also recommend doing public forums on the FF15. In Chicago, all three community branches held forums that were well attended and facilitated important discussions. The forums were titled “Low Wages Don’t Work--Except for the Bosses” and we had comrades involved as rank-and-filers in FF15 speak. We framed these meetings around a couple of central questions: why does capitalism create low wages? why is Fight for 15 so important? how can socialists play a role in building this movement and what can socialist politics offer in terms of strategy? These meetings played important roles in encouraging our FF15 contacts to play a bigger political role in meetings, in building our relationships with established union activists (one forum brought out not only low-wage workers, but also members of SEIU, AFSCME, NNU, and CTU who wanted to discuss the way forward for the labor movement as a whole).

### Toward a National Strategy

In Chicago, we seem well poised to carry on with this work, but our capacity nationally is much more uneven. Currently, comrades involved in FF15 and other low-wage organizing have been relating to the movement in their cities with little national coordination of our effort.

We took an important step toward changing this with our first conference call in December, but going forward, we should look to continue to develop national coordination. It would allow us to respond better to calls for solidarity that emerge from one city, to get a better sense of the national movement’s character, and possibly to push in future for nationally coordinated actions, such as possible Thanksgiving walkouts. If SEIU holds another national convergence like last summer in Detroit, we could coordinate a presence there to help shift discussion more effectively.

Developing a more cohesive, national approach will also be helpful given the likely importance of this issue in upcoming ballot initiatives and electoral campaigns. We will need to coordinate our efforts with any electoral strategy that might emerge, and will be able to more effectively coordinate against co-option by national Democratic politicians.

Finally, national coordination can be a way to share tactics, strategies, and more. We could also this spring sponsor a speaking tour of FF15 activists to help build the movement and ISO connections to it in other cities. We could also organize regional Fight for 15 meetings to bring together the left wing of the movement and allies to discuss political questions forefront in discussions with FF15 contacts. FF15 comrades in Chicago propose to formalize our effort nationally by coordinating bi-monthly conference calls and a national list-server through the national office.

### Conclusion

While not a traditional union campaign at this point, FF15 represents an important development for the labor movement in the US and class consciousness more generally. In less than a year, our movement effectively shifted public debate on the minimum wage, aided in the election of Kshama Sawant in Seattle, and involved thousands of workers—most of whom had never before participated in labor struggle—in union activism for the first time, permanently transforming them.

The campaign in its current form has strong limitations, but the involvement of socialists and national coordination of ISO efforts is needed to ensure that the organization built by the campaign is as strong as possible and that the most militant workers continue to become politicized and as much as possible, organized as revolutionary socialists, meanwhile developing our own members as leaders in the movement and as builders of trade unions.

**Resolution:**

For the reasons listed above, we propose:

1. To formalize our orientation toward Fight for 15 as important area of work for comrades to be involved in wherever possible
2. To facilitate this work through the national office in order to more consistently develop political and organizational perspectives toward this movement based on regular reports from the branches involved
3. To hold bi-monthly national conference calls for all involved comrades, and to set up a national Fight for 15 list serve.

-Trish K, Chicago

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